

U.S. Ambassador Howard Gutman

In his almost daily chronicle entitled “Diplomacy for Dummies” and under the heading “A Belgian-American Love Affair,” U.S. affairs writer Philippe Paquet in La Libre of April 24, 2012, writes:

“Each year, Meridian International Center, an NGO that promotes U.S. leadership in the field of education, culture, and informal diplomacy, asks the polling company Gallup to measure the approval rating of the ‘U.S. leadership’ in the world, i.e. the United States’ popularity abroad. The poll is conducted among people living in 150 countries. During the Bush years, as we remember, the poll had shown that the American image had been considerably tarnished.

“Barack Obama has largely restored the credit of the sole superpower but, based on the results which Meridian published on Monday, there were some problems in 2011. Indeed, the list of countries where U.S. popularity has ‘substantially’ decreased – i.e. 10 percent or more – is almost twice as long as the 2010 list. Besides, it includes some of the U.S. closest allies, such as Germany – minus 10 percent – Canada – minus 10 percent – and Australia – minus 12 percent. And the fact that Nicolas Sarkozy kept on referring to ‘Barack’ during his meetings with Obama while at the same time putting his hand on Obama’s shoulder did not prevent France from seeing an approval rating down by 13 percent.

“On the contrary, U.S. popularity has only ‘substantially’ increased in three countries: Cambodia – plus 11 percent – the UK – plus 13 percent – and Belgium – plus 15 percent – Belgium being the country where the number of supporters of American leadership has increased the most in 2011. The evolution of the approval rating in Belgium is worth being noted: it was only 8 percent in 2007 and 12 percent in 2008, the last two years of the Bush Presidency. It jumped to 30 percent in 2010 and reached 45 percent last year. It is still far from the 90 percent in Kosovo but it nevertheless enables Belgium to rank 14th on the list of America’s friends in Europe.

“How can one explain this popularity? According to the expert in Belgian-U.S. relations Peter Lermantier, a researcher at the Parallel World Foundation, this is the result of the energetic PR campaign conducted by (Democratic) U.S. Ambassador to Belgium Howard W. Gutman, who, since he took office, has undertaken to pay a courtesy call to each of the 589 Belgian communes. In the extremely secure map room of the U.S. Embassy, he has already been able to put 430 little flags on the map of our very Atlanticist country and he is confident that that he will pay the missing 159 visits before he moves to other responsibilities.

Here is a commitment to go into the field that is the exact opposite of the traditional diplomacy of most Ambassadors, who leave the country where they were assigned knowing it even less than when they arrived. And one likes to dream what Mr. Gutman might do if he ever became UN Secretary General.”