



**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Unity Breakfast  
January 21, 2008**

***A Single Garment of Destiny*  
by Janet Murguía, President and CEO,  
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Thank you so much. It is a great pleasure to be with you today and I am truly honored to be the first Hispanic keynote speaker at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Unity Breakfast here in Birmingham. I want to give a special thanks to Odessa Woolfolk and to Isabel Rubio for their support and their personal commitment in bringing our communities closer together.

I am humbled by this honor, especially when I think of the names that have preceded me at this podium today and over the years. Thank you to the committee of organizations sponsoring this breakfast. I know it was not an easy decision but it is more than symbolic – it is historic and visionary to recognize that Dr. King’s dream was an inclusive dream and spoke to more than one community. Thank you for your courage and vision.

A generation has passed since my predecessor, Raul Yzaguirre, along with many of you in this room, marched with Dr. King to secure basic civil rights and human dignity for all Americans. That commitment to a common goal started a partnership between the newly-formed National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and the African American civil rights movement that survives to this day. For 40 years, NCLR has stood shoulder to shoulder with the black community to promote equal opportunity for all Americans.

In the '50s and '60s, the African American community showed us the way forward and swept in a wave of change to make America a better place. The Civil Rights movement helped to liberate all of us and moved America forward.

But, for this generation, there’s never been a more important time for our communities to stand together for social justice and civil rights.

The hate and prejudice that defined opponents of civil rights forty years ago has found a new home. This new strain of hate is open and ugly, and it demonizes all Latinos in the emerging debate on immigration.

The debate is needed because our immigration system is badly broken. But we must make it clear that a debate on issues is not an opportunity to dehumanize any human being. We must stop the hate. And we must do it together.

To quote Dr. King, “We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.”

I am here today to renew that pledge.

Nothing is stronger than our commitment to civil rights and human dignity. Nothing is stronger than our commitment to full and equal political participation. Nothing is stronger than our commitment to increased opportunity for all.

I am personally committed to this course and, as President of the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in this country, I will do everything I can to ensure that we remain united in our pursuit of a better America for all who live in this land of promise and opportunity.

We should note, however, that the landscape is changing. It used to be that the American Latino community was concentrated in certain cities: Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and Chicago. For many years, Americans enjoyed the fruits of our labor and celebrated our culture, but did not see us as part of the larger American community.

Now, the Latino population is spreading beyond the confines of those core cities into other regions of the country. You can see it here in Birmingham. There are growing neighborhoods, businesses, retail shops and professionals where names like “Rodriguez” and “Gomez” are common.

Inevitably, with that kind of change comes tension – tension across the country and tension between our two communities. A recent survey showed that relations among African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans are still fraught with misunderstandings and negative stereotypes.

And when the 2000 Census revealed that Latinos had become the nation’s largest minority group, the media and many others instantly wanted to turn it into a contest – a story about winners and losers. They wanted to create a rift between our two communities. We must not let them. We have too much in common and too much at stake.

But we should acknowledge that there have been tensions. They do exist. It does none of us any good, I think, to gloss over these realities. You can’t solve problems by pretending they aren’t there. We should discuss them, come to grips with them and move on to our much larger common agenda.

Dr. King once wrote that, “I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a constructive non-violent tension that is necessary for growth.”

I believe that Dr. King would want us to embrace that tension and would want us to grow together. We may come to this time and place by different paths and different journeys...but we

have so much in common...far more than those things that set us apart. We have more that unites us than divides us.

People of color are bound together by two American legacies that define our existence and frame our common struggle. One is “Hope.” The other is “Hate.” The conflict between them is our shared story. One lifts us. The other restricts us. One guides us. The other divides us.

The strength of America...what makes it great...is more than the might of our armies and the vitality of our capital markets. It is more than the caliber of our educational system and the inventiveness of our entrepreneurs. What makes America great is the “promise” of America...the “dream” of America...the “hope” of America.

The African American and Hispanic community understand hope. For so long, it was all we had to hold onto. Hope allowed us to endure. It gave strength to our work, steel to our resolve, focus to our ambitions and salve to our wounds. It is through hope that we shall overcome.

Dr. King saw the power in this. He saw it more clearly than the rest of us. And it was his dream that renewed us. His vision galvanized us. His words compelled us forward to seek “the promised land.”

I am a child of Dr. King’s hope. I know about the power of his dream. I’ve seen it come true for me and my family. My parents, Alfredo and Amalia, came to this country more than 50 years ago with little money and barely a grade school education.

They worked hard – my father worked in a steel plant taking all the overtime he could get and my mother took care of us kids and other kids in the neighborhood to add to the family income. We did not have a lot of money but they sure had hope in a better tomorrow for their children. They believed deeply in the promise of this country, especially for me and my six brothers and sisters. The values they instilled in us – family, faith, community, education, hard work, and sacrifice – have always been our guide.

And thanks to those values and the opportunities afforded by the success of the civil rights movement, today, I have a brother who graduated from Harvard Law School. I also have a brother and a sister who graduated from law school and are the first brother and sister in U.S. history to serve on the federal bench together. And, I am very proud that my father and mother were able to visit me when I worked in the West Wing of the White House.

I know the power of Dr. King’s dream – I am a child of his hope – yet, I also know hate. I saw it throughout my youth growing up as a Latina in Kansas – I remember the pain in my father’s eyes when he would tell us about being directed to other bathrooms at work or when we were sent to separate churches to worship. And I see it today in my work on behalf of the Latino community.

Sadly, as a nation, “hate” has defined us as well as “hope.”

The native peoples of this continent were nearly erased; Africans Americans were enslaved. Whole groups of people have been exploited including Chinese Americans, Irish Americans and

Italian Americans. Japanese Americans were put in interment camps during WWII and, in the 1930s and '50s, thousands of people of Mexican descent – including many native-born Americans – were deported to Mexico.

But, I know you know about hate. You saw it when Bull Connor unleashed the dogs and the fire hoses on the peaceful people here who marched in protest, singing gospel songs. You saw it again in Albany, Georgia, again in Selma, Alabama, and again in Memphis, Tennessee.

And, of course, it was hate that took Dr. King from us...but, in the end, his hope was more powerful. His hope was our salvation.

I come before you today, forty years later, to say our work is not done. Despite all the progress of the civil rights movement, hate has not been vanquished. For a time, it was beaten back. It festered out of sight and away from the light.

But during the last few years, hate has found a new home.

Hate is alive and well in the immigration debate. Harbored on the World Wide Web, hate spreads through the Internet unabated and unashamed and grows more virulent by the day.

Hate is alive and well on mainstream television, where nativist and extremist groups are called “expert commentators” and where media personalities grow bold and unafraid to show their prejudice.

Hate is alive and well in American politics, which has become obsessed with blaming immigrants for all of the nation’s ills. They say, “Forget about health care. Forget about Iraq.” They want to know, “What have you done about those illegal immigrants?”

I want to stop for a moment and say that, for the most part, these are hard-working people who have risked much to provide for their families. Many hold down two or three jobs to make ends meet. They are church-goers, people of faith. They are parents who care for their children and children who respect their elders. Every one of them would choose to be here legally if they could. The fact is our immigration system is broken. For people wanting to come here there is a 20-year backlog to legal entry – if they can get in at all.

But, to the voices of hate...they are only “illegals,” a term deftly used as a code word to hide prejudice. These hard-working men and women are not separate from the Hispanic community. They’re part of its fabric. Many Latino families have U.S. citizens, legal residents, and undocumented under the same roof. And you can’t tell just by looking at us who is a citizen and who is not.

So if the undocumented are demonized as a threat to the American way of life...then, all Latinos are demonized. Voices of hate depict us as “an army of invaders” ... “a massive horde that brings disease and crime to our country.” This is an example of an email that I received at the height of the immigration debate: “JANET IS A LYING, FACT-MISREPRESENTING MEXICAN JERK. THERE WILL COME A DAY WHEN THE AVERAGE AMERICAN HAS

HAD ENOUGH OF HER AND HER LIES AND RUNS HER BACK TO MEXICO WITH THE REST OF THE DISEASED, IGNORANT, BUDGET RUINING, CRIME CAUSING SCUM THEY ARE.”

The man who sent this email wants me to back to where I came from, but I don't think he realizes he is sending me home to Kansas.

Extremists say we are “criminals who should be deported,” regardless of the cost to our families and our children and to the communities we leave behind.

Last March, a young toddler was forced to watch her father being arrested by armed immigration officials in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Baby Tomasa, an American citizen, was left behind crying in her mother's arms. She may never see her father again.

She is not alone. A study we conducted with the Urban Institute indicates that for every two immigrants deported, one American child is separated from a parent. There are already more than ten thousand such children living in America. And, if the rhetoric of the anti-immigrant crowd takes hold, that number will become millions.

In today's presidential race, political ads reminiscent of those using Willie Horton to smear the African American community are already being used to demonize Latinos and sow fear amongst Americans. In Tom Tancredo's ads, all Latinos are painted as criminals. All Latinos are called rapists. All Latinos are labeled as gang members and terrorists.

Hateful images have become so ingrained in the public consciousness that a fifth-grader in Iowa asked Barack Obama what he would do when the illegal immigrants started bombing. Last month, Mike Huckabee accepted the endorsement of man who has proclaimed he is “proud to be a vigilante.” Mitt Romney, who once employed undocumented immigrants to mow his lawn, now shamelessly exploits the issue and talks about the need to deport 12 million people.

When presidential politicians vie for seeing who can be the harshest to the weakest among us, it is time for all of us to take heed.

But, politicians are not alone in embracing the hate groups and vigilantes. The media has offered hate a helping hand. Not only have they provided access to the airwaves to spokespeople associated with hate groups, they have regularly voiced their own prejudice. Glenn Beck, a CNN commentator, recently offered a one-stop solution to the immigration and energy crises on his radio program. He proposed a "giant refinery" that produces "Mexinol," a fuel made from the bodies of illegal immigrants coming here from Mexico.

This kind of vitriol is outrageous and offensive to the Hispanic community and it is leaving an indelible mark. Because words do matter...Dr. King understood the impact of words. But this kind of hate speech should offend all of us. This kind of rhetoric is not consistent with our American values, ideals and traditions.

It is no coincidence that in recent years, we are seeing the highest historical spike in hate crimes against Hispanics. Hate crimes have jumped by 23 percent over the past two years, as recorded by the FBI. Hate groups are growing and becoming better funded. Nativist–extremist groups are multiplying at the local level.

The FBI has a file with my name on it. They have files with the names of my staff and the names of NCLR Affiliates. Not because they fear us as they feared Dr. King...but because they fear for us...as targets of a growing wave of hate.

When hate grows, we are all diminished. We are all its victims. Today's struggle to defy it is just the newest chapter in our shared history.

I ask you today to support us as we challenge those seeking office to renounce the politics of hate and to distance themselves from those known to be affiliated with hate groups or vigilantes.

I ask you to support us today as we challenge the media to clean up their act. Hate speech has no place on the air waves and those representing hate should not get a free ride to spread their agenda.

I ask you to support us today as we appeal to the American people for reason. Issues like immigration deserve serious debate and serious solutions. We cannot have that debate as long as hate has the floor.

In the 1960s, at the height of Cesar Chavez' fast to bring attention to the plight of farm workers, Dr. King sent him a telegram that read, in part: "Our separate struggles are really one. A struggle for freedom, for dignity, and humanity."

Just as Dr. King supported our cause a generation ago, I ask for your support today.

From his cell in the Birmingham City Jail, Dr. King wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

Forty years have passed since the death of Dr. King. So much has been accomplished. So much has been done. Yet, it is clear that there is so much left to do.

It is my hope that, forty years from now, we will be able to look back on this time and that historians will say that, together, we wrote a special chapter in our country's history.

That we came together and stepped up to build the coalitions, the bridges, the understanding that allowed us to not only advance our respective communities but to move our entire nation forward.

For when we come together, when we passionately stand up for our principles and insist on what is right, together, we remind everyone what it means to be part of this nation of promise and of brightness . . . and of hope.

Let us ensure that hope triumphs. We have that chance. And this is our moment.

Thank you.