

Remarks at the Hispanic Heritage Month Reception September 15, 2004

Thank you all for coming, *Bienvenidos a la Casa Blanca*. [Laughter] Thanks for coming. Laura and I are thrilled to have you here. We welcome you to the—to observe Hispanic Heritage Month. What a performance. Thank you all very much. It was spectacular.

This is the month we celebrate great contributions of Latinos to our country. It's a special month. It really echoes our diversity and the strength of our great democracy. I spend a lot of time talking about the transformational power of liberty, reminding people that liberty has got an incredible way of taking diverse people and uniting them into one common purpose—*pais*, a great land. That's why we believe democracy has a place in our own neighborhood. We believe that liberty is important in countries throughout our hemisphere. We believe in human dignity and human rights, the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity. And that's best achieved through liberty.

That's why we're working to advance liberty in the greater Middle East. We believe all people desire to be free. We believe that inherently in the soul of men and women is this desire to live in free societies. It's worked here in America. It can work everywhere. Think about our country. We're such a diverse land with different cultures all bound together in this great country because of freedom.

You know, recently I talked to President Putin of Russia. I told him this country mourns the loss of life as a result of the terrorist attacks, the terrorist attack on the school. I told him we stand shoulder to shoulder with them in fighting terror, that we abhor men who kill innocent children to try to achieve a dark vision. I'm also concerned about the decisions that are being made in Russia that could undermine democracy in Russia, that great countries,

great democracies have a balance of power between central government and local governments, a balance of power within central governments between the executive branch and the legislative branch and the judicial branch. As governments fight the enemies of democracy, they must uphold the principles of democracy.

I also want to say something, as we gather, about Hurricane Ivan. I talked to the Governors of Mississippi and Alabama and Louisiana, *tambien mi hermano, el Gobernador de Florida*. I told him the people of this country—I told all four Governors the people of this country are praying for their safety. We pray that the storm passes as quickly as possible without any loss of life or loss of property, and that—I told them that the Government is ready to help.

I appreciate Hector. I want to thank you for your service. I appreciate Secretary Evans and Secretary Chao, members of my Cabinet who have joined us today. I'm proud of your work.

We've got Ambassadors here. This is an important month, by the way, and we're tracking a lot of big shots. [Laughter] Hans Hertell is with us. Hans, thanks for coming. He's the Ambassador to the Dominican Republic, *mi amigo*.

Gaddi Vasquez, who's the Director of the Peace Corps. Roger Noriega is Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs. Eduardo Aguirre is the Director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Al Gonzales is my lawyer. [Laughter] He is the White House Counsel to the President. Ruben Barrales is the Director of Intergovernmental Affairs. I'm naming people that work in my administration. I think it's important to promote a diverse administration, to welcome all cultures, and we're better for it here in Washington. And I want to thank them for their service.

I want to thank the *Embajador de Colombia y tambien de Mexico y el nuevo Embajador de Espana*. Welcome today to the White House for the credentialing ceremony. I want to thank the three Ambassadors for coming. Welcome. *Bienvenidos*.

I want to thank the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee for the United States Senate, Chairman Lugar—great man—Senator Lugar from the great State of Indiana. I also appreciate Congressmen Weller, Diaz-Balart *de Florida, y tambien* Steve Pearce from New Mexico. Thank you all for coming. Proud you're here.

Brian Sandoval, *donde esta?* Anyway, he's here somewhere. He got a lousy seat—[laughter]—or no seat at all. [Laughter]

Marcos, thanks for your prayer. It was beautiful. Welcome. Tell everybody at home hello. That would be Houston, is where he lives. And Laura and I are *Tejanos*.

I want to thank Joaquin. Thank you very much. It was a spectacular performance. What a great athlete and an artist. Thank you guys. Your buddies brought out the best in you. It was really great. Thanks. Myrka—thanks for coming, Myrka. *Gracias*.

I want to thank Emilio. Appreciate you coming. *El amigo de mi familia*, Gustavo Cisneros. *Esta aqui. Gracias*, Gustavo, welcome. Jimmy, thanks for coming—Jimmy Smits, proud you're here. Elizabeth Vargas is with us. I'm proud she is here. I want to thank Alex Wallau from ABC Television for coming with us.

Eliseo—we've got some soccer stars? Where are they? *Donde esta los* soccer stars? Well, they're somewhere. Oh, there they are, yes. The three stars, Eliseo, Marco, *y* Amado. Thank you for coming. So how is the team this year, pretty good? Yes? *No hablas Ingles*. [Laughter] Eliseo is from El Salvador. Marco, *que pais?* Bolivia. Amado is from Honduras. *Bienvenidos*. Good luck in the season.

I want to thank members of the Hispanic Organization who are here today.

I do want to make special mention of the fact that Judge Reynaldo Garza of Brownsville, Texas, passed away this week. He was 89 years old. In 1961, President Kennedy appointed Judge Garza to the district court in Texas. Judge Garza was one of the first Hispanic Federal judges in America. He's a great Texan. Those of us who are from Texas were proud to say, "We're both Texans." He was the son of Mexican immigrants. He was a shining example of the American Dream. He was a good man, and he made this country a better place, and we honor his memory today.

People often talk about the Latino culture. Here's how I'd like to describe it: faith in God, commitment to family, and love of country. In this moment in our history, America is defending—depending on the unselfish dedication of patriots. Today, there are almost 200,000 Hispanic Americans serving in the Armed Forces. Eight of these incredibly brave men and women are with us today. I want to thank you all for coming. Thank you for wearing the uniform.

Latinos have contributed to the defense of freedom abroad and to the advance of freedom inside our own country. This afternoon, Laura and I were honored to meet members of an Hispanic American family who struggled against discrimination and won a victory for all in this country. We welcome Sylvia and Gonzalo and Jerome and Sandra Mendez with us. *Bienvenidos*. Let me tell you their story. I think you'll find it so incredibly American and so uplifting.

Sixty years ago, their parents, Gonzalo *y* Felicitas Mendez, tried to enroll their children as students in a mostly white elementary school closest to their house in Westminster, California. That was 60 years ago. Unfortunately, in those days, America had a—our vision wasn't as clear as it should be. They were turned away from that school, and they went to an older *barrio* school. I'm told it was a rickety,

wooden building bordered by an electric cattle fence. The mom and dad didn't like it. They didn't like their children being treated that way. They loved their children. And so they—and so the dad saved his money, 1945, and he went into a Federal court to sue with four other families for equality and fairness. That's 1945.

He said, "I'm just doing this for my children." What he really meant to say was, "I'm just doing this for every child." He was fighting so that everyone in this country has a chance to realize the American Dream.

A lawyer named Thurgood Marshall filed a friend of the court brief in the lawsuit, and the Mendez family won their case. Their effects reached far beyond a single neighborhood school. Inspired by the *Mendez* decision, Governor Earl Warren signed an order desegregating all the schools of California. Five years later, Thurgood Marshall would use the same arguments against segregation when he argued *Brown* versus *Board of Education*. And Earl Warren, who had become Chief Justice, would write the Supreme Court opinion that ended segregation in schools across America.

Today we honor your family and your mom and dad.

When Laura and I were taking our picture, one of the beautiful girls said—women said the No Child Left Behind Act is great. It's in the spirit of the Mendez family that the No Child Left Behind Act is flourishing, because we're fighting against another kind of discrimination in that act. It's called the soft bigotry of low expectations. We should never allow a system to exist in where they walk into a classroom and say, "This child can't read because of the color of their skin." You can't condemn somebody to failure because their parents don't speak English as a first language. That's not what we stand for here in America.

And so the laws we passed with Republican and Democrat help are challenging

that soft bigotry of low expectation. We believe every child can learn. We want to know if every child can read and write and add and subtract early, before it's too late. We're going to stop this business about just shuffling children through the school, year after year, without learning the basics. We'll correct problems now. We're raising the bar. *No dejamos a ningun nino atras*. No child will be left behind in America.

Recently, I talked about a school in Georgia, northeast Georgia, called Gainesville Elementary School. It's mostly Hispanic, mostly poor. It's the kind of school where people just say, "Well, gosh, these kids can't learn. Give up. Move them through." This year, 90 percent of the students passed the State tests in reading and math. That's a fantastic statistic, isn't it?

We wouldn't know if we didn't measure. We wouldn't know if we didn't ask the questions about whether a child can read and write and add and subtract. We wouldn't know if we didn't correct problems early, before they're too late. And fortunately, the school has got a principal that has challenged the soft bigotry of low expectations. Here's what he said: "We don't focus on what we can't do at this school. We focus on what we can do. We do whatever it takes to get the kids across the finish line."

That's what we're going to do here in this country. As we celebrate this important month, our mission, our goal, our deepest desire is for every child—every child—including those whose parents don't speak English as a first language, to be able to realize the promise of this country by making sure the public schools have high standards in excellence in every classroom. And that's what we're going to do.

As we celebrate this important month, we also need to celebrate ownership, because that's part of the American experience. We want more people owning their own home. I think there's nothing better than people opening up the door where they live and saying, "Welcome to my

home.” “*Bienvenidos a mi casa.*” [Laughter] “Thanks for coming to my piece of property.” And we must be dedicated to the proposition that ownership ought to extend to every neighborhood and every group.

I set a goal to have 5.5 million new minority homeowners by the end of this decade. And we’re on track to meet the goal—1.6 million new minority homeowners bought homes in the last 2 years. It’s a fantastic statistic, I think. I think it’s part of helping bring hope into people’s families.

Also I’d like to talk about entrepreneurship. I mean, the Latino community is entrepreneurial. I mean, you talk about small-business owners who have got vision and drive and desire, sit down with Latino businessowners. They have a great sense of business and balance sheet and, as importantly, a great desire to own their own business. And one of the most hopeful aspects of our society today is the number of Hispanic-owned businesses that thrive throughout America. I love it when I meet an Hispanic entrepreneur, particularly somebody who came up with an idea at their kitchen table and said, “I want to own something. I want to own my business.” And now they’re employing people. Seventy percent of new jobs in America are created by small businesses. Think about that. And the role of Government is to encourage the expansion of small-business opportunity and entrepreneurship through every society, every part of our society. And we’re doing just that in America, and our country is better for it.

Listen, we’re a diverse nation, but there are things that bind us, our love of free-

dom, our belief in God, our understanding of the importance of family, our desire to realize dreams, the deep desire for people to live in a free society. I’m proud of your heritage. I’m proud of the ancestry. I’m proud to call Latinos Americans, and I’m proud to be your President.

God bless, and welcome to the White House.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:37 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Vladimir Putin of Russia; Gov. Haley Barbour of Mississippi; Gov. Bob Riley of Alabama; Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco of Louisiana; Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida; Hector V. Barreto, Administrator, Small Business Administration; Luis Alberto Moreno Mejia, Colombia’s Ambassador to the United States; Carlos Alberto De Icaza, Mexico’s Ambassador to the United States; Carlos Westendorp y Cabeza, Spain’s Ambassador to the United States; Nevada State Attorney General Brian Sandoval; entertainers Marcos Witt, Joaquin Cortes, and Emilio Estefan; actor Jimmy Smits; television personality Myrka Dellanos; Elizabeth Vargas, reporter, and Alex Wallau, president, ABC Television Network; professional soccer players Eliseo Quintanilla, Marco Etcheverry, and Amado Guevara; and Shawn McCollough, principal, Gainesville Elementary School. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks. The National Hispanic Heritage Month proclamation of September 17 is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Remarks in St. Cloud, Minnesota September 16, 2004

The President. Thank you all. Thank you all for coming. I’m honored to be here in St. Cloud. I understand I am the first

sitting President—[applause]—I am glad I came, and the other Presidents missed a lot. Thanks for coming out today. It’s such