



I'd Like to Go to Molenbeek to Tell my Story

Interview of U.S. Ambassador Howard Gutman

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In sidebar on the first page of the interview, the *Le Vif* journalist writes: “Assigned to Belgium since 2009, U.S. Ambassador Howard Gutman vowed to visit the 589 communes of our country. In his office, there is a map with pins to indicate where he has been. Modern art pieces from U.S. museums contrast with the golden tints of the U.S. Ambassador’s residence next to the Royal Park. But the man who lives in that house together with his wife and 15-year-old son – the eldest son has stayed in the U.S. – is spirited by such an enthusiasm that his stay in Brussels will undoubtedly leave marks.

“A business lawyer with multiple talents – he played his own role in a TV series – he put himself in the service of Barack Obama the very evening the latter consulted with him to help him write his letter announcing his candidacy for the White House. The son of a Jewish Pole who escaped the European Holocaust when he was 15, Howard Gutman wants to build ties, bring well-being, and organize receptions. All this with a communicative enthusiasm, in the image of his personal successful life.”

A transcript of the interview follows.

Will we soon see Barack Obama in Belgium?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘I will tell you a confidence: the President will certainly come this year during the Belgian EU Presidency. Now the question is the time. His schedule is only confirmed for two weeks ahead. In any case, I have started preparing big festivities for July 1, three days before our Independence Day on July 4, which is on a Sunday this year, hoping that Obama will be present. We are planning a whole day of activities to mark the transatlantic relationship between our two countries, and whole Belgium will be invited. My hope would be a bike ride with Eddy Merckx just before the Tour de France. Manneken Pis will be dressed with a ‘Yes we can’ T Shirt. We have asked permission to use the Park of Brussels where Belgian and American singers will perform. We shall see what the Embassy’s budget can pay for, but I personally would like to do more for Belgium.’

At the Chamber of Commerce (sic,) you said that Belgium is one of the most important country in the world. You are going to make us blush!

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Yes and I believe it. We have wonderful allies all over Europe but Belgium has something different. When Belgium talks, people listen, because when Belgium talks, it is because they have something to say, with the necessary credibility and without hidden agenda. In that sense, Belgium is powerful. As far as we, Americans, are concerned, we are trying to regain our credibility. During the last ten years, I came to Europe every year as a tourist and I could witness how Europe was upset with America and for a good reason. But now

Obama is very popular and there is basically no significant difference between our two countries anymore. We both believe in women's rights, health care, and peace.'

Yet, there is still a difference, i.e. the United States has no BHV!

Ambassador Gutman: 'Many countries have political and cultural differences, including the U.S. You just need to watch TV networks. What's common between Fox News and MSNBC? What's important is how we handle these differences, i.e. with dialogue. I notice that everyone in Belgium is proud when Kim Clijsters wins the U.S. Open or when Herman Van Rompuy becomes President of the European Council. The same is true in the U.S. We sometimes disagree, but we are all Americans and proud of it. Let's handle these issues peacefully and honestly. That is what marks a great country and that's what Belgium is doing whether on BHV or something else. I keep the U.S. State Department informed of your problems. Whatever they are, we do not judge them and we certainly do not want to interfere. We still regard Belgium as one country and a strong partner.'

Last February, you pleaded in favor of sending additional Belgian troops to Afghanistan. It was a rather direct speech...

Ambassador Gutman: 'First, I would like to say that there is no one who believes in peace more than Barack Obama and his Administration. General Stanley McChrystal, the new Commander of the international force in Afghanistan, said that we need more troops. Another leader than Obama would either have fired the General or demanded more troops. But instead Barack Obama studied the problem for seven weeks. Then he came back and said : 'I have listened to everyone and I think that we have a good chance of restoring a civilian administration and restoring functional society by sending more trainers for agriculture, education, and security.' Under the Taliban, only 900,000 students were educated and they were all boys. Today 6 million people in schools, including two million girls. So how can responsible people leave Afghanistan without building a civilian society? But a preliminary condition is security. Just like when Belgium sent its B-Fast team immediately after the quake in Haiti and they found themselves in danger. I immediately called our Southern Command and we sent military to help protect the Belgians.'

‘Of course, when you hear that 30,000 more troops are needed and that’s all you hear, you cannot make the difference between that and the George Bush message. My job is to get the message clear. I was misinterpreted. Some even said that I was trying to get within Belgian politics. Yet, I am here to promote a win-win policy, and we can only build this partnership if we respect each other and listen to each other. The time when the United States dictated to its partners what they ought to do is over.’

The United States is asking with insistence for Belgium to take more Guantanamo detainees...

Ambassador Gutman: ‘We believe that Guantanamo is wrong and that it should be closed. Ethically and morally it should be closed. So Europe and the U.S. and Belgium share that view. Obama promised to close Guantanamo and one year later, it is still not closed. The problem is not the about 40 dangerous people who will be tried. . If they’re convicted they will go to prison and if they are acquitted they will be on the streets of America. The problem is the 50 or sixty who are able to be in society but who need to find a country that welcomes them. Belgium has already taken one and we are grateful. But it gets harder to ask for a second or a third because then comes the ‘not in my back yard.’ Yet, if twenty countries decided two or three, then the problem that was created by the Bush Administration would be solved in three weeks. We know that it is our fault but we need our partners’ help. And who has the credibility to relay that message in Europe? Belgium does.

Belgium was also one of the very few European countries which opposed the war in Iraq in 2003. Do you think Belgium was wrong? Were you against the war?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Obama opposed that war. I was a lawyer and I didn’t have a vote nor much information. If I was in leadership and I had a say in 2003 I hope I would have been as smart as him, simply asking that question: if we get in, how do we get out?’

You organized an Iftar reception. Is the United States getting reconciled with the Muslim world?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘We made a mistake for eight years in the East versus West, which put everyone of us in greater peril. I went to see the Moroccan ambassador to plan a joint visit to a high school in Molenbeek. In Cairo, Obama made unbelievable progress in a 57-minute speech. He changed the East’s understanding of who we are. But he didn’t mince words, he didn’t lie to anyone. He said: ‘It is an act of morale cowardice to bomb buses or to send bombs over borders.’ He still got a standing ovation. It’s not going to be easy but we are in the process. I’d also like to go to Molenbeek to tell my story. I grew up in a lower class neighbourhood. My father died when I was 16 and I went to work as a dishwasher after school. At some point, my grandmother, my parents, my sister, and myself were living in two bedrooms. Yet, I went to university, studied law and so on.

What do you think of the proposal to ban the Burqa in Belgium?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘I do not want to judge anyone. God judges, I learn and I listen. That’s my role. What works in our country is that we celebrate everyone’s diversity and at the same time they become part of society. In my country, they can wear burqas. But it does not automatically mean it is a good formula for Belgium.

It will soon be the 50th anniversary of Congo’s independence. Who will represent the United States?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘I do not know. The Great Lakes Region is a very high priority for the United States. We consider Belgium one of the leaders on the issue. We have a Special Envoy, Howard Wolpe, and Hillary Clinton went herself to Goma, but we should work together even more. Do you know that there are 2,300 rapes per month in East Congo? Our two Governments must work together for such crimes to be punished.

What do you think of Rwanda, which is one of your main allies in the region?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘I am here to listen and learn. I leave African questions to our Africa desk. I am not the right person to talk about our relations with Rwanda.

I have so many things to do. Besides, I take my language lesson, French one day, Dutch the other day. And at midnight, I call my son in Washington. I only sleep five hours per night.

U.S. Investments in Belgium have fallen by 30 percent last year. How to revert that trend?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘The world is getting smaller we are interdependent economically. What we can do? Opens markets, put people to work, and build diplomacy. If you work for Bekaert in the U.S., you know Belgium as if you were born there. And if you work for FedEx in Belgium, then U.S. is part of your world as well. I think Belgium is a spectacular place for investment, thanks to its trained workforce and central location. For instance Nike opened a distribution center in the port of Antwerp from where it ships its products to Russia. That is cost effective and good for the planet. I met with most of the provinces’ governors and we looked at what is attractive and what’s not, and when I go back to the U.S., I will talk about Belgium.

What is the last thing you fell in love with in our country?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘I grew up in Queen’s New York but there is no charm. Here every village is wonderful. I intend to visit all the communes of Belgium, including as a simple tourist. I was a lawyer for 27 years, I made good money, and after three or four years as Ambassador, I will see the difference in terms of income. But I wanted to do something that matters. I waited 53 years. . I enjoy every day whether it’s talking to Ministers or to people in the streets. So I get to be the first tourist and yet I deal with important dossiers. . There can be nothing better. It’s great.’