

MESSAGE
Subject: Telling words from Owen Lopez
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Item 1

TO: DISTRIBUTION (Title: Telling words from Owen Lopez)

Item 2

← Exec. Dir., McCune Foundation (NM's largest?)

Owen Lopez

New Mexico has been my home since birth and the home of my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents for more than one hundred years. There is no other state I could love more nor would rather call home, and I have visited all but Hawaii.

On the surface, New Mexico is one of the most physically attractive places to live. Its history is unrivaled and spans prehistoric dinosaurs, the Clovis Man, the Anazasi and their Pueblo descendants, the Dineh and Apaches, the Conquistadors and their descendants, the Anglo influx, the first Atomic Bomb, the National Laboratories, and the Very Large Array on the plains of San Augustin. New Mexico's diverse geographical landscape encompassing the Rio Grande Valley, the Jemez and Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the northwestern mesas and Plateaus, White Sands, Carlsbad Caverns and the Gila Wilderness; provides a sense of place and scenic beauty that compares favorably with any other state. Combine all this with New Mexico's unsurpassable weather, incomparable sky with breathtaking sunrises and sunsets, along with its various cultures and preserved traditions, and the result is truly the Land of Enchantment.

Unfortunately, however, there is a darker side. New Mexico is the state with the lowest per capita income of the 59 states; the least desirable state for rearing children; the state with the highest percentage of children living in poverty and without access to health care; the state with one of the highest per capita rates of teenage pregnancy, teenage suicide, domestic violence, and deaths from violence and alcohol. The bitter irony is that these statistics apply to a state that outranks all others in dollars received from Washington, Seven Dollars received back for every Dollar paid in. What is wrong here?

A root cause of New Mexico's inability to better succeed is its disproportionate dependence on federal and state tax dollars and "la politica" that flows from it. When the vast majority of jobs derive from government sources, and when poverty is so widespread, it seems inevitable that politics will have a too important influence over the well-being of New Mexico's citizens. It also seems inevitable that this imbalance will nurture a "we" versus "they" mentality, causing deep and bitter divisions in communities, no matter how small or large. Although the "patron" has typically been identified with politics in Rio Arriba County, as a representative of a statewide funding organization, my experience is that a patronage system permeates activities throughout the state; it is not solely a Hispanic phenomenon. Too much power resides in the hands of politicians and their governmental bureaucracies and commissions.

Moreover, because poverty is so extensive, the fear of not getting a piece of the government pie can often lead to racial or ethnic divisions and hostilities. The competition for the pieces of the pie is not limited to the Native American community, nor to Hispanic rural towns and villages in the northern part of the state. It includes the majority of New Mexico's citizenry whose paychecks are drawn directly from government sources -- whether they come from the national labs, the air bases, the missile range, myriad federal and state, judicial, regulatory and administrative agencies, including all public education, and yes, even private companies and consulting firms whose support is heavily dependent on government contracts.

For five years I have served as Executive Director of the McCune

Charitable Foundation, headquartered in Santa Fe, which provides financial support for non-profit charitable and educational organizations throughout the state. I have met and worked with many enlightened and remarkably dedicated individuals who are combating the state's social maladies. But it's an uphill and often losing battle.

Given the extent to which New Mexicans are dependent on government, including the organizations our foundation supports, it also becomes clear why they cannot escape the pervasive influence of the "patron" system and the political culture and mind set which it fosters. The dependence on government also creates a breeding ground for incompetence because employment too often is based on "who" you know and what favors you've done for them rather than "what" you know. When employment patronage is political and not necessarily based on competence, the educational system is undermined as well, because the extent of a person's education too often has little or no value in either securing employment or moving up through the job ranks. When the populace receives little to no value from the educational system in its search for subsistence livelihood, the educational system is demeaned. It therefore becomes difficult, if not impossible, to improve our educational system when there is no buy-in by the public.

A tax-based employment system becomes even more dysfunctional when government cuts back its funding, as is now happening. New Mexico, unfortunately, again is unique when compared to all other western states whose economies are expanding, in some cases by leaps and bounds. We, on the other hand, have moved from 49th to the 50th in per capita income and are now the poorest state. The 'latino' populations in the other western states are expanding, if not exploding, due in large measure to immigration, but New Mexico's "latino" population is decreasing as a percentage of the whole. Immigration into this state is not a major problem because, like bees to honey, immigrants go where there are jobs, which we don't have.

The Catch 22 we find ourselves in would be funny if it were not tragic. We damn any new businesses and industries because of possible adverse environmental consequences and because they could impact the status quo; whether positively or negatively is largely irrelevant. We resent change. Yet the only way out of the mire in which we're stuck is new jobs in the private sector which business and industry bring. Again, however, it's difficult to attract the private sector to New Mexico because of the disturbing lack of education and skill in the work force.

What's the solution? I wish I had even a clue. I do believe that confronting the realities of the New Mexico workplace could be a helpful first step. It could also be helpful to get real about economic development. It is worse than laughable when the state's total annual economic development budget is less than that of Amarillo, Texas, and when the entire budget for rural economic development is less than \$300,000.00 per year. You could argue that the federal government has a responsibility to help us extricate ourselves from the black hole it has created for us with its huge defense spending beginning with World War II and continuing through the Cold War to the present day. But might not this simply dig the hole even deeper?

In the final analysis, I believe that, if we New Mexicans would understand that our divisions and partisanship are often caused by petty jealousies and political rhetoric, "la invidia" and "la politica," then we could work toward producing systemic change through consensus building and cooperation.