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## WE ARE AMERICA

Federico Pena

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Over 250 years ago, one of my ancestors Tomas Sanchez founded Laredo, Texas. Later, another of my ancestors Santos Benavides fought in the Civil War. Years later, my Grandfather, Eduardo Pena, served as a city councilman for a quarter of a century. Like many Americans, my Father, his brothers, and other relatives have fought to defend our nation in war. I have been proud to follow in their footsteps by making my own contributions to the country I love dearly. Millions of other Latino families have made their contributions to our nation, some over centuries, some over the last several decades, but each of us in our own way, whether recent immigrants or long time inhabitants of this land we call America, have made a contribution. For we are America.

I am here today to ask of ourselves that we recognize that immigrant workers come to America to work and to better the lives of their families back home. We must acknowledge that many work in unsafe working conditions and are 80 % more likely to die or be injured at work. We should admire them for cleaning our buildings, building our homes, preparing our food, producing our oil, working our mines, cleaning our hotels, mowing our lawns, digging our ditches, and yes, even fighting our wars. And for those of us who attended religious worship this past weekend, we should conduct a full moral gut check as we watch immigrant workers wither in our deserts, drown in our rivers, and die on our highways. And let me be clear: they are not here to commandeer airplanes to crash them into our buildings. If we are honest with ourselves, we should recognize that in many ways, immigrant workers embody basic American values of hard work, sacrifice and love of family. We Americans should ask ourselves: How many of us would risk so much to better ourselves and our families?

I believe that a great people live by their moral and ethical principles every day. I believe that a great nation earns respect when it shows compassion and decency. And I believe that this United States is great because it has been a nation of immigrants and will be greater because of future immigrants.

So today, let us ask of our leaders in Washington to listen carefully: we want an effective immigration system. We want Congress to penalize the employer whose addiction to low cost labor draws immigrants to come and work in our country. We want CEOs to verify that they hire employees legally. And if they fail, they should receive harsh penalties. We want Congress to recognize the obvious: it is the demand for immigrant labor that is the issue, not the supply.

We need a fair and effective guest worker program from Congress that ensures decent wages, safe working conditions and health care for immigrant workers. The United States must partner with Mexico on joint border enforcement. These policies are cost effective ways to bring immigration under control.

And if Congress has the courage and wisdom to do this, we won't need to build fences along our borders. If we were to build a fence with Mexico we had better build one with Canada. And still the smugglers will find new ways to bring workers in, through tunnels, in aircraft, or onto our beaches. Have we learned nothing from our experiences with the influx of Haitians, Cubans and the Chinese? These ineffective fences will cost billions of tax dollars, anger our two leading trading partners, and isolate us further from the world.

As we implement a guest worker program, and aggressively monitor employers and borders, let us finally grant amnesty to the twelve million immigrants who are here today. Why do some oppose amnesty now when it has been regularly used throughout our country? Have we forgotten that state and local governments have for decades been granting amnesty to citizens who have failed to pay taxes, violated municipal codes, and even faced felony warrants? And if both Democratic and Republican Presidents can pardon hundreds of criminals, then surely Congress can forgive those whose only mistake was to risk death to seek jobs that most Americans don't want. If we can have amnesty for criminals, certainly we can have amnesty for those immigrants who have violated no criminal laws.

We leave here today as one America. We are united by a just cause. Together we have a powerful voice. Let us strengthen our voice with our vote.

Let us remember that our immigrant ancestors helped build our great country. So let the immigrants of today help build an even greater America.