

Remarks by President Obama at U.S. Embassy Meet and Greet -- Havana, Cuba

Melia Habana Hotel
Havana, Cuba

5:23 P.M. EDT

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Thank you. Muchas gracias. (Applause.) Well, it's so good to see everybody. Thank you. Hello, everybody.

AUDIENCE: Hi!

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, as our ambassador -- or Chief of Mission just stated, it's been nearly 90 years since a U.S. President stepped foot in Cuba. It is wonderful to be here.

Back in 1928, President Coolidge came on a battleship. It took him three days to get here. It only took me three hours.

(Laughter.) For the first time ever, Air Force One has landed in Cuba, and this is our very first stop. So this is a historic visit, and it's a historic opportunity to engage directly with the Cuban people and to forge new agreements and commercial deals, to build new ties between our two peoples, and for me to lay out my vision for a future that's brighter than our past.

Michelle and I wanted to start with all of you because nothing symbolizes better the new relationship between the United States and the Cuban people. For the first time in more than half a century, as Jeff just noted, the American flag flies over a reopened U.S. embassy. And having a U.S. embassy here means that

we're able to more effectively advance our interests and our values and understand the Cuban people and their concerns.

I want to thank the outstanding leadership team that's here, especially our outstanding ambassador, Jeff DeLaurentis, and his wonderful wife, Jennifer. Give them a big round of applause.

(Applause.) As well as DCM, Scott Hamilton, and his wife, Isabel. Give them a big round of applause. (Applause.)

But most of all, I want to thank all of you, who embody the spirit of friendship and partnership that brings us together today. We've got a lot of proud Americans here, but we also have a lot of proud Cubans. Como andan? (Laughter and applause.)

I want to mention three of our Cuban friends who have been a part of your work for decades, including all those years when we only had an Interest Section here. A guard for 30 years, Carlos Flores. (Applause.) In our visa section, Caridad Castellanos.

(Applause.) And a dedicated driver for almost 40 years, Francisco Camargo. (Applause.)

So I know it's been a pretty busy seven months. You've had to stand up America's newest embassy, you've helped support high-profile visitors from across the administration, and the business community, and now me and Michelle. And I know your workload is a lot heavier than it was, but I want you to know everything we've accomplished so far -- more Americans coming to Cuba, more engagement with the Cuban people, civil society, faith groups, entrepreneurs, students, young people, more opportunities for the Cuban people to improve their lives -- it's all happening because of you. Every single day, you're bringing the Cuban people and the American people closer together.

So, oftentimes, when I come to embassies it attracts a lot of

attention -- and this one attracts more attention than usual.

(Laughter.) But I always say to people that no matter how much people are excited about Michelle's visit or my visit, the most important ambassadors for the United States are all of you, because you're the ones who, every day, are interacting with Cubans* people. You're helping businesses who are trying to figure out ways that they can start working together. You're helping people with visas. You're helping people with a whole range of things. And so the interactions you have end up having the most lasting impact, because it sends a signal of the professionalism and dedication and the kindness and courtesy that I want the American people always to represent.

And so I am so grateful to all of you for the great work that you've done. I'm glad that you had a chance to bring your families here because I always like taking pictures with kids. (Laughter.) That's the future that we hope for -- young American children, young Cuban children, by the time they're adults, our hope is, is that they think it's natural that a U.S. President should be visiting Cuba, they think it's natural that the two peoples are working together. Their future is what we work for so hard, and I'm so grateful to all of you for making it happen.

Thank you very much. Muchas gracias. (Applause.)

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5:30 P.M. EDT