



Office of Commissioner  
Alvaro M. Bedoya

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
**Federal Trade Commission**  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20580

**A Letter to a Latino Public Servant:  
A Statement in Honor of Hispanic Heritage Month**

**Commissioner Alvaro M. Bedoya  
Federal Trade Commission**

**October 15, 2024  
Washington, D.C.**

I.

Like most presidential appointees, I remember the moment I got the call from the White House. It was a little before 5pm on a Friday, and my wife Sima and I were sitting on the couch with our kids. The vetting process had been long. Yet the entire time I had a strange certainty that, regardless of the ongoing process, I ultimately would not be selected.

When the call came I looked at my phone, looked at Sima, and dismissively said as I stood to take the call something to the effect of, “Ah. This is them saying it isn’t me – this is when you do that kind of thing.” And what’s funny that is that, until the precise moment the words came out of the speaker – “the president is going to nominate you on Monday” – I *remained* convinced that it was never going to happen.

And then, of course, it did.

I’ve had the chance to meet with other Latino appointees at various functions over the course of Hispanic Heritage Month. Many of them had the same story: At the very moment we were convinced it *wasn’t* us, the President of the United States was convinced it was.

I think a lot of us feel a measure of that self-doubt. And I don’t think it’s limited to presidential appointees. Maybe it’s a certain dissonance we feel between our professional titles and the people we think ourselves to be. Maybe we hesitate to speak first in a big meeting. However it comes up, I think it’s important to talk about that self-doubt, how we push past it, and where we go from there.

II.

Thirty-seven years ago this month, my mother, brother and I landed at John F. Kennedy airport on a late-night Lufthansa flight. It was 1987. I was five. My brother Pablo was seven. It was a Saturday night. That Tuesday we started school – Monday was a holiday.

I remember a few things very clearly about our mornings before school.

I remember how we were dressed. Our new home was in Vestal, New York. But they didn't sell winter coats in Lima. They definitely didn't sell 1987 winter coats in Lima. So my mother had us wear these little wool overcoats that she'd had made out of my great-grandfather's old suit jackets. *That* is what we wore to the bus stop.

I remember that we didn't speak much English. So every morning, my father would sit down and translate the cafeteria menu for us so we would know what to ask for. We thought the word "ketchup" was hilarious. "Catch?" "Up?" For *tomato sauce*? We chased our dad around the living room, jumping on him and yelling "KETCHUP!" "KETCHUP!"

I remember this kid on the bus who inexplicably knew every single Spanish swearword – and would scream them at the top of his lungs for the whole bus ride. This was *pre-Internet*... and this child was *not* Latino. We never quite figured it out. In any event, Pablo and I decided to call him "*miercoles*."

But what I remember most is what my mother would say to us before we walked to the bus. She would kneel down, look at us in the eye, and say: "Remember, you're the only Peruvians anyone at school will ever meet."

We knew what *that* was about. Some days, she'd add something else. She'd say: "Remember, you're from an old family and an old culture that goes back thousands of years. Remember that." *Acuérdense. Son de una familia antigua y de una cultura antigua. Acuérdense de eso.*

I think a lot about what my mother said. Because now I'm a father and my kids are about the same age I was. And I think about how my mom sent off a five-year-old and a seven-year-old to a new school, in a new country, with next to no English, in literal stitched-together 1940s hand-me-downs – and she didn't just want us to be okay. She wanted us to be *proud*.

And the most extraordinary thing is that *it worked*. She made me and my brother fiercely proud of who we were, even though in the eyes of most people we didn't have terribly much. And she didn't do that by telling us we were smart or strong or handsome. She did that by telling us about where we came from – by telling us about our history.

It is thanks to my mother that, when I hear people say things about Mexican and Central American migrants, I think about how many of them speak English not as a second language, but as a third or even fourth language. I think about how some of their ancestors who spoke the same languages built a city so wondrous that the Spanish marveled at it and Venetian engineers sought to emulate it.

There are verbatim contemporary accounts from the 1500s of the Spanish seeing the capital of the Aztec empire, Tenochtitlan, and saying: *We have never seen anything like this, this is possibly the largest city in the world, it has a zoo, it has an aviary, it has not one but two*

*aquariums, it has a market with uniform weights and measures, it has canals that bring fresh water in from the mountains.*<sup>1</sup>

When the Venetians learned of Tenochtitlan, when they saw maps of it, they were *jealous*. There are contemporary accounts of them essentially saying, *Here we are stuck in this brackish water, if only we could be like ‘Themistitan’* – their name for Tenochtitlan – *how wondrous our city would be.*<sup>2</sup>

That’s how my mother taught me to think. It’s also thanks to her that when I hear people talk about us as “flows of labor,” when I hear them talk about us as if the only thing we’re good for is work – for cooking food, for picking crops – I think about how our ancestors *domesticated* those crops.<sup>3</sup> Mesoamerican farmers and botanists domesticated corn, beans, tomatoes, potatoes, avocados, and yes – chocolate.

And it’s thanks to my mother that when people say that we are here to hurt this country, I think about how soldiers from Mexico, Cuba, and Spain helped *create* this country by fighting against the British in the *American* Revolutionary War – in Baton Rouge and Natchez and Mobile and Pensacola.<sup>4</sup>

But you don’t need to love history to feel that pride. You can look at what’s happening today, all around us – in music, in literature, in civic life.

We used to be novelties, sideshows. We sang “La Cucaracha” and danced the “Macarena.” Now, as recently as two years ago, the number one artist in the United States was not Taylor Swift, nor Beyoncé, but a Puerto Rican artist named Bad Bunny. The next time someone makes fun of your English, reflect on the fact that Bad Bunny does not sing in English.

Some people call us names. Ugly names. Consider that today, a generation of young people who were called those same names are now adults. They are telling their own stories. They are writing books about those stories. Look them up: Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, José Olivares, Vanessa Angélica Villarreal, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, Javier Zamora. The list grows longer by the year. With every year, we write our own history.

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<sup>1</sup> See generally Charles C. Mann, *1491* (2005); Camilla Townsend, *The Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs* (2019). For a popular version of these accounts, I recommend “The Rest is History” and the “Explorers” podcasts’ episodes on Cortez and his company’s encounter with the Mexica and Moctezuma.

<sup>2</sup> In 1550, after proposing a widening of canals that would return Venice to a freshwater lagoon, “like Themistitan,” an advisor to one of Venice’s top civil engineers wrote that if *Venice* followed the model of *Tenochtitlan*, Venice would become “the most beautiful, the most commodious city that one could imagine.” See Elizabeth Horodowich, *The Venetian Discovery of America* (2018) at 189 (describing correspondence between Paduan physician and scientist Girolamo Fracastoro and Avlise Contaro, a Venetian expert on water management); David Y. Kim, “Uneasy Reflections: Images of Venice and Tenochtitlan in Benedetto Bordone’s *Isolario*,” *Res*, Vol. 49/50, Spring/Autumn 2006, at 89.

<sup>3</sup> See Melissa Petruzzello, “18 Food Crops Developed in the Americas,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, available online at <https://www.britannica.com/story/18-food-crops-developed-in-the-americas>.

<sup>4</sup> See generally Gonzalo M. Quintero Saravia, *Bernardo de Gálvez: Spanish Hero of the American Revolution* (2018).

For so long, we have been asking for a seat at the table. The activists of today say “we built that seat, we built that table, so sit down and listen.” They say *somos más y no tenemos miedo*. Everywhere you look, young people are saying *somos más y no tenemos miedo*.

You are from a culture as complex and sophisticated as any you’ll read about in history books. Today, in 2024, that culture is no longer supplicant. It is loud, it is vibrant, it is defiant.

*You* are a part of that. And wherever you are – in Patterson or Coalinga, from the Boundary Waters of Minnesota to the bayous of Louisiana and everywhere in between – you will find people who will celebrate you not despite of who you are, but *because* of it.

### III.

Whether you’re an immigrant like me or whether your family has been here for 500 years or more, I suspect you weren’t brought up to say “me first.” We were taught to be humble and modest. And there is great good in that.

At the same time, my hope for you is that you give yourself permission to be *immodest*. What I mean by that is that you need to give yourself permission to dream big.

I have always tried to make time to talk to young people about their careers, especially young Latinos. I used to ask them: “What’s your dream job? Where do you want to be in 20 years?”

I’d ask that question and I’d get some answers. But I wouldn’t get *all* the answers; there was always some hesitation.

So now, I ask something different. I don’t ask “What’s your dream job?” Instead, I say, “Picture this: You’ve worked crazy hard, you’ve had success after success, and on top of all of that, *you got lucky*. Tell me about *that* dream job.”

That is when the real answers come out. And I don’t say that luck part because I think they need it. I say it so that they can give themselves permission to dream big.

Give yourself that permission. Say your dream out loud. Don’t say it in an empty room. Say it to someone else. Say it to someone *today*.

Say it: *I want to build my own business. I want to run a university. I want to start an organization that will help people where I grew up. I want to write a book. I want to be a judge, a senator, a cabinet secretary. I want to be president.*

I think there is no room in this city you don’t belong in. I think there is no job in this country that you cannot aspire to and one day hold. Find out for yourself. Try.

And if it all feels too much, remind yourself that if the only people who step up for these roles are people who have no problem saying “me first,” *we* will suffer because of it. And we

have too much need. We are too much in danger of becoming an underclass. We are still shockingly absent and even invisible from so many of the places we should be.

So give yourself that permission. But what can we give each other?

I think we need to be immodest *for each other*. I think we need to dream big *for each other*. Because whatever endeavor you embark on, if that endeavor is worth it, it will be exhausting.

You should not bear that burden alone. We should bear it for each other. We should be the ones who ensure opportunities reach out to *you*, we should be the ones bragging about *you*, we should be helping you *without* you asking for it.

There will always be self-doubt. There will always be uncertainty. My hope is that over time, around that self-doubt will grow an enveloping *certainty*: In yourself; in your family; in us, your brothers and sisters; in the fact that you are from an old, beautiful culture that goes back thousands of years – *y que ya no tiene miedo*.