

Elpidio Villarreal – Immigration Speech

Elpidio “PD” Villarreal is head of Litigation for Schering Plough. He is a third generation Mexican American. He gave a speech at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund dinner in New York in October 2006. People told me it was one of the most heartfelt and emotional speeches they ever heard. I contacted PD and requested a copy of the speech. We have excerpted it in our Spring 2007 Pro Bono Update, but wanted to include the entire text here on our web site. The speech complements our lead article in that issue on the increasing amount of asylum work being handled by lawyers in the firm. The speech helps to explain why this work has become so popular within the firm.

-- Marc Kadish



Elpidio “PD” Villarreal

**Puerto Rican Legal Defense and
Education Fund Gala**

Elpidio Villarreal

The Waldorf Astoria – New York

October 26, 2006

- Thank you Linda Willett for that kind introduction. My sincere gratitude to the PRLDEF for this great honor. My thanks also to Amy Schulman and David Rivkin, my dear friends, for graciously Co-Chairing this event. And thank all of you for attending.
- I want to spend just a few minutes sharing my personal opinions (not necessarily those of my employer), on an issue dividing the nation in this election year –immigration. In particular, I want to talk about how my own history and that of my family colors my view of this issue.
- I will not suggest that this nation does not have a right to control and police its own borders. This right is, in fact, an essential attribute of nationhood. Nor do I mean to suggest that immigration is not a legitimate subject of national debate, it surely is. But I think it is important that the debate be framed by facts not fictions.
- Underlying the ongoing debate over immigration is one central idea – that somehow the current wave of Mexican immigrants coming to this country is fundamentally different from prior waves of immigrants.
 - Mexicans, so the argument goes, are “different” for two main reasons:
 - (1) They are disloyal. They allegedly remain loyal to Mexico and harbor a desire to return the Southwestern United States to Mexico – either politically or, at the very least, culturally and linguistically – the so called La Reconquista.
 - (2) They refuse to assimilate. In particular, we are told that they are not learning English and will never learn it, and they will never succeed in America.

It is my purpose here tonight to take issue with and to challenge both of these “fictions.”

- There are three particularly prominent advocates of the view that Mexican Americans are “different” – (1) Harvard Professor Samuel P. Huntington; (2) political pundit and ex-presidential candidate Pat Buchanan; and (3) Representative Tom Tancredo of Colorado. Here is what they have to say.

Samuel Huntington

- “The assimilation successes of past [immigrants] are unlikely to be duplicated with the contemporary flood of immigrants from Latin America.” “Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves – from Los Angeles to Miami – and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream.”

- “There is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English.”

Pat Buchanan

- “A spirit of separatism, nationalism, and irredentism is alive in the barrios.”
- “We are inviting La Reconquista, the reconquest of the Southwest by Mexico, even as Ferdinand and Isabella effected La Reconquista of Spain in 1492 from the Moors who had invaded eight hundred years before.”
- “What Mexico’s elites are systematically pursuing is a sharing of sovereignty in these lost lands and their ultimate recapture, culturally and linguistically, by Mexico.”

Tom Tancredo

- “For years I have witnessed a difference in the kinds of people coming into the United States.” “Too many immigrants continue to be loyal to their native countries. They desire to maintain their own language, customs and culture. Yet, they seek to exploit the success of America while giving back as little in return as possible.”
- I have to tell you that when I listen to these guys (let’s call them Los Tres Amigos) – when I listen to Los Tres Amigos describe Mexican Americans it’s like an out-of-body experience. I am 46 years old and I’ve been a Mexican American all my life. The people Los Tres Amigos describe in such derogatory and paranoid terms are nothing like the Mexican Americans I know. Nothing at all.
- Let us deal first with this Reconquista idea. I realize that there are a very few Mexican-Americans who do talk about La Reconquista, but they are hardly typical or representative of Mexican Americans as a whole. Indeed, I suspect there are more White Southerners who openly call for a return of the Confederacy than there are Mexican Americans who call for the “reconquest” of California and Texas. Lincoln thought the Mexican War of 1848 was immoral because it was fought to advance the interests of the slaveholding class, but I know no Mexican Americans who cares to refight that war. History has no rewind button.
- Indeed, the notion that Mexican Americans are disloyal is not only wrong, but offensive. Mexican Americans have won proportionately more Congressional Medals of Honor than any other ethnic group in the nation’s history. Next time you catch the Honor Roll of the Dead on the PBS Nightly News Hour notice how many of the names and faces are Mexican,

or other Hispanic. These Mexican Americans sure have a peculiar way of demonstrating their disloyalty.

- Pat Buchanan complains bitterly about the fact that some of the people protesting the immigration “reform” proposals pending before Congress this Spring were waving Mexican flags. He cites this as proof that their political allegiance remains with Mexico. But ethnic flag waiving is hardly unusual in this Country. Ever been to a St. Patrick’s Day Parade? Or to a March in support of Israel?
- My late grandmother, Elena Villarreal, who came to this Country as a refugee from political violence during the Mexican Civil War, had eleven children – nine sons – one of whom died in childhood. Six of her sons served in this Country’s armed forces. My uncles have fistfuls of medals to prove their bravery, but I want to talk about the bravest one of all – the one who didn’t want to go.
- My Uncle Guadalupe was drafted during the Second World War. But he didn’t want to go. He became, in fact, a draft dodger. One day, the MPs came to the family house to get him. My Uncle hid in a shed in the back of the yard. The MPs knew he was home and they told my Grandfather that if he persuaded his son to come with them peacefully, they would not hurt him. My Grandfather went to my Uncle Lupe and told him that he had to go. My Uncle said he didn’t want to go because he knew, he knew in his heart, that he would die. He had foreseen his own death. My Grandfather told him that it didn’t matter. Even if it were true, and even if he was destined to die, he still had to go because this was our country now.
- My Uncle Lupe surrendered peacefully to the MPs. On June 6, 1944, he landed at a place called Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. He was killed while leading an attack on an enemy bunker that was pinning down his platoon. He was nominated, but did not receive, the Congressional Medal of Honor. My Grandparents received a photograph of a road my Uncle’s unit built in France. The road had been named Villarreal Road.
- Years ago, I was privileged to walk the battlefields of Normandy, including Omaha Beach, and I visited the great American Cemetery there where lie 17,000 Americans who gave the “last full measure of devotion”, as Lincoln so beautifully put it. Simple white marble crosses, interspersed with occasional Stars of David, stretch out for 70 acres. It remains one of the most moving things I have ever seen. I thought about all the brave Americans buried there and of the meaning of their deaths, but I thought especially about my Uncle Lupe, the one who went to war knowing he would die for no other reason than that his Country, the

one that treated him as a second class citizen, asked him to.

- Like I said, these Mexican Americans have a peculiar way of demonstrating their disloyalty. The fact is that, in all my life, I have never heard any member of my large family voice even one unpatriotic word. It sickens me to hear Los Tres Amigos question their loyalty.
- “Never mind about all that,” say Los Tres Amigos. The real problem is that “you people” are not assimilating, not becoming “real” Americans, not learning the beautiful English language, the language of Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and, er, South Park. This idea is also a fiction.
- In this world, at this point in its history, NO ONE can withstand the overpowering force of the English language. It is everywhere and it is 24/7. TV and American pop culture are the great assimilators – final proof that the world really is flat. I know wealthy people in Lima who complain that they can barely get their children to speak Spanish, so besotted are they with American culture.
- In fact, when it comes to learning English, Mexican American immigrants are behaving exactly like previous waves of immigrants. The first generation to arrive in America tries to stay close to the mother country. They speak their mother language as much as possible, they keep the old customs as much as they can, they return as often as they can. All of this is completely predictable and thoroughly human. But the process of Americanization is relentless.
- According to a study published last month in the Population & Development Review, by the third generation, the grandchildren of the original immigrants, only 17% of Mexican Americans speak fluent Spanish. By the fourth generation, the generation represented by my children, only 5% do. Regardless of ability to speak Spanish, by the third generation, 96% of Mexican Americans prefer to speak English at home. I am not saying this is an unalloyed good thing, only that it is inevitable.
- My grandparents spoke very little English. My parents are bilingual. I am ashamed to admit my Spanish is pretty poor. And my children speak only the Spanish they’ve learned in school. It is only a question of time.
- It is true, and very upsetting, that the educational achievement of Mexican Americans, while improving, continues to lag behind the general population, even into the second and third generations. There are certainly lots of reasons for that. (Personally, having spent some time volunteering in our modern urban schools, it’s a minor miracle anyone gets educated in them.) But do these educational shortcomings mean, as Lost Tres Amigos imply, that

Mexicans are stupid? Of course not.

- My father is a high school graduate – as are all of his siblings – a considerable achievement for their time. My mother is a high school drop out, but she would be angry with me if I failed to point out that she later received her G.E.D. and, indeed, a couple of semesters of credit at a local junior college. They each held a series of tough, dead end jobs until they were both lucky enough to become federal employees. But money was always tight. They had two sons. Though my parents did not get very far in school, they understood the importance of education, and sacrificed to send their children to the best schools they could afford, the local Catholic Schools. Their oldest son graduated from Columbia, and then from the Yale Law School; their youngest son earned two Bachelors degrees from the University of Texas.
- My daughters, who are both here tonight, are the real Luceros. Both of my children were identified early on as “gifted” by the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. My oldest daughter Elena (named after the family matriarch) is now 15 years old and a sophomore at the Hopkins School in New Haven – a private school founded in 1660 and the favorite school for the children of the Yale Faculty. Elena took the SAT when she was 12, with no prior preparation, and scored almost as high as I did when I took the test at age 17. This summer, she took an AP Government course at Yale and wrote her term paper on the Commercial Speech Doctrine of the Supreme Court. She got an A+ on it. I know a little bit about legal writing. I thought her paper was at the level of a good first year law student. And, guess what Professor Huntington? That paper was written in English not Spanish!
- My 12 year old, Elizabeth, is also here. She’s in the 7th grade at the Middlebrook Public School in Wilton, Connecticut. (She will go to Hopkins too.) Earlier this year, Elizabeth took a test administered by the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. Like the SAT, which it resembles, the test measures both verbal and math ability. She did extraordinarily well. Indeed, Johns Hopkins advised us that Elizabeth got the highest verbal score in the State of Connecticut. Most recently, she took the CT State Mastery Tests. 7th Graders are tested on math, reading and writing skills. The grading scale is 0-400. Elizabeth did extremely well on the math section, but in reading and writing she scored a perfect 400 about 130 points higher than the average score in her school district – which is one of the best in the State. And, guess what Pat Buchanan and Tom Tancredo? Both tests were administered in English!

- So take a good look at my girls. According to Los Tres Amigos, they represent the greatest existing threat to the future of America. They may look like nice kids, but don't let appearances fool you. They are actually busy plotting an insurrection and refusing to learn to speak English.
- And it is on the basis of these absurd fictions that Los Tres Amigos, and others who agree with them, propose to conduct a debate on the need for immigration "reform."
- I think that Los Tres Amigos should be afraid of my daughters. They, and millions of Latinos just like them, are growing up fast. They are growing up strong, and they are growing up smart, and they will have zero patience for the prejudiced and the ignorant. And THAT, Mis Tres Amigos, that is what you need to be afraid of.
- These attacks upon Mexican Americans are, I confess, particularly hard to take from the Buchanans and Tancredos of this world who descend from immigrants who were themselves once derided as stupid, criminally predisposed, uneducable and genetically inferior.
- In 1891, the "great" Henry Cabot Lodge had this to say about the wave of immigration that brought Representative Tancredo's grandparents to the United States. He warned "that immigration to this country is increasing and is making its greatest relative increase from races most alien to the body of the American people and from the lowest and most illiterate classes among those races." These immigrants, "half of whom have no occupation and most of whom represent the rudest form of labor," are "people whom it is very difficult to assimilate and do not promise well for the standard of civilization in the United States." "They form an element in the population which regards home as a foreign country." "They have no interest or stake in the country, and they never become American citizens."
- The same sorts of stereotypes greeted the Irish ancestors of Pat Buchanan. Indeed, for a long time the Irish were not even considered "white" by native born Americans. Newspaper cartoonists often depicted them as ape-like with a jutting jaw and sloping forehead. The Irish had terrible and well-known problems with alcohol, violence and crime. That is why police vans are still called "Paddy Wagons."
- So, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Not fundamental differences amongst immigrants, but, instead, merely a persistence of prejudice, ignorance and xenophobia – and, oh yes, a total absence of any sense of irony.
- About 90 years ago, my Grandfather Francisco, crossed the Rio Grande River illegally, settling eventually in San Antonio, where I was born and raised. He came to America because his father, a policeman, had been assassinated. He worked for many years in a

menial job at an Air Force base in Texas. Many times, he was hidden from immigration officers seeking to clear the Base of Negroes and Mexicans by a sympathetic German-American. Today, he and my Grandmother have almost 200 living descendants.

- I do sometimes wonder what my Grandfather must have been thinking as he crossed the Rio Grande into a strange new land, just as I sometimes wonder what my Uncle Lupe must have been thinking as he felt his landing boat bump against the beaches of France. I am sure they were both afraid. But both of them found the courage and the strength to keep moving forward – as we all must.
- I like to think they would have been pleased to see me accept this Award. They would have been proud of me and even prouder, I believe, of my astounding daughters. They led hard and unsentimental lives, as did all my grandparents and their children. But, in the end, they found a home here. This Country was brave and strong enough to give their descendants a chance to succeed or fail – their own chance to Achieve the Dream.
- One of my greatest fears is that we are seeing the passing of that Great Country – replaced by one governed by fear – of the future, of the present, and of “the other”. Two paths are open to us. One path would keep us true to our fundamental values as a nation and a people. The other would lead us down a dark trail; one marked by 700 mile long fences, emergency detention centers and vigilante border patrols. Because I really am an American, heart and soul, and because that means never being without hope, I still believe we will ultimately choose the right path. We have to.
- Thank you for listening. And thanks once again to PRLDEF for this great honor.