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Immigration Reform: Ending the Culture of Illegality

*A keynote by Mickey Ibarra to the Hinckley Institute of Politics Forum
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Thank you, Scott Rasmussen, for the introduction. As political science majors, many of you will appreciate my choice in education – an undergraduate degree in political science...and a masters degree in Education with a specialty in Behavioral Disorders.

Think about that for a moment . . . Political Science and Behavioral Disorders. I must confess that both degrees have served me well in our nation's capital for over 20 years.

I would like to begin by acknowledging Mayor Rocky Anderson, who has joined us today, for his courage and leadership on so many issues important to Salt Lake City residents.

Earlier this month, I joined Mayor Anderson in Washington, DC for the presentation of the first Profile in Courage Award by the League of United Latin American Citizens. He was honored by LULAC for standing up for the Latino community even at his own political risk.

Mayor Anderson spoke out on behalf of the entire Utah immigrant community during "Operation Safe Travel" when very few Utah officials would – Mayor Anderson was the exception – and for that I thank him.

Let me also recognize Kirk Jowers, the Director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics and Jim Hinckley. Your work inspires so many young people to learn more about the policies that shape their lives. I am truly honored to serve as a Hinckley Institute Fellow.

It is a great pleasure to be back in my home state of Utah. I want to share with you the story of my journey, which started in Salt Lake City. Today is a good time to share it given the debate here and around the country about immigration reform.

You see, my father, Francisco Nicolas Santiago Ibarra was an immigrant. Born in Oaxaca, Mexico, he arrived at Spanish Fork, Utah in 1945 at the age of 15.

Dad came to Utah as a Bracero ...a federal guest worker program created to bring farm laborers from Mexico to harvest the crops to feed our nation while America's men and women fought overseas in World War II.

Someone once said that "Democracy is based on the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people." It didn't take Francisco long to see the possibilities that lay before him -- to figure out that with hard work, he too could live the American dream.

He took a job with the Kennecott Copper Mine at Bingham Canyon just west of here . . . a union job with better pay, benefits, and job security.

Dad became a miner, a member of the Powder Gang. Those were the brave souls that were required to load holes dug deep into the earth with explosives and then evacuate the area before triggering the blast.

But he soon took a two-year break from the mine, courtesy of the United States Army during the Korean conflict. Francisco returned to Kennecott having earned a valuable new benefit . . . the G.I. Bill for education and much more.

His dreams of a better life began to take shape. Dad enrolled in college . . . the Hollywood Beauty College in downtown Salt Lake City – he knew how to dream big!

Francisco Ibarra became a hair stylist, left the copper mine for Sacramento where he achieved his dream . . . opening his own business...the Mona Lisa House of Beauty.

America is the land of opportunity and I consider my dad a true American hero for overcoming so many obstacles, including language, education, and raw discrimination to achieve his dream.

Yet, as you know life is not always easy or fair. My mother was just 16 years old when I was born in Salt Lake City and my brother, David, was born just 11 months later.

By the time I was two-years old, David and I were placed in the custody of the state of Utah after my parents divorced.

We lived in a series of foster homes for most of the next 13 years, visited by Dad infrequently and my mother even less until David and I reunited with Dad in Sacramento to attend high school.

However, thanks to many good people **along the way**, two young boys found **their way**... through a good education, hard work, and a belief that we too could succeed in America.

My dad is now retired from the beauty salon in Sacramento. Unfortunately, he has suffered a total hearing loss from what I strongly suspect was the experience with the Powder Gang at Kennecott, but he is otherwise in good health and happy.

David and I both reunited with our mother long ago and enjoy a good relationship today.

David is a successful member of the business community in Salt Lake City and he has joined me here today. My brother demonstrates everyday that it is possible to do well and do good at the same time.

He recently launched the Ibarra Foundation, invited me to serve on its Board of Directors and promptly made the largest gift ever received by the Chicano Scholarship Fund to award three renewable, full-ride scholarships to Latino students at the University of Utah. He understands that from those of us who have much, much is expected in return. I would like by brother to stand to receive our thanks for his valuable gift to the University.

And as you have heard, I had the honor of serving at the White House as an Assistant to the President of the United States for

Intergovernmental Affairs responsible for serving as his liaison with all state and local elected officials.

President Clinton was fond of pointing out that “Mickey Ibarra of Utah” was proof positive that not all of his appointments were political.

Last month, my government relations and public affairs firm celebrated its 5th Anniversary in Washington with over 300 clients, friends, and officials proving there is life after the White House and it can be good.

While my personal story is not unique...many people in this room have an inspiring story about obstacles overcome... it serves as a useful introduction to a very important challenge facing America: immigration reform.

At the core, the challenge is to address our nation’s legitimate security and economic interests without turning our backs on the long-standing values of our nation. America is a nation of immigrants where, no matter your background, anyone can dream and achieve their dream. America is truly the land of opportunity and we must protect it the right way.

Indeed, we must “End the Culture of Illegality” that shrouds those who came here to find a better way of life!

The bracero program that brought my father and 4 million other Mexican migrant workers to the U.S. during World War II and beyond was the last significant U.S.-sponsored guest worker program with Mexico that gave immigrants a legal entry to this nation.

Today, there are an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants who now live, work and raise families in America.

The lack of a clear federal policy and enforcement of existing laws to address the flow of immigrants across the border has left many states to deal with the challenge on their own.

Two Southwestern governors -- Bill Richardson of New Mexico and Janet Napolitano of Arizona – recently declared states of emergency and activated National Guard units, blaming the federal government for failing to secure the border from illegal crossings.

Just as the federal government failed to respond adequately during Hurricane Katrina, it has failed to address this critical issue, leaving Mayor Anderson here in Salt Lake City and others across the country feeling abandoned and overwhelmed by a lack of resources and other support.

Immigration reform concerns Americans on several levels. One, it impacts our national economy which relies on low income immigrant labor to fill the jobs that other Americans won’t take. The reality is that America is not only addicted to oil, but to cheap labor as well.

Two, it impacts our national security -- during a time when America is fighting the War against Terrorism both at home and abroad, we must be able to secure our borders against those who would do us harm.

How we address this issue ultimately reflects how we define ourselves as Americans – will we continue to be the nation that declares: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

Lawmakers are even now grappling with this issue in Washington, exemplified by two recent bills that illustrate some fundamental and philosophical differences on the issue of immigration.

All but a few House Democrats believe that any “reform” must first and foremost strive to end the culture of illegality that exists around immigration. Democrats also believe that, while we must tighten our borders, we must also take steps to create a viable guest worker program to cope with the continued demands of the labor market, and develop an earned path to citizenship to bring undocumented residents out of the shadows. These values are reflected in a bill introduced last spring by Senators McCain and Kennedy.

Most House Republicans on the other hand have crafted a bill that does just the opposite – calling for the deportation of undocumented immigrants, even those currently working, paying taxes, and raising families on U.S. soil. Their version of immigration reform has the potential to criminalize family members and employers under broadened definitions of smuggling, harboring, and transporting.

Disappointingly, the House bill was supported by the Bush Administration, but faces strong opposition from many organizations, including numerous Latino advocacy groups and the Catholic Church, which could be held criminally liable for providing support services to immigrants under expanded “aiding and abetting” laws.

Since the passage of the Republican bill in the House last December, the issue has moved into the hands of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which is tasked with debating a companion bill. After five very intense meetings of the Judiciary Committee, there is growing hope that that a compromise bill may emerge which will provide undocumented workers

with an eventual path to U.S. citizenship, family reunification, and a reduction of the immigrant backlog.

Under the leadership of Judiciary Committee Chair Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, the Judiciary Committee is trying to craft a bill more similar in tone and content to the McCain -Kennedy bill introduced last spring, which strikes a far better balance by including earned legalization, family reunification, and strict but fair enforcement policies.

However, immigration reform is threatened anew by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist who has now introduced an “enforcement only” bill to the floor that capitulates to the anti-immigrant wing of the Republican Party, without giving the Judiciary Committee the opportunity to finish its work on crafting a compromise bill.

The good news is that efforts from all over the country, including a National Call-In Day, high school walkouts, and public demonstrations in many cities to include Los Angeles last Saturday that drew a crowd of 500,000 without one arrest, are making a difference! The senate office phones have been “ringing off the hook” with calls in support of comprehensive immigration reform.

I am pleased to report that just yesterday on a 12 to 6 vote with support from Republican Senators Specter, Graham, Brownback, and DeWine voting with the majority, the Senate Judiciary Committee adopted a comprehensive immigration reform bill for full Senate consideration. We must be as vigorous in our praise as we are in our criticism and call these brave leaders to thank them for doing the right thing.

However, one member of the Committee was absent for the vote yesterday; Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah. His support for undocumented workers, through the AG Jobs Bill and the Dream Act has won him praise from numerous Hispanic advocacy organizations. As his constituents, your

opinion matters most – so please call him to urge that he continue to be a voice of reason and to encourage his support for comprehensive immigration reform.

Why the deep divide on this issue? I think the difference lies in how we view immigrants. Those who take a hard-line approach view immigrants only in negative stereotypes – they label them as criminals and terrorists. In fact, the House bill would automatically declare all 12 million undocumented immigrants as felons.

Those who support earned citizenship see immigrants as individuals seeking to improve their quality of life and that of their families.

So who are they really? Are they terrorists or useful workers? The reality is that while no minority group is crime-free, no Spanish-speaking immigrant has ever been jailed for terrorism and the vast majority of immigrants are here to work, support a family, and improve their quality of life. They are the cooks, cleaners, gardeners and farm workers like Francisco Ibarra who came here to find a better way of life.

In fact, A Pew Hispanic Center report issued last year showed that most illegal immigrants share a strong work ethic and a deep commitment to their families, hardly the stuff of terrorists.

And the good news is that most Americans reject the negative stereotypes and share this view. A recent TIME Magazine poll found that 76% of those polled favored earned citizenship for undocumented workers.

The reality is that Latinos have become a vital component in every sector of this nation's economic, social, and political life. The Hispanic marketplace alone will soon be a one-trillion-dollar annual market.

The largest growth in new small businesses is coming from Latina-owned businesses. Our artists – actors, musicians, singers – are among the most celebrated and popular in the country.

We have political leaders at the highest levels in our nation's Capital, serving as Governors, as the Mayor of Los Angeles and in state legislatures throughout the country.

Let there be no doubt that this is not the same country that greeted Francisco Ibarra over fifty years ago but we've still got a ways to go. I believe it is the responsibility of those of us who have achieved our dreams to raise our voices on behalf of countless others who continue to struggle.

As the debate continues in the Congress, I urge you to judge any proposed legislative resolution by three criteria. Does it increase border security? Does it establish a guest worker program that leads to citizenship? And, does it embrace our national values of tolerance, fairness, and opportunity? We must demand a comprehensive immigration reform bill from the Congress.

The Hinckley Institute of Politics was founded to help teach the importance of political participation – it promotes the belief that we all have a stake in helping shape the policies that impact our lives. So when I stand here today at the University that helped me receive a good education and taught me the importance of standing up for what I believe in, I do so proudly as the son of an immigrant, who was undocumented for over 30 years, with

the knowledge that we all are one America and that this nation is the greatest nation in the world because of our diversity.

The Latino Agenda is America's Agenda; our challenges are America's challenges; our accomplishments are America's accomplishments; and our future is America's future!

I will close as I began with a personal story...so many fond memories of my years at The White House...

---Having the honor of attending the White House State dinner for King Juan Carlos de Bourbon and Queen Sophia of Spain.

---Being introduced to Mexico President Vincente Fox by President Clinton.

---And, having a front row seat for so much of history in the making at the West Wing... from impeachment, to acquittal, to 8 years of unprecedented economic growth, prosperity, progress and peace for our nation.

Yet, perhaps my fondest memory will always be of my father. He came to the White House for his first and only visit in December of 1999.

For this special occasion, I walked from my West Wing office along the short driveway to the appointments gate to greet him. I had previously alerted the Secret Service agents that a VIP would be arriving to see me ... Francisco Ibarra.

Once he cleared the security checkpoint, the expression on his face communicated clearly what he told me later ... "I can't believe they let me in here and ... do you really work here?" He did manage to inquire at the time, "Am I dressed okay?"

Francisco arrived to see me, but also to attend a White House Holiday reception. Christmas at the White House is a wonderful time of year. ... the stunning decorations, the heartwarming music and a photo-op with the President of the United States.

When our turn came to greet the President, I introduced my 5'3" father, who looked up at the President but could not speak. He had lost his voice.

After a brief pause, the President leaned over to look dad squarely in the eyes, shook his hand and put his arm around his shoulder and said ... "Sir, your son is doing a terrific job for me and I am delighted that you are here with us."

Francisco was still speechless as we took our photo and moved on. Later, for days he told everyone we met in Washington, "The President called me Sir."

I now know, why dad lost his voice ... he was overcome by emotion ... heartfelt gratitude for having had the opportunity to come to this great country, to provide a better life for his family ... to achieve the American dream for himself and his children. For me, it was important to show my dad what had been accomplished because of his courage and sacrifice and to relieve him of some guilt I suspected he felt for not always being there for me.

It is the potential that lives in all of us – American born and immigrant alike – and it is the potential that makes America great.

So I challenge America to end the culture of illegality facing America's immigrants, to bring millions of people who live among us out of the shadows in order to fully recognize the common dignity that exists in all who strive to work, raise families, and live the American dream. I urge you to stand up for what you believe in – and to take a stand on behalf of American values on the matter of immigration reform.

We must do this as a nation because it is the right thing to do and because it is the smart thing to do for America. We must rededicate ourselves to building bridges that bring us together rather than constructing new walls that divide us.

Winning in politics and life is about addition and multiplication, losing in politics and life is about subtraction and division.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa of Los Angeles said it best recently; 'together America can do better. And it starts with restoring our sense of a national community within the context of the new global economy. In the end, it really doesn't matter whether you're Democrat, Republican or independent. It doesn't matter what part of the country you come from or what language your family speaks at home. We are all part of one American family.'

Let's continue to dream big.