

Never to Forget

Memorial Day 2011

Ambassador Howard Gutman

We commemorate Memorial Day never to forget.

Never to forget who they were.

Men and women of many titles.

To some they were sergeant or colonel or general;
To others they were mom or dad, Uncle or aunt . . .
Son or daughter.

To us, they are all heroes.
We honor them all.

And we honor their parents who lost children.
We honor their children who lost parents.

As a head of one of our top American Battlefield cemeteries once told me: For those buried in his cemetery they remain each day on active duty. . . And on each day that we fail to remember them . . . that we fail to honor them . . . they have served a day without a mission.

Every soldier is entitled to his mission. Here at the American Battlefield Cemeteries in Belgium – Ardennes, Henri-Chappelle and Waregem – we, Belgians and Americans, parents and children, we are that mission.

We commemorate Memorial Day never to forget. Never to forget what they did.

Every one of them understood when they joined that the road would be rough.

They knew that this was not about television commercials boasting pressed uniforms and glistening shoes or steeds clashing on chessboards.

They knew this was not about training exercises amidst sunny days in North Carolina, They knew instead that this was about life and death.

They knew that for every moment of thrill, there could be months of fear.
But they knew that the rest of us needed them. They knew our fellow world citizens had been victims of murder or terror.

Perhaps they knew in 1915 that the poppies and the hearts of Belgians had been trampled on the way to 9 million deaths in WWI.

Or perhaps they knew in 1944 that Max Gutman was hiding in the woods in Poland after every other Jew in his small town of Biala Rawska had been slaughtered. Maybe they knew that his dream one day to come to America, to raise a future U.S. Ambassador to Belgium, had nearly been extinguished along with the future for so many Poles and Catholics and Jews.

Maybe they knew in 2001 that our citizens had been the victims of terror and remained under threat.

Whenever they served, wherever they served, they knew we needed someone to help, to respond, to free, to save, to protect. And they said, "I will."

We commemorate Memorial Day never to forget the face of evil.

We welcome all into the brotherhood of man. We will meet you far more than half way. We and our allies will send our diplomats, help feed your poor, and treat you with respect. But threaten none, harm even fewer.

We commemorate Memorial War never to forget.
Never to forget what they died for.

Can you hear them – each and every one of the 5323 buried here and the tens of thousands buried elsewhere . . . Can you hear them?
If not, it is because you are listening with your ears.

But on Memorial Day, we listen not with our ears, but instead with our hearts. And with our hearts we can hear them loudly and clearly.

They tell us that they lived in a country that believed in freedom and understood right from wrong.

And they tell us that they believed in service, in duty, in the mission of creating a better world. They tell us never to forget, but certainly to move forward and build bridges where pools of hatred previously existed.

They fought and they died to move us a step closer towards the brotherhood of man. We must never use their memory as an excuse not to get there.

Thus while we can never forget, while we will never forget, we will forgive those who have followed. Where we faced each other to the death, we will walk together to rebuild a better life.

And that may be the most enduring lesson -- lessons for Belgium, for Europe, for the Middle East, or for all places where tensions rooted in the mistakes or ill deeds of the past threaten the progress of the future.

The lessons are that we need not carry the blame nor clear the name of our parents and grandparents looking back.

Rather that we build a better name for our children and our grandchildren going forward. That we must use the lessons of the past to carve a better future.

We are so used to the expression "Forgive but don't forget." And of course Memorial Day proclaims that we shall never forget.

But in making sure we don't forget, sometimes we don't truly forgive.

We commemorate Memorial Day never to forget precisely so that we can forgive.

Thanks so much.

And all the best.