

**New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson
Speech on Comprehensive immigration Reform
Georgetown University
Thursday, December 7, 2006**

Thank you all very much. Gracias, Lisa. Muy bien hecho! Foreign service- a student after my own heart. I am very sure you will continue to make New Mexico Proud. And by the way, the answer is “Christmas”. For those who don’t speak “chile”, that means both red *and* green chile.

Thank you also Professor Lotrionte. I am very familiar with your distinguished career and I am grateful that your organization sponsored my appearance here today.

I come here today as a border state Governor, and a Hispanic-American who knows that our nation can no longer afford to ignore the issue of illegal immigration.

I come here as a Democrat who believes my party has an obligation as the new majority party to pass comprehensive legislation to reform our immigration laws.

And I come here as someone who believes it’s time for our leaders to tell the simple truth about this – and every other – issue.

Today, there are over 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States. Most are law abiding, except for the fact that they have entered this country illegally. And almost

all have come here to work -- to build a better life for themselves and their families, just as previous generations of immigrants have done.

Eleven million people living in the shadows is a huge problem, and we need to address it intelligently and thoughtfully -- and urgently. If Congress fails to do so, it will only get worse, and the demagoguery about it which we have heard so much of recently will only get louder.

As the California-born son of an American father and a Mexican mother, I have known immigrants all my life and I know why they come to America. And as Governor of New Mexico I have known the problem of illegal immigration all too well -- we live with this issue every day in my state.

Like it or not, these people have become part of the fabric of our economy and our culture. They have broken the law to enter our country, but they are here -- there are millions of them building and cleaning our homes and offices, picking and cooking our food, caring for our children. These men and women are here illegally, but they work hard, pay taxes, and contribute to the communities they live in.

Eleven million people living in the shadows is a huge problem, and we need to address it intelligently and thoughtfully -- and urgently. If Congress fails to do so, it will only get worse, and the demagoguery about it which we have heard so much of recently will only get louder. America needs to SOLVE this problem, not tear itself apart over it.

I believe the American people are better than the demagogues think we are, and that the voters proved it on November 7th. The most extreme candidates lost across the country. Seventy percent of Hispanic citizens voted Democratic, and most non-Hispanics also rejected the divisive politics of the anti-immigrant extremists. I hope that the Republican right-wing learned its lesson and that sensible Senators and Congressmen from both parties can now come together and address this real problem with real solutions. I also hope that President Bush, whose rhetoric has been moderate on this issue, will now step up and lead a bipartisan comprehensive reform effort.

Think for a moment about the quality of life for an undocumented worker. No protection from unscrupulous employers. No job benefits. No health care, no pension, no Social Security, no workers compensation, no Medicare or disability insurance.

Yet – despite what some people would have you think -- almost all of these workers pay taxes, including Social Security and Medicare taxes. Because in order to find work they must either use someone else's Social Security number or make one up. Since they will never collect benefits, these illegal workers are subsidizing our Social Security and Medicare trust funds with their payroll taxes. And those who are not paying into Social Security and Medicare are working under the table, and are at even greater risk of being exploited. No minimum wage, no safety standards, no over-time, no protection against sexual harassment or even sexual abuse.

Many workers change jobs every few months because their employer finds out that their Social Security number is invalid or belongs to someone else.

Most undocumented immigrants come to the United States to work low-wage jobs which few Americans want, such as picking crops or cleaning toilets. Our economy creates demand for at least 400,000 new low-skill illegal immigrants per year, but only about 140,000 are allowed to enter legally. When demand and legal supply are so out of line, the pressures for illegal immigration are enormous.

And let's not forget what kind of lives the vast majority of illegal immigrants were living in their home countries – what propels them to come here in the first place. Economic opportunity and upward mobility in Mexico and Central American countries are limited, and half of all Mexicans live in poverty and a fifth live in extreme poverty. When there are hundreds of thousands of relatively good paying new jobs available every year a few hundred miles to the north the result is completely predictable.

Yes, we are talking about people who knowingly have broken the law. And they should be held accountable, like all lawbreakers. But we also are talking about people who are economic refugees, and who contribute significantly to America's economic success and to the economic and political stability of their home countries – with the billions in remittances they send home to their families every year.

If we're going to tell the truth we'll admit that entire sectors of our economy rely on these laborers – construction, restaurants, and agriculture, for example. Without them, many American businesses simply could not continue to function. By some estimates, undocumented workers account for fully 2% of our national economy.

11 million lawbreakers is a daunting number – and more arrive every day. Such widespread disregard for the law is corrosive of our civic culture, and must not be allowed to continue. A nation of laws cannot allow millions of undocumented immigrants to live in the shadows and hundreds of thousands more to enter the country illegally every year.

For decades politicians have passed laws on immigration with a wink and a nudge, with no intent of following through and making sure those laws were enforced. For far too long, the immigration debate has been about electoral politics, not about policy. We need more honest leadership than that. We need to stop exploiting the immigration problem, and start solving it. We need to pass realistic laws and then enforce them rigorously.

Despite the campaign rhetoric, I refuse to believe that most House Republicans really favor trying to round up 11 million people, separating them from their children who are citizens, and deporting them en masse. But that's what the bill they passed in the House of Representatives on December 16, 2005 would require.

Americans don't want that and I believe the results of the 2006 elections prove it. Only in a few races for local office in communities that have been dramatically transformed in recent years by illegal immigration was anybody defeated for public office because they supported a moderate approach to the problem. Certainly no congressional or gubernatorial candidate was defeated for that reason.

I got almost 70 percent of the vote for Governor this year in New Mexico – 15 percent more than in 2002 when I was first elected, and New Mexico is a swing state. This is after I implemented a policy to grant drivers licenses without regard to legal residency. As a result of this policy we got the percentage of uninsured drivers down from 31 percent to 12 percent. New Mexicans want our roads to be safe and the driver who rear-ends them to be insured. We want our highway cops to focus on catching drunk drivers, not illegal immigrants.

The Federal government has failed to deal with illegal immigration, forcing state governors to deal with the consequences of this failure. Governors must promote public safety and ensure that all residents of the state -- welcome or unwelcome, legally here or not -- are productive, self-supporting, and law abiding contributors to our community.

But treating illegal immigrants like human beings won't make the problem go away. We also need to face up to the problem, and that begins with better border security. Last year I declared a State of Emergency along our border with Mexico

because the situation there had gotten out of hand. Nobody was addressing the issue in Washington, D.C., and crime, drugs and lawlessness were out of control.

I also was the first Governor to meet President Bush's request to send National Guard troops to the border, because the situation is a national security concern as well. Al Qaeda took decades to find a way to hit America hard and terrorists are still out there, probing, plotting, and preparing for their next attack. I know that full well from my diplomatic experience. If there's a way for them to get into this country and attack us again they will find it. We need to stop them, and border security is essential to doing so.

I believe in recognizing the reality of the immigration problem and addressing it head-on. I reject both the cheap rhetoric we heard in this year's campaign, AND I reject the fears of some Democrats that taking action will cause our party political harm. We should seek a bipartisan solution to the problem of illegal immigration, and I believe such a solution is at hand.

We have a unique opportunity to deal with this issue in 2007 and if we let it pass we might not get another opportunity for years to come. Illegal immigration has doubled in the past ten years and if it is not addressed it could double again in the next ten years. Think of the demagoguery we will hear then!

So I am calling on the Democratic Congress to act swiftly to work with the President and solve this problem. And it can be solved by taking four realistic steps --

securing the border, increasing legal immigration, preventing employers from hiring illegal workers, and providing a path to legalization for most of the 11 million illegal immigrants already here.

Securing the border must come first – but we must understand that building a fence will not in any way accomplish that objective. No fence ever built has stopped history and this one wouldn't either. The Congress should abandon the fence, lock, stock, and barrel. It flies in the face of America as a symbol of freedom.

This is what we should do: immediately put enough National Guard troops at the border to keep it covered until we can secure it with Border Patrol officers. That should take no longer than three years. If it takes another year, let's do it.

Second, we must hire and train enough Border Guards to actually cover the entire border. I have spent a lot of time at the border and I know we cannot secure it with a fence, but we can secure it with enough trained Border Patrol officers. I propose doubling the number of Border Patrol agents from approximately 12-thousand to 24-thousand. That would secure the border. And you could more than pay for it with the funding for the first segment of that ill-advised fence between, Mexico and the United States. Real security, real results, at a fraction of the financial or political cost.

Third, we should give the Border Patrol the benefit of the best surveillance equipment available to our military. And, as suggested by Texas Congresswoman Sheila

Jackson Lee, a leader on immigration issues, we should implement a system of “informant visas” and cash rewards for aliens who provide law enforcement with information on human traffickers and document forgers. We should establish a “fraudulent documents task force” to constantly update law enforcement and border officials on the latest fraudulent documents being marketed for entry into the United States.

Finally, we have to work closely with the Mexican government. Illegal immigration is, at its root, primarily an economic problem: Mexicans need jobs and incomes, and Mexico benefits greatly from illegal immigration to the United States. It is a safety valve for their unemployed, and a major source of revenue in their economy, from the money illegal workers here send home. Under present conditions, the Mexicans just don’t have enough incentive to give us the help we need at the border. Mexico needs to do more to stem the flow.

But if we create a reasonable guest worker program and provide a path to legalization for illegal immigrants already here – as I will discuss in a moment -- there is every reason to expect Mexico to do its part to create more jobs in Mexico and to help us with border security. The Mexicans, after all, also suffer great harm from the lawlessness at the border, from drug smuggling and the simple misery of people trying again and again to get into the United States illegally.

But don't expect the Mexican government to do anything if we're going to talk about building a Berlin-style wall and deporting millions of Latinos.

Two weeks ago I met with Mexican President Calderon and he told me he is willing to do work with us to stop illegal immigration – if the United States is willing to address the crisis honestly and realistically along with him. If we refrain from building the fence (which, as I have said, is a waste of money anyway), I believe that the Mexicans would to step in with real efforts to help us patrol the border more effectively. We need to build a special relationship with our neighbor to the south, so that we can jointly patrol the border, and work together on creating more jobs for Mexicans at home in Mexico. President Bush needs to address this issue with Mexico aggressively and realistically. He needs to use his last two years to turn President Calderon's good intentions into good efforts.

One of the reasons for my meeting with President Calderon was to pitch a plan to develop border infrastructure to move goods through the free-trade zones along the border, revitalizing communities on both sides of the border and creating much-needed jobs.

This kind of action takes face-to-face diplomacy- something this country has been far too reluctant to engage in lately. I believe many problems can be solved by facing them head-on, face-to-face. My entire career has been based largely on that principle.

Earlier today, I was very proud to stand with Secretary General Insulza of the organization of American States, who has appointed me as a Special Envoy to the OAS

for Hemispheric Relations. I will work on special assignments in Latin America at the request of the Secretary, with a special focus on economic development and immigration. It would be my goal to demonstrate to OAS member states that they have an equal responsibility to solve the immigration problem, and work together on many important issues.

Once the border is secure we must make it possible for employers to meet legally their unskilled labor needs. Raising the minimum wage to \$7.50 dollars an hour will motivate more Americans to fill some of these jobs, but most low-wage jobs will still need to be filled by immigrants – because there simply are not enough Americans who want them. If the US economy needs these workers, it is in our national interest to let more of them come legally, by increasing combined legal quotas for temporary and permanent taxpaying immigrants to 400,000 workers per year. To keep families together, we also should double the number of family member visas, from 480,000 to 960,000.

We also need to improve the efficiency and transparency of our legal immigration machinery, which is plagued by long delays and huge backlogs. We need clearer procedures and more rapid and efficient processing of immigration petitions, so that fewer people will seek to evade the legal process, and more can be admitted legally.

The McCain-Kennedy legislation passed by the Senate this year provided an excellent framework for a guest worker program: pay an application fee, undergo a medical examination and a background check, the initial work period would be three years and it could be extended for up to three more years, if you're out of work for more

than 45 days you must return to your home country or last country of residence, you can change employers, but if you break the law you must leave. Those are realistic and sustainable requirements.

The number of guest workers allowed at any one time must be based upon the needs of the US economy. The goal must be to meet demand for jobs that go unfilled by American citizens, and no more. Increasing the minimum wage will help, but we must make certain that no American loses a job because of a guest worker program. Enforcement of our minimum wage laws also must improve: any employer who pays less than the minimum wage to any worker must face both high fines and a high probability of getting caught. We also must expand employment-training for low-wage American workers.

We also need a national system to reliably and instantaneously verify the legal status of every job applicant and worker. We cannot stop illegal immigration if we continue to look the other way on illegal employment. We need a national, non-duplicable electronic worker identification document to be used exclusively for employment purposes. Such a system must come with legal protections against it being used to discriminate in hiring practices, as well as privacy safeguards.

After the institution of such an ID system, employers will have no excuses: those who knowingly hire undocumented workers must face serious and certain penalties.

Those who hire illegal immigrants are law-breakers too, and like illegal immigrants themselves, they must be held to account for breaking the law.

Finally, there is the question of the status of the 11 million illegal immigrants who are here today. The legislation passed last December by the Republican House of Representatives was a monument to demagoguery. It actually proposed making felons of 11 million people and rounding them up for deportation.

Clearly, this would be impossible to do. The number of illegal immigrants is five times the number of inmates in all American prisons combined. Our economy could not stand the shock of losing all these workers, and our national conscience would not countenance arresting millions of men, women and children. We did this to Japanese Americans in 1942, and we rightfully regret that abandonment of basic American decency.

So the choice is clear: either we leave 11 million people in limbo and let them be joined by millions more, or we devise a path to earned legalization. You certainly can't enact a guest worker program without dealing with the millions already here, and the economic reality is that the demand for workers will be met with immigrants one way or another.

Providing a path to earned legalization is not amnesty, albeit some will call it that. Let them: Fear mongers spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to call it amnesty --

and the American people saw through it. Polls show that large majorities of Americans favor providing illegal immigrants a path to legalization

Still, the path to legalization should recognize that laws have been broken. The presence of most of them benefits this country, but there must be accountability.

Almost all illegal workers pay into the Social Security and Medicare Trust Funds. By legalizing them, they all will. And to be legalized, they should be required to pay any other back taxes they owe.

They also should pay a fine for breaking the law. And they must learn English and have a clean record.

If they meet all of these requirements, we should say, “Welcome to America. You’re now a legal worker. Just remember, you’re our guests and you must continue to follow these rules, and those that don’t will face the consequences.

And with instantaneous worker verification in place, we’ll be able to do it.

Finally, let me return to the subject of family. Our Constitution states unambiguously that if you are born in the United States you are a citizen of this country and you are guaranteed equal protection under all of our laws.

It's estimated that more than 50% of all illegal immigrants have children who thus are citizens of the United States. If we required their parents to leave what would become of the minor children? Would they be made wards of the state somehow? They cannot be required to leave along with their parents.

This is one of the reasons why I believe the legislation was passed in the House without any intent of it ever becoming law – which is transparently dishonest leadership.

And I believe the proponents of immigration reform have nothing to fear from those who have resorted to such tactics. The voters are fed up with that kind of politics and they are fed up with the failure to address pressing problems like illegal immigration.

Most Democrats in the House of Representatives voted against the Republican bill to criminalize illegal immigration and Democrats are now in charge of the House. A bipartisan majority in the Senate passed the McCain-Kennedy bill. That majority grew larger on Election Day. And President Bush supports a guest worker program and a path to legalization.

The new political lineup in Washington means that Congress has the numbers to pass a comprehensive immigration reform law next year which the President will sign. We have a historic opportunity to solve a problem that is tearing our country apart. We must not miss this chance.

The Democratic Agenda for the next Congress is an excellent one – raise the minimum wage, get lobbyists out of the business of writing legislation, allow Medicare to negotiate for the lowest possible prescription drug legislation, enact all of the 9/11 Commission recommendations, and change the course of our Iraq policy. Immigration reform must be added to the top of that list.

The Democrats won the election and the price of leadership is doing what's right for America.

Thank you very much.