



**Office of the Mayor
City of Los Angeles**

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**"Repairing the Economic Ladder"
Remarks of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa
The National Press Club
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Ladies and gentlemen:

Thank you for that incredible introduction. And thank you all for having me here today. I want to concede something right up front: I hope you will pardon me if I have some butterflies today.

It's more than a little daunting for a kid from East LA to be admitted here into the "sanctum sanctorum" of American journalism to enjoy the honor of addressing the venerable members of the National Press Club.

My daughter Natalia gave me some good advice before I headed off to the airport. She said, "It's a tough audience, Dad. Don't worry. And don't focus on being brilliant or insightful . . . just... be yourself."

Natalia's a very tough young woman. She'd be right at home here with all of you.

I would like to say this, though: By and large, over the years, I have enjoyed a positive and productive relationship with the working press. Of course, not everyone agrees with this. Take my communications director, for example. He accuses me of being too loose-lipped around reporters. He calls me "a walking, talking leak."

He complains that I take too many questions at my press conferences. That I go on... and on... and on. And when he's really annoyed, he looks me straight in the eye and says, "you know, the problem with you, Antonio, is you actually believe you can persuade these reporters to vote for you."

Now, I cannot tell a lie. Like any politician, I can always use a few more votes. My philosophy in dealing with the media has always been the same: Simply and succinctly, I believe dealing with the press is fundamentally about earning respect.

We don't say it often enough. News reporters are some of the most vibrant, engaged, intellectually curious and relentless people you'll ever come across. You work hard doing what you believe in. And most of you do it for not very much money.

And even though I'm sure it would probably pain any self-respecting reporter to acknowledge it, the truth is, we press and politicians share a lot in common.

Despite the popular perceptions of our work, despite how dimly we rank in those annual Gallup surveys measuring public esteem for our professions, despite the implied antagonism inherent in our respective roles, in my experience, most journalists and public officials are propelled by the same abiding belief in service.

I think about this every single morning when I go through the door and pick up my copy of my home town's flagship newspaper, which has been undergoing so much turbulent change for the people who work there.

Members of the National Press Club, if we don't say it enough, the truth is, we we depend on you. We depend on you dearly to tell us the truth. We depend on you to even the scales.

Notwithstanding one network's questionable appropriation of the slogan, we depend on you for fairness and balance in your coverage, especially on the most emotionally charged issues, like how we address the issue of illegal immigration.

We depend on you to delve fully and faithfully into the causes and consequences surrounding the most fateful decisions of state, like when and whether we send our people off to war.

And we depend on you to keep the discussion alive on the most vexing and complex questions facing our country, even if their gravity drives many of us to want to flip the channel, turn the page, or click over to EBay.

Seventeen months ago, our nation watched in frustration and disbelief as a Category Three hurricane slammed into the towns and cities of the Gulf Coast, destroying, in its wake, untold lives and property and breaching the mighty levies that guard one of America's oldest and most treasured cities.

Storms as fierce as Katrina not only have the power to change the landscape, they have a way of removing the camouflage. And in the twisted aftermath of

this hurricane, we were all forced to confront a less than flattering reflection of ourselves.

The truth was there for all of us to see. The truth that for many Americans, despite the most urgent distress calls, the cavalry may not arrive in time. The truth that in America today, if you're flat broke or flat on your back you may be flat out of luck in a time of serious jeopardy.

And as we could all read the lips of those people calling out to us from the rooftops of the Lower 9th Ward, the lack of an effective evacuation plan was not merely a question of emergency preparedness. In a broader sense, millions of Americans find themselves equally stranded today with no clear ladder to evacuate them to a middle class life.

You certainly don't need to go to New Orleans -- or be from the South -- to understand the crippling effects of persistent poverty in this country. From South Los Angeles to the South Side of Chicago, from the South Bronx to South East Washington, we see more children growing up in poverty in America than in any other leading industrialized nation. In my city, we have close to ten thousand kids arriving in our public schools every day who don't have a bed for the night.

Fifty years after Brown versus the Board of Education, one third of African American children still grow up poor. Eleven million Americans can't read a bus schedule or fill out a job application.

And the statistics tell another story as well. They tell us that, for many Americans working full-time may not be enough in a world gone "flat." That more and more middle class families feel their grasp slipping. They see their prospects sliding inexorably down the economic ladder.

With increasing competition from abroad, wages have stagnated or declined for more than 40 percent of our country's workforce. And millions of our people now find themselves questioning the continuing relevance of the basic American idea.

The idea that if you work hard and you play by the rules, you ought to be able to expect a good life for your family. What's more, you should look forward to the future with confidence that your kids will enjoy even greater blessings than you were bestowed.

So, last January, the US Conference of Mayors established a Task Force on Poverty, Work and Opportunity, and we set to work on these hard questions.

We talked to leading experts in the field. We took ideas from both political parties. We culled through the data, consulted with mayors around the country, and identified the most effective policies and practices in their cities and neighborhoods.

And with every idea, we applied the test: We asked is it grounded in the reality of global economic transformation? We asked: Is it proven by practice? Does it have demonstrated bi-partisan support? Is there a clear and quantifiable return on investment? And we asked how could federal investments be strategically leveraged and aligned with private, corporate, state, and local dollars?

Over the last year, our work converged on two overarching and connected conclusions. First, we concluded that the way to fight poverty is to increase the rewards for work.

Second, to expand the earning power of our people, we concluded that there is an overriding national need for a bold, coordinated, cross-cutting and transformative strategy giving our people the education and the skills they need to compete and thrive in the global workplace.

And we all know what this means. There is no clearer predictor of economic success -- no more powerful weapon against poverty -- than educational attainment.

Members of the Press Club, it's time to move the issue of education reform to the front and center of the national debate.

Let's put aside divisive distractions like "teaching intelligent design." Let's confront the fundamental question: How do we intelligently design and align our policies to give all of our people a shot at a good education and a good life?

Now, I will be presenting the findings of the Mayors' Task Force on Poverty, Work and Opportunity tomorrow. But since my communications director isn't here, let me give you a brief overview of our top recommendations.

First, we are recommending a substantial new federal investment to guarantee high-quality pre-kindergarten instruction for every child in America.

The evidence supporting the need for this investment is abundant and absolute. We know that the achievement gap starts before kindergarten. We know that nearly a quarter of our children now live in single-parent households. We know that kids growing up in poverty are three-times as likely to drop out.

And one recent study projects that 2 trillion dollars in new GDP will be generated over the next two-to-three generations if we make this one single investment.

This is a down payment on the future of America that we can no longer afford to postpone.

Next, we need to retool our schools.

We need to give our kids job skills relevant to the global workplace and the global marketplace.

This is not rocket science. And we can't afford to stay stuck in the past. We can see the macro economic trends coming right at us.

Let me give an example: As the Baby Boom generation ages, we know the millions of new full-time healthcare jobs -- many with career ladders and family-supporting compensation -- will open up for the next generation of workers.

Meanwhile, planners predict that one half of our current stock of buildings will be built and rebuilt in the next thirty years. We need to prepare our people for the jobs that are coming.

So, we are recommending that state and local governments commit up to \$650 per student for schools adopting a high-quality, standards-based Career Academy curriculum.

It's time to reinvent "Voc. Ed" with rigorous and relevant instruction emphasizing career building in fields ranging from graphic design and information technology to healthcare.

But ultimately, this is a knowledge based economy, and we need to send more people to college and back to college.

So, we're calling for the creation of a tax-free Lifetime Learning Savings Account for every child in America, where the government would match individual contributions by up to \$500 per student per year.

Just think about the power of this idea. Imagine if every kid in America knew that no matter who they are, or where they come from, or what their parents' circumstances, there is a bank account with a balance for them to go to college.

We estimate – conservatively – that by the typical high school graduate's 18th birthday, they'll have \$30,000 to invest in education or career training.

And let's not be confused: This is not our grandparents' entitlement program. It is an idea that has been championed by members of both parties. It demonstrates that big ideas don't necessarily translate into big government.

This plan encourages savings, while leveraging public investments against individual initiative, and compounding the combination over the life of each child!

And our recommendations recognize the need to pay our people what they deserve. We are calling for what the House of Representatives has already

approved in its first one hundred hours. A reasonable increase in the national minimum wage.

And we also recommend expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit to include more people who are working every day while still struggling to pay the basic necessities of life.

You'll see the full report tomorrow. I hope that it will help to keep all of us focused on the stories that matter.

And believe me, I say this as one who knows. I say this as a son of a single mom. I say this as a former high school drop out. The future wasn't always so bright. Then, somebody gave me a second chance.

Think of what we can achieve together if we regain our confidence; if we work together; if we overcome the poverty of political will.

Thank you so much for listening.