## What Makes a Good Neighbor? Upholding Values of Human Rights and Security in Latin American Immigration to the United States

Good morning. First, I would like to thank President Middleton for giving me the opportunity to speak here and for the kind introduction. I also would like to thank Anna Eleanor Roosevelt for her presence today; I suspect she is the one behind the invitation and I am grateful for it. Lastly, thank you to Margaret Rung for making this entire visit possible. It is an honor to commemorate the legacy of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. They represented values of democracy and moral leadership in the midst of politically challenging times and they have provided us with an enduring and compelling example of how to address some of the problems that persist in our world today.

When I first sat down to contemplate the topic of Latin American immigration to the United States, I thought about the political environment in which the Roosevelts lived: economic depression, national recovery from one war and the looming dread of another world conflict. Despite the resistance of a hesitant and weary citizenry in the face of these challenges, they both courageously advanced the idea of a global community where Americans had a moral obligation to act in accordance with the country's most fundamental values. Franklin Roosevelt, in his 1933 inaugural address, stated, "In the field of world policy I would dedicate this Nation to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others—the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors."

He lived up to this commitment by ushering in significant changes in United States relations with Latin America through the Good Neighbor Policy, which renounced armed intervention by the U.S. in Latin American countries and aimed to create a new atmosphere of stability and solidarity between the regions. Roosevelt recognized that Americans and Latin Americans are neighbors in the truest sense—we are neighbors not just because of our common border but also because of our common spirit. Using the Roosevelts' timeless ideals as inspiration, I thought, perhaps we could elevate the debate about Latin American immigration to the United States and address the causes and effects more successfully. In this vein, it might be helpful first to consider the characteristics that make for a good neighbor and then contemplate how to harness them in relation to this pressing issue.

One of the first qualities that occurred to me was generosity. Of course, there has always been the old lore of neighbors lending each other sugar and milk when in need. In more contemporary terms, many of you may know a university student who fondly remembers the dorm room friend that lent them his computer when their laptop crashed the night before an important deadline. Some of you may have even been that panicked student. Regardless of the era, this neighborly kindness is not just material but reflects an ability to step outside of oneself and a willingness to give support of various forms when a friend or neighbor is in need.

1

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> First Inaugural Address of Franklin Roosevelt, The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, March 4, 1933. (http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/presiden/inaug/froos1.htm)

Compromise was another quality that came to mind. Perhaps some of the university students and young graduates are familiar with it in the form of an agreement with your neighbor to allow her raucous parties just as long as you are invited to join in the festivities. This principle, in the case of good neighbors, requires mutual sacrifice but also allows for mutual gain.

Finally, I thought back to Franklin Roosevelt's inaugural statement and considered the most fundamentally coveted qualities in a neighbor to be respect for who you are and recognition of your right to happiness. This includes tolerance given any cross-cultural divide. For example, in order for any Red Sox fan to be a good neighbor to me, they have to be accepting of me lending them milk or sugar in my Yankees pinstripes. It is just part of the package and, despite what some baseball fans would have you believe, the two can, in some cases, coexist peacefully; they can even be good neighbors.

These qualities of generosity, compromise and acceptance mean that both parties recognize their mutual humanity, that is, that, while one may be a Yankees fan and one a Red Sox fan, there are fundamental experiences and needs you share as humans. They also mean that you and your neighbor acknowledge your intertwined fates, for these shared and interdependent existences are the underpinnings of communities, small and large, local and global, in the United States and in Latin America. Eleanor Roosevelt, in her quest to establish standards for universal human rights, emphasized that respect for these rights begins at the individual level and extends out to the larger world. She argued to the American people, "Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world." With the Roosevelts' focus on the global community, they recognized that human progress hinged upon the ability of individuals to act as neighbors. In this age in which global instability appears to be growing daily, the United States and Latin America acting as neighbors would set a positive example of community building; thus, this type of consideration needs to be a part of the debate about immigration.

In addressing this topic, it is first important for me to acknowledge the diversity of the Latin American experience of migration. This is critical because the debate often is oversimplified as a U.S.-Mexico border issue. An Argentinean moving to New York undoubtedly has a different experience than a Cuban exile living in Washington, D.C. or a Honduran family settling in New Orleans. Immigrants from Latin American countries travel with different accents, unique national traditions, and varying socioeconomic backgrounds. While it is important to acknowledge these differences to form the best, nuanced policies on a local level, it is just as critical in the larger picture to remember that Latin American immigrants carry similar hopes to those immigrants of all countries, to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Citizens for Kennedy present Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt on "The Make-up of America: A Majority of Minorities," *Eleanor Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and the Election of 1960: A Project of The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers*, ed. by Allida Black, June Hopkins, John Sears, Chris Alhambra, Mary Jo Binker, Christopher Brick, John S. Emrich, Eugenia Gusev, Kristen E. Gwinn, and Bryan D. Peery (Columbia, S.C.: Model Editions Partnership, 2003). Electronic version based on unpublished letters. (<a href="http://adh.sc.edu">http://adh.sc.edu</a>)

search for opportunities and to contribute positively to the lives of their families and communities back home.

Costa Rica, like the United States, is a large recipient of migrants. These immigrants arrive mostly from our northern neighbor, Nicaragua, and work in sectors of the labor market with a high demand for and low supply of employees, such as the seasonal agriculture and construction industries. In 2000, Nicaraguans constituted about 6% of the Costa Rican population and, while there is no official statistic, some estimates have placed the current number around 10%. The World Bank Group determined that approximately 12% of Nicaragua's total gross domestic product (GDP) was dependent on migrant remittances. Immigrants to Costa Rica contribute to our economy and significantly affect their own. I provide you with this context to demonstrate the similar challenges to the United States that Costa Rica faces as well as the universality of the immigrant experience. Beneath different national statistics of population and dollars, there are still people searching for the same thing in the United States and Costa Rica: opportunity.

The humanity of Latin American immigrants must not be lost in the debate about fences and patrol dogs and employer verification systems. Immigrants are not enemies conspiring to invade a country but rather they are the hopeless searching for hope as generations of Americans have done in the past. One of my favorite poems, entitled "Hombre" or "Man," was written by Costa Rican poet, Jorge Debravo. In this poem, Debravo writes about being human, "No pido eternidades/llenas de estrellas blancas./Pido ternura, cena,/silencio, pan y casa.../Soy hombre." In English, this roughly translates to, "I don't ask for eternities full of white stars. I ask for tenderness, dinner, silence, bread and shelter. I am man." People do not make difficult journeys of migration away from their families and everything they know to demand eternities of perfection; rather, these journeys serve to reinforce only their most basic human needs. It is the obligation of the more fortunate to ensure that these needs are met.

Eleanor Roosevelt recognized the strength of the American melting pot when she encouraged citizens not to preoccupy themselves with particular waves of immigration. Rather, the focus, she insisted, should be on providing immigrants with a home and an opportunity to use their talents to the fullest capacity to add to the structure of the United States. This attitude was courageous in the face of the many people who had to be convinced of its truth as Mrs. Roosevelt bravely acknowledged the right of immigrants to find happiness in the United States and to contribute to the country. In reading newspapers today, it often would seem that immigration is not positive at all but, despite the pervasive antagonistic rhetoric, the mutual respect of good neighbors demands that all citizens recognize the benefits of the relationship.

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> "Porcentaje de la población nacida en el extranjero en Costa Rica," *InfoCensos*. Centro Centroamericano de Población, Universidad de Costa Rica (CCP-UCR), 2004. (http://infocensos.ccp.ucr.ac.cr).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The World Bank Group, Nicaragua Data Profile.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Jorge Debravo, "Hombre"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Citizens for Kennedy present Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt on "The Make-up of America: A Majority of Minorities."

Immigration does help the American economy. 500 economists and social scientists, including five Nobel Prize winners stated their consensus in a June 2006 Open Letter to U.S. President George W. Bush that the benefits most likely outweigh the losses. The argument that immigrants take American jobs is an illusion, they claim, because, "if labor markets remain free, flexible and open to all workers on an equal basis," enough jobs should be created to fill the demand. The negative effect on American workers would be to lower wages in low-skill jobs but, given the skills, capital and entrepreneurship that immigrants bring to the U.S. economy, the overall effect is positive for Americans. In addition, the benefits are not just to the United States but rather, as is the nature of compromise, the gain can be mutual. Since immigrants often work to send money back to their communities in Latin America, the signatories of the Open Letter argue that the opportunities available in the United States constitute "a form of truly effective foreign aid."

While I believe this letter is important in creating a counterweight in the often negative language of immigration, the final point about foreign aid glides much too smoothly over critical issues seething below the surface that rarely come to light in discussion: the inequality of per capita income between the United States and Latin America, its causes, and how it contributes directly to the amount of emigration from Latin America to the United States. No real progress can be made on the issue so long as the effects rather than the causes are being addressed. Punitive measures, furthermore, are counterproductive to the long-term goals of the United States domestically and to neighborly relations.

As a result of current American policy, many immigrants without official status are forced to endure violations of their basic rights because of their inability to hold abusers accountable; and when human rights are not upheld, everyone loses. An August 2006 New York Times article illuminated as an example of a larger phenomenon the reality of Guatemalan immigrants in Florida targeted by criminals specifically because the fear accompanying their status discourages them from reporting crimes.<sup>8</sup> The Human Rights Brief of the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at American University's Washington College of Law further lays out the implication of a March 2002 U.S. Supreme Court decision in which American law fails to protect the labor rights of undocumented workers. The decision creates a distinct divide between the remedies for labor rights violations against documented and undocumented employees. As a result, in addition to a depression of wages and obstacles to labor organization, "the availability of workers who will expect and demand less from their employers allows employers in turn to lower workplace labor standards for all employees." This combination of immigrant fear and inability to defend their rights or seek help is demoralizing, and hurts American citizens as much as it deteriorates the relationship between Latin America and the United States; in this case, everyone sacrifices and no one gains.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Open Letter on Immigration, The Independent Institute, June 19, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Riki Altman and Terry Aguayo, "Here Illegally, Guatemalans Are Prime Targets of Crime," New York Times, Section 1, Page 12, Column 1, August 27, 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Lilah S. Rosenblum, "Mistakes in the Making: The Failure of U.S. Immigration Reform to Protect the Labor Rights of Undocumented Workers," 13 No. 3 Hum. Rts. Brief, Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at American University Washington College of Law, p. 25.

Some of the immigration reform policies proposed this year in the United States reflects the next logical step in jeopardizing the human rights of immigrants. The proposed House of Representatives bill further criminalizes undocumented immigrants and would make it a felony even to give humanitarian aid to them. <sup>10</sup> While the proposed Senate bill is not as harsh in its language, the focus is still on border security and putting up a literal and figurative wall between the United States and Latin America. The talk of constructing the border fence always reminds me of the famous Robert Frost poem, "Mending Wall," in which the narrator's neighbor claims in the most famous line that, "Good fences make good neighbors." Somehow, this is not what I believe Franklin Roosevelt had in mind when he described his foreign policy. In the same poem, Frost asks his neighbor mischievously, "Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out/And to whom I was like to give offence." The lines implore the reader to question the reasons for constructing a wall. Both the U.S. and Latin America need to engage in this sort of examination internally, cooperatively, and from the standpoint of good neighbors.

In order for the countries of Latin America to do their part, they first must ensure that their own values of human security and rights are upheld regionally. This would reflect reverence for good citizenship and the intentions of each state for acting transparently, fairly, and without discrimination. Defining these values makes it easier to establish common standards with the United States. For example, one of the most important issues at the U.S.-Mexico border that can be addressed through international cooperation is A fence between Mexico and the United States will not stop human smuggling. smuggling but rather will raise the stakes for such an act, increasing profits for smugglers as prices rise with increased danger and further compromising the human rights of the most desperate people. These kinds of violations should not happen and citizens on both sides of the border need to work together to demand better.

Latin American governments, furthermore, need to take care of things at home as best they can so as to promote the self-respect and confidence that accompanies development. When Latin America does well, it has many more positive things to offer the United States and the world; it can be the stable generous neighbor that Franklin Roosevelt described. This requires the governments of each Latin American country to take responsibility for national reforms that improve infrastructure, healthcare, education, and that cut military expenditures. There is no justification for promoting policies that lead children to work instead of learning to read and write or those that allow extensive spending on the military while there are no desks or books in schools. Strong policies lead to stability and allow countries to benefit from increased economic openness.

One of the main issues to tackle is lack of job opportunities in Latin America both for low-skill and for talented young workers. From a Central American perspective, this problem is pressing. In Guatemala, over seventy percent of the population survives in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, H.R.4437 (Referred to Senate Committee after being Received from House). <sup>11</sup> Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," 1915.

informal sector. A 2005 survey in Nicaragua found that three out of five households have a member that has tried unsuccessfully to find a job. Costa Rica faces a distinct but no less serious problem of providing employment opportunities to the growing number of college graduates. Latin America needs to focus on garnering the support of private investment, better integration into the world economy, and providing capital and training to entrepreneurs, especially peasant farmers. Each country needs to take into account its resources, its inequalities and the ways in which it can harness its resources to best eradicate its inequalities. This level of scrutiny needs to extend from regional to hemispheric policies that affect development. Subsequently, Latin Americans can call for reform but, if it falls on deaf ears, the desire for development is a moot point; you can ask a neighbor to stop littering by showing him the bigger picture of why it is bad for everyone in the community, but if he refuses to acknowledge your plea, it reduces the incentive for anyone to keep the neighborhood clean; and, again, everyone loses.

In order for true economic development to happen, where people have real opportunities to establish quality lives in their home countries, the United States as Latin America's most developed neighbor needs to sincerely examine the effects of its policies. Growth through economic openness often is an ideal rather than a reality, and, unfortunately in Latin America, while there is extensive openness, this has led in most cases to marginalization rather than integration. It is a matter of policy and a moral obligation of the United States to give true foreign aid to Latin America instead of allowing limited immigration to define its course of action. The current President of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias, has often argued that, "The leaders of wealthy countries with large domestic markets must understand that we, in the developing world, depend on trade for our survival. We must export or die, and if we cannot export our goods, we will have no option but to continue exporting our people."<sup>13</sup> Without the generosity of spirit of our more developed neighbor, Latin America will be subject to a progressively harsher fate without economic or human resources. This is problematic for all because it will almost certainly affect the United States as Latin American lives grow increasingly dire and as people search for an outlet for their discontent.

One of the most important things that the United States can do in terms of addressing the causes of immigration is to end their agricultural subsidies as they have been implemented through the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, and that have forced so many farmers into abject poverty. It has always been the policy of the United States to encourage other countries to open their domestic markets, but this should be a mutual process and not to the disadvantage of the willing countries in Latin America. The regional share for agricultural exports is highest globally for Latin America at 29%, excluding Mexico. Under NAFTA, imports of subsidized maize from the United States have contributed to a 70% decline in real proceeds for Mexico's millions of maize farmers. These protectionist subsidies serve to undermine economic development in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Oscar Arias, "Combating the Causes of Coerced Migration," El Libro de la Cumbre Iberoamericana, 2006

Oscar Arias, Speech to the Albert Schweitzer Institute at Quinnipiac University, November 8, 2003.
United Nations Development Programme, et.al., "Making Global Trade Work for People., New York,

<sup>2003,</sup> p. 122.

Latin America as well as human development in the region, as people emigrate in search of opportunities.

The spending habits that accompany these policies need to be reconsidered. For a fraction of what the United States spends subsidizing the overproduction of crops, it could help to establish a system of small loans for entrepreneurs and businesspeople in Latin America; it could contribute to the development of sustainable access to safe drinking water for its neighbors; and it could provide millions of children with full primary schooling. This reevaluation needs to apply to agricultural subsidies as well as to the misguided proposals of the United States Senate and House of Representatives for spending more than a billion dollars on constructing a fence between the United States and Mexico. Again, this brings me back to assessing the goals of building a fence or, more precisely, why people believe in the need for a fence in the first place. The issue fundamentally is one of causes, not effects, and some well-planned generosity could empower everyone.

The debate about Latin American immigration, it occurs to me, really is about the global community and whether or not we can make values of camaraderie come to life in our own backyard. Indeed, sometimes it is easier to have goodwill towards a stranger than your own neighbor but that does not let anyone off the hook. Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt were visionaries in their progressive thinking on international relations, universal human rights, and domestic policy. They promoted good citizenship and accountability when it was most difficult. The world needs more countries committed to being good neighbors and it especially needs developed countries to show some genuine interest in helping those who seek to improve themselves. As such, it would do to remember that kindness is not a show of weakness but of strength. Franklin Roosevelt, in his second inaugural address, reminded the world and the American people that, "We have always known that heedless self-interest was bad morals; we know now that it is bad economics...In the long run economic morality pays. We are beginning to wipe out the line that divides the practical from the ideal, and in doing so we are fashioning an instrument of unimagined power for the establishment of a morally better world." <sup>15</sup>

The values of striving for a morally better world must be a part of the relationship between Latin America and the United States if there is to be progress on the issue of immigration. Indeed, it is no small feat, especially, as Franklin Roosevelt acknowledged, that, "in our personal ambitions we are individualists." But, he countered, "...in our seeking for economic and political progress as a nation, we all go up, or else we all go down, as one people." By this, he meant that, regardless of how much we prioritize ourselves as individuals, our fate is collective; the global community begins with the individual. Jorge Debravo also wrote in his poem, "Hombre," "Soy hombre, es decir,/animal con palabras./Y exijo, por lo tanto,/que me dejen usarlas." "I am man, that is to say,/animal with words./And I demand, hence,/That I be allowed to use them." Both Franklin Roosevelt and Jorge Debravo's statements remind us that, as humans, we all struggle

7

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Second Inaugural Address of Franklin Roosevelt, The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, January 20, 1937 (<a href="http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/presiden/inaug/froos2.htm">http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/presiden/inaug/froos2.htm</a>).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Jorge Debravo, "Hombre."

against the same dilemmas, contradictions, and weaknesses. There is much to be gained, however, by addressing these with words, not concrete; generosity, not hostility; and compromise, not obstinance. By aiming to rise above the commonplace, we can determine the direction of our shared destinies. I politely urge all American and Latin American citizens to choose the path of human progress. Please, as good neighbors, let us stand up and go up together.

Thank you all again for attending and good afternoon.