

## **Farewell of the American Ambassador Howard W. Gutman**

“I don’t know any country that is as united as Belgium

He would like to bring his friend president Barack Obama to Brussels before he leaves on July 23. But it will be close. “Belgium is one of the most complicated countries to bring a president to.’ If we tell him that our country is very complicated in many other areas, he starts to laugh. “I don’t know any countries as unified as Belgium. Wonderful country, amazing people.” Welcome to the optimistic world of Howard W. Gutman.

By Michel Vandersmissen

As goes the president, so goes the ambassador. Especially in Brussels. Sam Fox and Tom Korologos, Gutman’s two predecessors, and both Republicans to the core, were totally different from the current and departing Democratic ambassador. Just as the presidents under which they served: Bush and Obama. Korologos said as a way of greeting people that it is very difficult to fire people in Belgium, that the wages were too high, and that he was sick and tired of the ‘fucking’ weather.

No, the current likeable ambassador is a very different type. Charming and upbeat. Diplomatic and accessible. Everything is great in Belgium. “I love it, amazing people’, etc. In four years he not only became the most famous American Ambassador of all time, this Harvard trained lawyer has also become the best advocate of this country on the North Sea.

In his statements, he can use one unique argument. He has visited all 589 Belgian cities and communes in a few years. Or almost all. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, he will travel to Voeren in his armored 4X4 to meet the mayor Huub Broers and maybe also José Happart to tell them how great he thinks the place is. Then his ‘tour of Belgium’ will have ended. Which Belgian has ever done this?

During the photo-shoot, he asks us a quiz question: “Do you know of a place in Flanders where they only speak French or a place in Wallonia where you only hear Dutch? You don’t know? They are the Royal Zoute Golf Club of Knokke and the place where they rent out kayaks in Coo.”

As a crowning event of his ambassadorship in our country he will organize a big reception that night with the 589 mayors, the ten governors, and to get to 600 guests, Prime Minister Di Rupo will also attend. What do you mean this country is divided? Not if it is up to Ambassador Gutman.

He has become more of a BV than most other BVs. There has not been a single talk show that he has not yet appeared in. No organization that Gutman has not visited .

If his two Republican predecessors were straightforward and were sometimes perceived as rude, Gutman is much more diplomatic. But he does not accept any criticism of his country and his president. Also not of Belgium. The interview with Howard W. Gutman took place last week Thursday in his ample residence bordering the Warande Park and the Royal Palace. In the hallways there are beautiful works of art with among other works the beautiful masterpiece ‘Puzzle’ by Greg Drasler.

It had not been the best week for the United States: In Boston, three people were killed in a deadly attack on the annual marathon. In a show of compassion, the ‘Star and Stripes’ is at half-mast. In Texas, an artificial fertilizer factory exploded costing numerous people their lives. The president

received a letter with the poisonous ricin in it and in Washington the Senate rejected the careful reforms to the gun laws.

Still Gutman approaches us in a good mood, his hands nonchalantly in his pockets and a broad smile showing his pearly whites. This will remain this way the entire time, or almost the entire time.

To start with current events, what do you think of what just happened in Boston? The Dutch *Volkscrant* led the following day on its front page with: 'the 9/11 feeling is back.' Do you agree with this?

'Everybody once again realizes that we live with a great security risk and that life has to go on. Not only in the US, but also in Europe and the rest of the world. It's tragic, but in the meanwhile we have learned how to react to this as a city, a country, and as allies. And the culprits, the terrorists have to realize that they will never win. Never. Next year there will be a new marathon in Boston. The culprits will receive their punishment.'

And with the ricin letter addressed to President Obama?

'There are some 310 million Americans of all kinds. As everywhere, some have mental problems, there are some criminals, people with anger attacks, but the good news is that as everywhere, most have good intentions.'

In Europe there is a sentiment that there is a lot of hate in the US. Hate against the president, against people with other beliefs, against homosexuals, people of another race etc.

'I disagree with this. Most Americans and Belgians are great citizens. Still in Belgium there was a shooting incident two weeks ago in which a suspected terrorist was shot by police. In his apartment in Brussels, the police found a large number of weapons, night-vision goggles, a list of magistrates. '

Yesterday, a Flemish newspaper wrote about the hate radio phenomenon in the US. This phenomenon does not exist in this country.

'Hate radios? I don't know them. I do have a great respect for the freedom of speech. The way to beat incorrect opinions is by coming up with better arguments.'

When you read the raw comments about Obama on social media, this is shocking, insulting. Does this not bother you?

'No, I think it's great that every American who is upset at his or her president has and takes the freedom to yell and write this. This is one of the most important norms of the American society. Just like Walloons and Flemings do not always agree with each other and on occasion say nasty things about each other. As long as it happens peacefully. What is insulting for one person might be the truth for another. This is the beauty of freedom of speech. Besides, don't worry about Obama. He's used to it.'

There are a lot of pictures of you and Barack and Michelle Obama in the embassy. You make no secret of your friendship with him. When did you talk to him last?

'We had an appointment in January. I was even in the White House when our meeting was cancelled because of the swearing in of Chuck Hagel as the new Secretary of Defense. I will likely talk to Barack in July when I am finished here as ambassador and will return to Washington.'

Isn't Obama coming to Brussels in June?

'I don't know. I really don't. I am trying to convince him to come. He understands the importance, but Belgium is one of the most difficult countries. There is the Belgian government, the European Commission and NATO. The three elements have to align perfectly. That moment was there in November 2010. Then everything had been arranged for an official presidential visit. There was a NATO summit, a European Commission summit...and this is when the Belgian government fell. The meeting was moved to Portugal. I told Barack that he should just visit Belgium. It is not obvious, but it is still possible that he might visit in June or July.'

,

Then you might no longer be here?

'I will leave on July 23. I will have then been here for four full years. This is extremely long, two years longer than my two predecessors. I am one of the three longest serving American ambassadors to Brussels in the last 100 years. The State Department is against an ambassador serving in the same country for this long. Two is maybe too short to be efficient, four is too long because you might become too local. The State Department does not like you becoming more Belgian than American (grins). I can hear you coming. Yes, I am accused of this, but this was already after a year in Brussels (laughs).'

Do you know who will succeed you?

'No but I have a hunch.'

To return to Obama's possible visit to Brussels. The fact that he has not been here yet, also not for the European Commission or NATO headquarters, is this an indication that the US's focus is no longer on Europe, but has moved to the East?

'Once again, his plan was to come here in November 2010. Besides, this argument is wrong. He has contacts with NATO, with Herman (Van Rompuy), with (José Manuel) Barosso. Europe is and will always remain our most important ally. Always. The US and Europe know that neither can solve the world's problems alone. We have to do it together.'

Do you remember the day that you found out that you could or had to come to Brussels?

'As if it were yesterday. I was applying to be the deputy secretary of labor or energy. Until the White House called with the announcement that the President has the privilege to appoint 35 ambassadors. They asked me if I objected to be on the list. If you do not want to, because you for example do not want to move abroad, you can have your name removed. When I saw the list of possible countries and posts, there were seven or eight countries where I wanted to go.'

Was Belgium one of them?

'Belgium was even one of our favorite countries.'

You are saying this because a Belgian journalist is visiting you.

'No not at all. I was a Washington man and Brussels resembles Washington in a lot of ways. Brussels is a very international city with many important institutions. I love this. Among the seven there were other countries that were larger than Belgium, but in some ways they were more local countries.'

Did you know Belgium well before you came here?

'Fairly well. I was here on vacation a number of times. The first time was with my wife, the year before we got married. We visited Brussels, Bruges and some other spots. It was a combined trip with England, France, and Belgium. We thus knew very well where we were going for this post.'

Your direct appointment by the president is a reward for work you did for him?

(Slightly irritated). 'No, this is a misunderstanding. At that time, I was in the running to become Deputy Secretary of labor or energy. I can thus say that I have the necessary qualities to represent my country. I was a member of the Obama team. I wrote speeches for him, advised him on a number of topics. He did not offer me this position as a reward for my work. He did this because he knew that I was qualified.'

How did you meet Barack Obama? Did you see a future President of the United States in him?

'I was working in the 2008 campaign. Not for Obama. He had only just been elected Junior Senator of Illinois. I worked with Mark Warner, then the governor of Virginia and a candidate for the Democratic nomination. Clinton was also running, as well as Senator Biden. At that time, there was no mention of Barack Obama. But in October 2006, Mark Warner told me that he wanted to drop out of the race. This also meant the end for me. I was asked by other candidates, but it did not appeal to me.'

'When Biden also dropped out of the race, Obama must have thought: Maybe now is the right moment to run and not in four years in 2012. He called me that evening in my law office. It was 21.30 and he was writing the speech in which he would announce that he would be a candidate. He asked me if I would stop by. I called my wife that I would be home an hour later and that I was going to explain to Obama why I would not campaign for him.'

'When I came home an hour later, the first words I said to my wife were: 'I just met the next President of the United States of America.' She asked me if America was ready for a black president. I answered that the entire time I sat in his office, I did not think for a second that I was sitting across from someone who was black.'

You were completely convinced?

'He was so convincing, so charismatic. He did not want to persuade me at all costs. He especially advised me to think carefully about the disadvantages, what would happen if he were not to be elected. That I would be part of a group that had lost and that would end up on the sidelines of the Democratic Party. He was more concerned about me than himself.'

'And he remained so calm. I thought that if you were to measure his blood pressure, you would not find a pulse. Then I realized that if two people were threatening to drop a nuclear bomb, and a third

would have to prevent this from happening, Obama would be able to. I knew that the world would be better off with Obama as the American president.'

Do you understand that people are disappointed about him and his work during his first term in office?

'Opposite to Belgium, which is a very unified country, the US is a very divided country, politically. So yes, I understand that some are disappointed about his work. But in my opinion his first term was an unbelievable success. He only failed in one way. He was not able to convince people of how successful he actually was and is.'

'When he became president in 2008, the economy was shrinking. Unemployment was at 10 percent. But during his presidency, the government brought about 33 consecutive months of job growth in the private sector. The government saved the automotive sector. Unemployment is now below 8 percent. Healthcare has improved. Obama has worked on gay rights and the relations between our country and the rest of the world and also the relationship with Belgium is a lot better than it was four years ago.'

'Five years ago the Belgian government was threatening to deny access to American military ships to the harbor of Antwerp. This is how large the anti-American sentiments were in Belgium at that time. The situation is completely different today.'

Guantánamo is still open.

'In my opinion, this is in part a European failure. He really did want to close Guantanamo, but Congress did not follow suit and he asked Europe for help to receive one hundred prisoners to no avail.'

Obama is likely more popular here than in the US. If he were to run in elections here, he might receive sixty percent of the votes.

'Only sixty? I would think 98%. Although Belgians don't know it themselves, Belgium is a united country. The Belgian values are the same values as Obama's. We agree on most things. In the US about 47 % of the population disapproves of his policies. I am convinced that this 47 % would not approve of the policies of the seven most important Belgian parties.'

Still, you sometimes hear that Obama was reelected because the Republicans were weak and divided.

'I don't want to go in to that. I am here to represent my country and to serve my president and I do this with a lot of pride.'

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, there will be a big reception to celebrate the end of your grand tour of our country and your visit to all Belgian communes. Was it truly necessary to visit all of them?

'When I arrived here the friendship between our two countries had cooled down. 65 % of the population harbored anti-American sentiments. I had to thus think of something. As an ambassador you have to of course maintain good relations with the government, the ministers, the companies, but especially the citizens. I thus hit the streets. I have to do one more, Voeren on May 5<sup>th</sup>.'

What a symbolic commune. Do you realize the sensitivity?

'Of course. I know that there have been problems there, but this visit is about the future. This is not about north against south, or Walloons against the Flemish. This is about international relations between the US and your country. Let's make it a party in Voeren.'

You will talk to mayor Huub Boers, but also Jose Happart?

'I don't know yet. The visit has not been fully organized yet.'

How do you look back on all these visits? You are the first American ambassador who became a BV.

'Thanks to Belgians. You can knock on a door, but someone has to answer and Belgians have in large numbers opened their door for me. What a great country, so warm and hospitable. When Vice President Biden was visiting, Yves Leterme or Kris Peeters told him that I had become a BV here. Biden answered: 'Oh well, Gutman is also a BV in America.'

If Obama were to come to Brussels, people are going to wonder who that man is standing next to Gutman.

(Laughs loudly). 'That won't happen.'

But is it a game to visit all the Belgian communes?

'It is definitely not a game. It's a symbol. It is about our future together. It is not about the man in the White House, but about the 310 million Americans who share the same values as the Belgians. Our world is getting smaller. What are the differences nowadays between a Belgian, a Greek, and an American? They have more things in common than differences. There are enough 'bad guys' to fight together, economic challenges to solve together etc.'

You are more positive about our country than most Belgians, are you aware of that? You have become our best advocate.

'I have a better perspective from here. When Belgians say how divided they are, I tell them how united they are. If you want to see division, come to America. The difference between the left wing of the Democrats and the right wing is ten times, no one hundred times greater than the difference between political parties here. In Belgium people speak two languages. Does this create division? I am still always amazed when I enter a café in Belgium and hear people effortlessly switch over from Dutch to French and English and back. What a wealth.'

'But is everything perfect? Is there a country where in the morning people wake up and say that everything is perfect? I don't know of any, unless it's a dictatorship where the inhabitants are forced to believe this (laughs).'

Do you understand the Belgian criticisms of their country?

'Yes, it's a luxury to be able to criticize.'

Have you met the N-VA leaders who according to some are pushing for a gradual split of the country or want it to be integrated in the European Union?

'Of course, I have had lunch with Bart De Wever, Jan Jambon, but also Di Rupo. I meet politicians of all parties and convictions, but I have talked to nobody who is angry at Belgium. I don't hear anybody calling for the use of violence or to announce a revolution. When I talk to students, I take a New York Times article with me with as a headline 'Belgium might split.' They are shocked by this. Only then I tell them that the story is from 1930, when the Ghent university wanted to become more Dutch. If they want to understand today and the future, they will have to first look to the past.'

Will Belgium miss you?

'I don't know. But I know that I will miss Belgium. I seriously mean this. But maybe I won't have to. I am thinking of becoming a business consultant for companies that want to be active in the US and vice versa. I have, for example, been asked to become a manager of an important Belgian company. I cannot name the company yet. If everything works out, I will later be in Belgium for one week a month for business.'

Bio

Howard W. Gutman

His father, Max Gutman, immigrated to the US around 1950 from the Polish town Biala Rawska

Born on 8 July 1956 in New York

Studied law

In 2000 he was active in Al Gore's presidential campaign.

Got to know Barack Obama in Washington and became one of his advisors.

Obama named him Ambassador to the Kingdom of Belgium in 2009.

In that year, he played the role of a butcher in the remake of the movie 'Fame.'

Quotes:

When Belgians say how divided they are, I tell them how united they are. If you want to see divisiveness, come to America.

I have told Barack that he should come to visit Belgium. This is not easy, but it is still possible that he might come in June or July.

I think it's great that each American can be angry at his president and has the freedom to shout or write this. This is one of the most important values of our society.