

Keynote Speaker

Remarks by Jim Edgar

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I first of all want to compliment the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago and all the cosponsors of this event. I think this is an extremely important and very timely session, but I have to note that they are pretty tough task masters. I looked over the agenda. You have a full agenda, you have two speakers at lunch. Now I think that is more than you should be expected to endure, and I know that my following speaker will be much more interesting than me and much more knowledgeable, so I'll try to keep my remarks brief. Plus, as was mentioned, I'm at the University of Illinois and I've got to drive a hundred and fifty miles and teach a class by 4:30, and I no longer have any kind of immunity from the State Police, so you can be assured I won't be here too long. Also let me just say I've been involved with a lot of conferences in my past and I was very impressed at such a large gathering in this room and the fact you're still here. It is a beautiful day outside, and the Cubs and the Sox are both playing in town, but somebody pointed out you were threatened that if you ever leave here you can't ever get back in, so this is a good place to have a conference.

I, as a student many years ago, majored in history, and I always had a tendency to look at things from a historical perspective. I'm a great believer that you can plan for the future a lot better if you understand the past, and if you look at the past in America, we are truly a nation of immigrants. That's what I think sets America apart from every other nation on this globe and I think that's our strength. In fact, I have to say that I used to think this was kind of in our past. In the eight years I was Governor during the 90s in Illinois I realized how wrong I was – that immigration is a factor today and even maybe greater than in the past. The 90s were a time of huge immigration here in Illinois and throughout the nation. In fact, it rivaled the turn of the century, which most of us think was the peak of immigration, and as a result of that immigration, not only because of the immigration but the impact it had on our society, we are undergoing huge changes. There is major

change in our demographics and in our culture as a result to a great extent of this huge influx of new immigration. Also, I think there is awareness now that we need to take a look at our immigration policy at this point in our history when there is, I think, awareness on the part of many that we need to look at where we are in immigration, where we should go, and what should be our policies. Because of security and economic concern, there is the danger that our immigration might be directed toward more restriction, which I think would be very unfortunate. We need a comprehensive and effective set of national immigration policies that addresses security and economic and social concerns, but we also need to take into consideration how immigration really benefits most of those concerns and not in any way to put walls up or to divide communities because I think that would be very detrimental to the future of this country.

So as a result of this need to re-examine our immigration policy, the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations established the task force of which I have the honor of cochairing to take a look at this issue. In fact, there are other members of the task force here in the audience and will probably be with you throughout the session. They don't have to drive a hundred and fifty miles and two and a half hours to get to a class. But one of the reasons that the Chicago Council thought that we needed this Task Force was, besides the fact this is an extremely timely issue that has huge implications both internally and externally, is that often when these types of discussions occur, there's a tendency to think that all the wisdom is either on the East Coast or the West Coast and the Heartland doesn't really know or doesn't really care. But in fact again, if you look at history, the Midwest has been a center where many of the immigrants who have come to our shores have settled, and that continues today. In fact, again, many of you are from the Midwest, you know the history. In the 1800s, many came from Germany and Poland and settled in our cities and our smaller communities. At the turn of the century

many came from southern Europe and that's continued right up to today where we see many from Asia, from South America, Central America, continue to come here to the center of America, the Heartland. In fact, a Brookings Institution Report as recent as this year describes Chicago as a "continuous gateway, a long established destination for immigration that also continues to receive a large number of new immigrants." So we believe the Midwest has a lot at stake in this discussion, and we also think the Midwest has a lot to offer in this discussion, and so the Task Force is made up of 37 distinguished leaders from a variety of backgrounds throughout the Midwest. We've been meeting since last fall. We've held a series of meetings and we have examined many of the topics that apply to immigration, some that you probably would

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expect: the impact of immigration on the national and regional economies – and I want to talk a little bit about that in a minute; the security dimension of immigration which has been a very timely issue; also the issue of undocumented immigrants which I think probably, putting on my old political hat, is

probably the most difficult issue and perhaps one of the most important issues we need to deal with sooner than later.

The Task Force is now completing its findings. We're in the process of finalizing our report and we will be submitting that report to policy makers not only at the national level – which I think everyone understands that the federal government plays a major role in immigration – but also, as was commented in the last panel discussion, we recognize there's a role for state and local government in dealing with immigration issues, and we'll have recommendations for what we think state and local governments can do as well as the federal government.

We truly believe that the Midwest, when it comes to immigration and many other issues, is really a microcosm for the nation, and we think our thoughts are applicable not only to the Midwest but throughout the nation. Now one of the issues that we will talk about in our report and particularly that I think are pertinent to what you're talking about today and tomorrow is the demographics. If you look at America's population today, you see that the immigrant population is the fastest growing segment of

our population by far. Thirty-five percent of U.S. population growth came from immigrants, but even more important to me is that 40 percent of our new labor force came from immigrants; meaning that our work force, where the growth has been in our work forces, has been particularly among the immigrants, and as we look to the future that's going to be even more crucial.

During the last decade the Urban Institute said that one out of every nine U.S. residents was foreign-born. One out of seven workers was foreign-born and one out of five students in school was foreign-born. I think that underscores anyone who in a public policy position says that immigration is a major factor when we're looking at the future of this nation and trying to determine how we're going to meet some of the challenges we face. Now I think everyone recognized that the 1990s was a very good decade for our economy. What I don't think a lot of Americans appreciate is one of the reasons we had the success in the 90s was because of the number of immigrants coming to America. They really fueled that economic boom and those are not just the words of my thoughts; those are the findings of the Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, which found that immigrants were a major factor in the boom of the 90s; and also as commented by Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan. So while it's ironic that many people worry about immigration being a detriment to our economy, in fact immigration, recent immigration, as I think it has historically, has been a major factor in our economic success, and as we look to the future that's not going to change. We know that in the decade of the 90s immigration had a major impact. It's going to continue to have a major impact and I think a positive impact if it's handled properly.

The number of available jobs projected in the next decade, or by 2010, is going to be roughly 22 million, but current population projections are only a 17 million increase. So there will be 22 million more jobs where we only have 17 million people to put in those jobs. That underscores again, the importance why we need, from an economic point of view, to look favorably on immigration and not look upon it as a detriment. Also, one of the things that the experts tell us is the types of jobs that will become available between now and 2010 are jobs that immigrants are probably going to be more willing to take on than those who have been in America for several generations. Fifty-eight percent of the total job growth will arise in sections that require short work-related training while post-secondary degrees will account for only 13 percent of the increase. So again we know from recent history, as we know from long-term history, that immigrants are willing to take on jobs that a lot of Americans don't want to do. Now we also know they take on those jobs and move up the economic ladder, which to me is what America's all about.

So as we look to the future and we talk about immigration policy in this nation, anyone I think who's really concerned about America's economy continuing to grow has to view a positive immigration policy as a necessity and that's one of the things that I think we have found in our Task Force, that this is extremely important if we're going to see our economy continue to grow as we move through the twenty-first century.

I don't have to tell anyone in this room, I think to some extent I'm preaching to the choir when I talk about the positive implications of immigration. There are unfortunately some who do not view immigration in what I would consider a positive light. There are some who want to be restrictive, which I think would be very detrimental to this nation. It's critical though that, as we debate our

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immigration policy, we speak up and make sure the people understand that our economy depends on immigration and that dependency will increase over time. Economic integration with other nations will continue and increase pressure for greater

regional labor mobility, another issue that gets people pretty excited, sometimes very hostile to the question of immigration.

The key for the United States, and what we hope to contribute from our report, is that the United States will need to determine the right balance between having relatively open borders and how we protect our home land from attack. The United States needs to develop immigration integration policies that address the need for fully incorporating immigrants into American lives, and that's what's so important about this conference. You're talking about one of the most important facets of successful integration into our society; and that's making sure that immigrants have access to our financial institutions, that they're able to protect the hard earned money that they've made and see that money grow, and see that they have the opportunity that other Americans have, to buy homes and do the things that we do in this nation, and enjoy the fruits of our labor. So they gave me a list of things I could tell you what you ought to do, but I don't think I need to tell you. I think you people know much more about that aspect than I do. But let me just say I think it's extremely important for our immigrants to be successful and for us as a country to realize their fullest

potential. They need to be successfully integrated into our society, and what you're about to hear over the next two days is an important part of seeing that integration is successful. Now if this country does not face up to the need for enlightened immigration policy, let me just say from a political point of view, that's not always that easy, much easier in this room probably to agree on an immigration policy than on a national level, but it's critical. If we don't face up to this need then we will see our population decline, we'll see unfulfilled jobs, we'll see slower growth and I think perhaps, most devastating of all, we'll see increasing divided communities in our nation.

Now I'm optimistic, I'm hopeful that our American policy makers as well as our American citizens won't let that happen. And with your help, we can be successful in meeting that challenge, and making sure that we take advantage of a great opportunity this nation has had throughout our history and will continue to have as we welcome millions of new people to our shores and see that in a very short time they're no longer viewed as 'this' nationality or 'that' nationality but they truly are part of the American dream.

Thank you very much.