

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's Speech at Embassy Flag-Raising Ceremony in Cuba



Secretary of State John Kerry

Speech at Embassy Flag-Raising Ceremony, Havana

August 14, 2015

Distinguished members of the Cuban delegation; Excellencies from the diplomatic corps; colleagues from Washington; Ambassador De Laurentis and embassy staff; and friends watching around the world:

Thank you for joining us at this historic moment as we prepare to raise the United States flag at our embassy in Havana, symbolizing the re-establishment of diplomatic relations after more than 54 years. This is also the first time since 1945 that a U.S. Secretary of State has visited Cuba.

But this morning, I feel very much at home in our embassy here in Cuba – because this is truly a memorable occasion; a day for pushing aside old barriers and exploring new possibilities. And it is in that spirit that I say on behalf of my country:

Los Estados Unidos acogen con beneplácito este nuevo comienzo de su relación con el pueblo y el Gobierno de Cuba. Sabemos que el camino hacia unas relaciones plenamente normales es largo, pero es precisamente por ello que tenemos que empezar en este mismo instante. No hay nada que temer, ya que serán muchos los beneficios de los que gozaremos cuando permitamos a nuestros ciudadanos conocerse mejor, visitarse con más frecuencia, realizar negocios de forma habitual, intercambiar ideas y aprender los unos de los otros.

My friends, we are gathered here today because our leaders – President Obama and President Castro – made a courageous decision to stop being prisoners of history and to focus on the opportunities of today and tomorrow.

This doesn't mean that we should forget the past. How could we? At least for my generation, the images are indelible. In 1959, Fidel Castro came to the United States and was greeted by enthusiastic crowds. Returning the next year for the UN General Assembly, he was embraced by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. In 1961, the Bay of Pigs tragedy unfolded, with President Kennedy accepting responsibility. And in October 1962, the Missile Crisis arose: Thirteen days that pushed us to the very threshold of nuclear war.

I was a student and can still remember the taut faces of our leaders, the grim maps showing the movement of opposing ships, the approaching deadline, and that peculiar word "quarantine." I don't mind saying that we were scared, because we didn't know when closing our eyes at night what we would find when we woke up.

In that frozen environment, diplomatic ties between Washington and this capital city were strained, then stretched thin, then severed. In late 1960, the U.S. ambassador left Havana. Early the following January, Cuba demanded a big cut in the size of our diplomatic mission. President Eisenhower then decided he had no choice but to shut the embassy down.

Most of the U.S. staff departed quickly, but a few stayed behind to hand the keys to our Swiss colleagues, who would serve diligently and honorably as our protecting power for more than 50 years, and to whom we will always be grateful.

Among those remaining at the embassy were three Marine guards: Larry Morris, Mike East, and Jim Tracey. As they stepped outside, they were confronted by a large crowd standing between them and the flagpole. Tensions were high. No one felt safe. But the marines had a mission to accomplish. Slowly, the crowd parted as they made their way to the flagpole, lowered "Old Glory," folded it, and returned to the building.

Larry, Mike and Jim had done their jobs, but they also made a bold promise – that one day they would return to Havana and raise the flag again.

At the time, no one could have guessed how distant that day would be.

For more than half a century, U.S.-Cuban relations have been suspended in the amber of Cold War politics.

In the interim, a whole generation of Americans and Cubans have grown up and grown old.

The United States has had ten new presidents.

In a united Germany, the Berlin Wall is a fading memory.

Freed from Soviet shackles, Central Europe is again home to thriving democracies.

And last week, I was in Hanoi to mark the 20th anniversary of normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam. Think about that. A long and terrible war that inflicted indelible scars on body and mind, followed by two decades of mutual healing, followed by another two decades of diplomatic and commercial engagement. In this period, Vietnam evolved from a country torn apart by violence into a dynamic society with one of the world's fastest growing economies.

Meanwhile, new technologies have enabled people everywhere to benefit from shared projects across vast stretches of ocean and land.

My friends, it doesn't take a GPS to realize that the road of mutual isolation and estrangement that the United States and Cuba have been traveling is not the right one and that the time has come for us to move in a more promising direction.

In the United States, that means recognizing that U.S. policy is not the anvil on which Cuba's future will be forged.

Decades of good intentions aside, the policies of the past have not led to a democratic transition here in Cuba. It would be equally unrealistic to expect normalizing relations to have a transformative impact in the short term.

After all, Cuba's future is for Cubans to shape.

Responsibility for the nature and quality of governance – and accountability for it – rests, as it should, not with any outside entity; but solely with the citizens of this country.

But the leaders in Havana – and the Cuban people – should also know that the United States will remain a champion of democratic principles and reforms.

Like many other governments in and outside this Hemisphere, we will continue to urge the Cuban government to fulfill its obligations under UN and Inter-American human rights covenants – obligations shared by the United States and every other country in the Americas.

And, indeed, we remain convinced the people of Cuba would be best served by a genuine democracy, where people are free to choose their leaders, express their ideas, and practice their faith; where the commitment to economic and social justice is realized more fully; where institutions are answerable to those they serve; and where civil society is independent and allowed to flourish.

Let me be clear: The establishment of normal diplomatic relations is not something one government does as a favor to another; it is something that two countries do together when the citizens of both will benefit.

And in this case, the re-opening of our embassies is important on two levels: People-to-people and government-to-government.

First, we believe it is helpful for the people of our nations to learn more about each other. That is why we are encouraged that travel from the United States to Cuba has already increased by 35 percent since January and is continuing to go up. We are encouraged that more and more U.S. companies are exploring commercial ventures here that would create opportunities for Cuba's own rising number of entrepreneurs. And we are encouraged that U.S. firms are interested in helping Cuba expand its telecommunications and Internet links, and that the government here recently pledged to create dozens of new and more affordable Wi-Fi hot spots.

We also want to acknowledge the special role the Cuban-American community is playing in building a new relationship between our countries. And, in fact, we have with us this morning representatives from that community, some of whom were born here and others who were born in the United States. With their strong ties of culture and family, they can contribute much to the spirit of bilateral cooperation and

progress we are seeking to create – just as they have contributed much to communities in their adopted land.

The restoration of diplomatic ties will also make it easier for our governments to engage. After all, we are neighbors and neighbors will always have much to discuss in such areas as civil aviation, migration policy, disaster preparedness, and protecting the marine environment, as well as tougher and more complex issues.

Having normal relations makes it easier to talk – and talk can deepen understanding even when we know full well that we will not always see eye-to-eye.

We are all aware that, notwithstanding President Obama's new policy, the overall U.S. embargo on trade with Cuba remains in place and can only be lifted by Congressional action – a step we strongly favor.

For now, the President has taken steps to ease restrictions on remittances, on exports and imports to help Cuban private entrepreneurs, on telecommunications, and family travel – and we want to go further. The goal of all these changes is to help Cubans connect to the world and improve their lives. And just as we are doing our part, we urge the Cuban government to make it less difficult for their citizens to start businesses, engage in trade, and access information online. The embargo has always been something of a two-way street. Both sides need to remove restrictions that have been holding Cubans back.

Before closing, I want to sincerely thank leaders from throughout the Americas who have long urged the United States and Cuba to restore normal ties.

I thank the Holy Father, Pope Francis, and the Vatican for supporting the start of a new chapter in relations between our countries.

I applaud President Obama and President Castro for having the courage to bring us together in the face of considerable opposition.

I am grateful to Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson and her team – to our counterparts in the Cuban foreign ministry – and to our Chief of Mission, Ambassador Jeff de Laurentis, and his extraordinary staff – for all their hard work leading up to this day. And let me just say to our wonderful embassy staff – if you think you've been busy these past few months, just wait.

But above all, I want to pay tribute to the people of Cuba and to the Cuban-American community in the United States.

José Martí once said that “everything that divides men...is a sin against humanity.”

Clearly, the events of the past – the harsh words, the provocative and retaliatory actions, the human tragedies – have been a source of deep division that has diminished our common humanity. There have been too many days of sacrifice and sorrow; too many decades of suspicion and fear. That is why I am heartened by the many on both sides of the Straits who – whether because of family ties or a simple desire to replace anger with something more productive – have endorsed our search for a better path.

We have begun to move down that path without any illusions about how difficult our new relationship will be. But we are each confident in our intentions, in the contacts we have made, and the friendships we have begun to forge.

And we are certain that the time is now to reach out to one another, as two peoples who are no longer enemies or rivals, but neighbors – time to unfurl our flags, raise them up, and let the world know that we wish each other well.

Estamos seguros de que este es el momento de acercarnos: dos pueblos ya no enemigos ni rivales, sino vecinos. Es el momento de desplegar nuestras banderas, enarbolarlas y hacerle saber al resto del mundo que nos deseamos lo mejor los unos a los otros.

It is with that healing mission in mind that I turn now to Larry Morris, Jim Tracey, and Mike East. Fifty-four years ago, you gentlemen promised to return to Havana and hoist the flag over the United States Embassy that you lowered on that January day long ago. Today, I invite you on behalf of President Obama and the American people to fulfill that pledge by presenting the Stars and Stripes to be raised by members of our current military detachment.

Larry, Jim, Mike. It's your cue to deliver on words that would make any diplomat proud, just as they would any member of the United States Marine Corps: Promise made, promise kept. Thank you all.

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