

But Will They Applaud the U.S. in Charleroi? And Will Their Children?

September 30, 2009

Speech by Ambassador Howard W. Gutman

at the Université du Travail in Charleroi

J'ai tellement de respect pour la beauté de la langue française bien parlée que je continuerai en anglais.

This is my first official speech in Belgium as the United States Ambassador to Belgium.

And I have chosen to come to Charleroi for it.

But I did not really come to speak.

I have really come to listen to your voices. And to watch your hands.

I have come to see what the voices and hands of Charleroi tell me about my country. About where we stand in building a better partnership with Charleroi and thus with Belgium, and with Europe. About where we stand as citizens of the world. About how far we have perhaps come . . . and how much ground still lies ahead.

I have come to Charleroi to learn from fathers who would gladly work two jobs to support their family, but often cannot find even one. I have come to learn from mothers whose love for their children leaves them uncertain about whether to worry more about the effect of climate change or of the need to change the current economic climate. I have come to learn from the reaction of this community built out of wonderful diversity – of people whose forefathers saw the crowning of the first king of the Belgians in 1831, of people whose grandparents moved from Italy in search of the riches that seemed to lay just ahead in the next coal mine; and of people who just finished unpacking their bags from Morocco or Turkey. A community that proves that what matters is not where you come from, but where you are going.

I have come to learn from your handshakes and your smiles; from your hopes and dreams; and yes from your criticisms or even catcalls. For I have much to learn.

And there is nowhere to learn it better than Charleroi. I will have my time with and learn much from diplomats and political leaders. I will have my time with and learn much from barons and princesses. But this time, this first and most important time, is the time to speak with the people. The people of Charleroi have so much to teach.

For the people of Charleroi, 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 become, and must 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 share the problems . . . we must work together on the solutions.

So the people of Belgium 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; and we have to get it right in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We can never even appear to compromise the principles that we believe in for short term gains, and thus we must work together to close the detention center at Guantanamo. Belgians and Americans understand and share a commitment to addressing the needs of the least advantaged people on the planet, 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 Charleroi thinks about the United States.

History instructs that a U.S. Ambassador need not worry about how a Belgian audience would receive him. The graves of hundreds of young American soldiers at Flanders Field who died fighting with Belgians in World War I; the more than 13,000 American soldiers buried in Belgium in World War II, and the devotion of the thousands of Belgium families who have adopted those gravesites stand as a daily tribute to our past as the closest of allies.

But the past – even for dear allies – does not automatically become prologue. Allies must always renew their bond through mutual respect and mutual interest. In the last several years that bond has weakened. We desperately needed to stop talking passed one another, and to engage in a conversation with each other. And so I have come to Charleroi personally to take up that new conversation.

In fact, although we have just met and although Michelle, my son and I just recently arrived, our conversation actually started 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 knew 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.

I knew it about my country that cold January day in Washington. And we all know it now about our planet, in Charleroi, Brussels, and Antwerp, in Rome, Paris and London; in Ankara, Rabat and Tel Aviv. 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 must 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. That there are no zero sum games – we all rise together – including mothers and fathers in Charleroi -- 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 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. 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 deeds? I was deeply honored by the President's call, and honored to be part of what you 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 which always see American Ambassadors and those that 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, up to the port in Antwerp, through the hills of the Ardennes, along the river in Dinant, to Namur and yes . . . to Charleroi.

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 Charleroi 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 soldiers, – is the greatest sacrifice any nation or alliance can make.

But terror is as real as the crumbled steel of the World Trade Towers, or the blown out windows 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 Charleroi? And as parents concerned with the blood of children, terror plainly knows no age limits. 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 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 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.

Economic recovery

Over the past year, some politicians, journalists and business leaders have talked about an economic crisis as though it is something new—a recent development.. They pretend that prosperity flourished for all till last fall, when some bankers happened to fool the world.

But here in Charleroi, and in Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan, and southwest Virginia, and in former industrial and mining capitals across the globe, we know better. The crisis has existed for decades, whether Wall Street or the Bourse slowed down to notice. It was created for many not by the sudden collapse of real estate mortgages, but by the slow deterioration of industries and mines focused more on their past heydays than on their dwindling futures.

So this time --for Charleroi, for Newark, for Detroit and for so many more – we have to get it right and we have to get it right together. Clearly a financial economic recovery based on real international cooperation, transparency and lasting meaningful reform is necessary. Without such internationally coordinated reform, no lasting recovery is possible. But such financial reform is not enough. . This time, we need to see a little further down the road and we need to look there together.

For where others see crisis, true leaders see opportunity. Inherent in the collapse is the opportunity to rebuild it and to build it better. To honor the past by transitioning to job-creating industries of the

future -- biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, agri-bio foods, clean energy. And in so doing, we can leave no one behind. Because in these fields – in a world of technology and alternative energy, of research and information – if you can build it in New York or Paris or Brussels or Mumbai, you can build it in Charleroi, in Newark and in southwest Virginia.

So we have to get it right together. I know many U.S. companies get it. Johnson and Johnson has invested about 45 million dollars in its facilities in nearby Courcelles, the home of a state of the art European distribution center. Some 260 direct jobs have been created there. Microsoft and HP get it, building an innovation center in Mons. My friends at Google get it, with a 250 million dollar data processing center in Wallonia. And of course, Caterpillar continues to make significant investments at its plant outside of town in Gosselies, where it employs thousands of workers, even as it rides through these difficult times. Ninety-six U.S. investments in Wallonia since 2000 have amounted to over 1.2 billion dollars and created 4000 new jobs.

I know this Université du Travail gets it, educating Wallonians to compete not in the last century, but in this one, not in the sectors of yesterday, but in the sectors of tomorrow. And I know Barack Obama gets it. But I also know Minister-President Rudy Demotte gets it, because I have sat in audiences and heard him twice in one week talk about the Marshall Plan 2.0. And I know Minister-President Kris Peeters gets it because I have sat with him and discussed sectors that are closing and those that are just beginning to thrive. And I know Minister-President Charles Picqué gets it, because we have discussed the future of all.

This time, we have to all get it right together and we can leave no one behind.

Climate change

Can there be any doubt? Is there any debate? Could it not be clearer that we no longer can afford to borrow heavily to pay over 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 we have 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.

So I think we realize that this time, we have to get climate right and we have to get it right together. But I worry. To some in international circles and 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 gamesmanship. About who can be made to look good and who can be criticized.

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 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 and we must close it together.

The Belgian Role

I would not come to Charleroi simply to avoid the hard questions. And so I have set forth today what I see as the role of the United States as we proceed to the next phase. 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. The children of Charleroi too must inherit that better planet or we will never be able to achieve it.

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

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, Chief of Staff Van Daele and many more. I have heard Minister Maignette. Belgium indeed has that great leadership necessary to march in front and not simply to follow – on Afghanistan, restoring economic prosperity, climate change, 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 cares nothing about population or GDP.

Conclusion

This is my first visit to Charleroi, but it will not be my last. We have far too much to get done . . .
and to get done together.