



Office of the Mayor
City of Los Angeles

ANTONIO R. VILLARAIGOSA

"A Poverty of Aspirations"

Remarks of Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa
US Conference of Mayors
January 25, 2006

Fellow Mayors:

My name is Antonio Villaraigosa, and I'm the Mayor of the City of Los Angeles. Allow me to say what an honor it is to be here. I feel a little bit like the new kid on the block! Of course, I've already seen many of you around campus, and I want to say how grateful I am to each and every one of you for welcoming me as a colleague and for treating me as a friend. It is a thrill to be here. Thank you all.

It is an even greater privilege to be able to say why I'm here: to announce the formation of the U.S. Conference of Mayors Task force on Poverty and Opportunity in America. I want to thank Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago for his pivotal role in conceiving this idea, and I want to thank my friend and neighbor—our president—Beverly O'Neill of Long Beach, for helping to bring the task force to life.

I also want to say a word about the speakers who came before me--Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans, Mayor A.J. Holloway of Biloxi, Mayor Brent Warr of Gulfport, Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana--each of whom has spoken with conviction and clarity

about the affects of Hurricane Katrina and the monumental challenges of repopulating and rebuilding the great cities of the Gulf Coast.

I know I speak for the mayors assembled here when I say that your cities will be back--and you will be back stronger than ever. And I know that you can count on the men and women in this room to work with you, and to fight for you—side-by-side, each and every step of the way—to ensure that Washington honors its commitment to the communities still struggling to survive the storm.

As mayors, we understand... that while the floodwaters may have receded, we still need to move to higher ground.

We know that this rebuilding effort isn't just about repairing levees and reclaiming lost neighborhoods. It's about rebuilding and restoring our sense of national community.

We know that the desolation of the Gulf Coast revealed a more profound gulf in America. A gulf between the words we etch in marble and the realities that we've come to accept as set in stone. A gulf between the basic promise of opportunity for all and the continuing chasm of race and class across our country. A gulf between those at the very top of the economic ladder who are earning more and doing better than they ever have and the growing number of Americans who are working harder and slipping back. Above all else, Katrina exposed a deepening gulf in our larger political discourse: a gulf in our understanding of our obligations to one another as Americans and in our shared conception of the common good.

As mayors, I think we can all agree: We saw reflections of all of our cities in the faces of the people stranded on the rooftops of the Lower 9th Ward. You certainly don't need to go to New Orleans--and you don't need to be from the South--to understand the crippling effects of persistent poverty in this country. Go to South Los Angeles. Go to the South Side of Chicago. Go to the

South Bronx. Go to South East Washington. And you see the same faces and the same stories.

You see more children growing up in poverty in America today than in any other leading industrialized nation.

In my city of Los Angeles—in the undisputed commercial and cultural capital of the richest state in the wealthiest nation in the world—you see close to 10,000 homeless children. Thousands of 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 living in poverty.

Six million school children on the verge of failing out.

11 million Americans can't read a bus schedule or fill out a job application.

Three and a half million people sleeping in shelters and doorways, and underpasses.

And in cities across this country—from New Orleans to Cleveland to Atlanta to LA—we still see the same historical concentrations of the very poor, working families isolated in communities without access to the basic services that most Americans take for granted as the essential preconditions to a decent life.

Communities plagued by higher levels of crime and lower rates of home ownership.

Where opportunity seems a faint echo in those neighborhoods where fewer than one in ten residents has a college degree.

Where vacant storefronts and a lack of business competition conspire with the unforgiving laws of market economics to force the very people with the least money to pay the highest prices for the most inferior goods.

Where, for too many people, access to capital is limited to the pawn shop and the payday loan service.

And we know that the problem is even deeper than that.

We know that any meaningful discussion of the problems of the working poor can't be confined to the outdated paradigm describing some "Other America," some distant America separate from our lives, unconnected to our concerns, and remote from our values.

We know that the tired, old myth describing the poor as the victims of their own lack of imagination and drive is both factually and morally wrong.

We know that most poor people work. And we know that growing numbers of working Americans—whom we don't technically define as "poor"—are dancing on the razor's edge of subsistence.

With savings rates at historic lows, the average American is carrying \$8,500 in credit card debt. And just to get by, most families are spending more than they earn.

In the last four years, over four million Americans slipped from the working class to the under class.

And with the shape of poverty being rapidly recast in the accelerating story of global economic change, the issue is moving from the margins to the mainstream.

Families are working harder than ever today, struggling to make ends meet in the face of stagnant and declining wages, losing ground against the escalating costs of energy, tuition, medical care and childcare.

And they're struggling to keep faith with the idea, with the basic idea and the defining thread of our common national story. The

idea that in America hard work earns real rewards. That work builds individual wealth. That it yields generational progress. That if you work hard, and you pay your taxes, and you take care of your kids, you ought to have a reasonable expectation of a good life. What's more, you should be able to look forward to the future secure in the knowledge that your children will have greater opportunities than you had.

Mayors, we need to restore this faith and keep that promise. We need to change the terms of the debate about the working poor. We need to return to a set of civic values in which we once again measure ourselves as a people against our greatest moral challenges.

Above all, we need to recognize that the single greatest issue of poverty in America today... is the poverty of our aspirations.

It is a question of will.

And fellow mayors, I know that it may seem like an obvious thing to say, but we should never hesitate to remind ourselves: What a great country America is.

You see, I know something about poverty. And I know many of you do too.

I wouldn't be here today, if this country hadn't been there for me. If a man named Herman Katz--a great public school teacher in a struggling urban school--hadn't reached out and offered me his hand. A man who literally gave me a second chance. Who paid for my SAT exams. And who showed me that I could aspire... and that I could make it... to one of California's great public universities. And I did. I graduated with a degree from UCLA. But only with the sustaining support of federally-backed loans and grants.

This is a great country.

I know.

In America, you can make it from the lowest rung of the ladder to the highest office in the greatest city in the world.

It is a question of will.

And not individual will alone. I'm speaking of collective will.

And I will tell you this: I believe that the mayors of America are uniquely positioned to provide the leadership on this issue that has been so sorely lacking. Cities not only have the greatest concentrations of the poor—it's in cities where you see the greatest concentration of creativity and innovation in public service today. And cities have always been the places where the miracle of American pluralism has drawn breath and taken life.

Mayors, we need to take this challenge head on. We need to dream again. We need to be bold. We need to be willing to take risks. We need to be unafraid to upset the orthodoxies of the left and the right. We need to transform the debate inside the Beltway.

Poverty is not a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. It is an American tragedy.

And the erosion of our middle class, and the declining living standards of our working poor, is not a matter of partisan politics. It is the first order question of our global competitiveness and our common national interest.

Fighting poverty is not just the responsibility of government alone. Or families alone. Or religious institutions alone. Or the private sector alone. It's all of us.

So, I am asking for the active participation of every mayor in this room and across this country. I'm asking you all to take part in the work of the Task Force on Poverty and Opportunity. And I can assure you that the work of this task force will not be dictated by its chair. We need your voices and your vision.

It is my hope that—together, in partnership—we will be willing to ask—and we will be eager to find honest answers—to the hardest questions.

Questions like:

Where can we agree as mayors that past strategies have failed?

Where have the recent innovations been—both inside and *outside* of government?

Does the federal government's measure of poverty bear any relationship to the lives of families struggling to survive in the economy of the 21st Century?

How do current state and federal policies stifle innovation and hinder our ability to solve the problems of real people?

And how can we pursue a national strategy to truly widen the circle, a strategy that builds on the skills of our workforce and promotes the growth of good jobs in sectors vital to our ability to compete over the long term?

And we need to do more than issue findings.

We will be missing the meaning of this moment if we do not make this an action-oriented effort. It is my hope that America's mayors will be able to stand together on the foundation of our work, to lock arms together, to speak together with one voice, and to articulate with commanding moral authority a pragmatic, problem-solving agenda for change.

My hope is that we will draw on the best ideas, no matter where they come from, and without regard to party affiliation. That we will take up the President's challenge to "confront poverty with bold action." That we will look for ways to create a genuine "Ownership Society" in which working people enjoy greater opportunities to expand their assets and build their wealth.

We should examine the Senate Republicans' call for the expansion of individual development accounts that help working people save for a down payment, pay for college, and start small businesses.

We should consider the idea of providing housing vouchers to working families, allowing them to move physically from the margins into the economic mainstream.

We should look for ways to maximize the impact of charitable giving and to fully engage our religious partners in the conversation.

We should challenge the private sector to stake a greater claim in the futures of our cities.

We should examine how we can better leverage our assets and public pension portfolios to build wealth in our neediest areas.

We should find ways we can make better use of the resources we've got.

But, fellow mayors, we also need to ask the fundamental questions.

Whether it's fair to set the minimum wage at a level where no family can get by.

Whether it's really in our economic interest to favor tax policies that reward investors and punish workers.

Whether we can be truly healthy as a nation when 48 million people don't have health insurance.

And we need to face the biggest question of all. How we can rescue our failing public schools.

We know that one of the greatest predictors of a child's chances in life can be counted in the number of books in his parents' home.

We know that the greatest anti-poverty program in American history was the universal adoption of free and compulsory public education.

And we know that across America our schools are failing to reach the very kids most in need. In my city, over seventy percent of middle school students are consigned to failing schools.

Mayors, we need to take the issue of education reform to the front and center of the debate about poverty and opportunity.

It's time to get past the partisan culture wars. Let's move beyond the divisive distractions about teaching "intelligent design" and proceed to the fundamental question of how we can intelligently design our schools in a way that gives all of our kids a shot at a good life.

I know there are many related issues that I didn't have time to touch on here this morning. And I look forward to discussing them with you in detail as the work of this task force gets underway.

I believe that America's Mayors are up to the task.

Hurricane Katrina may have reminded us of the great unfinished work of our democracy. But it also illuminated the way.

Our people responded as a community. And our nation's cities reached out as good neighbors.

Let's seize this moment. Let's change this debate. Let's lead the way.

Thank you all.