

LATINO LEADERS NETWORK™

MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN

Remarks by:
Lt. General Ricardo Sanchez
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Ricardo Sanchez: Gracias. Esos gringos no saben de lo que estabamos hablando, eh? Congresswoman, thank you so much for those very humbling comments.

Secretaries, undersecretaries, deputy secretaries, distinguished guests, and especially the young people that are here, future leaders of our Hispanic community, I deeply appreciate your taking the time to be here. And to Mickey, thank you for organizing this and thank you for this honor. I am deeply humbled.

We're to talk about how we managed to achieve -- when a leader gets honored with his work, he talks about how he's done what he has accomplished. I have done absolutely nothing extraordinary in my life. What I have done has been driven by the oath of office that made me a soldier. That oath demands loyalty to our constitution and has as its foundation a very fundamental commitment to do our duty. As Robert E. Lee said, "Duty is the sublimest word in our language. Do your duty in all things. You cannot do more. You should never do less." I pray that I have lived up to my professional oath.

Now, I am an old soldier who is blessed with commanding warriors from 40 different countries over the course of my time leading international forces in battle. I am a husband who has been tolerated for almost 37 years by a beautiful wife from South Texas. I am a father who has tried to instill values, character, and patriotism in his children and has been blessed with two of my daughters -- I have four children -- with my two daughters, the oldest of the family, having volunteered to go to Iraq as members of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service because it was their duty to serve their country, not because they had to go.

And now finally, Maria Elena and I have entered the next amazing phase of our lives. We are grandparents. Don't ask me to show you a picture of my granddaughter because I've got about 320 of them in my iPhone, okay? It'll take you about 30 minutes to go through them all, the latest one from yesterday.

Now, given my beginnings, the odds must surely have been against me. But I didn't know what the odds were as I grew up in Starr County deep in South Texas, the poorest county in the nation, back then when I was growing up and pretty much still so today. By any standard, in spite of all of my challenges, the Lord has blessed me with success, happiness, and friendships that go well beyond anything I had a right to dream of when I was young. I grew up in a very simple world where the simplest things in life were oftentimes very hard to come by: a hot bath in winter, a new pair of shoes during the school year, a second-hand sports coat, and warmth in our home. I learned to appreciate the simplest things in life at a very early age. Joy came from winning at marbles, the rare restaurant meal, and a new family car which I would find out later was over 10 years old when my father bought it.

Economic opportunity for me was getting a job as a custodian or a gardener so that I wouldn't have to pick cotton. In fact, I was such a lousy cotton picker that I made more money sweeping stores and gardening than I ever made in the cotton fields. My pay was \$1.50 a week working two jobs as a custodian and errand boy. The most I ever earned in a week picking cotton was \$0.75. I was blessed with a mother who valued education even though she struggled until middle age to get her high school GED. I remember all of us walking to the high school campus and playing in the schoolyard while she attended night classes. This was a first example of perseverance that I remember.

My personal first challenge with perseverance came when I was told by my fifth-grade math teacher in front of all my peers that I was a dummy and would never do well in math. Guess what? Maybe this was a motivation technique back then, but I'll tell you very honestly, I was peeved, okay, but it worked. After that incident, I told myself that never again would I be embarrassed by anyone in that manner and especially not in math. I took away the lesson that I had to work extra hard to prove myself worthy and probably the most impactful lesson that I learned was that I had to prove wrong those that had very low expectations of me. This would prove critical because that was the stereotypical environment that I would face immediately upon entering the army. Nobody expected Hispanics to succeed in the officer corps.

The value of perseverance and never accepting defeat was reinforced later when I went to see the high school counselor to get help in completing an application to the military academies. Instead of helping me -- and I can hear it as clear today as the day she said it -- she said, "What you need to do is you need to go be a welder just like your father," and she didn't help me. With the help of my junior ROTC instructors, Sergeant Grigsby and Major Marshall, I was awarded both Army and Air Force four-year ROTC scholarships and also nominations to West Point and the Naval Academy.

Many took credit for helping. Teachers and counselors have a special responsibility to encourage young people, instill confidence, set high expectations and praise them in order for them to succeed, but it is ultimately the parents that must accept the responsibility for their failures, their attitudes, their successes, and their motivations. Our society must recapture the focus on education that has been slipping away from American society if we are to retain our greatness as a nation. I hope that I have taught my children, and I hope to teach my grandchildren and all those that I have been blessed to influence that they must dare to dream of greatness, that they must never allow anyone to keep them from realizing their dreams. Many will try but all must fail. You can control your destiny but it requires unrelenting perseverance and a never-accept-defeat approach to life.

Now, also during my early days in Rio Grande City, I learned that character, family, and love of country were important. My parents knew that doing the right thing all of the time was important. When I made a commitment, I was expected to follow through regardless of how difficult it was. Facing the consequences of my actions was not negotiable. Integrity was absolute. We were expected to tell the truth. Somehow my parents always knew when I had gotten into trouble before they asked us about it. Lying was futile and lying made the consequences more severe. The lesson for me was clear: Always do the right thing even when no one is watching because someone will be -- those damn neighbors.

This is a definition of discipline that is embraced by many but adhered to by few. All of us are fallible and will sometimes fail in this quest, but this should not deter us from constant pursuit of this nearly impossible goal.

Now, I have never forgotten that a man of character is valued. Only you can compromise your integrity. Now, if you choose to compromise your integrity, then it's gone forever.

When I was in the throes of dealing with Abu Ghraib, I sought counsel from some of the most senior general officers that are alive today, those that I had worked with, and I was told by a very senior general whose name all of you would immediately recognize, that I was too honest for my own good. Unfortunately, I knew of no other way to live my life. The life lessons and values that I learned in South Texas were indelibly seared in my soul as I transitioned after college into a world that was foreign, complex, and unforgiving. I had never seen a black person until I was a senior in high school. English was a second language. Discrimination was not a part of my life because all of us were Hispanics. Ninety-nine percent of us were Hispanics in Rio Grande City, and the five or six Anglos that were in my senior class spoke Spanish perfectly for survival.

Service to country was this idealistic notion that was the most likely avenue to escape poverty. Very quickly, Maria Elena and I learned that American society was still struggling with immigration and non-discrimination. What I didn't know was that I was entering a profession which has set the standard for equal opportunity and non-discrimination for over two decades at that time. I would live a sheltered life.

In my initial assignment, I very quickly understood what it was to be a minority, a Hispanic, and a non-West Point graduate when I was told by my commander that my first efficiency report was going to be about 10 percent lower than the average because of where I had come from. He expected that it would take me about six to eight years, half of a career, in order for me to catch up with the rest of the junior officers in the unit. I didn't know any better. I didn't know to complain. What I did know was that I had to work relentlessly and a hell of a lot harder if I was to have a chance of success in that unit.

After being in the unit for about eight months, I was rewarded with the lousiest job in the unit, dining facility officer, because I had volunteered in my quest to improve myself to serve on an inspection team that found gross problems with the unit's dining facilities. Back then, we called them mess halls, and they were truly a mess. But the commander told me, "Well, Lieutenant Sanchez, you found the problems, now you get a chance to fix them." I did. And after almost two years I had to serve as a staff officer and upon assignment to the operations staff, I was given a desk in the corner with duties that consumed about one to two hours a week. I was reviewing training schedules, that was my sole duty, and that was if I took my time.

I volunteered for everything in sight. After four months, I was nominated and selected to be an aide to one of the general officers in the 82nd Airborne Division. On my exit call, my boss, a captain at that time, told me that he had fought very hard to keep me from being assigned to his section because all of his experience with Hispanics up to that point had been bad. The commander had forced him to give me the job. And it all became clear, the stereotypes, the prejudices, the low expectations of Hispanics were deeply embedded within the officer ranks and it would take a couple of generations for us all to completely overcome those biases. There was no question that if I was to succeed, I would have to demonstrate exceptional commitment, and my duty performance would have to go way beyond what was expected of an average officer.

I was doubly disadvantaged: I was a Hispanic and from an ROTC source of commission. This barely changed during the course of my career. And by the way, that boss and I are good friends to this day. I admired him in retrospect because he had the courage to sit in front of me and tell me that he had fought real hard to keep me from joining his team, but then after four-and-a-half months, he had been the one that personally recommended me to go be the aide-de-camp to the number two general officer in the division.

Now, these experiences were never far from my mind as I maneuvered my way through the challenges of being a professional warrior. Without the ability to share experiences, problems, and successes with a fellow Hispanic officer, that created significant problems for me and I never had a Hispanic role model. In my initial assignment, I served with a Puerto Rican officer but did not have a Hispanic officer in the same unit again until about 15 years later. I did not serve with a Hispanic of higher rank until I was a colonel in 1993, 20 years after I had joined the army.

Now, along the way, the need for adaptation, flexibility, and introspection was ever present. Immersion into the culture and value systems of the military was indispensable to my success. What I struggled with was the different perspectives and approaches that my heritage and my cultural values drove me to and what was necessary for success. At times, they were competing demands.

Now, one cannot deny that there is a need for mentors and role models that are willing to assist our minority subordinates in understanding and helping them work through the challenges of our profession. Without Hispanic mentors, I had to rely on those superior officers that had embraced, truly embraced the value system of the army and who had discarded their biases that still existed in the general population of American society. Fortunately, I met some along the way who understood that I needed professional guidance and they also understood that my perspectives might be slightly different. They underwrote my mistakes.

Having served with great warriors like Robinson and Boyle and Eddins and Hausch and Meigs and McCaffrey and Wallace and others, I learned that the most desirable trait in a warrior was courage. Now, you might ask, "Okay. So, what's new for a warrior?" I'm not talking about physical courage. Because I learned during my time in uniform that in battle, a soldier does his duty and his reaction to adversity is instinctive, sometimes resulting in amazing feats of physical courage and sometimes resulting in cowardice. However, the greatest challenge for us is displaying moral courage, and this is applying across every profession.

Moral courage is that indispensable characteristic of a warrior that demands selflessness when faced with a need to consciously decide whether you will stand up for what is right knowing all along that all of the possible personal consequences are unfavorable. Will you be willing and able to weather the storm that will inevitably follow? Now, moral courage is an uncommon trait, virtue, during the toughest of times and it is the greatest challenge for most of us.

Many encouraged me to speak out during the fall of 2007 against the strategy that had gone awry but no one was willing to stand up and be counted in the maelstrom to follow. Now, Robert E. Lee stated that true patriotism sometimes requires a man to act exactly contrary at one period to that which it does at another, and the motive which impels them the desire to do right is precisely the same.

Now, very early on, I've learned that a warrior must always control the high ground. This is a life lesson for all since it applies to all that we do. As we face challenges, we must never leave the moral high ground. You must have the commitment and faith to stay on that moral high ground knowing that you will prevail. There will be many anxious moments and some very tough seas that must be navigated, but in the end, your conscience will be clear. And as Dr. Martin Luther King stated, "however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth crushed to earth will rise again, and no lie can live forever."

Now, if you stay on that moral high ground, all controversy surrounds you, there will be many with opinions and many will express them freely especially the media, but few will be informed and even less will know the truth, so you must have the patience, the courage, and the willingness to stay out of the fray because you cannot win.

As a young captain, one of my bosses told me, "Never wrestle with a pig because you'll both get dirty and the pig will love it." I never forgot that. That was Colonel Watha James Eddins.

Now, when you are engaged in controversy, "you are like a wounded zebra on the Serengeti. The herd is mildly interested in your survival. Their first priority is the protection of the herd. But if you survive, they will bring you back into the herd." This was a description given to me by one of those generals that I sought counsel from while dealing with Abu Ghraib. This is a very accurate metaphorical comparison but it must not deter you if you find yourself in those situations.

Now, without question, the greatest challenge for a military leader in high command lies in the politics of war. This isn't surprising and it should be understood by all Americans since war is an extension of politics. The American way of war is fractured because modern war demands the integration and the synchronization of all elements of national power, and we as a nation have not quite figured out how to do that effectively. The challenges of interagency operations oftentimes overwhelm and undermine our war effort in total and as a nation to this day we continue to struggle. It's primarily because we have no mechanism to ensure unity of effort. The partisanship that has fractured our political processes is also a contributor to these challenges. Now, I have come away from my professional experiences with an undaunted spirit of faith that is unshakeable and a love of country that is still unsurpassed.

I have been asked by some of my foreign military friends, "How can you be so loyal today given what your country did to you?" My answer is simple. I was blessed with seeing firsthand that American democracy has evolved into something that is not understood around the world. Americans do not appreciate our democracy unless you have seen other countries struggle with these issues. We have made great strides in advancing to the ideal human condition that our forefathers envisioned when they enshrined the Bill of Rights as the first 10 amendments to our constitution. We are truly without a question the greatest democracy on earth. We do not understand when other people tell us that they do not want what we have in America because it is tough to accept.

While serving as a commander of U.S. Forces in Kosovo from '99 to 2000, I encountered a highly respected Kosovar leader who repeatedly asked me at a social function, "What are you? Who are you?" I couldn't understand his question, so I told him I was an American soldier and I was a commander of the U.S. Forces. He insisted, saying, "No. But what are you?" He said, "You are not an American." Finally, I understood the question. So, I told him that I was a Mexican American. I told him a little bit about my grandparents and my great-grandparents and how they'd come to the United States. And his response was, "How can this be? How is it that a minority

is commanding all of U.S. Forces here in my country?" He couldn't comprehend what it was to have equal opportunity.

Years later, as recently as a couple of years ago in a conversation with a Western European military leader, we started talking about the opportunity for high command and strategic leadership within their armed forces and he stated flat out, he said, "You would never have become a general officer in our country. Your background and ethnicity would have automatically disqualified you. You might've become a lieutenant colonel or colonel."

My country gave me great opportunities, but in the end, I was asked to retire. Now, we must be proud of being Americans. We can never forget the tremendous benefits and rights that we possess, and we must understand that we have a responsibility to serve our country. Our opportunities as minorities and specifically as Hispanics within the military are unlimited. There is no other segment of society that has embraced equal opportunity and non-discrimination to the same extent as the American military. This is what I meant earlier when I said I had lived a sheltered life.

This is not to say that there aren't problems because as Hispanics we still have glass ceilings. We still are not represented at the strategic level of leadership, at the general officer, army general officer level, at the same rate as we are represented across the society and within the military. Over the last 40 years, we have never had more than five to seven Hispanic general officers at any given time in the American Army. And over the last 75 years or so, we have had only three active duty three stars. These are active duty three stars that made it their lives profession to serve in uniform and only one four star. What's the problem? We are just as capable, just as competent, just as well educated as any other segment of this society.

Furthermore, when we finally hang up our uniform regardless of length of service, regardless of rank, we return to a society with multiple disadvantages. Not only do we return to be in a minority but we carry the added burden that accrues when America has lost touch with its military, with its armed forces. Sometimes we return to the poverty and the problems that we left behind when we joined our army. Corporate America values the traditional characteristics that have always been attributed to a warrior: courage, dedication, discipline, all of those things, but what they do not understand is a tremendously broad range of experiences and responsibilities that these warriors bring back to American society. The economic opportunity for a returning warrior is scarce and America must re-dedicate itself to correcting this injustice.

Now, in summary, never forget where you came from. It will give you humility, and humility provides a window to the heart and the soul of many who would otherwise shun you. Many choose to aggrandize themselves at the expense of others by whatever means, and some do succeed, but that is not necessary to succeed. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being idealistic, aggressive, disciplined, and focused and, in fact, if you are a minority, these traits are absolutely essential if you're going to have a

chance at success, but you must temper these characteristics with a dose of reality, compassion, humility, moral courage, and absolute integrity.

Throughout all of my professional career, I learned that in battle, even the simplest things are hard. The same is true in our daily lives. All the challenges that the Lord has allowed me to face have been a blessing and He has taken me to the heights of glory and the depths of despair. But I walk away proud of having served my country and I thank Him every day.

We are not guaranteed an easy life, and in fact, what is guaranteed is that we will struggle through untold sacrifices, desperation, sadness, disappointment, and injustice. But in the end, what is most important is that during the toughest of times, we never left the moral high ground and we display the courage to walk by faith and not by sight.

May God bless you. Thank you for your time.

[End of transcript]