



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

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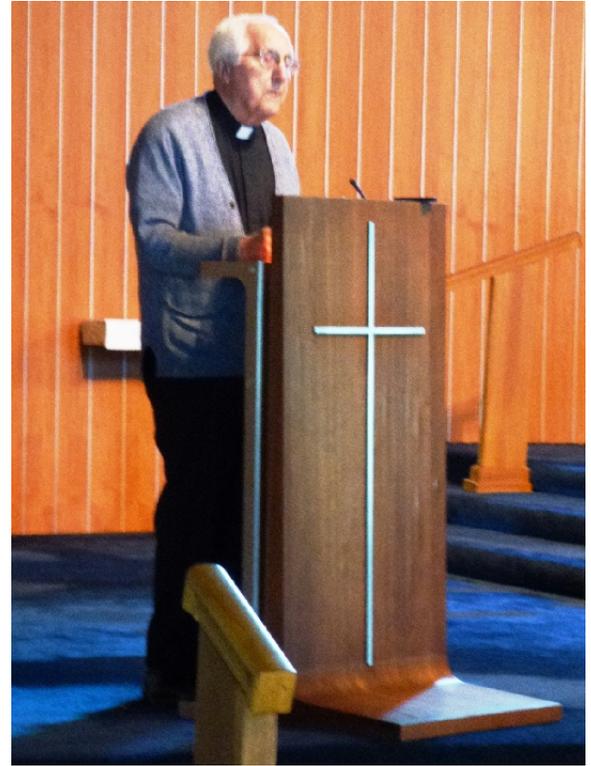


OSCAR CHACON
MCAULY MERCY CENTR
FARMINGTON HILLS, MI
TUESDAY, MAY 21, 2019

INTRODUCTION

Bishop Tom Gumbleton

I have the privilege of introducing our speaker today. I met Oscar Chacon in December of 1987, when he came to the airport in San Salvador to welcome the delegation of citizens of the United States. We had traveled to El Salvador to support Salvadorans who had recently returned from Messagrande, a refugee camp in Honduras. The people had been bombed out of their own villages in the rural communities in El Salvador, and fled to Honduras. After many years in exile, they had determined to return to their own country, even though the civil war was still being fearfully contested. They wanted to be part of the solution. They did not want their children to have to learn to beg, or their older people to die in a foreign country. While Oscar served as our guide, we discovered he had fled El Salvador to the United States in 1980 in fear of his life. The year St. Romero and four women from the United States were murdered in that evil civil war. Oscar had just recently graduated from the technical high school and was active in promoting literacy in his parish. This is what made him a target - working to improve the lives of poor Salvadorans. Undocumented Oscar arrived in New York City. He worked in a deli for a while, learned English, and stayed connected with other Salvadorans and at home in El Salvador. Soon after he came to the U. S., he married Myra, also a Salvadoran exile. Now they have two children and one grandchild; and all are U. S. citizens. Since he arrived in 1987, he has remained fully committed to improve the lives of immigrants and has passionately advocated for immigrants of the U. S. and throughout the world. He is co-founder and executive director of the *Alianza Americas*, an umbrella group of immigrant-led and immigrant serving organizations, based in the United States, dedicated to improving the quality of life of Latino immigrant communities in the U. S., as well as people throughout the Americas.



Oscar is a frequent national and international spokesperson on economic justice, on the link between immigration and development, on migration policies, racism, and issues that affect the U. S. Latino community. Back in 1987, after our return from El Salvador, Oscar continued to work with us, promising to assist us as our guide and translator, whenever we went as a delegation to El Salvador. Oscar has kept that promise for over 25 years. Through the three decades since we met, Oscar has been a teacher, an advocate, and especially a friend to those of us seeking to understand the reality of our Salvadoran sisters and brothers.

I am very pleased and honored that Oscar is with us today to speak on the topic: *Immigrants in a Time of Fear and Anxiety; Understanding Their True Role in the U. S. Today*. Oscar. Please greet him with great joy. (Applause)



IMMIGRANTS IN A TIME OF FEAR AND ANXIETY: UNDERSTANDING THEIR TRUE ROLE IN AMERICA TODAY OSCAR CHACON

Good afternoon everyone. It's absolutely an honor, a pleasure, to be back in the Detroit area. There is nothing that Tom Gumbleton would invite me to do that I wouldn't do. (laughter) So, I'm very honored that he called me and asked me if I would be willing to be here today. And I absolutely said, "Yes!" And I also want to say that I am very grateful to be in the presence of many friends with whom I have traveled to El Salvador many times - don't know exactly how many and when: Sue Sadler, who has been in almost every one of those trips, except< I believe, one. And, although I never really resided in the Detroit area or in

Michigan, I often feel like I am coming home whenever I am coming to the Detroit area, because of all the friends I have come to love, respect, and friends from whom I have learned a great deal of things from fortunately that day in December of 1987. I didn't know any of them when I was in El Salvador, finishing with another group of people from Massachusetts. As a matter of fact, I got a call from a colleague of mine, some of you know him, Jose Artega, and asked me, "Can you stay another few days to work with a group from Michigan?" So, I said, "OK! I will stay for one more trip." And that is how I got to know these folks. Somebody earlier asked me, "How did you get to know people in Detroit, and Sue in particular?" And I said, "It was an accident of life, because none of us actually planned to meet; it just happened." And, as I have said, I have been fortunate ever since.

Tom already described to you a bit of who I am, a bit of what my life is like. I want to tell you a little bit about the group that I work for: *Alianza Americas*. And you can certainly check it out also on the web by going to alianzaamericas.org. That's our website.

One of the interesting experiences I had in my life, since I came to the U.S., is to see how the role of people from Latin America in the U.S. has evolved, has changed. By the year 2000, after the census had been done, we learned one thing that actually made the headlines, you know, in the news. And it is that the people of Latin American origin have actually become the second largest group of people after white European Americans. And that was something that people like me have already suspected, just because of our experience in working with those in communities all over the U.S. In one aspect of that piece of news that did not get that much airing is that in that year, nearly 40% of all of the population of those who self subscribe as Hispanic or Latino in the U.S. were actually foreign born, mainly from Mexico, but also from Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, from the Dominican Republic, and a few other Latin American countries. Today that population has become extremely large. There are about 65,000,000 people who would self describe as Hispanic or Latinos in the U.S. And there are about 22,000,000 of those 65,000,000 that are actually foreign born, making people of Latin American origin the largest percentage of all of the foreign-born population.

But in the year 2000, I was in California in that year, but I had just finished nearly 15 years working with Latin American immigrants in the Boston area. And one thing that I have reflected many times about is that there was not one single organization that represented those communities: the communities of Latin American immigrants residing in the U.S. And you all remember what happened: the events on 9/11 in 2001, basically set back the conversation about immigration and immigrants for a while until the year 2004, when the president at the time, George W. Bush, actually gave a speech about the role of immigrants in the U.S. People hardly remember these, because it seems like such a long time ago. And immediately following that 7th of January of 2004, I happened to be in Detroit. And I happened to be visiting and doing some presentations here and there. And I was already fixing my mind with the idea that that speech given by George W. Bush was actually a great opportunity: to finally put together the right group of people to found a brand new organization that would be charged with being a voice for those communities, but also be a perspective that was kind of missing in the larger landscape of Latino organizations, or simply civil society organizations, in the U.S.

And so here we are in the year 2019; and we are about to actually celebrate 15 years of the founding of that organization. And it's been very difficult to come to be 15 for this organization, because the moment we were born, it's the myth of a period which has been extremely hostile for immigrant communities in the U.S., especially Latin American immigrant communities. So, I won't say more about *Alianza Americas* but I do invite people interested in learning more about it to check it out.

If you happen to be active in Facebook, you can also look for us on Facebook. We keep a very active presence through Facebook as well. But, let me begin to get to the substance of what I was asked to speak about.

First change

You know, most of you may or may not be aware that most Americans, when they are asked, “Do you agree with the statement that we are a nation of immigrants. Do you approve or disapprove?” Most people in the U.S., last time I checked, nearly seventy some percent say, “Yes! We agree that we are a nation of immigrants.” I don't know, I would like to have a show of hands. How many of you would agree with that statement? Most people. Okay, so you are representative of the surveys that are done on these questions. Yet, what you may not know - hopefully you do, some of you may not -with this statement that this very nation whose population largely agree with the statement that we have a nation of immigrants, has never really been a nation that really welcomes newcomers. We have been suspicious of newcomers, pretty much from the beginning. And I am talking about colonial times. Without going through everything that happened in those years, that dealing with that society, it created a good path for the future, including the annihilation of a good number of the native populations in these lands before it was called the United States of America.

But, as early as pre-Revolution, there were people who were very suspicious about those weird- sounding Germans— and I am talking about again colonial time. So, from that moment forward, the realities of our history in as far as we treat foreign nationals coming in, has not been really loyal to Mathew 25:31 that we just heard a little bit ago. And so, it is important to understand that every single group that ever came was not necessarily welcomed with open arms and really treated nicely. We, in retrospective, re-do history very often. For example, it is not unusual nowadays to hear people saying, “I don't know why these people are coming to the U.S. without visas, without permission; my grandparents came the right way.” What right way?

Beginning with the fact that, up until 1924, we did not really have a full-blown immigration policy. And so, if you came to the U.S., it was common that you would be asked if you had any illness; and they would check you for those illnesses. And they would also ask you what your plan was: “Are you planning to come to stay, or just to visit.” But it didn't matter what your response was; you would still be able essentially to come in. Most people don't know that the moment in history, when the largest percentage of foreign nationals came into the U.S. in relationship to the population living in the country, was actually the period between 1890 and 1910. And, I assure you, those were not Mexicans coming in. (*Laughter*) So, pretty much from the beginning of our immigration policy, it's been very restrictive. And between 1924 and 1965, it was openly racist. If you were a European coming into the U.S., you largely managed to come in and settle in the U.S. But, if you were from anywhere else, that was not necessarily a good experience for you.

And, while on the topic of foreign nationals, let me also remind you that a sizable chunk of land that today, we call the United States of America, was actually Mexico. And I am talking about the Southwest, by and large and the West of the country. So, for those people, they never even came to the U.S.; the U.S. came to them. The border crossed them, as opposed to them crossing the border.

Now, as I was saying, through 1965 white supremacy was openly embedded in our immigration policy. In 1965, largely in the heat of the civil rights movement, the nation adopted an important change in immigration law, mainly because we really felt bad: some people really felt bad about how the immigration policy had been built and put into motion from 1924 all the way through 1965; and we passed a law, that at least in theory, was going to provide equal opportunity for all countries, all nationalities around the world. At that moment, it really looked like a very important change, very progressive, forward looking change in the law. But, I can tell you, as one who has studied very carefully at these changes, that that law was more about fixing our moral sense of guilt for what kind of law we had up until 1965; it was not so much as looking forward. It was more about how we should have been in the past; because, what seemed like a very progressive change in 1965 very soon turned out to show serious limitations, because of the changes of who was coming to the U.S. Just to give you an idea: in 1970 the U.S. Census Bureau tell us that 61% of the foreign-born population in the country in that year were actually Europeans. But, from that moment forward, from 1974, that shifted dramatically. By the late 1970s evidence shows us that we were already shifting rapidly from a predominately European immigration population to a predominately Latin American, largely Mexican immigrant population.

Second Change.

Now, I think it is also important to point out—and I'll come back to this in a moment—there was another area where changes were happening. Not only who were foreign-born was changing, but something that also began to change dramatically was birth rates in the country. We began as a society, as a whole, we began to have fewer children. And when you actually stratify that change by ethnic group, you will also find that that there was an asymmetrical relationship between white Europeans, in terms of racial makeup, and everybody else. You know, while white Europeans were rapidly declining, people of African, Latin American, and Asian origin were rapidly growing. So, when you combine less white Europeans coming, and much lower birth rates than we have ever had, that actually presented from the point of view of white supremacy ideologues, a big problem in terms to the future identity of the nation.

Now, demographics, including birth rates, was not the only thing changing from 1974 forward. There was another big change that began to take root more firmly in the 1970s, in 1980s: the dynamics, the nature of global economics. You know, U.S. corporations had subscribed in the 1950's that it was far more profitable to produce American merchandise abroad and to sell them in the U.S..

But not understanding that it was kind of an isolated niche became, beginning in the 1970s, a far more vigorous, and it remains with us until today. And, if I were to ask all of you right now to check the label on your clothing, and to remove everything that was manufactured abroad, I don't know how the picture would look. (*laughter*) But, that's a change that I am bringing into the conversation, because the accumulated effect of that basic change, in terms of the nature of the jobs available, the type of benefits that people get at a given job, it's been a very slow-motion change.

But, it has happened at the same time that the makeup of the foreign born population, including their birth rates, has also been changing. So, I'm pointing essentially to two very important changes that have occurred over the last 40 years or so, very slowly; so slowly, that most people don't even realize that these changes have happened. It is one thing to have things change dramatically from one day to the other, like when an earthquake happens in a given country. The look changes dramatically because there are no buildings left standing anymore. That's not the kind of change I am talking about. I am talking about a very slow change.

Third Change.

And there is a third change that has also been kind of slow. Most Americans do seem to be fully aware of this change. And it is a fact that our policy makers, especially in Washington D.C, have been increasingly perceived as useless (*laughter*) in terms of changing these dynamics that I'm describing, to the point that to defy conventional approaches has become very popular. The idea that you don't come from politics, you don't have a career running for Congress, that that's not all that you have done in your life is appealing, because a lot of people perceive that the politicians who have been there for too long have not actually done anything, you know, to change what people know, that nothing quite sits right in their mind; but they don't know exactly what it is.

Now, the confusion that all this causes is very much present in the reality of life that we all experience, but many seem unaware. And so, in this respect, I do want to say, that while a lot of people tend to believe that the life of immigrants and the understanding of what migration does for our country, began to go bad in 2015, because of a guy who decided to run for President, saying to the world that one of the key things he was going to try to do was, to get rid of people who were rapists, who were killers, and many other objectives that he used. I wish it were true, that the problems only begun then; but, in reality, our headaches began earlier. They began by the late 1980s. We were already seeing very dangerous signs resulting from the narrative that painting immigrants, especially Mexicans, especially Latin Americans, as some sort of threat that has to be contained.

I don't know if there is anybody here from California, or with California roots?—and there is one hand at least—well, by the end of the 1980s, California was experiencing an acute pain resulting mainly from the economic restructuring that I was describing very, very briefly, meaning, lots of people lost good jobs with good benefits, never to be seen again, until the technology revolution came about, for some. That reality in California turned into a very ugly electoral campaign in 1994. That electoral season, in many ways, was the electoral campaign in California, where the blueprint for the kind of campaign that led to the election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S. in 2016 was actually written. And it was, specifically, the marriage between electoral politics and xenophobia and racist assault against foreign nationalists.

Not only did the dying gubernatorial administration revive in 1994 with the re-election of Pete Wilson, but there was also a ballot initiative, as they are called in California, referendums, Proposition 187, that actually brought, for the first time in recent history, an all out assault against foreign nationals. And, even though the Democratic party put a great candidate to run against Pete Wilson, she lost. That Democratic candidate by the way was Kathleen Brown. If the name sounds familiar, it's because, yes, she was the sister of the recent governor of California, and the daughter of a very famous California governor. But she lost to Pete Wilson, because the Democratic party failed to understand the kind of toxic formula that manifested in the re-election campaign of Pete Wilson. And, I have to sadly say, that the Democratic party at the upper echelons remains lost to this day, confused as to how to respond to the kind of attack that was inaugurated in recent history in California; and it was, as I said, the blueprint that Donald Trump followed in 2015 and 2016 to become the president of our country.

Now, we have been heeding for nearly three- and one-half decades, a consistent narrative that suggests that foreign nationals, especially Mexicans, are simply bad for the country. And, it's amazing how the persistency of this message gradually occupies the minds of everyone. Now, if you would think that only Republicans think that way, you would be very wrong. That narrative has penetrated the way almost all of us think about immigrants. Sometimes, we are conscious of it; sometimes, we are not conscious of it. Because it has been, as I have said, persistently said, persistently broadcasted. This is what we see very often at the movies. This is what we see in TV shows. This is what we read very often. So, there are multiple ways in which these lies have been injected into the way we think. I tell you one thing that, you may even not believe me, if the national/international debate about immigrants, about immigration were to be a debate solely based on scientific evidence, were to be solely based on facts, we would not be having this event here today; because, the evidence about what foreign nationals have done for countries like ours, but we are not the only one, is unbelievably positive, is vastly positive in multiple ways.

You know, I find, for example, it's surprising that Americans love to go to a city like New York, or San Francisco, or Chicago, and even Detroit, and enjoy food from anywhere in the world. That wouldn't be possible, if we didn't have the kind of immigration that we have had. But, I'm only talking about rather superficial things so far. Food, I mean, who doesn't like great food? And, let's face it, there is hardly a comparison between a hamburger and some really well-done tacos, you know, from Mexico. (*laughter*) From a fiscal standpoint, I always joke with people who are very suspicious about immigrants who don't pay taxes; because, I tell people, "You know, I think you're right." That's why I tell people, "People without visas always go to the special cashier in a supermarket (*laughter*) where they don't pay taxes." And they say, "What cashier?" Because they are innocent? Because, we all pay taxes. Now, if you are in the U.S., with or without authorization, we all pay taxes. And again, if you were to take the time to look at the fiscal contributions of foreign nationals, it is a proven fact that foreign-born populations use far less public resources than they contribute.

But, let me also tell you another element that I already referenced: birth rates. Just a couple of days ago, there were headlines in many newspapers saying that we had reached the lowest birthrate in decades in the U.S. Did any of you see those headlines? Some people—well, it is true—not only are we of the lowest birthrates, including Mexicans, including Latinos. And it is the natural consequence of what happens after a serious economic crisis, like what we had in 2008. It's very much a common pattern that, as an economic crisis comes about, people have fewer kids. It doesn't matter if you are black, Latino, white, Asian, it doesn't matter. Now, that wouldn't be so much of a problem, if we didn't have something called baby boomers.

You know, baby boomers began reaching age 65 in massive numbers beginning in 2011. I don't know if you all are aware, but every single day, since January 1, 2011, 10,000 people reach the age of 65; and it will continue to be the case until at least 2030. So, it is projected that about 87,000,000 people, give or take, will reach, or will have reached, the age of 65 by 2030. Now, if you combine the lowest birthrate that we are experiencing on one hand, with this other demographic statistic in the U.S., we had better find more people to actually come to this country; (*applause*) because, otherwise, we would become a decaying nation, unable to perform basic duties that every society hopes to be able to resolve positively.

Now, I also want you to be aware that, according to government sources, there are about 11,000,000 to 11,500,000 people residing in the U.S. without visas. And these individuals are not living in that condition because they so wish. You know, these individuals would love to be able to enjoy the practical implications of having a legal visa in the U.S., which allows you to get a social security number, which allows you to get a driver's license, which allows you to travel freely in and out of the U.S. I assure you, none of those people are in that situation because they think that that is the best they could have.

And, just a few days ago, I think it was Thursday, if I am not mistaken, it was announced that the White House is proposing a new approach to immigration policy, an approach that would favor skills, knowledge, and talent over family union. Now the realities: you will be surprised how many people that were doing menial jobs, could do much better jobs, except that they don't have a chance. Do the people here go to Washington D.C. with any frequency? Can you raise your hand if you do? Some.

Well some of the most informed, educational conversations you can have in Washington D.C. are not in Congress. They are actually in taxi cabs, (*laughter*) because the drivers of those taxi cabs are often engineers, doctors, chemists, and the like. And do you think they really wish to be working as drivers of taxi cabs? It is because we are underutilizing the talent that exists. But what the president, and other people, because he is not the only one, want to confuse us about is that there is a contradiction between talent, skill and knowledge, and family unity. The realities: there is no contradiction. If we had the right policies, we would do both. And I will come back to that in a couple of minutes.

But, let me shift a little bit to a more recent set of stories that we have been listening to. In June of 2014, President Obama declared we were facing a human crisis at the border because of unaccompanied children arriving to our southern border. And I have to tell you, very frankly, I don't know how many friends of Barack Obama there may be in the room, but his response was not the best one. His response was, "Round them up, and send them back." Now, at least, they had the decency to accept that there were legal obligations that existing law compelled the administration to treat those unaccompanied children the way the law prescribes.

From that point forward, Central America has come back into the news. When I left El Salvador, we were in the middle of very bloody civil wars that killed a lot of people. And, I have to say, back then people from Guatemala and El Salvador were not treated right either. In case you didn't know, in that decade between 1980 and 1990, only three percent of people who filed for political asylum in the U.S. got it; 97% were denied. In spite of Archbishop Romero's assassination in El Salvador in March of 1980, and in spite of the U.S., church women, who were also raped and killed, and in spite of the tens of thousands of Salvadorians who were being victimized by a military dictatorship. So, I am bringing this up, because it is not like our history in 2014 was exemplary. It was not!

But, there is also an additional complication. Reality of life in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala has dramatically changed in the sense that, number one: we have discovered in the 1980s that migration was a good survivalist strategy. And millions of people, if you put them together from those 3 countries, actually came to the U.S., settled in the U.S., and managed to eventually gain authorized presence in the U.S.; for that factor wasn't there when I left El Salvador.

I mean, the only person I knew in the U.S. was a friend of mine from my early childhood years, who I hadn't seen in years; but he was the only person I knew in Brooklyn, N.Y. That is why I went to New York. But, today, it is very different, because you have altogether close to 5,000,000 people from Central American countries residing in the U.S—all over the U.S., including Detroit.

But, number two: our countries have become extremely violent to the point that El Salvador and Honduras usually are competing with one another for who will be the country with the highest homicidal rates. And here is what I want to make you aware of: our current humanitarian protection laws do not have properly canonized, properly legislated. protection for people who are running away non-state actors. Now if you are running away from a government that is repressive, from a dictatorial regime, our immigration law in the area of humanitarian protection provides some grounds for protection; not that they will be respected, but at least that they are there. But, when it comes to gang violence, when it comes to non-trafficking related violence, our immigration policies are very, very rudimentary defined, which is why some people in government today say those Central Americans coming into the U.S. they don't qualify for asylum. And, in a very, very narrow technical manner, they are actually correct; because they are not running away from any of the conditions that, according to asylum law, they would qualify, not for asylum. That is not to say that they don't deserve humanitarian protection. And so, that's a big challenge that we have going forward.

And, aware of the time, let me just say that what we have been told recently, in as far as we are facing a crisis of unprecedented numbers: people arriving at our borders; it is largely manufactured. If you look at the data for the past 30 years, you will see that the number of Central Americans, who are coming in today, are not dramatically different than the numbers of people who were coming in the 1980s, or the numbers of people who were coming in the 2000s, or the numbers of people that are coming in today. But, it serves a political purpose to paint what is going on as an apocalyptic reality, where we have been invaded by poor Central American peasants wanting to break our laws and come into the country. Why? Because, just like the case was in 2016, the same formula amplified and improved, will be used in 2020 to make the case that we need to protect our border; we need to protect our sovereignty. “A nation that cannot protect its borders is not a nation.” That is something our president likes to say. They don't care that your clothing and mine are manufactured abroad; and that probably has more of an impact on our well being as a society than people coming in seeking humanitarian protection.

Now, going forward, what should we aspire to? I believe that one huge obstacle that we face is the fact that, even today, most people born in the U.S. have never had a meaningful conversation with a foreign-born individual. They may see them serving tables. They may see them cooking in the kitchen in restaurants we go to. They may see them cleaning your hotel room.

They may see them even taking care of an elderly person in a nursing home. But, you have never taken the time to know their stories, to inquire, “Why did you come here?” And so, we must acknowledge that there is a lot of work to be done in terms of engaging in what I call meaningful social interaction; because, some of the people who hold the strongest views against immigrants never had a conversation with an immigrant.

And so, that's in my view, an element that, I think, in the long haul will serve us well, if we are to have a society that is more harmonious, and not a society that is divided. More from a policy perspective, I think we need to acknowledge the centrality of family in society. So, to suggest that knowledge and skills are at odds with people living together with their loved ones is simply a false contradiction. We need to embrace both. We also need - and this is hard - we need to acknowledge the fact, that, as I was implying earlier, we will need more foreign-born individuals to come to our country. And we need to make sure that we don't get confused and end up creating an apartheid-like society; if we are going to deny fewer newcomers the opportunity to become full members in society. And that begins by acknowledging, that if you have been in a job for more than three years, that's not temporary. So, let's not fool ourselves into thinking, “Oh, they can come, and they can be temporary workers forever and ever. We need to acknowledge when that changes.

And lastly, there is more that I would like to say; but I know I already went beyond the time allotted to me. We need to align our foreign policy, and our domestic policy, on matters of immigration. Because, if you were to take the time to really seek the answer to the question, “Why did these people leave their countries,” inevitably, you will find that our own foreign policy is largely responsible for the conditions that have driven, and continue to drive, so many people out of Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and many other countries. And I am not talking just about military intervention. I am talking about the soft intervention that we do when we deny countries the opportunity to equip themselves with economic policies that have a chance of resulting in ways of life that make people happy.

Let me end just with something I also tell people all the time. If you think that all Mexicans want to come to the U.S., (laughter) if you think that all Salvadorans or Hondurans want to come to the U.S., you are dead wrong. Our countries are beautiful. Our weather is far more generous (laughter) than yours. Our capacity to be welcoming, loving, warm in the way we interact with one another is really something special. And the food—oh my God—no comparison. Thank you very much. (applause)

Transcribed by *Bev Parker* 20190605