

Remarks on the Reestablishment of Diplomatic Relations and Permanent Diplomatic Missions by the United States and Cuba *July 1, 2015*

Good morning, everybody. Please have a seat.

More than 54 years ago, at the height of the cold war, the United States closed its Embassy in Havana. Today I can announce that the United States has agreed to formally reestablish diplomatic relations with the Republic of Cuba and reopen Embassies in our respective countries. This is a historic step forward in our efforts to normalize relations with the Cuban Government and people and begin a new chapter with our neighbors in the Americas.

When the United States shuttered our Embassy in 1961, I don't think anyone expected that it would be more than half a century before it reopened. After all, our nations are separated by only 90 miles, and there are deep bonds of family and friendship between our people. But there have been very real, profound differences between our Governments, and sometimes, we allow ourselves to be trapped by a certain way of doing things.

For the United States, that meant clinging to a policy that was not working. Instead of supporting democracy and opportunity for the Cuban people, our efforts to isolate Cuba, despite good intentions, increasingly had the opposite effect: cementing the status quo and isolating the United States from our neighbors in this hemisphere. The progress that we mark today is yet another demonstration that we don't have to be imprisoned by the past. When something isn't working, we can and will change.

Last December, I announced that the United States and Cuba had decided to take steps to normalize our relationship. As part of that effort, President Raúl Castro and I directed our teams to negotiate the reestablishment of Embassies. Since then, our State Department has worked hard with their Cuban counterparts to achieve that goal. And later this summer, Secretary Kerry will travel to Havana for-

mally to proudly raise the American flag over our Embassy once more.

This is not merely symbolic. With this change, we will be able to substantially increase our contacts with the Cuban people. We'll have more personnel at our Embassy, and our diplomats will have the ability to engage more broadly across the island. That will include the Cuban Government, civil society, and ordinary Cubans who are reaching for a better life.

On issues of common interest, like counterterrorism, disaster response, and development, we will find new ways to cooperate with Cuba. And I've been clear that we will also continue to have some very serious differences. That will include America's enduring support for universal values like freedom of speech and assembly and the ability to access information. And we will not hesitate to speak out when we see actions that contradict those values.

However, I strongly believe that the best way for America to support our values is through engagement. That's why we've already taken steps to allow for greater travel, people-to-people, and commercial ties between the United States and Cuba. And we will continue to do so going forward.

Since December, we've already seen enormous enthusiasm for this new approach. Leaders across the Americas have expressed support for our change in policy; you heard that expressed by President Dilma Rousseff of Brazil yesterday. Public opinion surveys in both our countries show broad support for this engagement. One Cuban said, "I have prepared for this all my life." Another said that "this is like a shot of oxygen." One Cuban teacher put it simply: "We are neighbors. Now we can be friends."

Here in the United States, we've seen that same enthusiasm. There are Americans who want to travel to Cuba and American

businesses who want to invest in Cuba, American colleges and universities that want to partner with Cuba. Above all, Americans want to get to know their neighbors to the south. And through that engagement, we can also help the Cuban people improve their own lives. One Cuban American looked forward to “reuniting families and opening lines of communications.” Another put it bluntly: “You can’t hold the future of Cuba hostage to what happened in the past.”

And that’s what this is about: a choice between the future and the past.

Americans and Cubans alike are ready to move forward. I believe it’s time for Congress to do the same. And I’ve called on Congress to take steps to lift the embargo that prevents Americans from traveling or doing business in Cuba. We’ve already seen Members from both parties begin that work. After all, why should Washington stand in the way of our own people?

Yes, there are those who want to turn back the clock and double down on a policy of isolation. But it’s long past time for us to realize that this approach doesn’t work. It hasn’t worked for 50 years. It shuts America out of Cuba’s future, and it only makes life worse for the Cuban people.

So I’d ask Congress to listen to the Cuban people. Listen to the American people. Listen to the words of a proud Cuban American, Carlos Gutierrez, who recently came out against the policy of the past, saying, “I wonder if the Cubans who have to stand in line for the most basic necessities for hours in the hot Havana sun feel that this approach is helpful to them.”

Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at a Town Hall Meeting on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act at Taylor Stratton Elementary School in Nashville, Tennessee

July 1, 2015

The President. Hello, everybody! Everybody, have a seat. Have a seat. Well, it’s good to be back

Of course, nobody expects Cuba to be transformed overnight. But I believe that American engagement—through our Embassy, our businesses, and most of all, through our people—is the best way to advance our interests and support for democracy and human rights. Time and again, America has demonstrated that part of our leadership in the world is our capacity to change. It’s what inspires the world to reach for something better.

A year ago, it might have seemed impossible that the United States would once again be raising our flag, the Stars and Stripes, over an Embassy in Havana. This is what change looks like.

In January of 1961, the year I was born, when President Eisenhower announced the termination of our relations with Cuba, he said: It is my hope and my conviction that it is “in the not-too-distant future it will be possible for the historic friendship between us once again to find its reflection in normal relations of every sort.” Well, it took a while, but I believe that time has come. And a better future lies ahead.

Thank you very much. And I want to thank some of my team who worked diligently to make this happen. They’re here. They don’t always get acknowledged. We’re really proud of them. Good work.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:08 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Havana, Cuba, residents Julia Niurka Mesa Galbán, Carlos Gonzalez, and Frank Reyes; Aventura, FL, resident Mimi Davila; Miami, FL, resident Jorge Collazo; and former Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez.

in Nashville. I like Nashville. I don’t know if you noticed, I come back here quite a bit. [Laughter]