

**A Full Embrace, not Half a Handshake: Now is the Time
for Real Immigration Reform
Speech to the National Press Club
Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I am truly honored to be here at one of our country's most venerable institutions of public deliberation.

In less than six months, my final term as Mayor of Los Angeles will come to a close.

With each passing week, I take another step toward what one wit called, "The transition from Who's Who to Who's He?"

The sun may be setting on my administration, but I am not riding off into the sunset just yet.

The agenda is still packed with challenges.

Many pressing issues still demand action.

And chief among them is immigration reform.

There are few more fundamental questions that we face.

Who we welcome to our shores...

How we secure our borders...

What we do to include the millions of undocumented men and women who work hard and do the hardest work...

And **how** we keep them safely together with their five million citizen children.

These questions go straight to the heart of who we are as a people.

At stake are bedrock rights and responsibilities of American democracy.

They fuel strong passions on all sides.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is high time we gave clear and consistent answers to these most basic questions.

Now is the time for real immigration reform.

Comprehensive reform...

Common sense reform...

Humane reform.

Reform that is cemented by our most sacred values...

Reform that **serves** our country, **bolsters** our economy and **respects** the immigrants who risk so much to come here in search of nothing less and nothing more than a better life.

This cause strikes a deeply personal chord for me.

It is at the heart of one of my proudest moments...as an elected official...as an Angeleno...as a human being.

In March 2006, one million people marched to the Los Angeles City Hall.

On that historic day, one million people threw off the yoke of suspicion and fear and stepped out of the shadows.
Moms and dads...

Kids...

Grandmas and grandpas...

People who worked hard...who were humble...but who were tired of being scapegoated...

Tired of hearing the catcalls that they were the cause of all the country's problems...

Tired of being told to go home...to go back where they came from.

They marched because they had a message.

They **were** home and they weren't going **anywhere**.

And they wanted a response...

From me, from the *alcalde*.

Some said, "Don't do it."

"You've been in office less than a year."

"Your job is to fix the potholes. Leave immigration to the feds."

But when one million people march to your front step, they deserve a welcome.

And here's what I said:

I said, "I don't see any illegals here!"

That one got me into a lot of trouble.

But sometimes you have to say it figuratively before it becomes true.

No human being **is** illegal...No human being **should be** illegal.

We must enshrine this principle into the heart and soul of this country's immigration policy.

That is our moral imperative.

That is our political challenge.

And 2013 is the time.

When we fix our broken immigration system, we will restore a basic American covenant.

We are a nation of immigrants.

We rightly claim distinction for our long history of welcoming people from all four corners of the earth to our shores.

This history is a source of national pride.

This history is a source of national profit.

Think of it. Immigrants or their children started a full 40 percent of our Fortune 500 companies.

These companies – the powerhouses of our economy, the planet’s most recognizable brands – have combined revenues of 4.2 trillion dollars.

That sum is greater than the GDP of every single country in the world except the United States, China and Japan.

We are a beacon of freedom and opportunity the world over because we have sealed a social contract of a special and significant sort.

As immigrants have stepped across our borders, we have always said, “If you apply yourselves...

If you work hard...

If you join and participate in American society, doors will open...

You can achieve a sense of security, prosperity and, above all else, dignity.

Not only for yourselves but for your children.

In exchange for hard work and loyalty, we have promised to give immigrants a grip on the ladder ...

To provide access to education and resources....

To chart a path to full participation in our society that is transparent and fair.

Unfortunately we have lost touch with this tradition of openness and opportunity.

For the last two decades, we have not kept up our side of the bargain.

We have created an immigration system that is long on enforcement, but short on opportunity.

A system where states compete with one another to draft more and more draconian anti-immigrant legislation.

A system that happily capitalizes on the labor of millions of undocumented men and women, but that refuses to extend to them the basic rights and privileges most of us take for granted.

We have created a system no longer in step with our cherished values and ideals.

In November, Americans faced a fundamental choice...

A choice between keeping our broken system or reviving our immigration compact.

The American people made the right decision.

They rejected a policy based on fear and fences.

They embraced the hopes and dreams of people like Anthony Ng and Salvador Dorantes.

Anthony and Salvador aren't citizens.

They're DREAMers. Anthony is with us in the audience today.

Anthony came to the US from the Philippines when he was 12. Salvador first came to America from Mexico when he was only two.

They have worked hard and excelled.

Their hearts overflow with the passionate desire to give back to the place they call home.

Anthony is determined to let the world know that there are many Asian Pacific Islander DREAMers out there. So he works with API youth, educating them and inspiring them to lift their voices and be heard.

A patriot to his bones, Salvador's dream is to join the military.

To stand tall in uniform...to fight for the country that has given him so much...

This has been Salvador's goal since he was a kid.

When President Obama stopped the deportations of Dream Act eligible youth last year, he opened the door of opportunity for young people like Salvador and Anthony.

And he pointed the way forward by establishing important principles to guide immigration reform.

Immigrants must take personal responsibility for their actions, but as they do we must provide them a meaningful path forward to become full members of American society.

We have every right to enforce our laws and protect our borders, but we must balance this with the need to encourage the aspirations of immigrants.

These are the principles that the American people threw their support behind in November.

And these are the principles that must guide immigration reform in the coming months.

With these principles in mind, we need reform built on the following six policy pillars.

One, a pathway to legal permanent residency and citizenship for the eleven million undocumented immigrants must be at the core of reform.

Two, legalization should be earned, but not unattainable. It should be a process, not a punishment and should include a criminal background check, proof of English language skills and American civic knowledge, and the payment of back taxes.

Three, family unification should continue as a key priority of our immigration policy. The goal must be to protect the sanctity of the family. Keeping families together not only keeps capital in the United States, it also maximizes the potential that these immigrants start family-based small businesses and grow our economy. Despite the economic benefits and moral imperative, millions wait over two decades to be reunited with family members. This must change.

Four, the hard work and talent of immigrants fuels our economy. Our immigration policy must expand the avenues for these valued workers to seek legal employment. As the President has suggested, let's staple a green card to the diplomas of foreign students getting advanced degrees in science, technology, engineering and math. We need to expand the H1-B visa program and, at the same time, we need effective visa programs for agricultural workers and for low-skilled, non-seasonal workers.

Five, immigration reform must include an effective and efficient employment verification system. Such a system can and must prevent unlawful employment, reward those employers and employees who play by the rules and protect Americans' fundamental rights.

Six, we must protect our border through smart enforcement. According to the Migration Policy Institute, immigration enforcement takes the lion's share of federal law enforcement spending.

Today, net undocumented migration is at or below zero. But we must realize that we will not meet our immigration challenge through enforcement alone.

The goal of our immigration enforcement policy should be to remove real threats at our borders and inside our country.

We should deport serious offenders.

We should **not deport** people whose most serious crime is a lack of papers.

By deporting such people, we erode the trust between law enforcement and the immigrant community...

We needlessly break up families and deprive children of the love and protection of their parents – all in our zeal to enforce the law.

According to ICE's own data, almost three fourths of those deported have no serious felony convictions.

So the reform of Secure Communities must be part of the overall reform of immigration policy.

It is time to put an end to the practice of deporting non-serious criminals.

Our neighborhoods will be safer and our families will be more secure.

This is an ambitious agenda. But immigration reform cannot wait another political season.

Already we are hearing the voices of those who did not learn the lessons of November or who have chosen to ignore them.

“This isn't the right year,” they say.

“The agenda is too crowded,” they caution.

You've even heard some point to the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary to argue that immigration reform should be punted again.

Washington should be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. Congress is fully capable of enacting responsible gun safety legislation and comprehensive immigration reform.

Other voices are calling for a piecemeal approach.

Instead of a path to full citizenship, they are advocating the way-station of permanent residency....

Instead of reform for all immigrants, they are advocating just reform for the highly skilled...

Instead of balancing enforcement with integration, they are calling for us to double down on the policy of widespread deportations.

The time for half-measures and one-sided approaches is over.

The bottom line in this debate is full citizenship. There can be no second class citizens in America.

This doesn't just make moral sense. It makes economic sense.

As the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce notes, when the head of a household becomes a citizen, family income rises almost 14 percent.

According to the Center for American Progress, if we legalize the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, we would give our economy a 1.5 trillion dollar shot in the arm over the next decade.

The federal government would see 4.5 billion dollars in more tax revenue in just three years.

Who knew that creating a path toward citizenship would also help us create a path away from the fiscal cliff?

So let's make 2013 the year.

Immigrants don't deserve half a handshake.

They deserve a full embrace.

We aren't the land of opportunity for some...

We are the land of opportunity for all.

We Americans may come from different backgrounds.

We may speak different languages and worship in different ways.

But all of us are pursuing the same American Dream.

It's the dream that brought my grandfather from Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico to Los Angeles a century ago.

He had little money, even less English, but an unshakeable faith in the relationship between work and reward.

He left Mexico because the country was too divided. There was just rich and poor.

My grandfather did not believe that birth was destiny.

He believed that where you are born should not determine where you end up.

That's why he came to America.

In 2013, let us raise our voices above the partisan din and bring a message – a message of hope and promise -- to our fellow Americans.

In 2013, let us achieve immigration reform that honors our country's promise...

Its founding promise...

Its glorious promise of liberty and justice for all.

Thank you.

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