

Remarks at a White House Ceremony Celebrating Hispanic Heritage Week

September 15, 1982

Thank you very much for coming, and buenas tardes. [Laughter]

I have to let you in on a little secret here. I'm late, and I apologize for being late. You're never supposed to open your remarks with an apology, but I have to. But I've learned a little secret. If you start the day, as I did today, with a meeting with Members of Congress, you are behind schedule for the rest of the day. [Laughter] And it's been that way so far.

But it's a real pleasure to welcome you to the White House. Mi casa es su casa. And in this case, this always was su casa -- [laughter] -- I'm just a tenant here.

We're delighted to celebrate with you National Hispanic Heritage Week, honoring the many contributions that Hispanic men and women have made to American history. The many Hispanics who've come here as immigrants, as well as those who've been born and raised here, have greatly enriched our culture and given fresh vibrancy to our national life.

One hundred seventy-two years ago tomorrow, a brave Mexican priest named Miguel Hidalgo de Castillo rang the bells in his village church to announce the peoples' desire for freedom. We're told that he didn't live to see his victory. But the sound of those bells still rings today in the hearts of all freedom-loving peoples around the world. I know it rings in your hearts.

American Hispanics are bound by strong ties of language, religion, family, and culture. In your lives, you demonstrate the importance of real work: producing things of real value, building communities of shared values that enrich America and keep us strong and free. You work long and hard to own your homes, your farms, and business enterprises -- your piece of America.

And when America's been threatened by dark clouds of war, Hispanics defended our nation with pride and courage. Thirty-seven of them have received the Congressional Medal of Honor, America's highest military decoration, given only for service above and beyond the call of duty. And this 37 happens to be a greater proportion of such heroes than in any other group.

Just last year, I had an unforgettable experience. I presented Roy Benavidez, former farmboy from Texas, with the Medal of Honor for his exceptional valor and courage in the Vietnam war. Incidentally, on our way over to the Pentagon for that ceremony, he was telling me of the incident. He saved eight wounded men's lives, going under enemy fire to bring them one-by-one to a rescue helicopter. He was shot four times and finally was attacked hand-to-hand by a man with a rifle and a bayonet that he had to fight off, after he put down the wounded man he was carrying. And when we were talking about this -- and I think you'll appreciate this -- as we were riding over -- and when he was attacked by the man with the rifle and bayonet, he said, "I'd been shot four times already." He said, "That's when I got mad." [Laughter] And he got mad enough to complete that rescue.

Hispanics bring honor to their country; their country should honor them. In my 8 years as Governor of California, I'm proud to say that I appointed more Hispanics to high positions than any previous Governor in California's history.

We're trying to maintain that position in Washington, or that tradition, with Hispanics playing a major role in our administration since day one. We've already appointed more Hispanic men and women at top-level executive positions, more than 50, than any previous administration.

Three very recent appointments of Hispanics to very significant positions are with us today: Heriberto Herrera of Texas as Deputy Administrator of the Small Business Administration, Raymond L. Acosta as United States District Judge for the District of Puerto Rico, and Victor Blanco of California as Chairman of the Board of the Inter-American Foundation.

With good people, we can have better policies. We can strengthen those shared values of family, neighborhood, work, peace, and freedom, and help you make America great again.

Your families feel strongly about the moral values maintained by our country's religious school systems. Our tuition tax credit plan will provide relief to the many Hispanic families who send their children to independent schools, while supporting public schools with their taxes.

Speaking of these moral values, we think it's about time that all American children have the right to begin their days the same way the Members of the United States Congress do -- with prayer. So, we're pushing for a constitutional amendment that would permit voluntary prayer in our children's classrooms.

By extending the Voting Rights Act, we've locked in guarantees of full constitutional and political equality for Hispanic Americans. And getting control of runaway government means hard-working Hispanic families can keep more of the money they earn, and the rate of inflation and interest rates can keep heading in the right direction. They're going down, and they're going to stay down.

And finally, a stronger and more stable economy will permit us to be a better neighbor with Mexico and our other friends to the south. I think we've developed a new rapport with Mexico, based on mutual respect, that is better than any time in the history of our two proud nations. I'm also very enthusiastic about our Caribbean Initiative, which will break down trade barriers and provide new incentives for commerce and economic growth.

At the root of everything that we're trying to accomplish is the belief that America has a mission. We are a nation of freedom, living under God, believing all citizens must have the opportunity to grow, create wealth, and build a better life for those who follow. If we live up to those moral values, we can keep the American dream alive for our children and our grandchildren, and America will remain mankind's best hope. With your help, I know we can and we will.

Muchas gracias. Que Dios los bendiga. Thank you very much.

Refreshments await you down there. And I have to do what the little girl, 11-year-old girl said just after I got here when she wrote me a letter and -- who's lost a bracelet? All right. We really are conservative. [Laughter]

This little girl gave me a great deal of advice on what to do and how to handle the problems that I would meet -- 11 years old -- and then just said, ``Be happy that you're not God." [Laughter] And with that, she wound up with a P.S. in her letter. She said, ``Now, get back to the Oval Office and get to work." [Laughter] So, I will. Thank you all very much for being here.

Note: The President spoke at 1:14 p.m. at the ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House.