



## **Janet Murguía's Speech at the 2007 NCLR Annual Conference**

**(Thank you's, acknowledgments, etc.)**

**Miami has been quite a host, wouldn't you say?**

**Coming here always reminds me of what is possible with hard work, opportunity, and the sheer determination to make it.**

**Your experiences tell me there is great promise.**

**The American Dream is not only alive here . . . it's in Technicolor.**

**When I've talked with you over the past couple of days I am reminded of one thing: our destiny is in our hands – and no one else's.**

**This gathering represents our Hispanic community.**

**While many of us are newcomers, the majority of us were born here – citizens, with deep roots in the United States.**

**We have families like the Lozanos from California who started a newspaper in 1926 which became the largest Spanish language paper in the country.**

**We have sons and daughters like Luis Gutierrez-Rosales and Daniel Gomez who gave their lives last week fighting with distinction in the defense of our country.**

**Not only are we deeply part of the fabric of America ... we *are* America.**

**I know this.**

**You know this.**

**We all know this.**

**So why am I saying it?**

**I'm saying it because I'm troubled by what's happening in our country.**

**There is something so very wrong when the notion of America itself – generous, hopeful, diverse – is under siege.**

**There is an illness in America, an attack on who we are as Latinos that demeans not only our community, but our entire country.**

**We all know the Senate voted three weeks ago to kill the immigration bill.**

**It's horrible that despite a national consensus that our immigration system is broken, a majority of senators wouldn't even proceed with a debate on comprehensive immigration reform.**

**What bothers me more is how, and why, it happened.**

**There is simply no way to avoid some stark, simple truths.**

**When the Senate voted to deny a path to citizenship for the twelve million, it also voted to cave in to bigotry.**

**When the Senate voted to reject hope, it voted to embrace fear.**

**One Senator told us that he supported reform, but voted against the bill because he felt that the country wasn't ready.**

**He called his own vote "a profile in cowardice."**

**Another senator, from the South, said: "This vote was not about policy, it was about race."**

**A vocal minority, pushed along by an angry mob, aided and abetted by well-known talk radio shock jocks, made the United States Senate – the greatest deliberative body in the world – its pawn.**

**This cowardice has a message for us: It says, "You cannot rely on politicians, or opinion leaders, or the media, or even the large silent majority of Americans who support immigration reform to protect you.**

**Your fate is up to you. You – and no one else – must provide a cure."**

**Since then, many of us have shared with each other our shock, our anger, and our pain.**

**The level of anguish in our community is as severe and palpable as I've ever seen it.**

**We can't believe we are hated because our families have names like Rodriguez, or because of our accents, our skin color, or where we were born.**

**We know what this is. Our country has gone down this road before.**

**It's hatred and bigotry. We thought we were having a debate on immigration policy. But it was really a debate about who decides what it means to be an American.**

**My friends, while we have been trying hard to be civil and fair, some of our opponents have taken a different tack.**

**We've been playing by the rules – you know, wearing gloves, no blows behind the back or below the belt.**

**But some of our opponents have been streetfighting – kicking, scratching, and clawing, no holds barred.**

**Take, for example, this email sent to me at the height of the 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.**

**Apparently the person who sent the email wants me to go back to where I came from.**

**Maybe he doesn't realize he's sending me home to Kansas.**

**Or take this statement, quoted in the Washington Post.**

**“Man, I didn't realize how many Mexicans there were here....**

**If we don't get control over this, pretty soon all of America will be outnumbered.”**

**That doesn't sound like a policy debate to me.**

**That sounds like fear, ignorance, bigotry, and hate. And it has no place in our country.**

**This ugly atmosphere will produce serious consequences, and not just for the undocumented.**

**Ten days ago a county government near Washington, DC unanimously approved a resolution authorizing law enforcement to check the immigration status of those they “suspect” may be here illegally.**

**County authorities are literally deciding whether they will check the documents of people who use public libraries.**

**The motive of one Tennessee politician is even more obvious – he wants to ban Hispanics from the public parks in his town.**

**And this is just the tip of the iceberg.**

**There are as many as 1,000 proposed state laws like this, and thousands more at the city or county level.**

**The Senate’s failure to take action, and its surrender to the forces of fear and hate, have given some people the freedom to act on their worst impulses.**

**They now have a loud voice for what they would only have whispered before.**

**This is a sharp sting, deep and ugly.**

**We have every right to be disappointed and angry. But now, it’s time for something else.**

**In politics, there is a time for cooperation. And then there is a time for confrontation.**

**My friends, we have cooperated with our opponents for years. Debated, discussed, compromised, done everything democracy asks.**

**We’ve done it in good faith, and we’ve stuck to our principles.**

**Well, democracy is posing a different challenge now.**

**It wants to know if we will ask the tough questions.**

**“What does it mean to be an American?**

**Will you stand up and reaffirm the best of America?”**

**To answer these questions, we must commit ourselves to renewing our country.**

**Moments of great struggle are always where significant progress is made.**

**When federal troops shot and killed striking workers in the 1930s, unions got stronger.**

**When America grew in prosperity but our senior citizens remained in poverty, we created Social Security.**

**And when California passed Prop 187, we mobilized to protect immigrants and their families.**

**These are all actions in the best spirit of America – hopeful, passionate, and determined.**

**Just as these moments set our country on a brighter course, we must now step up and seize the day.**

**At this moment in history, renewing America means we have to be *everywhere – visible and engaged*. That's what being American *is*.**

**It's not a piece of paper or the words to an anthem – it's a way of life.**

**Let's renew America by graduating more students, increasing the number of Latino homeowners, creating more businesses, sitting on more boards, and running for office.**

**Let's weave ourselves so deeply into the American fabric – into schools, neighborhoods, offices, industries – so that there is no longer any room for the Latino bashers.**

**That means two things: integrate and participate.**

**Integration has always been the cornerstone of American progress.**

**Throughout our history, millions have come here, looking for a better life.**

**And they didn't find it – they *made* it.**

**My parents did it and your parents did it.**

**Today, the newest members of our *familia* continue in that tradition.**

**But to complete the renewal of America, we must do what matters most – we must *live* democracy on a daily basis.**

**That's what our opponents are most afraid of.**

**They know that bigotry will lose if it becomes a fair fight.**

**So we have to level the playing field with the most powerful weapon we have: the vote.**

**We can debate, we can propose, we can argue, but until, as a community, we vote – in massive numbers and in order to control our destiny – we will give their fear an advantage over our hope.**

**No more. There are four things we must do – things I am asking every one of you to commit to.**

**First, we must mobilize our young people.**

**Every year, 400,000 young Latino citizens become eligible to vote.**

**We've gotten a good start registering them here at our Leaders Conference, but it's not enough.**

**I ask you to go home and by the end of August, help one 18-year-old register to vote. Just one.**

**Second, we have to naturalize every Latino who is eligible.**

**You've done a lot here by helping nearly 500 people put their papers together.**

**Now I ask you to go home and do two more things.**

**One, give money to an organization helping immigrants become citizens, and two, volunteer your time to help them.**

**Third, we must commit ourselves to a *massive* voter registration program.**

**Registering to vote is a rare demand democracy makes of us.**

**Let's live up to it. And then, I ask you to register five more Latinos to vote between now and the end of the year. *Each of you.***

**And fourth, next November, vote.**

**Everyone who has a calendar or a Blackberry, take it out now, go to November 4th and enter "Vote" on that day.**

**You better take all of your close family and friends with you.**

**In 2004, only 1 in 4 Latinos who were eligible to vote did. I don't care if on November 4th it's raining, or you are late to work, or you just don't feel it's worth the effort ... Remember, "What does it mean to be an American? Will you stand up and reaffirm the best of America?"**

**We've just announced a partnership, *Ya Es Hora*, with our sister organization NALEO, Univision, and ImpreMedia, to do all these things.**

**Our goal in this campaign is to have the largest Hispanic turnout in history next year.**

**Make no mistake about it: we have been given a challenge.**

**And there is no magic answer, no silver bullet for this challenge.**

**But when has there ever been for Latinos in America?**

**There was no "miracle" that inspired Cesar Chavez to form the United Farm Workers. There was no silver bullet that made Prop 187 unconstitutional.**

**It wasn't easy for Herman Gallegos and his colleagues to form the Southwest Council of La Raza 40 years ago.**

**And it wasn't easy for so many Latinos to come to South Florida and rebuild their lives.**

**And my parents, like yours, didn't rely on outsiders to raise their family.**

**They relied on their own strong character to do what needed to be done, with no complaints about life being unfair, and without waiting for anyone else to do it for them.**

**They were guided by faith, family, hard work, and the promise of opportunity.**

**I'm going to leave you with this. A few months ago I was at a very rare night out at the movies with friends. The movie ended late, 10 or 11 p.m. at night, and we stopped at the ladies' room. Being so late, we were re-routed around some familiar "wet floor" signs. As I waited for my friends, I could hear someone singing in Spanish and I recognized the song. She was singing "*Desde cielo una hermosa mañana* – from the heavens comes a beautiful morning."**

**Imagine a woman cleaning a bathroom late on a Friday night and she was singing such a happy song. That's the kind of passion and joy immigrants**

**bring to their work and to this country. The song referred to a beautiful morning but I think she was singing about her belief in a beautiful tomorrow.**

**Even in our darkest hour, her unbreakable spirit and unbridled optimism should be a reminder to all of us of the very essence of America's promise – that our best days are not behind us, they are yet to come. *Gracias.***