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Cuba: A Flag of Dignity

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Last December much of the world sat silent in awe listening to Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro give simultaneous speeches announcing a thaw in the more than half century conflict between the United States and Cuba.

Their powerful, unexpected words were accompanied by the release of the remaining three prisoners of the Cuban Five, Gerardo Hernandez, Ramón Labañino and Antonio Guerrero, who had been unjustly incarcerated for more than 16 years in the United States. Alan Gross, a USAID contractor detained in Cuba on charges of subversion, was also released in the exchange, along with Rolando Sarraff Trujillo, a Cuban double agent who worked for the CIA.

The prisoner swap and the declared thaw was only the beginning. Weeks later, in mid-January, Obama relaxed restrictions on US citizen travel to Cuba and implemented a series of other measures that opened the door for US businesses to explore opportunities in Cuba. During his State of the Union address, he called for the 53-year old blockade against Cuba to end and reiterated the concrete steps his government was taking to reestablish relations with the Castro administration. In March, the first direct flight in decades from New York's JFK airport to Havana began operating and soon not an unoccupied hotel room could be found in Cuba's capital.

Unprecedented, ongoing discussions between high-level officials from Washington and Havana continued through the spring and details were agreed upon for the next major stage of the thaw:

re-opening embassies and formalizing renewed diplomatic relations. Although major discrepancies and key differences threatened to impede progress, both sides were determined to move forward. A date was confirmed for the Cuban and US embassies to open in Washington and Havana, and preparations were set into motion. At the stroke of midnight on July 20, Cuba and the US officially restored diplomatic relations and their respective embassies began to function.

Conrad Tribble, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Havana tweeted just after midnight, "Just made first phone call to State Dept. Ops Center from United States Embassy Havana ever. It didn't exist in Jan 1961." Minutes later, the Twitter handle @USEmbCuba wrote, "Hi friends! Greetings from the US Embassy in Havana, Cuba". But it was hours later that the real celebrations began, more than one thousand miles north of Cuba's capital, in Washington, DC. The crowds began to gather just after dawn in front of the landmarked building on 16th Street in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of the US capital.

Journalists were staking out the best spots to snag exclusive coverage of one of the most anticipated events in decades, as DC police and Secret Service officers placed barrier gates around the entrance to 2630 16th Street NW. Lines of distinguished guests began to form on either side of the building, everyone trying to hustle their way in early to escape the blaring sun and tropical humidity that gave the day a real Cuban feel.

Top journalists scrambled to flash their credentials and convince the Cuban protocol to let them in before the others so they could get the first scoop. Senators, members of Congress, celebrities and business executives stood in wait alongside long-term friends and allies of Cuba, as beads of sweat formed on their foreheads and the anticipation of the morning's events grew stronger. There was a nervous energy in the air, a collective excitement charged with the emotion of decades of struggle and resistance that many thought would never see this kind of victory. Minutes after 10am, more than 500 invited guests were allowed inside the grounds.

As many of us as possible made our way up the steps to the doorway, framing the entrance in preparation of the inaugural ceremony. At precisely 10:33am, the large doors flung open and Cuba's Foreign Minister, Bruno Rodriguez, led the modest delegation down the aisle to the basin of the steel flagpole that stood defiant and barren as a glaring reminder of the Cold War.

But on that morning, it wasn't just the intense sun generating warmth, shining down on the crowd below staring intently at the flagpole. The thaw had come as quick as ice melting in the hot Havana sun. Three Cuban soldiers marched down the path, drums guiding their patriotic rhythm, and soon the colors of the blue and white with a solitary beaming star encased in revolutionary red were raised above in a glorious proclamation of victory.

It was a moment frozen in time, a day many fought for but few believed they would witness. Tears accompanied by cheers of joy, "Viva Cuba! Viva Fidel" echoed in chorus throughout the streets surrounding the now-official Cuban Embassy. As the Cuban National anthem began, emotions peaked and the voice of Cuba silenced for so long by the powers seated just blocks away, took center stage, loud and clear. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution over U.S. imperialism was here and now.

Cuba prevailed. Cameras clicked away and cell phones rose up high to catch the memory of the heroic flag now proudly announcing the restoration of Cuba's sovereign territory in its full

splendor, and we filed inside behind the Cuban delegation to consecrate the interior. A grand marble staircase greeted guests, while the grandeur of the 1917 elegant building embraced visitors. The ornate walls and embellished ceilings sparkled from the recent refurbishment, reflecting the renewal in relations with Washington. At the top of the stairs on the far side hung the original Cuban flag that once flew high and strong over the Embassy before 1961.

It was taken down and saved by a former embassy employee for 54 years and now serves as a reminder of the island nation's resilience and determination. Foreign Minister Rodriguez addressed the multitude piled into the majestic ballroom on the second floor, which included State Department officials, members of Congress and friends of Cuba. "This ceremony has been possible thanks to the free and unshakable will, unity, sacrifice, selflessness, heroic resistance and work of our people and also the strength of the Cuban Nation and its culture", he affirmed, also thanking the "firm and wise leadership of Fidel Castro", who once visited this site in 1959 in the hopes of advancing bilateral relations.

As Cuba's top diplomat reminded all of those present that while this moment deserves celebration and rejoicing, there is still much to be overcome. The US blockade against Cuba remains in place, as does the US military base in Cuba's sovereign territory in Guantanamo. Nevertheless, mojitos were served from the Hemmingway Bar on the second floor of Cuba's restored Embassy and lawyers, journalists, activists and other long-time friends of Cuba toasted victory. Silvio Rodriguez, Cuba's most prolific singer-songwriter, who formed part of the delegation for this event, remarked that even he found it difficult to express his feelings about this day.

Amidst the buoyant voices filling the Embassy's magnificent walls, old friends reminiscing, and investors and business executives frantically networking for new opportunities in Cuba, the Cuban Foreign Minister went off to meet with Secretary of State John Kerry, the first encounter of its kind in US territory in more than 50 years. Outside the Embassy, the celebrations continued. Salsa music reverberated in the streets and friendly faces danced and hugged joyfully well into the night.

Just over a thousand miles south in Havana, the US Embassy also opened its doors, but there was no celebration and no flag raised. The other red, white and blue flag with its 50 stars won't be visible until Kerry goes to Cuba in August for the inaugural ceremony. Even so, this day was symbolic of what these events really mean. Cuba has defeated more than a half-century of US aggression without ever once bowing down. Cuba has shown that no matter how small you are, it's possible to stand strong against the most powerful obstacles, resisting even in the face of the greatest difficulties. The Cuban flag deserves to be the first to fly high, because this victory belongs to Cuba.