

**MESSAGE FROM
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Submitted by
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Good afternoon. I would like to thank the City of Orlando again for its gracious hospitality in such a challenging time. We have had a great conference. You have welcomed us here with an abundance of generosity and we will never forget your kindness.

A year ago at our last conference, I had wanted to talk about the many substantive issues facing the Latino community—access to health care, education, reforming our criminal justice system—but instead, I wound up talking about a new face on an old threat—I spoke about Donald Trump.

I called his rhetoric **then** for what it was: hate speech. And I asked the Republican leadership to walk away from it. In fact, I begged them to walk away. Such language is not representative of the heritage of their party nor is it representative of our heritage as Americans. I cautioned them that such language has hateful consequences and that it was important to denounce it for what it is.

But instead, scapegoating and demonization have been taken to a new level that we have not seen in generations. As the nominee of a major political party, Donald Trump has scapegoated immigrants, belittled the disabled, denigrated women, promoted violence at his rallies, called for banning Muslims, and questioned the integrity of an American judge based on his heritage, all in the name of “making America great again.”

You can see why we refused him an invitation to address this conference. Simply put, he does not deserve the privilege of our platform.

I’m sure many of you saw last week’s Republican National Convention. Well, that was something. For those who were still holding out hope for some change, we saw no pivot to a message that embraces all of America. Instead we saw the attacks on gender, race, and diversity taken to another level.

Those of us who have been dedicated to bringing light and common sense to the immigration debate watched in disbelief as the convention dug into the darkest corners of American politics. Front and center—in a place of honor and prominence—was the most extreme anti-immigrant nonsense spouted by the most extreme anti-immigrant voices... voices such as our old friend, Sheriff Joe Arpaio.

Really?

And in an hour and sixteen-minute speech, Donald Trump could find NOT ONE positive thing to say about our community or our contributions. It was a dark vision of our nation and completely at odds with the Republican Party I know and grew up with. Where is Ronald Reagan’s “shining city on a hill?” Where is George Bush’s “thousand points of light?” Where is George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservatism?” Instead of President Reagan’s hopeful and inclusive vision, we got a picture of fear, despair, and hate. Instead of President George Bush’s nod to the diversity of people who make this country great, we got a fact-free litany of why so many communities in this country—especially Latinos—should be deported. Instead of George W. Bush’s call for compassion, we got calls for a wall.

The party of Trump is not the Republican Party I know. It is not what I see from my friends who are Republicans, even when we disagree. But above all, it is not the America I know.

There is no question in my mind that the vast majority of Americans reject the view that America is only for some, that its best days are gone, and that its diversity is a threat to our future. That vision is not only offensive; it is just plain wrong.

The insidious nature of such rhetoric is that it hijacks our community's narrative and minimizes our voice. Immigrants are no longer hard-working, people of faith who seek a better life for their family and a shot at the American Dream; they are redefined as "murderers, drug dealers and rapists."

Those who label Latinos as un-American, ignore the fact that our young people have fought, and bled and died in every American conflict since the Revolutionary War. They insult the memory of our brave young men who were decorated for valor and bravery under fire and awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Go to Normandy, as I have. See the tombstones of the Americans who stormed the beaches there and you will find Latino surnames among our greatest generation—right alongside the Polish-, Irish-, English-, Asian-, and Italian-American surnames that populate that field.

We have always done our duty. We always will.

In today's political environment we are being painted by a broad brush of hate, fear, and ignorance. Too many are emboldened, if not proud, of their prejudice. And they think we are powerless to stop them.

But they should know that every day we grow stronger. Every day we get smarter. Every day we become more organized. Every day our voice gains more recognition and the numbers behind our vote become more powerful.

We will not be silent. We will not be demonized. We are nobody's punching bag. Our voices will be heard and we will punch back with the power of our vote.

In the face of the vitriol we have witnessed, it is easy to fall into the trap of polarization. It is easy to think of the world as "us versus them." It is easy to want retribution. But, as a community, we must find another way.

Look, people have a right to be angry, we're angry too. But we cannot return hate with hate or violence with violence. Violence and hate are never the answer. We have to be better than that. We are better than that.

We have seen times like this before, when racial tensions were charged, violence marred our streets, and protests against the Vietnam War and for civil rights converged to challenge our confidence in our public institutions. At the height of these times a voice committed to peace was brutally and tragically taken from us.

On the night Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, Bobby Kennedy, who had suffered his own unimaginable loss and pain when his brother was also assassinated, broke the news of King's death to a crowd in Indianapolis.

It was a difficult night for our country in a difficult time and I can't help but feel that we are fast approaching such times here and now.

Kennedy said, "It is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in.

"We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization—filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand, and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understanding, compassion, and love."

It is easy to sell an electorate on blame. It's easy to sell the idea that all our problems can be laid at someone else's door. It is much harder to get buy-in to a culture of shared-sacrifice, responsibility, compromise, and progress.

Yet, that is the road we must build, because that is the road to America's future—a future that reflects inclusion versus exclusion, participation versus prejudice, and opportunity versus exploitation.

We, as a community, must rebuild and defend the space where we can come together to work together and address the challenges facing our nation. A space where problem-solving rather than antagonism is rewarded, because charting a bright future for the nation requires unity, and unity is not for the weak or the selfish. It takes work, it takes commitment, it takes a belief in what is possible.

The Americans I live with, work with, and talk to every day do not recognize the picture of America that was painted last week in Cleveland. They believe America's best days are still ahead.

But believing it is not good enough. We need to lead in championing that belief. We need to join with others who share that vision of America. We need to ask our fellow Americans if what we saw last week is really who we are and who we want to be.

I believe America is better than that. I believe America is bigger than that. Make no mistake. Our community is being challenged.

We have worked too hard to help build this country—from harvesting the fields that feed America to rebuilding the Freedom Tower after 9/11—to making our mark in every sector of the American economy. We have contributed mightily to the greatness of America. We will not sit on the sidelines to watch the ideals that made this country great, subverted. It is our democracy too, and in our democracy, there is only one answer that has ever mattered: We will vote. We will own our voice.

We will own our narrative.

And we will own who we are.

The election this November will be a turning point—a critically important chapter in American history. It will define our community and the direction of this country for future generations.

There are only fifteen weeks left before this election. The question before us is: who among us will be accountable for that future and how?

I'm not talking about our political leaders. I'm talking about us. You and me. Together, we need to write this chapter of American history. When others look back at this time, years from now, and they will, what will they see?

Will they see how we came together to determine our destiny? What will you tell your children and your grandchildren that you did—with so much at stake, and so much on the line—to move America forward?

¿Qué van a decir los historiadores de nuestra comunidad del papel que tuvimos en esta elección? ¿Una palabra or dos? ¿ Presente? ¿ No presente? ¿ Presente? ¿No presente?

We don't have time to stop and complain about how unfair the world is. We don't have time to stop and lick our wounds.

We don't even have time to check our pulse.

As Cristina Saralegui used to say, "*siempre pa'lante, pa'trás ni para tomar impulso.*"

The challenge of our generation and the future of our country is before us and we must rise to meet it.

Muchísimas gracias and God bless America.
