



## **The Ambassador who makes us love America again**

Meeting with Howard Gutman, the surprising and atypical  
U.S. Ambassador in Brussels

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‘On September 11, 2001, I never saw such a chaos in Washington,’ U.S. Ambassador to Belgium Howard Gutman says with emotion. We met and interviewed this atypical member of the diplomatic corps in his official residence. He described this terrible day for America. ‘Nine-Eleven is one of those days that

you remember all your life. You perfectly remember what you were doing at that moment. I was in my office, five blocks from the White House. After the first plane crashed in New York, I called my wife. We learned that another plane that was supposed to crash on Washington had ended in Pennsylvania. We did not see the one that hit the Pentagon, but from everywhere in Washington you could see the smoke. Authorities recommended that we pick up our kids at school and leave the city, but roads were blocked and communication lines clogged. I had never seen such a chaos. It was shocking. We could not believe what we were seeing: we were vulnerable! We could never have imagined being attacked on U.S. soil, nor in such a manner. I was horrified to see these towers on fire. It took place in New York but it could have been Paris or Brussels. We will never forget those who died in these attacks or those who died as heroes trying to rescue them. But September 11 was not a defeat for the United States. The world had rarely been so close and so united. We have rarely seen such a brotherhood of men than at that moment. And that is a victory,' the Ambassador explains.

“Although the highest U.S. official in our country was shocked by these attacks, he was not traumatized and does not suffer from the need to be totally protected at all times. ‘My security is guaranteed by Belgian authorities. But I do not remain locked in the Embassy like in a bunker. I go out, everyday, both to the South and the North of the country, visiting cities and meeting people. Last year, no one else in Belgium has shaken as many hands as I have,’ Howard Gutman says. This was confirmed to us, as a little secret, by someone on Rue Ducale, where many Belgian institutions are located, in addition to Howard Gutman’s official residence. ‘We have never seen a U.S. Ambassador seeking to meet with Belgians as much as he does. He knows our country very well and is genuinely interested in it, which was not always the case with previous Ambassadors,’ someone told us.

“Ten years ago under the Bush Administration, the partnership between Belgium and the United States had suffered,’ Howard Gutman admits. ‘We made several mistakes. Most of them were our fault, with disagreements on Kyoto and on climate, the question of weapons of mass destruction, and then the war. My objective is to rebuild that partnership, and to make that an American would feel comfortable wearing a Red Sox T-shirt on the Grand-Place again and that Belgians look at us again in a positive manner and without skepticism. I also go and talk to Belgians at their place and support them, especially in difficult moments,’ he explains. That is why people could see Howard Gutman speak in Charleroi, discuss with the King, or attend the commemorative ceremony for the victim of Pukkelpop

but also watch a football game at Standard or Anderlecht, carry the Meyboom on the Grand-Place, being hit by an orange at the Binche Carnival, and try to grab a hair of the Doudou in Mons!

“He is one of the youngest U.S. Ambassadors who has served in Brussels and has a 17-year-old son still in school in Belgium. The other son, who is 23 and has graduated from Yale, is a young businessman in Washington. It is a fact that Howard Gutman is a rather atypical representative of his country. He is not a career diplomat and is among Barack Obama’s close political advisors. ‘While we have about 150 Ambassadors who are career diplomats to represent the United States throughout the world, the President entrusts 37 key-posts to representatives who share his political views,’ Howard Gutman explains. ‘Brussels is one of these posts, just like Beijing, Paris, London, the UN, NATO, and the EU.’

“Like his ‘colleague’ Barack Obama, Howard Gutman also comes from the middle class. ‘My father was a Polish immigrant who had survived the Holocaust. I was born in 1956 in New York, in the poor Bronx neighborhood. I grew up in the Queens, which isn’t much richer. And I went to public school,’ the Ambassador recalls. This did not prevent Howard Gutman from completing brilliant studies. He graduated summa cum laude from the Columbia University and from Harvard Law School. He quickly became a ‘super lawyer’ with Williams & Connolly, specializing in trade disputes – contracts, competition, real estate, and international law. During 27 years, he practiced throughout the United States and even in foreign courts. Earlier on in his career, he was also special assistant to the FBI Director, specializing in anti-terrorism and counter-intelligence. And he also worked for one of the Supreme Court’s Justices.

“Besides, he has a passion for politics. Being a convicted Democrat, he was on the side of Al Gore at the time of the famous dispute on the Presidential election outcome in 2000. He advised several Democratic candidates and participated in Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign, working on media and on fundraising. He is a member of the ‘Obama Presidential Inauguration Committee,’ the closest circle of collaborators of the future President. That is why in February of 2009 his name circulated to be the Deputy Labor or Energy Secretary of the Obama Administration. But the President decided that he would rather be one of those 37 key-representatives abroad. Another reason why he is atypical is that this ‘bekende’ Washingtonian is also an actor in his free time. He played the role of a lawyer in several episodes of the K Street series on HBO but also, and still as a

lawyer, on the side of Tim Robbins in *Noise* and, as a butcher and a high school dad in the 2009 remake of *Fame*. And he has something else in common with his President and boss: ‘There are two people in the world who graduated from Columbia and from Harvard Law School and who, on October 3 of the following year, married a woman named Michelle. That’s Barack Obama and me. But to those who would say that I am copying the President, I wish to point out that I did this six years before him,’ the Ambassador says.

“Back to Belgium. The Ambassador went to his office and brought back a map of Belgium with many areas colored in blue. ‘These are the cities and communes I have been to. With a perfect equilibrium: a francophone city in the morning, a Flemish one in the afternoon. I am always on the road’ he explains. Last weekend for instance, people saw him at the festivities of Ath, always escorted by bodyguards. The latter were also behind him when he was dancing at the Meyboom festivities. ‘They are always there, even when I go to the movie, at the Toison d’Or or Kinopolis – where I love the sweet popcorn which we do not have in the States! – but also when I am on a pedal-boat on the Mellaerts pond in Brussels. They are on another pedal-boat following me,’ Gutman says laughing.

“The Ambassador is really fond of Belgium. He is able to describe the city of Ghent – with its Castle but also the little streets – in great detail. He is also an expert on ‘made in Belgium’ specialties. ‘Food is very good here. You have the most elegant dishes with the finest wines. But I prefer mussels with French fries, a waterzooi, or a stoemp with carrots and a good beer. I visited all abbeys and met with Trappist monks. I took one of my friends, who will (perhaps) one day be U.S. President, eat French fries at ‘Antoine’ on Place Jourdan. I also like to have lunch at Armes de Bruxelles. Whether I do sports? I stopped jogging in the Royal Park with an escort of bodyguards. That was not fun. But I did the Lesse river in a kayak. What I do not like in Belgium? Chinese food. There is curry on all dishes of the menu. But you know, curry is Indian, not Chinese! (laughter.)”

In brief sidebars on top of the page under the heading “The King, Bart De Wever, and the Belgian Crisis,” the journalist quotes the Ambassador as commenting:

On Albert II: ‘I admire the King a lot. He does a remarkable job. Any society needs someone above parties. He represents stability and is cement for the country.’

Prince Philippe: ‘I told him that, in the U.S., the closest we have to monarchy is George Clooney. He replied to me: ‘without my beard, people often mistake me for him! The Prince is rather funny but also very aware of his duty. Media can be tough with him but that is part of the game in a democracy. He knows it and is there for Belgium. Besides, being able to listen the way he does is sometimes more important than talking.’

Didier Reynders: ‘He is fabulous at the Finance Ministry.’

Bart De Wever: ‘People need to move beyond North-South stereotypes. Your politicians perhaps disagree but they are always respectful.’

The Belgian political crisis: ‘To me, Belgium is incredibly united. You do not have disagreements on fundamental issues like health care, minimum wage for all, or climate change. Belgium works well. It controls its debt in a fabulous manner, meets its obligations in Afghanistan, participates in the mission in Libya, and is a leading voice on climate and human rights. It is true that Belgian politicians disagree on some economic and historic issues but they always keep the wellbeing of the population in mind.’

A split of the country: ‘Belgium is an important brand which is unanimously recognized in the United States. Not Flanders or Wallonia. You need to reinforce the Belgian brand, although I can understand political disagreements.’

Barack Obama’s first visit: ‘Nothing was planned but the best opportunity was when Belgium had the EU Presidency. Unfortunately your Government fell and there is still no Government in place. During an official visit, the President cannot just meet with the King, but he needs to meet with a Prime Minister and a full-fledged Government. Last February, Barack Obama received me in the Oval Office to discuss Belgium. He knows the situation well. We are waiting what will happen next.’