

THE WHITE HOUSE
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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT THE NATIONAL HISPANIC PRAYER BREAKFAST

Mellon Auditorium
Washington, D.C.

9:29 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you so much. Well, good morning. This is just an extraordinary gathering. I have to say to Reverend Cortes and all the other organizers of this prayer breakfast, I think it's getting bigger. Huh? I think this thing is growing. (Applause.)

I just want to thank Reverend Cortes. I just got a extraordinary gift -- a bilingual Bible. It is beautiful. (Applause.) I was told this will help improve my Spanish. (Laughter.) And I said, "I'll pray on it." (Laughter.)

To all the clergy, lay leaders, administration officials, and distinguished guests who are here today, it is an extraordinary pleasure to join you. We've had a number of prayer breakfasts over the past several months, and I've got to say, there is no more inspiring way to begin a day than by praying with fellow believers. And so I'm grateful to all of you to give me this opportunity.

I also know that these past few days have not only been a time of prayer and a time of reflection for all of you. They've also been a time to lend your voices to the causes that you're passionate about. And I want you to know that I'm listening. When you lend your voice to the cause of creating jobs and opening opportunity for all communities, I hear you. When you lend your voice to the cause of educating all of our children, not just some, to succeed in the 21st century, I'm listening. And when you lend your voice to the cause of immigration reform, I am listening.

As some of you probably heard, I flew down to El Paso a couple of days ago to give a speech on this topic. And what I said in that speech was that we define ourselves as a nation of immigrants, as a nation that's open to anyone who's willing to embrace America's precepts and America's ideals. That's why so many men and women have braved hardship and great risk to come here, picking up and leaving behind the world that they knew, carrying nothing but the hope that here in America, their children might live a better life.

Our heritage as a nation of immigrants is part of what has always made America strong. Out of many, one -- that is our creed. And we are also a nation of laws. A nation of immigrants and a nation of laws. And what I went down to El Paso to say is that we are enforcing our laws and we're securing our borders. In fact, we have more manpower down at the Southwest border than at any time in our history.

And so what we need to do going forward is to address some of the broader problems in our immigration system. And that means changing minds and changing votes, one at a time. I know there

are some folks who wish I could just bypass Congress. (Laughter.) I can't. But what I can do is sign a law. What you can do is champion a law. What we can do together is make comprehensive immigration reform the law of the land. That's what we can do. (Applause.)

Comprehensive reform is not only an economic imperative or a security imperative, it's also a moral imperative. It's a moral imperative when kids are being denied the chance to go to college or serve their military because of the actions of their parents. It's a moral imperative when millions of people live in the shadows and are made vulnerable to unscrupulous businesses or with nowhere to turn if they are wronged. It's a moral imperative when simply enforcing the law may mean inflicting pain on families who are just trying to do the right thing by their children.

So, yes, immigration reform is a moral imperative, and so it's worth seeking greater understanding from our faith. As it is written in the Book of Deuteronomy, "Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." To me, that verse is a call to show empathy to our brothers and our sisters; to try and recognize ourselves in one another.

And it's especially important that we try to do that when it comes to immigration -- because this is a subject that can expose raw feelings and feed our fears of change. It can be tempting to think that those coming to America today are somehow different from us. And we need to not have amnesia about how we populated this country. What this verse reminds us to do is to look at that migrant farmer and see our own grandfather disembarking at Ellis Island, or Angel Island in San Francisco Bay; and to look at that young mother, newly arrived in this country, and see our own grandmothers leaving Italy or Ireland or Eastern Europe in search of something better.

That sense of connection, that sense of empathy, that moral compass, that conviction of what is right is what led the National Association of Evangelicals to shoot short films to help people grasp the challenges facing immigrants. It's what led the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to launch a Justice for Immigrants campaign, and the Interfaith Immigration Coalition to advocate across religious lines. It's what led all the Latino pastors at the Hispanic Prayer Breakfast to come together around reform.

Ultimately, that's how change will come. At critical junctures throughout our history, it's often been men and women of faith who've helped to move this country forward. It was in our Episcopal churches of Boston that our earliest patriots planned our Revolution. It was in the Baptist churches of Montgomery and Selma that the civil rights movement was born. And it's in the Catholic and Evangelical and mainline churches of our Southwest and across our entire continent that a new movement for immigration reform is taking shape today.

So I'll keep doing my part. I'll keep pushing and working with Congress. But the only way we are going to get this done is by building a widespread movement for reform. That's why I'm asking you to keep preaching and persuading your congregations and communities. That's why I'm asking you to keep on activating, getting involved, mobilizing. That's why we all need to keep praying. I'm asking you to help us recognize ourselves in one another. And if you can do that, I'm absolutely confident that we will not only make sure America remains true to its heritage as a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws, but we'll make sure we remain true to our founding ideals, and that we build a beloved community here on this Earth.

God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

