

The Voices and Hands of Mechelen

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Ambassador Howard W. Gutman

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

My first weekend in Belgium, my staff asked me to attend a Memorial Service in Mechelen. Upon my return to my Embassy after the event, I told my staff that I wanted to give one of my first speeches in Mechelen.

They were surprised. Why Mechelen? Why not speak to an American group? Or an international think tank?

I replied that I wanted to go to Mechelen because the people are there. Real people.

People who root for K.V. Mechelen. People who drink Gouden Carolus and Keizer Karel.

Belgium is in Mechelen.

107 different nationalities live in this one city. That is Belgium today. Indeed, that is the world today. And that is whom I must meet.

You see I did not really come to speak.

I have really come to listen to the voices of Mechelen.

I have come to learn about where we stand in building a better partnership with Belgium. About where we stand as citizens of the world. About how far we have come in the past several months . . . and how much ground still lies ahead.

And there is nowhere to learn it better than Mechelen. I will learn much from diplomats and political leaders. I will learn much from barons and princesses. But this most important time, the best time to learn, is the time to speak with the people. The people of Mechelen – those whose families saw the crowning of a King in 1830, those who knew Beethoven's family, all the way to those who just got off a boat from Ankara and Rabat -- have so much to teach.

For the people of Mechelen, like the people of Belgium, the people of Europe, the people of the United States and indeed most of the people of the planet well understand that this time, we have to get it right. . . and we have to get it right together. 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.

So the people of Mechelen and the United States understand that this time we have to get it right on a meaningful economic recovery; we have to get it right on changing climate change before it changes us; we have to get it right in Afghanistan and Pakistan, disabling international criminal networks and rebuilding a prosperous civil society; and that we can never compromise the principles that we believe

in for short time gains and thus we must work together to close the base at Guantanamo and protect the rights of the less fortunate particularly in Africa.

But before turning to where those roads lead, let's consider how we got here. Let's consider why I came today to learn what Mechelen thinks about the United States.

More distant history teaches us that a U.S. Ambassador need not worry about how a Belgian audience would receive him. We 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. And so when I faced my first Belgian audience in Bree to present flowers at a celebration for Kim Clijsters victory at the U.S. Open tennis match, I was no longer confident how a U.S. Ambassador—how my country – would be received. But they in fact cheered our renewed friendship. The new conversation had plainly begun. And so I have come to Mechelen personally to continue that new conversation.

In fact, although we have just met and although Michelle, my son and I just recently arrived, our conversation with you actually has its roots 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 unite us are far greater than any differences or prejudices that have previously divided us.

And we all know that same truth now about our planet, in Mechelen or in Mons, in Brussels and Antwerp, in Rome, Paris and London; in Ankara, Rabat and Tel Aviv. We know now that the problems that we face that 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 separate us. There are no zero sum games – that we all rise together or

none of us can truly prosper. That the world we will leave to our children must be safer and more harmonious than the one we were left by our parents.

But understanding those truths is plainly only the first step. We all have work to do to implement them. We each face an individual call to action.

For me, the President's call to individual action was very direct. It came by telephone. When the President called me last March to thank me for my friendship, 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 and to focusing on the common humanity of people from all around our planet? Would they see the integrity of our words; the transparency of our hearts? I was deeply honored by the President's call, and honored to be part of what you all see when you take a fresh look at America, along with Michelle, and the other members of my Embassy. 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, up to the port in Antwerp, and yes . . . to Mechelen.

So where do those roads lead, and where do they lead us together? For the challenges that we face truly do unite us.

Afghanistan

To start with, we must rebuild Afghanistan and we must do it together. What happens there affects us all. I know it seems far, not only from Mechelen 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.

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 Mechelen? 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. Go and ask the question that is on your mind. "Can you trust America 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 a better world.

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 for 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 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 altogether 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 can not be solved by American might or strategy alone; it will be solved by the partnership of the world's citizens. The road of our partnership leads through a safer and more secure Afghanistan.

Climate change

Can there be any doubt? Is there any debate? That we have to change climate change before it changes us? That we can no longer afford 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? That the key to our joint economic revival is the investment in the technologies that will fuel us tomorrow? That while we are enhancing our joint national security interests and creating the jobs that will last, we will also save our planet? That as to climate, this time, we have to get it right and we have to get it right together?

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 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 with Afghanistan, I fear that, as to the climate issue, the U.S. also may need help and need the help of the Belgians. 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. 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. Our window of opportunity is too short and the task ahead too precious to let international divisiveness obstruct meaningful reform.

Guantanamo

As with climate, Europeans were ahead of the United States as to the need to close Guantanamo. But upon taking office President Obama could not have responded more quickly.

Do you remember the scene on the mall last January 20, as Barack Obama got sworn in as President of the United States? A million people as far as the eye could see. I was on the podium that day. I was seated near my 20 year law partner Greg Craig, who had just become White House Counsel. As the inauguration proceeded, while the proceedings were still ongoing, Greg left the podium with the keys to the White House. He was going to prepare the closing of Guantanamo.

With Europe having clamored for Guantanamo to close and with President Obama having planned the closure even as he was taking the oath of office, 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 today focused today a great deal on the American role in the days ahead. On our pledge 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 climate change and on Guantanamo. To be instrumental in insuring that the planet that we leave to our children is better than the one we 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 -- is to be in the lead – at the head of the pack – on each of these issues. Belgium often has played that lead – for example, in October 1967, almost 42 years ago to this very date, when NATO was looking for a new home – both physically and psychologically -- and Belgium stepped up. With its vast diplomatic community, Belgium remains 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 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 Von Rompuy, Foreign Minister Leterme, Defense Minister De Crem, Minister Reynders, Minister-President Peeters and many more. I have heard Minister Magnette. Belgium indeed has that great leadership necessary to march in front and not simply to follow – on Afghanistan, on directing unity on climate change, on Guantanamo, and far more. To participate fully in word and in deed in building that safer and more prosperous future. Yes, manpower and funding 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 getting it right.

I look forward to getting it right together.

All the best.