By Craig Simons, consular officer, U.S. Embassy in Havana

When Secretary of State John Kerry marked the reopening of the U.S. Embassy in Cuba on Aug. 14, he spoke of history. Standing in front of the chancery building in Havana, his back to the aquamarine Straits of Florida, he reminded a crowd of diplomats, officials, journalists and hundreds of Cuban spectators that, for more than 50 years, U.S.-Cuban relations had been "suspended in the amber of Cold War politics."

Since President Dwight Eisenhower closed the embassy in 1961, the United States has held 13 presidential elections, the Berlin Wall has crumbled and democracies have replaced communism throughout the former Soviet empire. Wars have been fought and wounds healed. Yet, it has taken "a courageous decision" by the United States and Cuba to "stop being the prisoners of history and to focus on the opportunities of today and tomorrow," Kerry said under a baking Caribbean sun.

That decision to re-establish diplomatic relations has created both new opportunities and challenges. From 1977 until July 20 of this year, when bilateral relations officially resumed, the United States and Cuba had operated "interests sections"—managed with the help of the Swiss government—in their respective capitals. But in both nations, the number of each nation's diplomats was limited, as were their activities, and their travel outside the capitals restricted. Government-to-government relations were "locked in the past," Kerry reminded.

Since the Dec. 17, 2014 announcement that Washington and

Opening Spread: The U.S. flag flies before the U.S. Embassy in Havana.
Photo by Scott Hamilton

Right: Secretary of State John Kerry and Chargé d'Affaires Jeffrey DeLaurentis pay their respects as the U.S. national anthem is played during the flag-raising at the ambassador's residence in Havana Aug. 14.
State Department photo