



Ray Martinez III
Commissioner
U.S. Election Assistance Commission
Address to Mexican American Bar Association of El Paso (MABA)
September 17, 2005
El Paso, Texas

I appreciate the invitation to be here at this wonderful event this evening. Let thank Gabriella Edwards Holguin, the President of the Mexican American Bar Association of El Paso – thank you, Gabriella, for all that you do in your position with MABA and the leadership you for provide in this important position.

Of course, I'm also honored to share tonight's festivities with so many important community leaders and dignitaries that are with us in the audience. Most have appropriately been recognized, but let me single out, if I may, **Enrique Moreno**, whom I've admired from a distance ever since I worked for the Clinton Administration; my good friend Senator **Eliot Shapleigh**, whose leadership in the Texas Senate commands the respect of all of his colleagues, Republicans and Democrats alike; and of course, the Dean of the Texas House, Representative **Paul Moreno**, who continues to set the moral high ground in the Texas Legislature. Thank you all for your attendance this evening, and for your leadership to this great community.

There are so many aspects of tonight's dinner that represent for me a profound honor to be here. First and foremost, I get to come back to my beloved home state of Texas, where my wife and I plan to return upon the end of my term on the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Second, in doing these kinds of speaking engagements, I get an opportunity to say a few words about my Hispanic culture and heritage – something which, like all of you, I am very proud of. Finally, I think what is most satisfying about functions like this is the opportunity for me to talk about the importance of civic responsibility and how critical it is for the Latino community to take more seriously our obligation to make our collective voice heard through the voting process. At a time in our country's history when elected officials are making decisions that so significantly impact our daily lives – it's important for all of us to think about how we can be better and more engaged citizens. So, I'll speak a bit more about this in the next several minutes.

You know, as I was sitting here listening to Mike's introduction of me, I started thinking that he and I are not that far apart in age, and yet, I feel a good bit older than he does these days. And the reason for that is that for the last two years, I've been serving on this brand new Federal agency that is in charge of making sure that our elections in this country run smoothly. And, if

you consider all the problems we had in Florida in 2000, and the additional problems that surfaced in places like Ohio just this past November, you can probably understand why my hair is falling out a little faster these days, and turning grey all at the same time!

I'm reminded of the story of this frail, wrinkled gentleman sitting in the front porch of his house. And there was a jogger who ran by his house every morning who noticed that there was ALWAYS this big (utopia) smile on the man's face – I mean this really happy smile. So, after several days of jogging by and seeing this man with his big, happy smile, one day, the jogger decided to stop and talk to this gentleman. The jogger said to him, "Tell me about your life. You're obviously a very happy man." And the frail, wrinkled gentleman, "I am very happy." The jogger than said, "What is the secret to your life? How can I have such a big, utopia smile when I get to be your age?" And the wrinkled gentleman said, "Well, it's pretty straight-forward: I smoke at least 3 packs of cigarettes a day; I drink 3 cases of whiskey a week; I eat all the fatty foods that I want; and, I never exercise!" And the jogger said, "My goodness, that is remarkable. Exactly how old are you?" And the man said, "Thirty-nine!"

Let me start this evening with just a few personal reflections on my road to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

As Mike mentioned, the position that I currently hold as a commissioner with the EAC required that I be nominated by President Bush and then confirmed by the United States Senate. Most of you in this room know by now that a confirmation process in the U.S. Senate isn't something that happens overnight – if it happens at all. Of course, the confirmation process for a job like mine – an executive level position that lasts for four years – is supposed to be much faster than confirmation for Federal judicial appointments which, as you know, last a lifetime.

Unfortunately, the "expedited" confirmation process did not quite happen for me. While there was no particular controversy associated with my nomination, the formation of this new agency got caught up in big picture political matters that were being debated throughout the year back in 2003. Thus, what was supposed to take no more than a few months, turned into a nine-month ordeal for both me and my family.

During those difficult months when I saw my solo administrative law practice literally "withering on the vine" as I awaited Senate action, I often reflected on the lives of those persons who came before me, struggling to ensure that Latinos had a place at the proverbial table of power. I grew up reading accounts of civil rights pioneers, such as Cesar Chavez and Willie Velasquez – their names came to mind frequently. I also thought about the modern-day achievements of civil rights leaders such as Raul Yzagguire (NCLR) and Linda Chavez-Thompson, both of whom I've had the privilege of getting to know personally. They are inspirations to all Hispanics – and indeed, to all Americans – regardless of age...regardless of political affiliation.

And yet, during this same period of reflection, the two people whose lives and accomplishments I thought of most were my very own parents. And so, as we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, there is perhaps no greater tribute to our achievements as a community than to tell the stories of our own families.

You know, my good friend and political mentor, Henry Cisneros – whom I’ve had the privilege of knowing and working closely with for many years now – is fond of saying that he is a believer in what he calls “**the inevitable march of human progress.**” And, when Henry speaks of this, he often recites a quote from our country’s second president, John Adams. President Adams wrote a letter to his wife, Abigail, in which he reflects on the progression of life and service and work. In this letter, he says the following: “I study war and diplomacy so that my sons can study commerce and agriculture...so that my grandchildren can study the arts...literature, music...and the humanities”.

And, it is certainly true that there is a modern-day parallel to John Adams eloquence right here in this room – in the countless stories of human progress that our own lives represent.

As Mike mentioned earlier, I was born and raised in Alice, Texas, a small South Texas town where my parents – now married for the past 58 years – still reside. My father, who is now 84 years old, is a retired auto mechanic and oil field worker. My mother, who is 77, is also retired, but she gets mad at me when I call her a “retired” homemaker, because, as she tells me: “One never retires from washing dishes and doing the laundry.” (And of course, she’s right.)

I have many fond memories of growing up with my parents in Alice. But perhaps the most vivid memories have to do with their commitment to serving our small community. Even after a long day of work, my father found the time to lead a Boy Scout troop; he found the time to coach Little League baseball (even though this was clearly not my sport); likewise, my mother always had time for activities involving our local Catholic church or to car pool me and my friends from one event to another. And, of course, my father swells with pride when he recounts his service in the U.S. Army during World War II.

Going back to the words of President John Adams, the generation represented by my parents worked very hard during most of their lives, and with few of the perks that we have today. They lived through a Depression; they protected our country in the midst of not one, but two World Wars; and they struggled for respect – many paying a very steep price for that respect. They did all of this so that our generation could do things such as attend college and law school; so that our generation could pass landmark laws such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965; the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; and the Help America Vote Act of 2002; and so that our generation could freely exercise our most **fundamental** obligation as an American citizen: the right to vote.

In short, ladies and gentlemen, as I think about the march of human progress as it relates to my own life, what I learned from my parents, as I watched them tirelessly serve their community (which they continue to do to this day)...what I learned from them was the **importance of public service.**

And the lesson of civic responsibility and community service came not just from my parents, but from my own life experiences, even at an early age. Several years ago, I was asked by my alma mater, Southwestern University in Georgetown, to contribute to a book that was being published by the University. For my essay, they asked me to write about my career in public service...how

it began and why it was my passion. I explained in my essay all that I just shared with you about the inspiration my parents provided; but then, I gave a more pointed account of how my interest in public service began in earnest. Here's a short excerpt of what they published:

My own public service began nearly twenty years ago. My desire to serve sprang not from an inspirational speech or political event, but mostly from something far different.

I remember the day vividly. The year was 1982, and I had just begun my senior year at Alice High School. I had an appointment with one of my school's career counselors to discuss "the future." Going into this meeting, I had already decided to go beyond high school and attend college. In doing so, I would become the first college graduate from my immediate family.

What I needed most from my counseling session that day was encouragement...to hear from a person of authority that a young student like me – of modest financial means and little exposure to the outside world beyond my small hometown – could succeed at a major undergraduate university in Texas. After all, my grades were competitive and my extracurricular activities were strong: Sophomore and senior class president; member of the varsity football team; member of the drama club; and an active member of my Catholic church.

However, when the meeting with the counselor was over, I was left feeling deeply disappointed and thoroughly discouraged. Why? Because my high school counselor, the person most appropriately situated to encourage a student like me to aim for my highest potential, advised only one course of action: To attend the local junior college because, as she put it, "...that's the only place where most of *you people* who want to go to college can succeed anyway." (End of excerpt.)

Well, no doubt that many other students, some more and some less gifted than myself, have been stymied, too, in their own pursuit of a dream by the ignorance, and perhaps even hate, of others in authority. From this unfortunate experience with my counselor came a realization that my future career would involve public service. It also helped to form my first true conviction about the role of government: that while it should never be viewed as the answer to all of our social ills, at a minimum, the appropriate *and necessary* role of government is to ensure that every American has an opportunity to succeed.

And, quite frankly, it is that same sentiment that has driven me to the work of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Back in March of 2003, when I first decided to accept an appointment to this Commission, I drove from Austin down to Alice to sit down with my parents and explain to them that, at some point after a Senate confirmation process, my wife and I would be moving the family back to D.C. so that I could serve on this brand new Federal agency.

As I mentioned earlier, my parents are older and so traveling around the country is not something they do well. So, taking my family halfway across the country is a significant decision for my wife and I, considering that our two young children will be so far away from their grandparents. I wasn't sure what to expect from that conversation with my parents. After I explained the situation and told them of the role of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, my mother turned to me and said that while she was sad that our family would be moving so far away, she was also happy that I would be on this particular Commission because, as she explained, having never used a computer before in her life, she would not know what to do if one of these fancy new machines were installed in the voting booths of Jim Wells County, Texas, where she and my Father have been voting for as long as I can remember. She said to me in very plain language:

someone has got to show me what to do if that happens, otherwise, I may not be able to vote anymore.

So, these are some of the thoughts that motivate me and the work I do on the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. You know, prior to the 2000 presidential election, most Americans applied little thought to the actual mechanics of the voting process. The term “hanging chad” had little meaning to most Americans. But the events that occurred in Florida in 2000, and indeed, to a lesser extent, the problems of long lines and provisional voting that occurred in some parts of the country during the 2004 presidential election, have created a new awareness about how we run our elections in this country. The last two presidential elections have caused us to think hard about the **technology** that we use on election day, the **processes** that are in place to ensure equal and fair treatment of all voters, and whether the **people** who assist every election cycle as poll workers are getting the appropriate training and resources they need on election day.

For example, we’ve seen attempts by some states to clean up their voter rolls, only to discover that thousands of people were erroneously disenfranchised with the stroke of a computer key; we’ve seen voting systems that at times, have unacceptably high error rates...where votes that were cast are not counted due to technical malfunction or simple voter error. And, we’ve also seen poorly trained poll workers whose actions have at times led to voter confusion or voter disenfranchisement.

These are all serious concerns that require our collective attention. And that is the day-to-day work of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission

But, beyond the obvious need to improve voting technology and better train our poll workers and election officials, there is another related issue that also deserves our attention. And that issue is voter participation and political empowerment— perhaps our most fundamental civic responsibility as an American. Let me recite some very real and current statistics that should give you reason to be concerned about the future of the Latino community:

- In the 2004 presidential election, while 67 percent of eligible whites cast a ballot (60 percent in 2000) and 60 percent of eligible African-Americans cast a ballot (57 percent in 2000), only 47 percent of eligible Hispanics cast a ballot (compared with 45 percent turnout in 2000)
- Today, approximately 58 percent of eligible Hispanics in this country are registered to vote, compared with 70 percent of whites and 67 percent of African Americans.
- And, in 2004, 33 percent of eligible Latinos between the ages of 18 and 24 took the time to cast a ballot, compared with 50 percent of whites and 47 of African Americans.

Consider as well that in the five year period from 1997 to 2003, the year the most current statistics are available, the percentage of Latinos in the Texas public school system increased from 38 percent of the total, to over 43 percent – and that number is likely to exceed 50 percent in the next 10 years, if not sooner.

In short ladies and gentlemen, these trends in voter participation for the Latino community – the very essence of civic participation and engagement – ought to alarm us all.

Years ago I came across a quote by the playwright George Bernard Shaw that is found in his play called *The Devil's Disciple*. He writes: “The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them. This is the essence of inhumanity.”

Certainly, George Bernard Shaw wrote those words with far different circumstance in mind and yet, I think his words make a great deal of sense to me in this context: if we are indifferent to the important public policy decisions being made at every level of government all around us – if we choose to not walk through all the doors of opportunity that were opened by countless individuals that we celebrate during Hispanic Heritage Month – then our collective indifference could, quite literally, mean the demise of our democracy.

Justifiably so, as a nation, we are all very focused these days on threats to our country that come from the outside; and yet, political apathy, especially on the part of this wonderfully diverse, compassionate, and responsible sleeping giant that is the American Latino community ought to concern us just the same. I do see positive signs of progress that are beginning to materialize – the historic election of Antonio Villaraigosa as mayor of Los Angeles comes to mind. And yet, we cannot lose focus on the responsibility we all have to ensure that the current generation of Latinos fully understands the concept of “consent by the governed.”

Let me simply say in closing that this audience is filled with influence, community leaders and great powers of persuasion. I urge you all to use that influence to motivate people to participate in our Democracy and to be informed and committed participants yourselves.

Although we are a small and relatively obscure Federal agency, I hope I've been able to convince you through my words tonight to follow what we do and to help play a role in our success. And I want to remind all of you in closing that the ideal of our participatory Democracy is this – that at least on Election Day, we are all equal. Whatever anybody thinks about all the challenges and problems we still have in America – and we are divided on many issues in this country today – that fact is that on Election Day, every single person who casts a ballot is just as important as the President of the United States. Everyone's vote counts just the same. Looking back on things, I realize now my Dad really was a very important person on election day.

Thank you all for the good work you do, and for having me here today.

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