

## **"The Future Runs Through Leuven"**

November 13, 2009

U.S. Ambassador Howard W. Gutman

Mayor Tobback, Rector Waer, Professors, Students, Colleagues and Friends:

Michelle and I are thrilled to be here today.

You see we have been to the Grand Place, to Brugge, to palaces and to churches to see the past.

We have been to Charleroi to see the present. To see fathers who would gladly work two jobs to feed their families, but often cannot find even one. To see mothers who worry about climate change, but, as to the conditions in which they live, feel that that they cannot hope to change the current climate. Who are worried about terrorism, but are not sure how to create true peace.

I have indeed seen the past and the present.

But we have come today to Leuven to see the future. For in Leuven, no matter where one looks, you see the future.

Sure I will visit Fonske and will judge for myself whether the Fountain depicts a student pouring wisdom or a beer into his head. And of course

I will stop in for a Stella.

But I have come to Leuven to see the future.

For the students of Leuven well understand that this time, we have to get it right. . . and we have to get it right together. The students of Leuven know that the problems that we face today that must unite us are far greater than the differences and prejudices that have previously divided us. That as our world gets flatter, we have to become better neighbors. That given our mutual respect and mutual interest, no voice of extremism, no economic hardship, and no threat to our climate can be allowed to separate us. That there are no zero sum games – we will all rise together or none of us can truly prosper. That the world you will grow old in must be safer and more harmonious than the one into which you were born.

I have come to Belgium to work as a partner with the students of Leuven to build that future.

You see, my country has well learned and well understands that futures must be built – they cannot be taken for granted. True, Belgium and America have long been dear allies. The bodies of hundreds of young American soldiers at Flanders Field who died freeing Belgium in World War I; the bodies of over 13,000 young American soldiers buried in Belgium in World War II; and the devotion of the thousands of Belgian families who have adopted those gravesites stand as a daily tribute to our past as dear allies.

But the past – even for dear allies – does not automatically become the future. Allies must always renew their bond through mutual interest and mutual respect. In the past several years that bond has weakened. We desperately needed to stop talking past one another, and to engage in a conversation with each other. So the United States indeed well understands that to get it right, we have had to be and remain better listeners, better learners and better partners. And not because it is politically expedient, but because it is the right thing to do. We have shared the world’s problems . . . we must work together on the solutions. We must build that future together.

For me, that future began in January 2007. At that time, a young African American Senator named Barack Obama asked me to visit with him for an hour to talk about his soon-to-be-announced campaign for President of the United States. I did not want to go, but neither did I want to be rude. I went that evening to tell him that I could not support him in his run for President. 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. Because after spending an hour with Barack Obama, you recognize that the world can be a better place today than it was yesterday and that tomorrow can be even better still.

Michelle asked me whether I really thought our country was ready to elect an African-American to be president. And I told her that, in the entire hour that I had spent with Senator Obama, it never occurred to me that he was African American. Vision and judgment know no race. That I believed that the U.S. would finally understand that the problems that we face that must unite us are far greater than any differences or prejudices that have previously divided us.

And I knew that my country had gotten the future right two years later, on that cold day last January, as I watched from the podium in front of a million and a half people as Barack Obama was sworn in as our President.

And I was deeply honored last March, when then President Obama called me and asked me to help build that future together in Belgium. He told me that he believed people in Europe and around the world were taking a new look at America. The question was what would they see.

Would they see our renewed commitment to dialogue?

Would they see our new focus on the common humanity of people from all around our planet?

Would they see the integrity of our words; the transparency of our hearts?

So in the next three years, I will visit each city, commune and village in Belgium, those who always see American Ambassadors and those who never dreamed of seeing one.

And can’t you already feel it. Can’t you just touch it? The feeling of renewed friendship and partnership between Belgium and America, that is traveling through the Grand Place in Brussels, across the hills of the Ardennes, along the river in Dinant, to Namur, up to the port in Antwerp, and yes . . . past the library in Leuven.

So where do those roads lead, and where do they lead us together?

What will that future look like that we must build together?

Energy Policy, Climate Change and Rebuilding our Economy

It starts with three related areas: energy policy, climate change and rebuilding our economy around the industries of the future. We know the problems that we face. Cities built around industries that focused more on their glorious pasts than on their dwindling futures, resulting in unemployment figures that sound more like the scores of American football games. And an energy policy that focused on our ability to borrow heavily to pay nearly a billion dollars a day for a fossil fuel addiction that at times fuels those who most oppose us and threaten our security, while similarly choking our planet.

But where others see challenges created by such policies and practices, the students of Leuven must see opportunities. It is broken, and you get to rebuild it the right way. In short, we have turned rust into green.

Something happened in my country last month that few noticed but may save us all. A closed General Motors plant in Delaware was re-opened, but this time, as a factory to produce long-range, plug-in, electric hybrid vehicles. For the first time in a long time, auto workers did not leave jobs but instead returned to work. It turns out manufacturing is not dying; you just have to build the right stuff. And the cars at the new Fisker Automotive plant will save hundreds of millions of gallons of gasoline and offset millions of tons of carbon pollution by 2016.

Now, Belgium has long been among the leaders on the issue of climate and, regrettably, the United States was late to the gate. But the U.S. has arrived and as we build our future together, we stand as partners, as energized and committed as anyone on the planet. The United States has now invested 80 billion dollars in clean energy. We have substantially increased our fuel-efficiency standards, provided new incentives for conservation, launched an energy partnership across the Americas, and moved from a bystander to a leader in the international climate negotiations. And we have made clear that we will cross the finish line in 2050 among the leaders of the pack.

But as we approach the summit in Copenhagen, I worry that to some in international circles and in international media, climate change appears not to be about how far we each have come, how committed we now are, and whether we will get to the finish line together, but about political gamesmanship. About who can be made to look good and who can be criticized.

The students of Leuven cannot let that happen. Our window of opportunity is too small and the task ahead too precious to let international divisiveness obstruct meaningful reform. We must vigilantly work in unison with the citizens of the world to focus the climate debate on efforts, commitment, and long term results, and not on political gamesmanship.

Peace, Terror and Afghanistan

The future that we must build together also depends on our basic security and our freedom from terror. The vast majority of that work turns on building better understandings and better partnerships

among people who long believed that they were different, but must ultimately understand that we are all one. It turns largely on changing hearts and minds and on expanding the brotherhood of citizens of the world.

But unfortunately for President Obama and Prime Minister Van Rompuy, while such efforts will largely ensure our safety, in some places of the world and with some on our planet, they simply will not work. And so we must rebuild Afghanistan and we must do it together. What happens there affects us all. I know it seems far, not only from Leuven and from Belgium, but from Texas or Miami. It often doesn't seem real. And war – the risk of spilling the blood of young Belgian and American boys – almost never can seem like it is worth any price. Despite the beauty of the Armistice Day celebration I attended with Foreign Minister Leterme in Ieper this past Wednesday, none of us want to create future armistice days.

But terror is as real as the crumbled steel of the World Trade Towers, or of buses in London or trains in Madrid. If New York, Washington, Madrid and London can not rest assured, how can Texas, Miami, Brussels or Leuven? This is not a war of choice. This is a war of necessity.

Moreover, Belgians, Americans and many others are helping Afghans to create a safer environment throughout the country, on our way towards helping to establish a lasting framework for reconstruction and development. We know these efforts must now work in tandem. Time is not on our side. So it's important that we get this effort right.

Do not be afraid, students of Leuven. Go and ask the question that is on your mind. "Can I trust America now and on this issue?"

Do not be afraid to ask. You have every right. And until we trust each other as neighbors, we cannot begin to build our better future.

But I think the answer is already in your grasp. I represent a country I have long loved, in a country I am growing to love and on behalf of a President in whom I believe to my core. You have heard him many times. And you have seen him deliver. As promised, he is responsibly bringing to an end the role of U.S. combat troops in Iraq. He has removed American combat brigades from Iraqi cities, and set a deadline of next August to remove all combat brigades from Iraqi territory. He will not put an American soldier, or ask an ally to put one of theirs, in harm's way one minute longer than is needed to protect all of our sons and daughters.

And since arriving in Belgium I have met with the Supreme Commander of the NATO Forces Admiral James Stavrides. You will find none finer. Like the President, Admiral Stavrides well understands that the problems in Afghanistan cannot be solved simply by military might. Civilian support is crucial. That requires money and expertise. The international community remains committed to Afghanistan's development, and has together pledged \$110 billion since 2001, with the United States supplying about half that total.

Belgium is doing its part, by pledging at the NATO summit not only to expand and continue its important military efforts in Afghanistan, but to double its economic assistance. Today, Americans, Belgians, and many others are helping Afghans to rebuild their country. Helping Afghans to build the

roads, the schools, and the clinics that are improving the lot of every single Afghan. Much has been done, but far more is still left to do.

Afghanistan is not an American problem, it is a problem facing the World. It cannot be solved by American might or strategy alone; it will be solved by the partnership of the world's citizens. The road of our future leads through a safer and more secure Afghanistan.

## Guantanamo

As with climate, Europeans were ahead of the United States as to the need to close Guantanamo. Europeans clamored that it should be closed as an ethical matter, as a moral matter and as a legal matter. And upon taking office President Obama could not have responded more quickly. On the very day of his inauguration, on that cold day in January while a million and a half people filled our mall leading to the Capitol, President Obama signed the order planning the relocation of those being held and the closing of Guantanamo. But with all of the good intentions in Europe and in the White House, it will take far more to close Guantanamo and thus we have to complete the closure of Guantanamo and we have to do it together. That will not be easy. There are trials to be prepared for some of the detainees, and homes to be found for those who are not a threat to society. I deeply respect and appreciate Belgium's pledge to do its part in helping to bring about the closure. I deeply appreciate every single transfer. But there are many more. We must close Guantanamo; we must close it together; and we must do so now.

## The Belgian Role

I have focused today a great deal on the American role in working with the students of Leuven to build our future. America's role to be a better partner; a better listener, a better learner. To work with the other citizens of the world as partners now to get it right: on Afghanistan, on economic prosperity, on energy policy and climate change, and on Guantanamo. To be instrumental in insuring that the planet that we leave to your children is better than the one you have found. And in so doing, to leave no one behind.

But what is the role of Belgium? How does Belgium figure in building this safer and more prosperous future for us all?

I believe to my core that the proper role for Belgium – today and now – could well be in the lead – at the head of the pack – on each of these issues. Belgium often in the past has played that lead – for example, in October 1967, 42 years ago, when NATO was looking for a new home, both physically and psychologically, and Belgium stepped up. Belgium is as trusted as any country in Europe – just ask those thinking about the future leadership in Europe. And with its vast diplomatic community, Belgium remains to a large extent the eyes and ears of Europe and much of the world. So, we have a saying at our Embassy: "If you want to be heard, say it in Belgium."

Since I have come to Belgium, I have heard some say that Belgium is but a small country and thus cannot contribute much in building that better, safer and more prosperous future. I reject that notion. The issue is not the size of the country but the heart of the leadership. There are no small countries with great leaders. And I have met Prime Minister Van Rompuy, Foreign Minister Leterme, Defense Minister De Crem, Minister Reynders, Minister Turtelboom, Chief of Staff van Daele and many

more. Belgium indeed has that great leadership necessary to march in front and not simply to follow.

With all of the moral right behind the closing of Guantanamo and with my President struggling to get it done, Belgium can ask Europe to step up together and to help finish the task. With my President thoughtfully weighing the best future options on Afghanistan and some showing signs of faltering, Belgium can ask Europe to step up together. When some try to substitute political gamesmanship for true progress at Copenhagen, Belgium can ask all to focus on what matters. Belgium can participate and indeed lead in word and in deed in building that safer and more prosperous future. Yes, manpower and funding commitments will be smaller than for some, but moral conviction and true leadership cares nothing about population or GDP.

I look forward to working with Belgium. I look forward to working with the students of Leuven. I look forward to getting it right. I look forward to getting it right together.

All the best.