

Ambassador Howard Gutman Iftar Remarks

September 14, 2009

*Residence of the Ambassador
Brussels*

Salaam Alikum,

My wife Michelle Loewinger and I would like to welcome you to our new home, America's home here in Brussels. Having just arrived in Brussels three weeks ago, this is the first event we have hosted in this home and in this room. I can think of no better nor more important start. We truly are honored to join with you tonight to break the fast this evening, during this holy month of Ramadan. Ramadan Mubarak.

I would like to apologize in advance. I should be a better host. It is our first time meeting one another. We should have a meal together. We should exchange many pleasantries. Maybe a story about chocolate and waffles. We should wish each other much success and happiness and bid each other a good night.

I cannot do that.

I have been waiting too long to speak with you.

You have been waiting too long to talk with me. We have so much to discuss.

In fact, although we have just met, our conversation started in January 2007.

On that day, 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 that I had just met the next President of the United States.

She asked me whether I really thought the country was ready for an African-American president. And I told her that, in the entire hour that I had spent with Obama, it never occurred to me that he was African American. 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.

I knew it about my country that cold January day in Washington. And we all know it now about our planet, in Brussels and Cairo; in Ankara and Rabat; in Tel Aviv and Amman. That the problems that we face that unite us are far greater than the differences and prejudices that have previously divided us. That however we have stumbled in the past, that this time, we cannot afford to get it wrong. That as our world gets flatter, we become better neighbors. That given our mutual respect and

mutual interest, no voice of extremism can separate us. That the world we will leave to our children must be safer and more harmonious than the one we were left by our parents.

We understand that during this period of Ramadan, of intense devotion and reflection. We will understand it in two weeks on Yom Kippur, and on Good Friday. We will understand it on Christmas and Kwansaa and Chanukah. There are no zero sum games – that we all rise together or none of us can truly prosper.

But understanding is plainly only the first step. We all have work to do. 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 -- our renewed commitment to dialogue and to focusing on the common humanity of people from all around our planet. 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 Wayne and Anna Marie Bush, and Dick Eason and Tania Chomiak Salvi. 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 with your help, I will go into Islamic centers and living rooms in Muslim communities across Belgium. We will have more meals, but not as Muslims, Jews, Catholics, or Protestants, not even as Americans or Belgians, but as parents and children, as husbands and wives, as citizens of our planet.

It doesn't happen with just one iftar. But we have none to waste.

So thanks to all of you for joining with us tonight. I wish you a very blessed Ramadan.