

## 2011 Maggio Reception Speech

### Senator Robert Menendez **Unofficial Transcript**

Thank you very much, and since you applauded me before I said anything, I should stop there. As an attorney, I know that if you're winning, you might as well just not press the judge anymore. But nonetheless I won't take my own advice.

Let me thank you for your recognition. Let me thank Bob for his gracious comments as well. I don't know. We support B1 Visas. We just want to make sure that at the end of the day we also have family reunification at the end in this process.

And just so you know how committed I am to this, I had a lot of opportunities to pick a lot of talented people as the chief counsel of my senate office, but the person who I picked is a person who came from AILA and that person is Kerri Talbot...

I am honored to receive the Michael Maggio Award. He is a legendary lawyer. I did not have the privilege of knowing Michael during his life, but I am very grateful to his advocacy. He believed as I believe that immigrants are the risk takers, they're the foundation of so much that has been done to build this country. And he believed as I believe when I pass the Supreme Court everyday on my way to work or my apartment where it says "Equal Justice Under Law." And I believe that is critically important.

I believe in not piecemeal, but comprehensive immigration reform. I believe that that is critical to national security, critical to the economy of the United States, critical to addressing what I believe – as I say as a member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and as one of only two Latinos in the United States Senate – that it is the civil rights issue of our time.

I introduced the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act in the last congress with my colleague Senator Leahy. We incorporated a whole host of Republican ideas. It was not just a Democratic vision. I listened to what Lindsey Graham, I listened to what Senator Kyl, and others have said, and while I don't agree with all of their views there were many, and I incorporated many of their views in an effort to create common ground and common cause to seek a bipartisan effort.

Notwithstanding that, we basically had a set of circumstances in which they were largely unwilling to negotiate. The bill includes Republican proposals for an even more robust border enforcement process, although my bill was written in a manner that more deliberately focuses on security threats. The bill includes a national security component so we know who is here to pursue the American Dream versus who might be here to do it harm. But I will never know who is here to pursue the

American Dream versus who is here to do it harm if I have 12 million people or more languishing in the darkness instead of coming into the light by registering with the government.

It includes efforts to reunify families, incorporates the DREAM Act, employment-based green card reforms, and a generous path to *earned* legalization. I reject, even in the face of all of the rigorous *approach* we put in the legislation, those who call it 'amnesty.'

'Amnesty' means that you get something for nothing. Earned legalization means that you have to work your way there. And it is an arduous process. You have to come forward. You have to register with the government. You have to go through a criminal background check. You have to pay taxes; if you haven't paid them before and you were working, you're going to have to pay taxes when you were in the rear zone. You will have to continue to purport yourself as a good citizen. You will have to learn English, which we have never done for someone to be a permanent resident of the United States. We have required English language skills for U.S. Citizenship, but we have not required it for permanent residence. That is a major significant threshold. So this is *earning* your way, ultimately, into a process of becoming a permanent resident of the United States.

But I am really concerned, and history teaches us that, when one group of people are turned against another, then history turns out very badly. And that is what so many in the Congress and in the country are in the midst of today: when one group of people is blamed for the ills of a nation, when one group of people are singled out, and when one group of people including those who are US citizens and legal permanent residents get unlawfully detained in immigration raids to the tune of hundreds – that I know of but as the Yale Report recently described possibly thousands of individuals – who among us is willing to be a second class citizen simply because of the surname we have, the community in which we happen to reside or the manner in which we speak? ...

The economy is something which often I hear my colleagues present as a reason that we should not pursue immigration reform. And it seems to me that this is not a reason as an obstacle to immigration reform. We should be seeking immigration reform as part of our solution to our economic challenges. The fact is that even in this economy, there are whole sectors of our economy in which I am for any American who wants to do any job, first and foremost. But I have farmers in New Jersey and – don't look at me that way. *[laughs]* We are called the Garden State. We have farmers! We are number two in blueberries in the nation. Number four in asparagus. If you had cranberry sauce for Thanksgiving, it was probably picked by Ocean Spray in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. So we have farms in New Jersey...

Even in this economy, I hear from farmers who tell me, "Senator, you need to solve this immigration problem. I'm paying \$12 an hour and can't get someone... even in this economy, you can't get people to do it." If you had chicken for dinner last night it

was probably plucked by the cut up hands of an immigrant worker. If you slept in this hotel, I would venture to say that your bed and room was probably made on the bent knee of an immigrant worker. If you had fruit for breakfast this morning, it was probably picked on the bent back of an immigrant worker. And if you had someone who is infirmed in your family they were probably being tended to by the warm, hard and steady hand of an immigrant worker. ...

So the economy should not be an obstacle to reform, it should be another reason for reform at the end of the day. As long as we permit a shadow subclass of worker to be exploited, it drags down the wages of all other workers as well. And the downward pressure eventually permeates every sector. Bringing these workers out of the shadows, out of the darkness, into the mainstream, will eliminate exploitation by those who are ruthless employers, it will ease the downward pressure on wages that have increased the divide between the wealthiest Americans and the rest among us. ...

Finally, let me just say that I am an optimist, but I am also a pragmatist. Maybe 38 years of public service has taught me that. I don't know in this Congress with what I see in this House and even as we are in this budget debate right now, which is no longer about money but about social issues – [it's] about a woman's right to choose, about Title X, about school vouchers, about the EPA; this is a budget crisis that we face, not a social crisis, and I'm not about to let those things debated away in the budget. ...

In every century, in every generation, immigrants in this country have contributed to the progress and prosperity of America. They have served in the armed forces of the United States with distinction. In my speeches, I always cite Lance Corporal Jose Gutierrez, a Guatemalan, who – when he died was the first soldier wearing the uniform of the United States in Iraq – was not even a citizen of the United States. Yet even at that time, he was a permanent resident of the United States. If Jose Gutierrez, an orphaned Guatemalan at the time of his death, was willing to fight and die for this country, he and his progeny deserve much more than we have given them.

I appreciate your advocacy, I appreciate your engagement in your profession, I appreciate what you're doing, I certainly appreciate your recognition tonight, but as Cesar Chavez said, "*La lucha siempre sobre el pueblo* – the fight is about people at the end of the day." And we won't stop until we've had the opportunity to bring millions of people out of the darkness and into the light. To help them be part of fulfilling the American Dream, to reunify families at the end of the day, and to make sure that America's promise continues to be one that creates hope and opportunity for those who are willing to take the risk and contribute and work hard.

Thank you so much.

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