

Speech to European Petrochemical Luncheon

If Barack Obama Were a Country, He Would Be Belgium

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March 3, 2011

So my friend Dan Zaum calls me months ago and tells me he has this wonderful group meeting in March.

A couple of hundred European petrochemical business leaders in a group called the European Petrochemical Luncheon.

Except that this group eats lunch at 8 o'clock at night.

Dan explained that he offered me as a speaker. I would speak between the main course and dessert ñ sort of a palate cleanser like a small cup of sorbet.

I learn that prior speakers have included petrochemical geniuses, a poker player, and a British comedienne. The goal is to be entertaining.

I explained to Dan that I know little about petrochemicals and have never won at poker.

But given that Ambassadors cannot charge for appearances, I explained to Dan that the price would be right.

And I assured him that I would at least appear and stand on my own two legs. . .

Until I went skiing in Courcheval France.

So I appear today a couple of days after having had surgery for a ruptured ACL in the States. If you like our get together, remember that I am a hero. And if you don't . . . you should blame the Vicodin.

As to being entertaining, Ambassadors generally cannot match British comediennes and I usually talk about such riveting topics as Afghanistan, Guantanamo, and the G-20.

But then again, I realized that the world today is indeed an amazing theater. That CNN today is by far the most entertaining network on television.

And not just for the stories about Charlie Sheen or John Galliano.

Think about the world today. Think about my world today. Think about democracy today.

The Ivory Coast held a single election and ended up with two governments. My second favorite democracy, Belgium, held one election last May and so far has ended up with no governments. But

even with no government, Belgium has passed a new 2011 budget and is fully open. Meanwhile, my favorite democracy, the U.S. has a government but it has no budget and it may have to shut down.

And a revolution is going on in front of our eyes and on our TV screens nightly, a revolution about this word "democracy." Think about the power of that concept.

Can the people from the inside do what the world powers from the outside can only struggle with?

So Belgium with its lack of a government, the United States with its lack of a budget, and much of the Arab world are struggling with the implementation of the principles of democracy. At times, I hear some in Belgium and some in the United States become embarrassed about the struggle. Belgians sometimes apologize for their lack of a new government, even as their country remains well-governed. Others question me about the deep and often contentious political divisions in my country that are preventing us even from passing a budget and may lead to our shutdown.

I never apologize for Belgium and I never apologize for the United States. Whenever a group of people exist in a unit, there will be differing ideas, beliefs, and viewpoints. The haves and the have nots; the have more and the have less. Reconciling diverse views effectively to govern together is a huge challenge. But it is also the hallmark of freedom. It should be cherished.

Don't take my word for it. Every day on TV, we see people willing to risk their lives for the sake of being able to have the struggle that democracy offers.

The lessons of the people in the Middle East fighting on TV nightly for democracy are lessons to the citizens of Belgium and of the United States. Lessons that democracy may not be easy and often is not efficient, but is always worth the investment. No one should ever fear spirited political disagreements.

The question is not the challenges we face. The question is how we respond to those challenges.

And for the most part, President Obama and Belgium respond alike. President Obama and Belgium share a common temperament. Indeed, I have on occasion said that if President Obama were a country, he would be Belgium.

Indeed Belgium and President Obama are good role models, good lessons, for me.

You see I learned in one of my first diplomatic sessions that there are at least two different types of people. There are indeed two ways to cook a frog.

A year and a half ago, I came to Belgium after over a quarter of a century as a high powered lawyer in Washington DC.

After 27 years of making money, I wanted instead to make a difference. I moved my family across the Atlantic for the honor of having a chance finally to make a real difference in the world. Finally to

help make tomorrow for many better than today. For me, as a matter of mission, as a matter of style, there was so much to do. And I had no time to waste.

So early on, I had a meeting at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with one of Belgium's top diplomats. A friend of mine now whom I will call Piet.

So in that early meeting, I urged Piet to join with me to change the world. I urged Piet that if Belgium took the lead in Europe, and brought all of the nations of Europe along with it, there was nothing we could not achieve together.

For example, I explained, my President had tried to close Guantanamo Prison by asking European nations one at a time to relocate one or more former detainees. It was a slow process and it was exhausting.

But, thinking far bigger, I explained that Belgium could indeed lead the European nations in meeting together at once, and deciding among themselves at once to divide up all of the remaining Guantanamo prisoners together. In one diplomatic exercise, much like one entrepreneurial effort, Belgium could close the Guantanamo institution when my country could not do it by asking countries one at a time.

Having listened intently, the leading Belgian diplomat to my surprise answered: "Howard, do you know the two ways to cook a frog?"

And of course I said, "no, Piet, what are the two ways to cook a frog?"

He replied, "The first way is to heat the water till it boils and then throw the frog in. But the frog feels the heat and immediately jumps out and there is no dinner."

The leading diplomat in Belgium went on to explain: "But the second way, the Belgian way, is to put the frog in nice cool water in a pot. He swims around happily. You then turn on the heat and it slowly cooks the frog and voila . . . there is dinner."

And, without missing a beat, I immediately replied: "Piet, there is a third way. You throw the frog in the boiling pot and grab a lid and slam it on the pot. Voila. The frog goes nowhere and we eat immediately."

So indeed we are different. But people and even partners often are. What matters is that through our joint skill, creativity and innovation, we both get to eat frogs. Whether we are dealing with a new product, a new means of production, a new business deal or even a new formula for closing Guantanamo Prison.

But isn't lid slamming more effective for a businessman?

Perhaps. I certainly used to think so for sure.

But Barack Obama and Belgium have taught me otherwise. And indeed, if Barack Obama Were A Country, He'd Be Belgium.

It was the way Barack Obama cooked frogs that in fact first attracted me to him.

You see, when the 2008 campaign started, I was helping to lead the exploratory efforts of a dear friend of mine, the then governor from Virginia, now a senator from Virginia, named Mark Warner. And we tested the water for 17 months as I practiced law. We traveled the nation, testing the theory that the candidate who could see a little further down the road will ultimately be more appealing than the candidate who remembered the last time they had been there. After 17 months on the campaign trail, Mark decided he was not having any fun, despite the fun I was having, and he quit the campaign. So my 2008 campaign ended for all time in October 2006.

I swore I was done; I had had 17 months doing it; I was over it.

And then one day in the last week of January in 2007, I was at my desk and I got a phone call. I had never met Barack Obama but he was on the line. And what he said was that he was due to go home that Monday evening at 9:30 to write his speech announcing his candidacy for president to be read that next Saturday, but if I'd come for an hour, he would stay until 10:30 and gladly spend the hour talking to me. Now I didn't plan on working for him, but how could I really tell a man, "Why don't you go home at 9:30?"

So I went to deliver the message that I wouldn't support him -- that I was done. I never delivered that message. Rather, later that evening, after an hour with Senator Obama, I went home and told Michelle -- two years before our election -- that I had just met the next President of the United States. That Barack Obama would certainly be the next president. Because if you spend an hour with Barack Obama, you realize that the world can be a better place today than it was yesterday and that tomorrow can be even better still.

What impressed me so much was that Obama made no effort to impress me. He slammed no lids. I was a frog swimming happily in cool water and never stood a chance.

When I got home, Michelle my wife asked me if I thought America was ready to elect a black president. And I told her that in the entire hour that I had been with Barack, it never occurred to me that he was African-American. Vision and judgment knew no race. That I believed that the U.S. had finally understood that the problems that we face that unite us are far greater than any differences or prejudices that have previously divided us.

And he has never disappointed me since.

I was with him in February 2008 and witnessed what I thought was the greatest speech I had ever seen delivered. Obama had won the first primary and 48 hours before the second primary -- this one in New Hampshire -- he had a 12 point lead. Were he to win that night, the improbable would be achieved -- he would win the nomination and likely the presidency.

So the plan was for the 60 of us who were his close friends and colleagues who were in New Hampshire to wait in a tavern. As soon as the returns came in; he would come by the tavern; speak to the 60 of us; weíd all go over to a high school where heíd give his winning address; and weíd be off celebrating the victory of the presidency.

A funny thing happened on the way that night: the polls stayed open, the returns came in, and Barack Obama lost the New Hampshire primary. And in front of us in those hours, it had all crumbled the two years of work, the certainty of the presidencyóit had literally all crumbled.

Picture the scene at midnight, on a cold New Hampshire night, when Barack Obama went from thinking he was about to win the presidency, to having seen it look like it all crumbled. And think about the 60 of us in that tavern. I was just disheartened. I couldnít even look up.

And in came Barack to the tavern, and he strolled to the mike, at midnight, having worked that long day. And he said he would speak briefly because we had just seen him on TV, and he had only two things to say. The first one was he wanted to thank us in his typical way. And of course when Barack wants to thank you, he thanks you in paragraphs and it was eloquent.

But the second part was what I will always rememberóof what I call the greatest speech I have ever heard. Because Barack then said, ìThis is going to sound like spin to all of you, and I assure you itís not, I am as disappointed as any of you: I am disappointed to my core. But Íve been talking to David Plouffe about a problem we were facing. We had won so easily in Iowa, and then came to such a big lead to New Hampshire, the win was going to come too easy, and the first minute we stumbled in the White House, the headlines would be, ìHe Rode the Era of Good Feeling.î It had been the reconciliation of race relations; it had been a wave that came over Americansóthey didnít know what they were doing. He said we were winning so easily that we would win, but not be able to govern.

"And never forget," he said "that what we're doing has nothing to do with winning an election, it has to do with governing and changing the world." He was at peace with the loss, because it meant that if he ultimately won, it would make governing easier. And the darndest thing is, as I looked into his eyes, he believed it. So when I saw inside that man that night, I knew we could do no wrong. I knew he could win, and I knew he would change the world.

Barack Obama is the first man I have ever met who has no blood pressure. Always calm and thinking. Did you ever notice that no matter how he moves, his suit never creases?

He never slams lids. Never rushes to judgment. At every meeting, staff gathers around the room to consider an issue. The lid slammers usually speak first. The timid tend to shy away. But if Obama had you in the room, he values your opinion. Patiently he solicits each viewpoint. He hears from all. And in time with due reflection, he finally decides.

As well, Barack Obama understands that you should never let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Compromise is progress, so always compromise and move in the right direction. Obama takes what he can get and then will return for more.

Moreover, Obama never accepts convention simply because it is conventional. What matters is not simply being able to think outside the box ñ it is being willing to refuse to accept that there even is a box at all. For him, great ideas can come from anywhere but need not come from the conventional.

And finally, he is friendly, a warm and good man. I got to spend 25 minutes with him alone in the Oval Office in early February to brief him about Belgium. And then, when I was back in the U.S. for knee surgery, the White House invited me to its celebration of Motown. Seeing me out of the corner of his eye, the President came over to find out what had happened.

All those qualities. Sound familiar? In short, in a sentence, indeed, . . .

If Barack Obama Were A Country, He'd Be Belgium.

And as with Barack Obama, when you are discussing Belgian resourcefulness and practicality, you need note only "Yes We Can." For the path of success for Belgians is long indeed. I marvel in their understated success. Typically Belgian -- understated, modest, thoughtful and completely successful.

Which leads us back to where we began. Don't I know that Belgium does not even have a government?

Whereas others sometime despair developments in the last several months in Belgium, I marvel at it.

As noted, all countries and people have disagreements and divisions. Just ask right-leaning Fox News and left-leaning MSNBC in my country. The question is not whether disagreements and divisions exist, but how a nation responds to them.

And in the past several months, I have seen a model of democracy. Legitimate disagreements followed by a vigorous election season. A population uniformly interested in its future and the choice of its government. Everyone energized. Forty days and election results. And then dedicated leaders working hard to bridge the gaps that exist in every nation.

No one will accuse democracy of being efficient and swift. But it is always worth its cost. Of course the quicker a government is formed and can focus more directly on the problems of the day, the quicker the problems of the day can be addressed. But the business of governing, of innovating and of moving forward need not pause.

Best of luck and all the best.