

Fostering the Partnership: The Next 90 Years

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Ik heb zo veel respect voor de schoonheid van uw taal dat ik niets meer ga zeggen in het Nederlands.

Thank you so much for your wonderful introduction.

It is truly an honor to speak to the the University of Gent today. You see, I well realize that the students are the leaders, not just of tomorrow, but of today. The leaders of thought; the leaders of conscience; and the building blocks of our continuing international partnerships.

And I love coming to Gent, although it was the scene of my first near diplomatic crisis. You see, on my first official visit to Gent, a journalist stuck a tv camera in my face and asked whether I thought Brugge or Gent was better. My Public Affairs head nearly fainted. I quivered, looked into the camera, and said: "It is like comparing a round diamond and a square diamond . . . in the end, they are both diamonds."

Times for an Obama ambassador in Belgium are easy but relations were not always so easy. When I arrived just a year and a half ago, I knew the painful truth that for much of the preceding recent past, relations between Belgium and the U.S., between Europe and the U.S. had suffered. With an unpopular Administration and unpopular policies in Iraq, Guantanamo, climate and more, relations had strained. We had not really spoken to one another. It had been too long since Belgians and Americans, since Europeans and Americans, had listened to one another. Since we had heard each other. Since we trusted and admired each other.

In that period, times for Americans in Europe were not easy. In the past decade before the last two years, any American travelling in Europe could be treated as a surrogate for an unpopular U.S. administration and unpopular U.S. policy. Americans during that period made sure not to wear tee shirts or baseball caps that could identify their nationality or associate them with unpopular U.S. foreign policy.

And that is what Barack Obama knew, when he called me a year and a half ago and told me he wanted me to represent him and the United States in Belgium. He told me that he believed people in Belgium, in Europe and around the world were taking a new look at America. The task was to change what they would see and ultimately to change what they believed when they did see us. To earn their trust, their respect and by so doing, to rebuild the true partnership.

But the old skepticism that existed in Europe for America would not die easily. The popularity of President Obama would certainly make a difference, but his presence in the lead would not itself earn Europe's trust, restore mutual respect and yield a true partnership. Would Europe loudly praise the person of the new U.S. President, while continuing to criticize the policies of the country that he led?

Clearly we had much work to do. Europe had much reason to doubt our motives and our word on many of the issues that really mattered. The questions can sound harsh and perhaps even rude, but indeed are fair. Questions about our values. Questions about our transparency, our honesty and our sincerity.

Questions like whether the country that had walked out of Kyoto really now shared Europe's commitment to our planet and its climate? Questions like whether the country that had rushed into Iraq really now desired as quickly as reasonably possible to depart from Afghanistan? Whether the country that had used the threat of terrorism as a justification to engage in torture really now understood the appropriate balance between civil rights, privacy and security?

The challenge in overcoming that skepticism was and is daunting. You see, until we can fully answer those questions and eliminate the skepticism within the mind and even moreso, within the heart of every Belgian, of every European, we could not fully rebuild the true partnership of action and of spirit. And unless we fully restore the true partnership of action and spirit between the United States and Belgium, between the United States and Europe, we cannot resolve – indeed we cannot even begin meaningfully to address – the very problems on which the security and prosperity of our planet depend. No nation alone can any longer address the challenges of climate, of the terror threat the still resides in Afghanistan and Pakistan, of the need to protect our homelands while respecting our liberties. It will indeed take the full coordinated effort of the greatest partnership on the planet – the partnership between the U.S. and Belgium, the U.S. and Europe – to lead the rest of the world down the path of solutions, and through the maze of a better world for our children than the one we inherited from our parents.

And as we set out to rebuild that most robust partnership with Belgium, with Europe, an additional hurdle, a hurdle beyond questions of policy, quickly developed. For unlike in the past, the solution to our problems of climate, of security for our planet from terror and military challenges can no longer be solved – indeed can no longer even be addressed – at a table for two for the U.S. and Europe. So even while we work to rebuild our full partnership with Europe, our most important partner, we need to get others to the table. Yet in focusing on getting the others to our former table for two, some at that table understandably question our continuing commitment to the priority of our partnership.

So in rebuilding the most critical of all partnerships – our partnership with Belgium, with Europe – we face the challenge not just of doubts about our policies, but about our commitment as well.

Though challenged by the nearly unprecedented economic crisis at home and the domestic pressures of the massive oil spill, President Obama has attempted to address the doubts about our policies and our commitment to and in Europe. He has been to Europe as much as any U.S. president. He has built meaningful relationships with many of its leaders—Ms. Merkel, Mr. Sarkozy, Mr. Cameron, and many more. He has recently met in Europe with NATO, with Herman Van Rompuy, and with Mr. Barosso. And they discussed our shared policy – climate, security from terror, military challenges in Afghanistan, mutual economic recovery -- and by so doing and in so doing, the tone of his voice and the earnest warmth of his smile attested to our nation's commitment to that table where Europe and the U.S. have long sat together.

And I have spent, our Embassy has spent, over a year similarly confirming our shared values, addressing the doubts about my country's policies in a way too that I hope can leave no question about our commitment to this partnership.

In so doing, I have spent and will continue to spend an hour each morning, each day, studying French one morning and Dutch the next, to be a better listener and a better partner.

And in rebuilding our partnership, I have travelled through all of Belgium, through every province, 220 cities, villages and communes so far, from Knokke to Bree, from Tournai to Dinant to Bulligen, shaking hands and listening to Belgians. On the coast, in ports, and along canals and rivers, through woods and hills. Near belfies, city halls and glorious churches. At Memorial ceremonies, bike races, carnivals and festivals. In classrooms, museums, board rooms, factories and laboratories. Polishing diamonds, brewing beer, crafting chocolates, giving speeches, teaching classes and always listening.

I have met with virtually every federal minister, with the leaders and key players in the regions, with every governor and scores of mayors and with the people everywhere.

For partnerships can be discussed in Minister's offices, in Parliament and in chateaus . . .

But partnerships are built with and exist between the people . . . all people. With counts and barons, CEOs and lawyers, and with families everywhere.

In the year, I have learned that the answers are indeed out there.

The answers are there. I heard them. I saw them. I hear them and see them daily.

I learned that Belgians and Americans today indeed share common values. We share common goals. A belief in common means to those ends.

We share not just a history on the battlefield. Not just undying gratitude for past World Wars among a grateful generation now too close to dying. We share not just respect for one man, even a transformative figure in history.

And with proper communication and understanding about the policies and continued demonstration of our commitment, sharing common values and common goals means that we should be able to tackle together the common problems . . . the world problems that we face together.

Two countries, one script, one page.

We of course will never demand, and indeed never really ask. Rather, we will always discuss. Partners discuss.

But when we discuss, when we fully address the lingering doubts about our policies today and about our commitment to Europe, can we as partners finally get to "yes?"

Not to "maybe." Not to "we would like to, but it is too hard, come back later." Not to "let's see what others do."

But to "yes." To working together hand-in-hand to solve the issues of climate, of security, of the challenges presented by terror threats of economic recovery? Can we get to the same podium, standing together urging other countries in the world to join our united efforts to control carbon emissions, rather than criticizing each other. Can we unite to focus on a common mission and a common end in Afghanistan, so we continue to stand together to foster world security. Can we reach

accommodations in sharing information designed to protect us all from terror without unnecessarily intruding on anyone's legitimate privacy.

CLIMATE

As we stare at Cancun, I remain more disillusioned at the lack of U.S. and European harmony on this one topic than on any other.

Now I realize that Europe has much cause for skepticism. We were indeed the country that walked out of Kyoto and had long denied the reality of our climate future.

But the truth is that that history is old news and that old news is history. The time for skepticism has long passed. Since the Obama administration took office, the United States has been and is willing to sign and be bound to a formal agreement regarding our climate future. Europe was willing to sign and be so bound. And even without a formal agreement, the U.S. is willing to stand by its pledge to reduce global warming emissions by 17 percent by 2020 – 10 years from today. And the U.S. can achieve such goals without any new legislation. Nothing about the mid-term elections, Tea Parties or Republican congresses effects our ability to deliver on our climate promise.

But the reason for the U.S. and for Europe to sign and be bound by a climate agreement is to save the planet. But we can no longer do it at a table for two for the United States and Europe. The U.S. and Europe account only for 45% of global emissions now and will account only for 35 % of the emissions by 2030. We will account for 10% of the emissions by 2050. And thus we need the rest of the world's leading emitters – like China, Brazil, India – to be part of any agreement if we are going to save the planet. Yet the Kyoto accord has long considered China and those others to be developing countries who need not agree to be bound to any limits on carbon. Yet China is now the world's largest emitter. Historically it is the second largest emitter on the planet. In 10 years, by 2020, China will be 60 % larger than the U.S.

How could the U.S. or Europe possibly think about entering into a climate agreement that does not cover China? How can you possibly negotiate a climate deal when implicit within it is the assumption that China is the equivalent of Chad. Of course any agreement must bind the emissions of the countries that account for at least 85% of the emissions and then build from there.

Indeed, it would appear to be a no-brainer that the U.S. and Europe must stand together and demand that China and the other leading global emitters be legally bound. There can be no point and no benefit for our planet in the U.S. and Europe sitting at a no-smoking table for 2, when the entire restaurant puffed smoke throughout.

We are tied at the hip on this planet. We need to be tied at the hip in focusing our efforts and our passions in Cancun and and in its aftermath at those who represent the future of carbon but refuse to participate in protecting the future of the planet. We cannot shoot at each other. We must work as partners to force others to join us meaningfully in saving the planet. Your world deserves no less.

AFGHANISTAN

I have recently toured Afghanistan with the Minister of Defense De Crem and visited all of the Belgian troops in Afghanistan – training Afghans in Kunduz, protecting the airport in Kabul, and flying air

support with F-16's in Kandahar. Belgian troops are working proudly with the other ISAF forces to bring the day of security from Al-Qaeda threats and progress for all Afghans ever closer. But skepticism still threatens to prevent joint realization of joint goals.

Here I well understand the origins of the skepticism and tension. Our history in Iraq and long misguided efforts in Afghanistan are hard to forget and credibility is a badge slowly earned.

But, I submit, Barack Obama has earned that badge of credibility. Here again, I submit, the problem is not differences in values or goals, but rather failures of communication and failures of understanding. Again, if we could just do a better job of communicating, the path of joint progress would be clearer. Suspicion and skepticism would not stand a chance.

For indeed, as promised, NATO is plainly working feverishly to transfer security obligations to a trained Afghan Security Force so that NATO forces can exit Afghanistan just like U.S. forces have exited Iraq. Our values and our goals I submit with regard to Afghanistan are therefore identical. To transfer all security obligations as quickly as possible to trained Afghans and to have the NATO forces leave as swiftly as possible. As far as I can tell, no one in Belgium, not the left, center or right, not the media, not the North or South, disagrees with that goal. And we all—every Belgian and American and every NATO Ally – take pride in the 7 million Afghani children now in school, including 37% who are female.

And the good news is that NATO's recruitment targets for 2010 for Afghans to join the Afghani National Security Force and to be trained has been met. So the good news for all is that the replacements exist – the ranks of dedicated Afghans awaiting training to provide the future security infrastructure that will hasten the exit of the NATO forces has appropriately been growing.

So is there serious question that the growing number of trainees need a growing number of trainers? Don't we all – Belgians and Americans -- support getting the training done and getting the NATO forces home? We need to have a loud chorus of transatlantic support for completing the training mission and transferring security to the Afghans. It may take to 2014 to get the training job done, but the road along the way is always earnest. We need to be on the road together.

PASSENGER NAME RECORDS

Europe and the United States, Belgium and the United States, have made a great deal of progress in resolving issues of balancing the need for access to information to protect our security with our shared desire to protect our privacy. You see again we share our values. We both cherish life, yearn for security and value privacy.

Yet tension skepticism is still widespread with regard to the related issue of access to Passenger Name Records of people boarding airplanes. The problem once again is not differences in values or goals, but failures of communication and failures of understanding. Old stereotypes often drown out changed circumstances.

There is in fact a long history of information sharing between the United States and Europe with no record of misuse of data. Because both entities have strong privacy and data protection cultures.

Both entities have come to understand that this is not an either-or proposition – we need to protect our security and our values to truly live free.

But sometimes the balance is viewed as involving the potential inroad on the privacy of Europeans mainly to foster the security of Americans. In other words, though we share the same values – we both cherish security fostered in the manner least intrusive on our privacy – somehow there is a sense that terror really is a problem that strikes only elsewhere. There is a skepticism that all of the hubbub really concerns American insistence on burdening Europe.

But the notion that the scope and targets of terror has or can be limited to America is indeed foolish and foolhardy and has never been more foolish than today. Today when Osama bin Laden has recently recorded threats against France. Today when gendarmes in German airports are patrolling with semi-automatic weapons. Today when package cargo bombs have been found in the U.K. Today when 10 folks in Antwerp and Brussels had discussed blowing up trains, the Jewish community in Antwerp or the sportspalace. And although we just recently succeeded in having the information declassified and although Belgium has not previously heard, the truth is that Belgians too have been attacked this year. Remember the Christmas airline bomber on a flight from the Netherlands to Detroit who tried to detonate the plastic explosives in his underwear and was tackled by passengers before he could do so? He was not going to commit simply the mass murder of Americans. In fact, he was going also to commit mass murder of Belgians as well. There were 7 Belgians on the flight. And there were in fact 100 non-Americans from 18 countries. One of the three major terror attempts viewed as having occurred in the United States this year actually endangered proportionately more of Belgium than of the U.S. And access to Passenger Name Records would prevent a repeat of that case happening on another plane. The debate is no longer theoretical – we are in this together and we need to protect one another together.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BELGIUM

In closing I wanted to turn to a topic I have discussed in speeches many times this year all over Belgium – namely the importance of Belgium. But this part of the speech has recently gotten quite a bit more famous recently. You see what I have long been saying here publicly, has recently been reported as well as an alleged secret leak from Wikileaks. And what I have now learned is that it is not simply what is allegedly leaked that matters, but how the media reacts that might be of greatest significance? It is the old skepticism, not the new leak, that might do the greatest damage.

You see, in speeches I often explain that during this first year, I learned how much Belgium really matters. I learned the importance of Belgium – an importance that even Belgians do not fully realize. And therefore I learned that the potential exists for real success by working together – to meet real world challenges together.

Now I often hear protests that Belgium is but a small country. That Belgium has relatively little manpower, relatively little funding. How can Belgium be needed to achieve our shared goals? Even if I am right that Belgium and the U.S. share values and goals, how important could Belgium really be to achieving those goals? What could we really achieve working together that the United States cannot achieve without Belgium?

Of course I understand that Belgium has a limited budget and limited manpower. But, though Belgium may be short on men and dollars, I learned that Belgium leads in credibility. I knew that and

said that long before Europe decided that Herman Van Rompuy should lead Europe. Before Guy Verhofstadt proved to be a leading figure in the European Parliament. You see, Belgium does not speak on the international stage that often or that loudly. Belgium never speaks with a hidden agenda. Belgium never speaks simply to hear itself speak. Rather, when Belgium speaks on the international stage, it does so for only one reason: it has something to say. So when Belgium speaks, people take note. People listen. People reflect and people ultimately agree, even if they do not know that they are following. Belgium indeed leads in credibility. It is that credibility that Belgium can provide as we work together to reach our shared goals.

And so in speeches, just as I am doing today, I often ask for your help, for Belgium's help. For I note that, with its credibility, if Belgium made the call that it is time to protect all by going forward on an agreement for access to Passenger Name Records; if Belgium made the call that it is time to get enough trainers into Afghanistan to hasten the principled withdrawal of NATO forces; if Belgium made the call that our planet's climate crisis demanded realistic action now, who would not answer those calls? If Belgium led, who in Europe could act with tension and skepticism? Who would not follow? If Belgium made those calls, none would have an excuse.

And when we are discussing fundamental security for our children, can anyone afford an excuse?

Now I cannot confirm any the accuracy of any Wikileaks memo or leak, but the press reports on an alleged memo that reports essentially these same conclusions to Secretary Clinton. And the episode has shown me that, in Wikileaks, it not simply what is allegedly leaked, but how the media reacts that might be of greatest significance?

So one Francophone newspaper reported this leak by saying:

"The surprise is that that the text approved by Ambassador Howard Gutman is factually correct, balanced, and to the point. There is no double talk: as the Embassy pointed out to us, what was written reflects what Howard Gutman 'has said on many occasions in public speeches.'

Another francophone paper reported the same alleged leak noting:

"It is just a hypothesis but if Johan Vande Lanotte were to fail in his Royal Conciliator mission, Albert II could turn to U.S. Ambassador to Belgium Howard Gutman.

So despite the leak, in Wallonia, the information simply confirmed our truthfulness and hard work.

Yet Flanders media read the same leaked memo and chose to report it differently, They seemed to have read the memo through the window of the old skepticism. And when you look at anything through dirty windows, it will always look dirty indeed. So one Flemish paper chose to title its story:

"How Do I Seduce Belgium?"

And another asked:

"How do you convince Belgium to more commitments in Afghanistan and Guantanamo? By telling it

that with that, it can play a leading role in Europe. The tactic which the U.S. Embassy used to persuade our country to send more troops to Afghanistan or take in detainees from Guantanamo is extensively documented in a secret message from Brussels to Washington.”

The same memo reported in diametrically opposed ways. I suspect the fault is mine – not in writing the memo, but in failing to topple the wall of skepticism that still causes some to see what we do through dirty windows.

Do I sincerely value Belgium’s credibility and its ability to help us build a better tomorrow. How could I not?

Thanks so much and all the best.