

Understanding Our Future

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

Et mon français est très mauvais aussi. J'étudie le français un jour et le néerlandais le lendemain.
Mais je ne suis pas un bon élève... et je continuerai donc en anglais.

It is an honor and a joy to be here tonight and to get to speak with senior students and parents of this school. It is indeed an important audience, of course because of the parents and even more so because of the students.

You see I speak to today's leaders all of the time. In the ministries. In the halls of corporations.

And I often speak with yesterday's leaders – at conferences and dinner parties all over Belgium.

But as to the students, this is my chance to speak with tomorrow's leaders. Tomorrow's leaders for Belgium, for Europe, and for our planet.

Indeed, you the students, and for the parents, your sons and daughters are the leaders of tomorrow. All in this room could change the planet. When a black kid from Hawaii who grew up in Indonesia can lead the free world, certainly a student from Sint-Jan Berchmanscollege can do so as well. Is the next Barack Obama in this room? How can't he or she be?

The path is ahead. But how should we get there.

First, you must understand where you stand. All of you in this room are citizens of the city you live in, of the region in which it is located, of Belgium, and of the world. You must understand that you are a citizen of the world.

And so you have obligations. You must understand your neighbor, your country, and your world. You must understand your history and our collective history to understand your future and our collective future.

To do that, you should do your best to learn the languages of your region, of your country and as much as possible of the world. Each of you is blessed to live in a bilingual country with a great deal of English all around. Languages help make you a citizen of the world.

To be a citizen of Belgium, you need to know Belgium. Go to the carnival in Aalst, the beach in Knokke, see the Gilles in Binche and the Doudou in Mons, and visit the field of the Battle of the Bulge in Bastogne. It is a wonderful country and it is yours.

To be a citizen of Belgium and of the world, you need to know the peoples of Belgium and of the world. This is more than Flemish and Francophones. The face of America changed so long ago, no one knows who comes from where. We found strength in diversity – just ask the black kid from Hawaii who grew up in Indonesia.

There are diverse communities coming to Europe, coming to Belgium. Knowing them – Turks, Moroccans, girls in head scarves -- will make you a more leading citizen.

To be a citizen of the world, you need to know the world. Drive to the Netherlands, Germany and France. And by all means, see the U.S. So lean over to your parents now and tell them that the U.S. Ambassador has said that they should take you to New York. Go to New York, but by all means, don't stop there. See Miami and Los Angeles, too.

The challenges for all of you today look somewhat daunting. For the world we live in today is confusing. It is confusing to be an American. Questions emerge as to why we seem to be so divided. A threatened government shutdown. Seeming anger among many.

It is confusing to be Belgian. Government stalemates and Guinness World Records.

It is confusing to be a citizen of the world. Terrorism, Iranian nuclear threats, disputes between neighboring countries.

With so much confusion and chaos, should we be worried?

And that is where more obligations come in. That is where understanding our past helps us approach our collective future.

I sometimes talk to schools in Belgium by showing an article from the New York Times. The headline of the article is "Belgium May Split." And the students and teachers gasp when I mention it – an American Ambassador discussing such an issue. And right when they are most shocked, I then ask the students whether they know what year the New York Times article was written? The answer is 1930. That was a headline in the New York Times over 80 years ago. And that headline has appeared in American politics since the time of George Washington. To approach your future, you must understand your past.

You see the confusion and chaos of democracy – the confusion of leaders with sharply divided views, is the confusion and chaos of freedom. Show me a country with two people and I will show you a difference of opinion – differences behind haves and have nots or have a little mores and have a little lesses. The question is never whether we have our differences for that is the essence of individuals and of countries. The question instead is how we deal with such differences. And in Belgium and in the U.S., we deal with it by selling more newspapers, debating with our neighbor, and letting the political process bloom.

Political processes differ among countries. Some, like my country, require two years of campaigning and hundreds of millions of dollars, but finally produce a winner. Others, like Belgium, yield a 40-day

result but a year of post-election discussion. Democracy is rarely efficient. But the question is: Does it work?

And in both the United States and Belgium, democracy is working well.

And because of democracy, far more than confusion, this period in our history is filled with the promise of opportunity. There could be no more exciting time to get ready to join the citizens of the world. Technology and a shrinking planet have empowered the people to run their own governments. For generations powerful nations could not figure out how to end oppression in some poorer nations, to rid countries of dictators. But what the mightiest of nations could not do, the youth of countries throughout Northern Africa and the Middle East achieved using Facebook, YouTube and their hearts. You have powerful new tools at your disposal to use in perfecting our democracies.

Meanwhile, in a period where so much confusion is supposed to reign over Belgium and the United States, both countries are working well.

And we are working well together, probably more closely at this moment than at any time in our history.

The Belgian-U.S. partnership has historic roots. This weekend, we are commemorating Memorial Day at the three battlefield cemeteries in Belgium. U.S. young men came to Europe twice to free Belgium and others from oppression. And Belgians, particularly over a certain age, do not forget.

But partnerships -- even among the best of partners -- have to be continually re-earned. By words and deeds.

And truth be told, over the decade preceding the Obama Presidency, our partnership had suffered. The U.S. decision to walk out of the Kyoto climate talks, the war in Iraq over weapons of mass destruction that were never found, the use of Guantanamo prison camp and more, had caused the partnership to suffer.

And so, although Belgians might not realize it, Americans started packing their suitcases differently when they prepared to come to Europe. Faced with the possibility of being identified as an American, we started leaving our Boston Red Sox tee-shirts home, and perhaps picking a Toronto Maple Leaf shirt. We carried our Frommer's guide books face down as we walked through the Grand Place.

And that has changed. Barack Obama has become one of the most popular figures in Europe and Belgium. And he has brought about change.

Now Belgian reaction to the President has not fully equated to that reaction for the policies the U.S. has pursued. There is still some cynicism for, some doubt about U.S. policy. But we have marched forward together much closer than at any time in the recent past.

And so part of the difference is that the U.S. has changed. But indeed, I would submit that part of the difference is that Belgium is changing, too.

And I am not sure how many people have noticed. Or perhaps, they will understand, but do not say it out loud.

But I will be so bold.

In America, the Chevrolet Car Company used to advertise that their car was not your grandmother's Chevrolet. Well, the truth is, this is not your grandmother's Belgium anymore.

Instead, the old truths still hang around, but far more today as badly fitting stereotypes.

You have heard them before.

- That Belgium is but a small country, without manpower or money
- That Belgium does not like to lead, but prefers to follow other European countries
- That Belgium does not even have a government so it can do nothing.

Perhaps that was true for your grandmother's Belgium, but this is not your grandmother's Belgium anymore.

Some of Europe's great leaders are Belgian such as Van Rompuy, De Gucht, and Reynders.

Belgium has not taken a backseat to other European countries. Rather, it has taken the lead. Did you know that Belgium's military flies the most combat missions in Libya?

When others expressed concerns about U.S. policy in Afghanistan, Libya and other leading issues, the Belgians did not hesitate to step up to the plate in meeting the challenges of the day.

Belgium's government is anything but powerless; it has been more effective and a more reliable partner this year than at any time in the recent past. Belgium this year ran an extremely successful EU Presidency, adopted one of the most responsible budgets in Europe, quickly engaged in Libya, increased its support in Afghanistan, served as a leader in enforcing Iranian sanctions, led on a counterterrorism program, and more.

We are facing the challenges of the world together. And they remain large: discussions of climate change, emissions and the environment, the issue of nuclear weapons in Iran and North Korea, instability in the Middle East, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

But the U.S. and Belgium, together, and you, as citizens of the world will accept the challenges ahead and continue to move forward, deepening our partnership and strengthening democracy.

And there, let me conclude. Thank you for inviting me; it has been a pleasure speaking to you tonight.