

U.S. Ambassador to Honduras – the Hon. Hugo Llorens

Speech to the National Convention of the National Association of Bilingual Educators New Orleans Convention Center, February 18, 2011

“Hispanic Heritage as a U.S. Diplomatic and Economic Resource.”

Thank you for your kind introduction. It's a great pleasure and a special privilege for me to be here with you today.

As someone who was born into a Spanish-speaking family and came to America as a small child, I want to acknowledge upfront a debt of gratitude to the outstanding teachers in the public schools of New York City, where I grew up. They not only taught me English, but helped me find my way in one of the great multilingual population centers of our nation, and deepened my curiosity about other people's customs and beliefs. They equipped me well to keep on learning and to qualify and take advantage of higher education in this great country of ours. I owe much of what I am today to great teachers who helped me overcome what could have been for me barriers of language and culture. And I know that many of you dedicate yourselves every day in your classrooms to doing the same with Hispanic students and foreign-born students of many languages from many parts of the world. Your work is contributing to making America stronger and more resilient to face the challenges of a new century---one in which our citizens of non-English language and foreign heritage will prove a resource, rather than a burden, linking us to the cultures, markets and opportunities that await us in the rest of the world.

I want to suggest to you today some of the international opportunities that await Hispanic and bilingual Americans and why Hispanics can be a potent resource for our country. I also want to touch on the current state of relations between the United States and our hemispheric neighbors, our objectives in the region, and where we are headed.

Bilingual Americans as a resource

First, let me say a few words about language, culture, and communication.

Simply put, if we are to prosper, remain secure and preserve our greatness, we Americans must communicate with peoples of other countries; in fact, we must learn to **out-communicate** the competition in the global marketplace of the 21st century---a marketplace of ideas, values, goods and services.

Now, besides Canada, our closest neighbors lie to the south, where we enjoy strong ties on many levels and where there is practically unlimited potential:

- American products and services sell
- create good jobs for Americans through trade crea
- open opportunities for American business to invest and profit abroad ope
- gain understanding for the values and interests that drive our country win
- more effectively aid our neighbors in this hemisphere who suffer from poverty and insecurity mor
- work as partners and friends with emerging economies and democracies to tackle global problems like climate change, energy and drug trafficking wor
- and to strengthen our own security by promoting peace and reconciliation where there is conflict or tyranny and

Of course, you who work in our schools to further language learning know that to be bilingual means more than just the ability to speak two languages. The bilingual child, the bilingual adult is someone who possesses insights and knowledge about two cultures, two different ways of thinking and acting, two distinct frames of reference for understanding the world. Twining together these identities can unleash creative power and, in this hemisphere, help to foster greater mutual appreciation between Americans and Latin Americans.

I know many Hispanics in the business community who are drawing on their bilingual/bicultural heritage to build bridges of understanding with our neighbors that promote commerce, investment and travel. What they are doing is very important for the future well being of our country as a whole. President Obama has called for doubling US exports in five years, to make trade the engine of growth, recovery and prosperity for our battered economy. This is a very ambitious goal that can't be achieved without multi-level engagement with Latin America. US Hispanics can be leaders here.

Latin America is an expanding market of almost 600 million potential customers. Poverty rates are falling and education is improving in most of Latin America. Chile alone between 1990 and 2006 reduced its poverty rate from about 44 percent to under 14 percent. The middle class that is emerging is hungry to have the same comforts and conveniences of life that we enjoy. They are eager to buy; we Americans as producers of goods and services must show that we have more to offer to satisfy their needs and aspirations than do the Chinese, Koreans, Europeans and our other competitors.

Here is a great chance for bilingual Americans to be in the forefront in increasing our economic ties with this vital region. The pronounced trend in the past two decades in Latin America, with some important exceptions, has been toward consolidation of democracy and increased economic openness. That's what's underpinning the drop in poverty and rise of the middle class in many countries. It means also that the values and interests of the 33 countries that make up our hemisphere have been drawing ever closer together.

Reflecting this convergence, the US strategic approach toward Latin America now rests on four pillars, or points of orientation for a common action agenda with our neighbors: democracy and good governance, economic and social opportunity, citizen security, and clean energy and climate change. I'll come back to foreign policy and our diplomatic relations with the governments of the region further on in this speech, but my point here is that this is a very positive agenda that pulls the US and our neighbors closer together.

This all adds up to a favorable environment for many forms of cooperation. And it should come as no surprise that it's easier to do business and reach understanding with people whose outlook is similar to our own, people with whom we have no major irresolvable conflicts. This is where our emerging opportunity lies. For Hispanics and bilingual Americans, this means dealing with counterparts who share a common heritage and share convictions about how we want to live. You know, there are six bureaus at the State Department, regional bureaus: Africa, Europe, South, Central Asia, and so forth. And we like to say that the Western Hemisphere Bureau is the only one that we actually live in. Historic ties of language, culture and customs are reinforced by our national priorities in the region, the four pillars, which I have just mentioned.

Here is something important I want you to keep in mind: Foreign policy is more than what is done in Washington. People-to-people links at the local, community and family level play an ever more vital part for US effectiveness in a changing world. Hispanics are especially well positioned to contribute to this effectiveness; good education and bilingual language skills will empower US Hispanics to be leaders in our relations with our hemispheric neighbors.

Secretary Clinton has rightly characterized Latin America as "one of the world's most dynamic and diverse" regions, and so one should approach generalizations warily. But it's also true that there is a sense of commonality among Latin Americans that extends to US Hispanics as well. In my experience, our neighbors look with pride at the achievements of the growing Hispanic community in the US, now 50 million strong and spread across the length and breadth of our country. US Hispanics increasingly influence and help define the "Latin" in Latin American.

To give one example from today's popular culture, Latin music used to be largely an import into the US but increasingly it is US Hispanics who are creating and exporting Latin music to the rest of the hemisphere. It's now a two-way exchange and much richer for it.

US cities with large Hispanic populations and strong links to Latin America are profiting as well. This wonderful, reborn city of New Orleans where we are meeting today is a great example of that. The port of New Orleans is a major port of entry for products of Central America like bananas and coffee, and ships US manufactures to countries of the region. The Hispanic population of New Orleans proudly traces its roots to colonial times when Louisiana was a territory of Spain. Many Hispanics work proudly today in the building trades that are reconstructing this great city. I'm well acquainted with New Orleans from my work as Ambassador to Honduras and through family links---both my sons chose fine Louisiana institutions for college. Incidentally, the Honduran colony here goes back generations and is still the largest single Hispanic contingent in New Orleans.

Another example is, of course, Miami, which is an important finance center, travel destination and transportation hub, especially for Central America and the Caribbean.

Of course, I realize the great challenge that you as educators are facing every day in your classrooms in preparing Hispanic youth for a future in which more of them can qualify to take part in our economic system as more than laborers. The opportunities I'm talking about are there for the taking---for those who have been equipped by education and whose eyes have been opened to a wider world than just the *barrio* where they live. In this regard, I don't underestimate how hard your task is. I know that teaching

in a bilingual environment often means teaching in economically deprived areas or in school systems struggling to find the resources to deal with children who lack advantages enjoyed by native English speakers. For those who make this into a real vocation, you have my admiration---and my thanks as a fellow American wanting the best for our great country.

I hope that each of you can find something in my remarks today that you can use to awake ambition and a sense of the possible in at least one Hispanic student, much as the teachers in New York's public schools did for me.

President Obama has said, "With enduring values of faith and family, hard work and sacrifice, Hispanics have preserved the rich heritage of generations past while contributing mightily to the promise of our Nation for their children and grandchildren."

This is the heritage that Hispanics combine with love of our country. Heritage and patriotism, combined with an education that imparts fluency in English and a grasp of the *mores* of our wider national culture, can serve as the basic building blocks for Hispanic success, just as they have been for many ethnic groups in America's history. But going beyond this basic formula, I want to repeat my message that Hispanics have a special, unique opportunity that lies in the close connection that we have with a newly emergent, newly modern Latin America that is open to our friendship and partnership. Bilingual Americans are especially well positioned to establish people-to-people relationships that can fuel trade, travel, investment, and many kinds of projects based on cooperation and trust.

Latin America's emerging markets

Let me briefly give you some idea of the size of the markets in our hemisphere that offer opportunity for Hispanics and other Americans to profit by using their cultural affinity to build links to other countries. In 2009, total U.S. merchandise trade between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean reached \$524 billion and more than 40% of the region's exports flowed to the United States, making us the region's single largest export destination, and the Western Hemisphere, including Canada, absorbs 42% of U.S. exports. 37% of all direct investment in Latin America comes from the United States. Half of our energy imports come from the Western Hemisphere. 10 of 17 Free Trade Agreements are with nations within our region. If there's greater commerce, if there are greater exports, if there's greater investments, this helps to improve living standards throughout the Americas--- and that is good for all of us.

And there are other statistics that I could cite, such as the migration flows that contribute to the billions of dollars in remittances that flow from the United States to Latin America each year. We all know that many Hispanic new immigrants in the US send money home regularly. These remittances have the potential to be a transformational asset because they put capital directly in the hands of people who will use it to meet basic needs and invest in the future of their families. This is parents sacrificing for their children. Indeed, workers in the United States send more than \$50 billion a year back to the region in the form of remittances and that is a huge resource for the receiving countries, as well as a continuing bond between Hispanic immigrants and the homelands they come from.

In addition to demographic and economic ties, and just as important, we share social and political views rooted in a common commitment to democracy, freedom, justice, and respect for human rights.

Taken together, these circumstances help make our region an open door for Hispanics who want to participate in and benefit from the strong economic expansion that is occurring in the region.

US diplomacy in Latin America today

Now, let me come back to the subject of US diplomacy in Latin America. In my almost 30 years as a Foreign Service officer with the State Department, I find the present time to be the most hopeful and exciting that I have experienced in the course of my career. I say that because we are moving from what we might characterize as a traditional pattern of action-reaction between our country and our hemispheric neighbors to one of mature, multi-level partnership in pursuing a broad agenda of mutual interest. There is creative energy in this new relationship and much goodwill toward the United States. It is also being driven by a sense of urgency in dealing with challenges to our common well being, challenges that come from transnational crime, youth violence, unfinished democratic institution-building and weak governance, inadequate investment in education and economic competitiveness, food security and relief of poverty, patterns of internal and cross-border migration, environmental degradation, energy needs, and global economic integration.

None of these problems is easy to solve but there is growing agreement that these are major issues for us all to work on together. Of course, on any given issue there may be countries like Cuba and Venezuela that are odd-man-out, but that does not negate the validity of this hemispheric "to do" list for us and our neighbors.

Our priorities are based on the premise that the United States has a vital interest in contributing to the building of stable, prosperous, and democratic nations in this hemisphere that can play a pivotal role in building a rules-based international system capable of meeting today's global challenges.

President Obama used the Summit of the Americas in 2009 to lay out a vision of equal partnership and it has contributed to a shift in Latin American public opinion. In the 2010 poll by the public opinion research firm *Latinobarometro*, two-thirds of the population in most countries had favorable attitudes toward the United States – an increase of 10 to 20 points from 2008 levels. The role of the United States in Latin America is also overwhelmingly viewed as positive.

Indeed, 2011 has begun on a promising note for most of the Americas. Growth and recovery from the world financial crisis are strong, civil society is vibrant, democratic governments are addressing key challenges, and polarizing voices are increasingly isolated. Interestingly, reactions in many countries to the recent Wikileaks cables incident, far from disrupting our regional relations, have reflected this renewed strength. While our government justifiably deplores the disclosure of any information that was intended to be confidential, the support and understanding offered by most of our regional partners has been heartening.

The recent *Latinobarometro* poll that I mentioned a moment ago also confirmed that the greatest concern of citizens throughout the hemisphere is achieving safety and security and combating the rise of international crime. Our partnerships with countries to improve citizen safety, especially in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean are of ever greater importance. Without basic security for all, nations cannot reach their full economic and social potential. We have learned that a successful approach to security challenges must be a comprehensive regional one. That is why the United States is working to enhance citizen safety through the Merida, Central America Regional Security and Caribbean Basin Security Initiatives, to break the power, violence, and impunity of the region's drug, gang, and criminal organizations, and strengthen law enforcement and justice sector institutions.

Drug trafficking brings with it murder, intimidation, corruption, and increased drug use and addiction in the transit countries. Murder rates in Central American countries are now among the highest in the world. Some experts assert that more people are being killed in drug-related violence than were dying in the 1980's in the wars that then afflicted much of Central America. Frankly, I wish that Americans who buy illegal "recreational drugs" would open their eyes and see the havoc they are responsible for in fragile countries to our south.

Our neighbors look to us for leadership in putting out the fire raging in their houses and we are responding both by providing resources and working as allies in the fight against traffickers, and also by helping our partners to engage with their large populations of youth-at-risk and to better address the needs of young people, above all to give them hope of a better future in which they can get education, get jobs and contribute to the welfare of their families rather than look to make a few bucks on the street through drug dealing and acts of violence.

Our support for Central America and the Caribbean is by no means limited to security, however. Traditional aid and assistance programs remain one part of our approach. The United States continues to deliver almost \$2 billion in assistance to some of the most impoverished places in our hemisphere.

New, innovative programs reach all parts of Latin America. Take, for example, the Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas which President Obama officially launched at the Summit of the Americas. It is a very flexible forum for countries to come together to explore issues such as energy efficiency, search for renewable forms of energy, and cleaner exploitation of traditional fossil fuels.

Or, to cite another example: Secretary Clinton's Pathways to Prosperity initiative, which taps the creative energy and business acumen of women entrepreneurs at the community level.

One further example that I'm very proud of: The U.S. is promoting food security in vulnerable countries. In Honduras alone, we have helped nearly 23,000 households augment their incomes by increasing corn yields by 33%, bean yields by 43%, and by introducing non-traditional crops.

As Americans, we should all take satisfaction in the good work and charity that American NGOs, church groups, foundations and thousands of our citizens are doing in order to help the poorest and most marginalized communities in many of our partner countries, especially in Central America. Americans have and continue to create schools and clinics, donate money to buy medicines, and lead medical brigades that give critical health and dental care to the most deprived.

All these initiatives are important. However, we recognize that our goals of facilitating regional prosperity, citizen safety, and a clean energy future will require building stronger institutions of democratic governance that respect fundamental civil and human rights. The United States is working with our regional partners to strengthen democratic institutions in the community of the Americas. We know that there are continuing weaknesses in democratic procedures and practices and threats to their consolidation. I am ambassador to a country, Honduras, which saw a collapse of democratic, constitutional government in 2009. Let me just say that we are working hard with Hondurans of good will to help them get their country back on the right track and they have been making real progress.

Greater trust has come with the convergence in our values. For an example, we have but to look at the hemispheric community's response to the earthquake in Haiti---despite the very difficult and imperfect reconstruction aftermath. The enormity of the disaster brought the hemisphere together. Every single country contributed something to the relief effort after the devastation in Haiti. There were no arguments about history or the past. There was just pragmatism and unity around a shared purpose.

Ultimately, the success, stability, growth, and achievements of the countries of the Americas are in the fundamental interest of the United States and we are committed to forging mutually respectful and beneficial relationships.

Some final reflections

I've tried to describe the opportunities that I believe await our bilingual citizens who can equip themselves through education to take advantage of opportunity. I have spoken of US relations with Latin America, and how the region is growing as an economic partner for us.

I would like to close with a personal appeal: That you as educators encourage Hispanic students to think internationally when they ponder what they are capable of and how they will live when they grow up. Help them to imagine themselves working and living in a wider world. Dare your best students to dream large dreams, to discover the talent they have and how they can develop it, to challenge themselves to attempt great things, to be ambitious, to want to plunge into the unknown, to believe that they can make a difference and have something positive to contribute that can reach and affect the lives of people in many places. That is the mind set they need to have to pursue international careers. And those careers can come in many forms and shapes---in business, academia, government, non-profit sector, volunteer and church work, and so on.

You know, the Peace Corps offers wonderful entry into cross-culture experience and the adventures that go with it. And many US corporations---not just large ones, have international operations and scour applicants' résumés for language skills and evidence of international engagement. There are many ways to profit personally and in the world of work from knowledge of other peoples and countries.

Now let me mention my own line of work. I'm sorry to say that Hispanics are under-represented in the State Department and American diplomacy. However, the Foreign Service of the United States is committed to strength its demographic diversity and the welcome mat is out for qualified Hispanic applicants. In the coming years, I hope to see more Hispanics take an interest in serving our country as young diplomats. Believe me, there are many satisfactions that go far beyond salary for those who contribute through work and personal involvement to a better future for the peoples of our hemisphere, and the work of diplomats in our Foreign Service is right up there at the top of the list for rewarding work that contributes to mutual understanding and a more peaceable world. Tell your students something about what diplomats do and how diplomacy fosters peacemaking in the struggling and conflicted world that is ours today. I hope that many more young bilingual Americans who want to see a better world will consider careers in our Foreign Service---and will remember the educators who inspired them to do so.

Well, that's my plea. Now, I've spoken at some length with you this morning and I'm eager to hear your questions and comment in the time we have remaining.

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