



**Remarks by  
The Reverend Luis Cortés, Jr.  
Latino Leader Luncheon Series**

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Luis Cortés: I'm so happy the senator read it just like I wrote it. Wow. This group looks so prosperous. I'm a Baptist minister, we should collect an offering right away. We just should.

So Mickey Ibarra who told me I have 20 minutes. I'm a Puerto Rican Baptist, 20 minutes is the intro. But nevertheless I will keep to that. I will not do that. I will keep to the tradition that Mickey has established with Latino leaders. To Mickey Ibarra, the board of directors, the event team, the staff and the sponsors, I'm humbled, my family's humbled, our organization is humbled and so we give you thanks. I do have a message from Julio Suárez who said please drink the beers because if you don't, he has to drink them. And there's an awful lot of it out here.

It's difficult to prepare for this meeting. I read the book. I know many of the people who are in the book. When I started thinking about what do you say to Latino leaders and how do you speak about the same issues or struggles as a clergy person, how can I be different? The answer is I can't. We face struggles in this country, and we always have.

The first language spoken in this country when Cristóbal Colón arrived here, a citizen of Spain - he was Italian, but a citizen of Spain - the first language spoken, first foreign language spoken on these shores was Spanish. So how do we recapture our history? Because I think that's a major issue. As our children are attacked directly and indirectly psychologically with the dialogue that we're having at a national level, I think there's

nothing more important than us recapturing our history. Who were in fact our first senators, our first congressmen? Who were in fact the business leaders of our nation?

This book *Latino Leaders* talks about some of that, but it's too recent. We go back to Cristóbal Colón. We need to recapture our history. We need to let our children know not only do we belong here; we were here first as strangers. We were here first as strangers because the indigenous people of this nation were saying like, who is this guy Colón?

When I looked and read through the book, Mickey, I realized there're four different types of struggle. You have our class and economic struggles. We have what I call our culture and Latino-ness or Hispanic-ness struggles. You have struggles in the book about network and access. And then, when we get to a certain point, we actually have struggles about policy and power. I don't have enough time so I just chose one. I chose culture and Hispanic-ness because I think all of us go through that particular struggle.

As a child I didn't know we were poor. I was born in Spanish Harlem, *El Barrio* as we called it. I didn't know that my father worked a low-skilled job. I did not know that selling popular club plan and my mother selling furniture and clothes out of the popular club plan and the Spiegel catalog. I don't know if some of you remember. You got to be kind of older to remember that. But my mother sold that so she could stay home with the children, me and my two brothers, and still support the family. I didn't know that speaking in Spanish at home with *abuela* and *abuelo* and your parents and understanding the television world - - was it real? I didn't know that. So I learned English watching television. Basically, what we called *muñequitos*, right? Like many of us. But I didn't know.

I always remember I was overjoyed as a child on my first day of school. I had a *bulto* with my paper and pencils. And I remember in my first day of school I met two kids, Larry and Gilbert. I don't remember their last names, but to this day I'll never forget them. They were the first *gringos* I ever met, Larry and Gilbert, and I wanted to be their friend. I don't know why, but I wanted to be. Those are like the TV guys. In my first day of school, back then public school, PS 83 in El Barrio, ended at lunch, ended in midday. You have a lunch and then you go. I was walking out and I saw Larry and Gilbert waiting for me. I was excited and I walked out. Before I could say a word, Larry and Gilbert spit in my face and they called me

something which I did not understand. They called me a spic. I didn't know what that was, but I remember it probably isn't good. And even as I say it today, I kind of feel the tension in my tummy, in my stomach because that happened. I remember going home and I remember my mother saying to me [speaks in Spanish]. Like ignore it, we don't want any problems.

Five years later, in 1967, my father and my mother got assigned to public housing. In my father's mind, moving from Spanish Harlem to Black Harlem in 1967 was a good idea. By then I looked like an Italian kid. In my first day of school -- and this is what I'm going to talk about, right, cultural clash. On my first day of school I'm walking in the hall with Anthony Tompkins, another name I will never forget. He says to me, you better get ready. And I said, why? He said, Hec. A guy named Hec. Those of you who follow basketball know Hec back in the days, a guy who fouls a lot. But he was a young African-American male in the 8th grade, I'm in 7th grade. He was about 5-foot-11. I thought he had a beard but he didn't, but it seemed that way to me.

Hec had called me a cracker and I'm like, I don't know what a cracker is. But it's 1967. I look Italian. I'm at Frederick Douglass Junior High School, 2,800 young people. There're two Puerto Ricans in that school - a young woman named Mary who was as fine as could be for young Latina, and this kid that looked Italian. Louie as they called me. I had the first of about a dozen fights in my first three months in that school.

Now I will say this about Hec because there's nothing more oppressive than being told at 10:00 in the morning that you're going to get your butt kicked at 3:00. So you watch the clock go slow. I did what any good Latino-American would do. I jumped out of school like two minutes early and ran to the bus stop. I get to the bus stop and I swore I made it out, and I'm like maybe tomorrow it won't happen. I'm looking this way and the kids who were looking this way went, ooh. That kind of sound came up which meant Hec is behind me. I would love to tell you that I beat the heck out of Hec, but Hec beat the heck out of me in my first day.

Two years later I'm at DeWitt Clinton High School in The Bronx. First day of school and I'm walking up the steps of DeWitt Clinton High School and there's a group of Puerto Rican guys. Those are my guys I'm thinking as I'm walking up the stairs. They looked at me and they laughed. I can't say it the way they say it but this is what they say, huh, this guy thinks he's a

Negro or black. I'm using nicer words. I was wearing Playboy shoes, sharkskin pants, and alpaca sweater, the official uniform of African-American youth in 1969. I did not know that.

The late '60s and '70s introduced me in Black Harlem and in The Bronx to the ideas of the time. So I want to raise this because these ideas have a role to play for us today. The ideas back then was black power, brown power, self-determination. This is a big one, the social control of institutions who set the pace, right, economic development by black, by brown. Latinos grow up in two very distinct cultures. At home we were taught to look down when authority speaks to us as a sign of respect. In school, that's a sign of disrespect. Most of our children do not have the capacity to tell a teacher, you know, teacher, your problem is that you don't understand how we've been sociologically brought up and culturally what you're asking me to do is an error. So what the kids do is what I do when I was screamed at in school. The more they screamed at me or told me to look at me in the eye, the lower I got which led to mommy being called to school for me being disrespectful and for a confusion for a period.

Too many of our young people still suffer that. Too many of our young people still don't understand that their culture is different. Our cultural differences are ingrained even in our language. Sometimes, I'm really grateful of that. Because if I'm thinking in Spanish and the airplane I'm supposed to be on flies overhead as I run to the airport, I get to say *el avión me dejó*. For those of you who don't speak the heavenly language of Spanish, the airplane left me. When a plate falls and it breaks, *el plato se cayó*. The plate fell as if it had its own will.

That fatalism comes as a mixture of indigenous culture, which we are and have, and Roman Catholicism. That mixture allows for an idea that can be abused to the detriment of our people. I'll give you an example. It's that idea of the Hollywood when I was a child, and still does, allows that three bad *gringos* can go into a Mexican town and take it over. And all the Mexicans are dressed like in these white little pants, ponchos, and hats. All of you have seen Clint Eastwood movies, so don't make believe you don't know what I'm talking about. Clint Eastwood became a zillionaire based on that, on perpetuating that image - that Mexican men and women are meek and that a super *gringo*, Clint Eastwood, can come into town and free us from a few bad *gringos*. It is subjugation. It's false communication. It is inferiority through media. And it happens in our school books.

We have in our textbooks two pages in world history dedicated to Simón Bolívar. How could that be when a man creates 13 countries and liberates them from oppression but he's not discussed? He doesn't really exist. He is a man that makes George Washington look puny in comparison. I used the word puny on purpose. Latinos first struggle and our continuing struggle is the one of culture. If they could beat us at culture, early in our life we are subjugated. We are psychologically subjugated to being second class. So conversations about borders, about criminality, that is the goal to psychologically subjugate not us because we're already beyond it, it's our children. It's about the future. Not about the present. That's what we have to understand. We won't have the gumption to fight for, or develop networks and access, or build our economy or influence policy and power if subtlety you have been subjugated psychologically. So it is about the future.

A Latino child crying at the border for a parent instills anger in all of us. But you know what it instills in our children? Not angerear - fear. Fear. Every Latino child's heart who's listening to the news in their soul - regardless of their status, education, or social class - is being told directly you have no future. This is our task. This is our primary fight - to protect our children, to fight for the future of our nation by not allowing the subjugation of our children psychologically. We must be vigilant of what we communicate to our children and what social media is communicating for them.

For me, it is schools and church that help me create the social constructs needed to survive these cultural onslaughts which are not new because, as I mentioned, they started with me as a child. It was during high school that I started going to a Protestant church in Spanish Harlem due to the fact that my mother kept complaining to my father and my father told me, if your mother is happy, I'm happy. If your mother's not happy, I'm not happy. And then it's going to be really bad for you.

So I start going to church on Sundays in order to keep my mother happy and keep my father from being bad for me. This decision changed my life for the better, the institutional Latino church in the neighborhood, right, the second Spanish Baptist church on 102nd Street. A small church, 200 people maybe. It provided for me access to a caring community. It provided for me access to an encouragement to find my Latino culture. They are the ones that told me you got to learn Spanish better. I'm like, why do I got to learn Spanish for? And they were like, because

you have to preach the gospel. You have to understand. You have to talk to your cousins. They actually helped me. I would speak, you know, as we always put kids up in church to terrorize them. We put them in front of the church to sing in Spanish. But they're singing in Spanish. We put them in front of the church to say something in Spanish.

When I said something wrong, the older ladies in the church from the first row will correct me. I learned through them. They challenged me to seek better for myself and for my future. They trained me for leadership by making me do things in the church that I didn't want to do. But they were leadership things. And they created mentors for me, adults who were academically prepared to challenge the world and to become a role model. A baseline, they gave me a baseline of thought of theology. Some of you might want to call it ideology. You could call it what you want, but it was a baseline which I could work from as I matured. And as I matured, I could take it to different levels and begin to do a critical analysis of what was going on in my world.

My mentors - the Rev. Santiago, Dr. Soto-Fontanez with a PhD out of Columbia University, Dr. José Ortiz, Dr. Orlando Costas. You notice something? Male role models all with PhD's in the church, and they were able to reach out and mentor me. An institution which provided a pathway to further develop in my career, I worked for the American Baptist churches. I worked for a group called IFCO, the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, whose head of it was a gentleman by the name of Julian Bond. I have had the opportunity to cross over and do a lot of work with African-American communities. Our future will depend on it.

Somehow we became the largest minority in America. It means nothing. It really means nothing. Somehow we've become the largest minority, but we are bifurcated because some of us are Mexicanos and some are Puerto Rican and some are Puerto Rican from here or Puerto Rican from there. And some of us are Mexicanos, but it depends what *colonia* you're from. I'm learning that. So we're pretty divided even among our unity here as leaders.

IFCO's taught me. At IFCO we did projects on the self-determination of Puerto Rico, the national anti-clan network, and we supported freedom for South Africa with Nelson Mandela. It was there that I began to have a connection to the African-American community that was different, which led to African-

American mentors. Union Theological Seminary gave me a base, a theological base. Eastern Baptist let me teach which I learned is not what I wanted to do for a living. The Philadelphia Baptist Association had 113 churches in Philadelphia under my care.

While I was there, it was interesting. I had Congressman Bill Gray. The Reverend Doctor Bill Gray was under my care, which was a joke. This is a congressman. He had one of the largest churches in the city, and I'm all of 24 years old trying to call him to tell him we're supposed to get together and pray. Back then he was doing the fax age. He says, you know what, son? When an African-American minister calls you son, you already know what's going on. He goes, you know what, son, why don't you sent me a fax about what we're supposed to pray about? So I did and he actually met with me and helped me, as did Rev. Dr. Leon Sullivan from the Sullivan principles, who eventually says to me I want you on the board of a bank, and it helped open doors and changed my life.

It is church, like my parents, that provided an ethical and social understanding about family, the poor and community service. It was at church where I scoped out the girl with the prettiest legs. She was the smartest of all of them. I was in high school --

Female Voice: That's right.

Luis Cortés: I didn't expect that response. I was in high school. All right, I want you to hear this. I was in high school and she was in college, so I had some work to do. I married Damaris Flores. We are here and we'll be celebrating our 41st wedding anniversary this month.

My mentors, like my parents, all pushed education. They all pushed social justice. They all demanded I speak and write for and on behalf of the neighborhood. Added to the men I mentioned were Dr. Lucius Walker of IFCO, Dr. Carl Flemister who's the first African-American to head of what was used to be called Health Education and Welfare. I talked about Leon Sullivan who put me on the board of an African-American bank called United Bank of Philadelphia. They formed me and I was able to become the founder of Esperanza. We have developed a faith-based, community-based response to the needs of Latinos in Philadelphia. We've been described as a national model, but I used other Latino groups.

I saw what happened in the African-American community in order to build Esperanza, the LACU, and Chicanos Por La Causa. The LACU is in East Los Angeles, in L.A, Chicanos Por La Causa in Arizona. I visited them early when I first started at Esperanza. The leadership of those two organizations never said they were too busy, they never said don't come. I flew across the country and met with the presidents of those groups, which at that time were 10 million to 50 million. They were the largest Latino organizations in the country. They taught me how to do this work, and they inspired me to do this work. Both of these organizations are Mexicano organizations. We have got to find ways to bridge these gaps that we have among our people.

The 32 years at Esperanza have helped us develop 15 acre campus, a charter school which is a difficult thing in a city like Philadelphia which is a fully Democratic city. Charter schools are for Latinos if they're run by the local community. Our empowerment, self-determination, economic development - it is what makes us. It is the most empowering thing we could do. But there is a conflict there between political parties and power, and so that's a really tough place. We got to find a way to bridge that gap or Latino charter schools are going to be separated from the Latino leadership. We've developed a college, a theater for the arts, over 450 jobs serving the local community.

Being in the faith has helped open doors to political leaders. I've had the opportunity to serve three presidents. President Clinton as part of the -- I founded the National Hispanic Partnership for Community Health which was a health response having to deal also with HIV-AIDS. With President Bush, I was able to do a prayer on his inauguration and worked with him on faith-based immigration and Hispanic affairs. With President Obama, we did Hispanic affairs immigration. I led a delegation on his behalf, on behalf of the White House, to Guatemala and Honduras on children coming to the border.

Esperanza organized the National -- I'm coming to an end. I'm going to go over a minute, I think. I'm pretty close. Two minutes, I'm there.

We organized the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast. As we've done every two years, we bring together over 500 of our clergy to advocate. This year we did over 150 visits to the Hill. We had in one program Mr. Schumer, Ms. Pelosi, Mr. Smith from the Carolinas who's Republican if you don't know him, the chair of



the RNC, the vice chair of the DNC, and the vice president of United States. It is a bipartisan program. I don't understand how people say we got to have bipartisan approaches and then we won't talk to each other. That's just not going to work.

Clergy went to the Hill on the separation of families. I am proud that we had over 180 visits where, regardless of the politician, we made it clear that separation of families is not allowed. There's a lot of noise in our current national debates on Hispanics and borders and us being criminals. We need to protect our children from psychological harm, teach our youth the tactics that were taught to us in the '60s and '70s that led to almost every Latino leader in this book.

I want to end with a quote from a very famous person. I'm a *Star Trek* fan and there's a group called the Borg which go around and take over other groups. My friends, all the noise, all the rhetoric, all the attempts to stop Latino-American culture from growing and becoming more powerful are irrelevant. You know why? The demographics are clear and, as the Borg say, resistance is futile, you will be assimilated. Thank you.