

LATINO  LEADERS  
NETWORK™

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HON. MICKEY IBARRA, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN

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**Remarks by  
The Honorable Ken Salazar  
Latino Leaders Luncheon Series**

**July 29, 2015  
The Palmer House  
Chicago, IL**

Ken Salazar: Thank you. Thank you very much for that wonderful and kind introduction, Gery. Let me just say first, I've been inspired by the people of Chicago and the people of Illinois from day one, from the days when as a young man I came to study here at the Newberry Library to find the first census of the state of Colorado in 1885, the original census which had my grandmother who was born in 1884 in Colorado at the age of one, and learning about the Latino community here in Chicago over the years and then in my 2004 quest to become the United States senator for the state of Colorado, coming here and being received by so many of you who are in this room today and receiving advice from you as to how it is that someone from my background and the challenges that we had in Colorado to be elected the first Latino United States senator outside of the state of New Mexico. And it was in Gery Chico's office where I received the advice on the roadmap to victory. So, let's give Gery a round of applause for what he has done.

I remember that race in 2004 here in Illinois and I remember what Gery did to inspire the community and the world and, yes, Barack Obama is a wonderful friend of mine and a great colleague, and I'll tell you a short, little story about that in just a minute, but we're so fortunate that we have so many people here in Illinois who decide that they're going to lead and that's what you're doing here in Chicago. I was just talking to Senator Martinez, a senator, the only Latina in the senate in the state of Illinois. Well, if a member of the House of Representatives could find its way to the U.S. Senate and find its way to the presidency of the United States, why not a President Martinez to be a president of the United States of America?

Or I think about my own time running for Colorado attorney general, and I remember very well when I started thinking about this in 1997 and it was the governor of the state of Colorado, Roy Romero, a great friend, a great supporter of mine, I went into his office and I said, "Governor, I'm thinking about running for attorney general." He said, "Ken," he said, "I

don't know whether you can win because you have some rocks in your knapsack that I didn't have in mine." He said, "There's never been a Latino elected to any position ever in the history of Colorado statewide and I'm not sure that you can run a statewide race but I'll do everything within my power to help you win." Well, when all was said and done in 1998, out of all the constitutional offices, including the two United States senators for the state of Colorado, they were all Republican except for mine and I became the attorney general of Colorado, defied all the odds, all the odds of people had against me.

And so, now I think about somebody like Anita Alvarez -- please stand, Anita -- Cook County district attorney, people's attorney. I don't even know whether she's Republican or Democrat so I'm not going to ask the question but I got to say this, I got to say this, I got to say this, "That she should be the next attorney general or perhaps the governor of the state of Illinois."

So, I say those stories because there are so many great leaders around the country and Mickey Ibarra is one of those people. I remember well in my time as attorney general for the great state of Colorado and going to Washington, D.C. and seeing the monument as I was coming across the Potomac River and going up to the White House as an elected attorney general, and I was fighting to help preserve this part of Colorado which is in the very southern part of the state, a place called the San Luis Valley which I'll tell you a little bit more about in a minute. And the President Bill Clinton, the secretary of Interior and the congressional delegation and I were thinking about moving forward with the creation of the Great Sand Dunes National Park at the feet of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the San Luis Valley. And I didn't know how exactly to get it done. I didn't know how exactly to get it done. But I knew that if I could somehow just thread the needle and figure out a way of getting into the White House, that there was a guy there by the name of Mickey Ibarra and because he knew my history and he knew my past, he would make it happen.

And so, somebody said, "To create a national park like this will take at least 10 years. That's what happened in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. That's what's happened in other national parks we've created." Well, because of Mickey's help, President Clinton signed the bill into law creating Great Sand Dunes Park within one year and I'm delighted that one of my proud mementos that I still keep in my office is a picture of President Clinton, a copy of the bill, and one of the pens that he used to sign that into law. So, thank you, Mickey, for inspiring me them. Thank you for inspiring the Latino Leadership Network. Thank you for taking it from coast to coast. Thank you for not only what you do in Washington but in Chicago and L.A. and all across the country to unite us.

We had a dinner last night for some of the sponsors who were here and a few others and we're talking about some of the challenges here in Illinois which is state budget or gerrymandering electoral politics, a whole host of

other things, and I was telling a story about my coming to Chicago as a young man at the age of 21 years old to study at the Newberry Library and my concept then of Latinos in the United States is that they came from only New Mexico and the southern part of Colorado, maybe a few sprinkled in California and Nevada, but I didn't know there was this vast Latino network in Chicago and across the country. And as I came here as a junior in college, I came to find out that there were more Latinos in the city of Chicago than there were combined in New Mexico, Arizona, and the state of Colorado.

So, thank you for bringing the Latino Leadership Network here to Chicago. And it does demonstrate I think a fundamental point of the United States of America today and where we are as a country, that we are present in every state, from sea to shining sea, from Barrow, Alaska, the northernmost point of the United States of America and the Arctic, all the way down to the of Keys of Florida. We are everywhere and we need to be involved and we need to be engaged and we need to support each other, and we need to make sure that people like Anita becomes attorney general of the state of Illinois because we have people like that everywhere around this country. So, give it up to the Leadership Network and for all you do to inspire all of us in our community.

We live in a time still of tremendous angst and we still live in a time of great challenge to try to find the right level of inclusion and representation of what I believe is our destiny and that's really to become an inclusive America. And we have come a long ways but we have a long ways to go.

One of the great honors that I had and have had is to work with presidents of the United States and leaders of different countries, and I remember as attorney general getting a call from a wonderful friend of mine who I had met in law school, a young man who grew up in Toledo, Ohio and whose roots are traced to a little town that only has one commercial establishment on Main Street, Romeo, Colorado. His name was Jose Padilla. And Jose was telling me about this case that was pending in front of the United States Supreme Court where the affirmative action program of the University of Michigan had been challenged, and he asked me as attorney general, whether I would be willing to lead an effort on behalf of the states to make sure that our voice was heard in the United States Supreme Court. I did so, and for that, Jose Padilla, let's give you a round of applause, the general counsel of DePaul University. Stand up, stand up, stand up. We're everywhere.

But as a result of that call, I started thinking, "Well, here I am, a Latino, an attorney general from the state of Colorado. How is it that we get some other voices to help us in the Supreme Court?" "Well," I thought, "maybe this person who had written this wonderful article in the *New York Times*," and it was called *An Inclusive America* and it had been written by a president by the name of Gerald Ford. So, I said, "Maybe this president

will take a call from an AG." So, I called President Ford and somehow I got through and I ended up having this wonderful half-an-hour conversation with him, and he said, "This is why I wrote the article." He said, "Because I remember going to the University of Michigan and if you weren't white, you were not welcome to be a part of that football team." Gerald Ford was a great star in the history of the University of Michigan football but he knew that there were people who were just as good but weren't being allowed to participate just because of the color of their skin. And so, he says what the University of Michigan is doing is absolutely right. So, I said to him, "Mr. President, will you help me? Will you co-author a letter with me that goes out to the 50 attorneys general of the country asking them to join in the amicus before the United States Supreme Court?" And Gerald Ford said, "Yes. I'd be happy to help."

So, when we won that case a year later or so in the U.S. Supreme Court, there was an opinion that was authored by Sandra Day O'Connor, and in there she cited to our brief and she cited to other briefs that have been filed, but what I always remember is those of you who are in the law know some of the more famous cases -- Gery, Anita, and others will remember that first part of Senator Day O'Connor's opinion where she said that affirmative action and diversity in an inclusive society was something that was an imperative for our country. She said for the national security of the United States of America, that it was important to understand and celebrate and support what our armed services were doing to increase diversity within the armed services, and for that proposition cited the brief that had been filed by the former members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

And then she went on and she spoke about the global economy, how understanding the world and supporting and celebrating diversity was so important for the United States in these times, and for that proposition she cited a brief that had been written by many of the companies in the Fortune 100 list, some of whom are here today.

And then, she went on and she talked about education and how in education it was important to create diversity and understanding among people, and that's why the affirmative action program was important. That decision still today, as I've had conversations with Senator Day O'Connor over the years, is one of the most moving decisions in the history of law that I have ever read.

And I always think back about how it is that we have made progress as a society and yet how much more progress we still have to make. Yes, we have, yes, a lot of angst in these times as we think about what's happening in our border with Mexico which is only 1500 miles and yet has probably a thousand times more security than we have across the northern border with Canada. We have those who would want to build a wall, and in fact a recent presidential candidate has said that he would somehow have Mexico and Mexicans build a wall between the United States and Mexico, and yet I remember Ronald Reagan and others who went to the Berlin Wall and the famous

speech which Jim Baker helped write where he pointed at the Berlin Wall and he said, "Mr. Gorbachev, bring down that wall." And yet you have a debate going on in this country that will have proponents with their anti-immigrant sentiment essentially create a wall across Mexico and the United States. That's not where we need to go. That's not where we need to go.

And so, as we think about that particular angst of our country, it's important for us to make sure that we are telling the story of our people. It's important that people know the history of the migrant trail. It's important that people know the contributions that were made in all the wars of this country from the Revolutionary War to World War II. Those of us who lost family, who many of us have been told a story who were not allowed to be buried in the national cemeteries of our country in World War II and hence the founding of the American G.I. Forum to fight for equality in the late '40s and '50s, those are struggles that we need to remind the people of the United States of America. And that's why this Leadership Network is so important because it creates an opportunity for us to tell some of those stories.

I remember well as United States Secretary of Interior, it was a tough decision for me because I loved being a United States senator. I loved being an advocate for the great laws that I sponsored and authored as a U.S. senator. I loved working very closely with Ted Kennedy and John McCain, and President Bush on the passage in the Senate successfully of a Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act. I loved working on those issues because they had a moral purpose and really were defining the future of our country.

And so, as secretary of Interior, one of the things that I tried to do is I took on the position after conversations many with the president and the then president-elect and with my friends in the Senate like Senator Dan Inouye. I did in part because I was not only the custodian of America's natural resources from sea to shining sea but I also had the honor of being the custodian of America's heritage. And so that meant that the passion that I brought to the job every day was really a continuing journey that all of you have. It meant that, yes, in the creation of those 10 national parks, I didn't have to wait 10 or 20 years to create a César Chávez National Monument in La Paz because I had a president who understood and he honored my recommendation to him that we honor the history of the migrant workers and the farm workers, and he went to La Paz with me in September 2012 and signed the proclamation that created the 400th unit of the national park system, the César Chávez National Monument in La Paz.

And it was because I also knew that he had my back on the border issues that I went to my counterparts in Mexico and I worked closely with President Calderon and others and we created the only border crossing that has been authorized since 9/11 in a place called Boquillas, Mexico where we united Big Bend National Park in the United States with the border in Northern Mexico and three million acres of ecosystem in Northern Mexico, and it was because I cared a lot about that border and about the relationship

between Mexico and the United States that I helped move forward and became a historic compact in the sharing of water and water storage facilities, flows of water in the Colorado River into the Mexican Delta in Mexico, an accord that was witnessed by President Calderon as Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State, and Patricia Espinosa for Mexico signed that accord that we had negotiated.

So, I tell you those stories only because one of the great angst of our time really is this whole relationship between the United States and our Latin America, and this conversation that we will have in the months leading up to the presidential and action that we hope we will see after November 2016 on what happens with this border and what happens in those relationships that we have, north and south, in this hemisphere.

There was only two, three, four days perhaps after the November 2004 election when I walked into the White House for a 7 a.m. meeting. There were nine new senators-elect at that time, seven of them were Republican, two of them were Democrat, and the nine newly elected senators had this conversation with President George W. Bush and then Vice President Cheney and two of the senior aides for that breakfast that morning. And because President Bush had campaigned very hard for the seven Republicans, he hadn't campaigned for Barack Obama or for me. When he came around in 7 a.m., he came from the residence, he came down, he goes around to the different senators who were there, he goes to people like David Vitter from Louisiana, he says, "Hey, Vit. You did it." And Senator Vitter says to him, "I did exactly what you said, Mr. President. I organized out in the rural areas and came back at the very end to New Orleans and I won." So he goes down the line and he talks to Barack Obama, he says, "Well, Senator, congratulations. I look forward working with you."

Then he gets to me, I'm the last one in the line of nine and he says to me, "Oh, congratulations, Senator. You're the one that shouldn't have been here and you got away." So, I gave him a big hug and he said, "Los hermanos Salazar ganaron." And I had actually a very positive constructive relationship with him but I still remember in that breakfast because he did know the seven Republican senators very well, he did not know Barack Obama or me, so most of the conversation was a conversation between George W. and myself and Barack Obama. And I said to President Bush at that time, I said, "You are a former governor. You understand the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. You understand the importance of commerce and culture and educational exchange." And I said to him, "Since the time of John Kennedy, the United States foreign policy has really been one that has been East-West. We focused a lot on Russia and Europe and China but the alliance for progress which John Kennedy launched in the 1960s was a new era for Latin America." And I reminded the president that when I spent some time in Central America and Costa Rica and some of the poorest villages of Costa Rica, they go on to these little huts and there'd still be a picture of John Kennedy hanging there because the United States was paying attention to the relationship to the South. So, I said to the president, I said, "You have

four more years, Mr. President. And I'm here as the U.S. senator, I will work on those issues." And so, it's part of that reason why I enjoyed very much working with him on the issue of immigration reform and the issues of North-South relationship.

But we obviously have to do a lot more. There's a lot more as we deal with this particular angst of our time. There are a lot of other angst that we have to deal with including the fact that our education system needs to create more opportunities so that everyone has the kinds of opportunities like those of us have had here in this room, that I've had.

And so, as I think about my own life journey and leadership and positions where I've worked with multiple presidents in this country and the honor to serve the people of Colorado as their U.S. senator and to serve the people of the nation as secretary of Interior, I think back about where I started. I think back about El Valle de San Luis. I think about a mother and a father who taught us the way, who didn't have a college degree themselves but somehow understood that education was a keystone for their children's success. My mother, at the age of 19 -- I don't know how many of us at the age of 19 would do this -- but found her way to a train, her father put her on that train to go across the country to work in Washington, D.C. during World War II, and during that war for five years, she worked at what was then the War Department and helped move them into the Pentagon. A [indiscernible] from a ranch without a village but the ranch is named San Miguel.

And I think about my father, how he went to Washington, D.C. as well, but then after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, enlisted in the United States Army. And even when he was in his last years of life was so proud of his service to his country that he told all of us, his children, that the only thing he wanted was to be buried in his uniform of World War II, an honor, a wish that he had that we kept.

I think about my Uncle Leandro who never came back from the war because he was killed in Northern Italy in the war, and I think about how my mother got the news when she was in Washington, that her brother, two years older and the closest of her siblings, had died in the war. And I think about the stories of the American G.I. Forum and it's founding in South Texas because of the fact that we had a right to be treated equally, we're giving it all for our country as we always have, and what all that means to us today. So, your stories are important, our stories are important, my stories are important.

I remember often as I've talked to people in every one of the 50 states, hundreds of different times, about how inspired I am, about how inspired I am about who I am and where I come from. I never get tired of telling the story that when I step out of the front door of my mom and dad's house which my family has lived on that same ranch now for about 150 years, that if I look out to the east, there're beautiful 14,000-foot mountains and they are named Sangre de Cristo. They are the Sangre de Cristo Mountains

because a Spanish priest was dying, was seeing the sunrise over the mountains in the early dawn and the crimson red of the mountains had him exclaim as he died, "Sangre de Cristo! Sangre de Cristo!" That name still rings true today there.

And if I look out to the west, the western part of the valley, the name of those mountains are the San Juan Mountains. My grandfather was named Juan Bautista after those mountains. And if you look at the ranch that we have there in the San Luis Valley, the river that runs through it is called El Rio San Antonio. When you look at the nearest big town, 30 miles away, a huge town, two stoplights, 10,000 people, its name is Alamosa. Alamosa. And so, you see how the landscape has forever etched our history just in that one particular place.

But it's true whether you're from Ludington, Michigan or you happen to end up in Chicago after the war, after World War I when so many of our people came to Chicago to find a new opportunity, or you ended up in places like Maine or even in Barrow, Alaska. Barrow, Alaska is the northernmost point on the map of the United States. You look out from the point of Barrow and you're looking out at the Chukchi Sea and the Beaufort Sea, they're at the end of the world. It's dark there. Three months out of the year, you never see the sun. The indigenous people who live there live a hard life. But there are people in that little town of Barrow, 800 people in that little town of Barrow who are actually Latinos and it was always an honor for me to go up there and to meet them. So, we are everywhere. So, let us tell our story. Let us tell our story.

So, I talked about the values which really have brought us all here, the value of hard work, which if you didn't have it you wouldn't be here today, the value of education as a keystone to opportunity, the value of high ethics to make sure, as my father would often tell us, keep your nose clean. Keep your nose clean. It's important to keep the name having high integrity. And most importantly perhaps, community. Don't ever forget where you come from and don't ever forget that none of us ever got to where we are by ourselves. I got where I am today because I had leaders like Dr. Andrade who cared. I had leaders like César Chávez and Dolores Huerta who inspired me. I had wonderful experiences like visiting Washington, D.C. and standing in awe in 1994 thinking that in one big building, there was a guy by the name of Henry Cisneros who's running housing and urban development. And that I looked on the other side of the street and there was a Department of Transportation and the person who was running it was a guy by the name of Federico Peña. So, we've come a long ways. Today whenever I go to the United States Supreme Court, I am so honored that we have Sonia Sotomayor as a member of the U.S. Supreme Court. So, we've come a long ways. And it's those values that continue to drive us to succeed.

So, let me just conclude with a story that for me is one which I know a few of you have heard before. This is the story of my grandmother, Antonia, and my grandfather, Juan. They're both born in 1884. This is a



story that probably takes place about 1890. So, they're trying to homestead a 160-acre homestead right on the border of New Mexico and the state of Colorado, and while they were out there, my uncle, we just call him Wilito, my Uncle Wilito became sick. And so, my grandmother bundled up my Uncle Wilito in a blanket and my grandfather hitched up the horses to the wagon, and they went in to the nearest doctor at the town of La Jara which was some 20 miles away, it took a while to get there.

As they were going to the doctor's office, my Uncle Willy would look up with his big green eyes, and my grandmother and she would tell the story, she would say, "Ay mama, ay papa, ay Dios. Ay mama, ay papa, ay Dios " Well, about a mile before they got to the doctor's office, my Uncle Wilito looked up at her eyes and said one more time, "Ay mama, ay papa, ay Dios," and died in her arms. I always thought about my grandmother, about how strong and how tough she was. No education but strong and tough. How could she lose a child like that and keep going. Because it wasn't just my Uncle Wilito who she lost before the age of five. In those days without good healthcare especially in rural America still today, she had lost four other children before they reached the age of five through the diseases of those days. And so, I would always wonder what is it that kept my grandmother and my grandfather going.

Well, she had faith. She had faith in a future that would be better for her surviving children, because she had three children that did survive. My father, Enrique, and his two sisters. And she knew she had to give it all up to make sure that they had the best in life. She could never have imagined. She passed away long before I got into public life, but she certainly could not have imagined that one of the children of her only surviving son would someday become a United States senator or secretary of Interior and have a brother who became a member of a U.S. House of Representatives. And she couldn't have imagined that all eight of her grandchildren, the children of her surviving son, would all become first-generation graduates in this country. But she had a faith that you all have and that I have that somehow we keep up the struggle, that somehow we keep up the hard work, that somehow we keep up the organization, that somehow we keep creating this wonderful network of our community, and that the corners around us in the future are going to be better than today. So, keep the faith. Keep the network going. Mil gracias.

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