

ing Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and British novelist Graham Greene—and scores of others were denied visas. But it also had the effect of maintaining the 1920s-era notion of the United States as a white nation. (Congress imposed the bill over President Truman’s veto.)

A decade later, attitudes were changing, and President Kennedy proposed a new immigration structure that would no longer be based on national origins. After Kennedy’s assassination, his brother Ted took up the fight, pushing the Johnson administration to go even further than it wanted in evening the playing field. Though Lyndon Johnson, in signing the bill, tried to reassure opponents that it wouldn’t do much to change the balance of immigration, its impact was dramatic.

In the 1950s, 53 percent of all immigrants were Europeans and just 6 percent were Asians; by the 1990s, just 16 percent were Europeans and 31 percent were Asians. The percentages of Latino and

African immigrants also jumped significantly.

Simon Rosenberg, president of the liberal think tank NDN, formerly the New Democrat Network, called the Immigration Act of 1965 “the most important piece of legislation that no one’s ever heard of,” and said it “set America on a very different demographic course than the previous 300 years.”

By adding so many Asians, Latinos, and African immigrants, Rosenberg says, the act changed the racial narrative in America from one of oppression — the white-black divide dating to slavery — to one of diversity. That change was strongly echoed in the Obama campaign, which emphasized the candidate’s mixed-race background as making him representative of a new generation of Americans.

That generation has its roots in the Immigration Act of 1965, and the act had its roots in the Kennedys’ legislation. Obamalot may be the modern reflection of JFK’s New Frontier, after all. ■

*We rise and fall together as one people: “La Raza Cosmica” — the cosmic people*

## Barack Obama’s Pledge to La Raza

*The following remarks are excerpts from Barack Obama’s speech to the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), San Diego, California, July 13, 2008.*

I’ve got to tell you, being here with all of you today feels a little like coming home. Because while I stand here as a candidate for President of the United States, I will never forget that the most important experience in my life came when I was doing what you do each day — working on the ground in our communities to bring about change.

[I]n this country, change doesn’t come from the top down. Change doesn’t happen just because someone in Washington says it should... [I]t starts when you send leaders to Washington committed to taking this country in a new direction.

That’s the kind of change you’re making every single day. The theme of this conference is the work of your lives: strengthening America together. It’s

been the work of this organization for four decades — lifting up families and transforming communities across America. And for that, I honor you, I congratulate you, I thank you, and I wish you another forty years as extraordinary as your last.

I come before you today at a defining moment for our nation. I’m thinking of an article I read in the newspaper a while back about struggling schools in Los Angeles. The article told the story of a boy named Gonzalo, who started falling behind in the seventh grade and wasn’t getting the support he needed to catch up. When his mother called the school to complain, nothing changed.

“Maybe the system is not designed for people like us,” she said.

Not designed for people like us.

It was a comment about education, but it reflects a broader feeling that so many people today share — that the system just isn’t working for them. And they’re right. It’s not.

The system isn’t working when a child in a

crumbling school graduates without learning to read or doesn't graduate at all. Or when a young person at the top of her class — a young person with so much to offer this country — can't attend a public college.

The system isn't working when Hispanics are losing their jobs faster than almost anybody else, or working jobs that pay less, and come with fewer benefits than almost anybody else.

*The system isn't working when 12 million people live in hiding, and hundreds of thousands cross our borders illegally each year; when companies hire undocumented immigrants instead of legal citizens to avoid paying overtime or to avoid a union; when communities are terrorized by ICE immigration raids — when nursing mothers are torn from their babies, when children come home from school to find their parents missing, when people are detained without access to legal counsel.*

When all that's happening, the system just isn't working... [a]nd I know how frustrated many of you are right now.

I know how hard you're working. I know the difference you're making in our communities. And I'm here today to make you this promise: *I will be a President who stands with you, and fights for you, and walks with you every step of the way.*

The 12 million people in the shadows, the communities taking immigration enforcement into their own hands, the neighborhoods seeing rising tensions as citizens are pitted against new immigrants... they're counting on us to stop the hateful rhetoric filling our airwaves — rhetoric that poisons our political discourse, degrades our democracy, and has no place in this great nation. They're counting on us to rise above the fear and demagoguery, the pettiness and partisanship, and finally enact comprehensive immigration reform.

I think it's time for a President who won't walk

away from something as important as comprehensive reform when it becomes politically unpopular. And that's the commitment I'm making to you. I marched with you in the streets of Chicago. I fought with you in the Senate for comprehensive immigration reform. And I will make it a top priority in my first year as President. Not just because we need to secure our borders and get control of who comes into our country. And not just because we have to crack down on employers abusing undocumented immigrants. *But because we have to finally bring those 12 million people out of the shadows.*

And I'm not taking a single Latino vote for granted in this campaign. We're meeting with Latino leaders across the country. We're reaching out to Latino organizations to get input on my policy proposals. We've got a nationwide Hispanic media strategy. We're recruiting and training Latino organizers. We're holding Latino voter registration drives across America. And when I'm President, I'll be asking many of you to serve at every



level of government.

*That's how we'll change the direction of this country — from the ground up, vote by vote, precinct by precinct, state by state. And I hope every single one of you will join us.*

*That's how we'll make the system work again for everyone. By living up to the ideals that this organization has always embodied — the ideals reflected in your name — La Raza, the people. I'm told that the original phrase was "La Raza Cosmica" — the cosmic people — a term big enough to embrace the rich tapestry of cultures, colors, and faiths that make up the Hispanic community. Big enough to embrace the notion that we are all part of a greater community — that we all have a stake in each other; that I am my brother's keeper; I am my sister's keeper; and we rise and fall together as one people.*

Thank you, and God bless you. ■