

Howard W. Gutman
Ambassador and friend of stars

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By Emmanuelle Jowa

The new U.S. Ambassador in Belgium is funny, accessible, and lively. Just like a movie star. Howard Gutman, a 'top lawyer' from Washington, has worked for the biggest financial groups, at the U.S. Supreme Court, and at the FBI, while also working on Presidential candidate Obama's campaign. The first time he heard about Barack Obama was from George Clooney himself. Indeed, Mr. Gutman, who has just began a new career and now represents the United States in Belgium, is also an actor in his free time. As an exclusive for *Paris-Match*, he talked in depth about himself in the intimacy of his new Residence in Brussels.

Q: In which context were you contacted to become Ambassador in the heart of Europe?

Howard Gutman: To be short, I got a call and was asked 'how about representing America's new face in Europe?' I did not know whether the members of my family would be willing to leave their life in the U.S. One of my sons was in college and I thought that he wanted to stay there.

Q: Your wife is a dentist...

Howard Gutman: Yes, since 27 years. My youngest son just finished his first year in high school. They had spent all their life in Washington DC. I talked to each of them and we voted three against one to leave for Europe.

Q: this is what one could call a perfectly democratic vote

Howard Gutman: Absolutely. So I said yes to the State Department. And I got a call in my office. When I picked up the phone, someone told me: 'please stay on the line for the President.' It was rather impressive. A few seconds later, Barack Obama asked me: 'Howard, how are you? I said 'pretty fine now because I just had a lady on the line who told me that I was going to talk to the President. He laughed.

He then told me that I had been a faithful friend, a good advisor and support, and that he would like to send me to Belgium to represent the U.S. Government. I told him I would go to Belgium if he promised to visit.'

Q: So you got here with your wife and your kids...

Howard Gutman: Yes, at least with my youngest son, because the eldest one has stayed in the U.S where he is at university. I should add that Obama Ambassadors are different from those who preceded them. There haven't been kids in this Residence for at least thirty years!

Q: Was Belgium among your preferences?

Howard Gutman: 'Yes. Brussels seemed similar to Washington. First it is a very pleasant city with people of quality. Secondly, at the heart of the EU, it has a strategic position. Besides, wherever you go in Belgium, you find diplomats from all over the world. There is interaction with all countries. And I am already beginning to interact with Belgians. Lastly, finding a school for my son would have been less easy in other countries. But if Barack Obama had called me to tell me that he was sending me to the moon, I would have gone.

Q: Had you been to Belgium before?

Howard Gutman – together with his wife: Yes, several times. After our wedding, we visited Paris, Belgium, London, and Amsterdam. Very recently, I attended the inauguration of the new port of Zeebrugge with the Prime Minister. I discovered Knokke – (which he pronounces Knokky.) We have spent a lot of time in St. Tropez, on the Italian Riviera, or on the Costa Del Sol, but I had never seen such a nice coastal city. No other place combines nice beach with shopping. I did not even know it existed. People don't know about Knokke in the U.S., they have never heard about it. What a shame! Something must be done about it. There are bugs in Belgium's international relations! Someone has not done a good job. We are going to go back to Knokke, and spend a lot of time there. Michelle loves fashion and Paris. You now have excellent creators in Belgium. I personally represented Louis Vuitton in the U.S. for several years. I am a 'boring' lawyer but Louis Vuitton was among my most exciting clients.

Mrs. Gutman, you personally met Michelle Obama. How do you see her as a woman?

Dr. Loewinger: She is my idol. She is so perfect in her role and so honest. She is neither insidious nor hypocrite or pretentious. She does not hide anything. She is simply herself and I love that. I was a businesswoman and she was a lawyer. She also has kids, and she takes care of them in an incredible manner. She must also support her husband, and she does all this, all these responsibilities, perfectly, like a 'real person.' Besides, I think she is open. She is happy, energetic, and she constantly radiates.'

Howard Gutman: Just like the President, she does not seek to impress people. She is herself. Michelle is completely right. This goes with what I said of Barack Obama: he did not need to win. He just wanted to change things. And as a family, they have remained who they were. No one changed Michelle Obama or her kids, or the way she raises them.'

Dr. Loewinger: 'Exactly. She wants them to be raised like normal kids. She does not want her daughters to be in the media. I do not think uses the White House to build new relationships for her daughters. She just wants them to have a life that is as normal as possible. Michelle's mother also takes a lot care of the daughters. She is a wonderful nanny. Just like in our family.'

Q: How do you view your husband's 'parallel career?'

Dr. Loewinger: 'His acting career! He was not satisfied as a lawyer, at least not fully. It is nice that he can fulfill other aspirations, do something that is gratifying for him in a different manner.'

Howard Gutman: 'It is just a hobby, to which I only devote six days per year.'

Q: Tell us more about yourself

Howard Gutman: 'I studied law at Harvard, then became a law clerk for a federal prosecutor at the U.S. Supreme Court, then for the biggest Washington law firm, and I also worked two years at the FBI. At the same time, I advised politicians and Government officials. But if you do that every day, you always want more. So in addition to the campaigns I was supporting, I had the opportunity of representing a

script writer in court who knew George Clooney and Steven Soderbergh. They were shooting the series ‘K Street’ and needed an advisor on legal issues in Washington and on Democrats’ politics. This friend of mine told them I was the perfect person. So I became an advisor to the series for six weeks. I explained to Steven Soderbergh how some scenes were supposed to take place. He ended up asking me if I did not want to play myself.’

Q: How did you get to know George Clooney?

Howard Gutman: ‘We were shooting the series with him and Elliott Gould. I was taking my lunch to the other side of the set in order not to bother the actors, because I was just a lawyer who happened to play a little role. But Clooney, who is constantly surrounded with actors and knows them well, was looking for a different interlocutor. He was more interested in hearing about politics in Washington. That’s why he came to sit next to me, and we talked politics. His father, Nick Clooney, ran for Congress. We organized an event in his honor at my place.’

Q: which other roles have you played?

Howard Gutman: ‘After this first experience, someone whom I had met during the shooting of the series offered me to play a lawyer again for Noise, a movie with Tim Robbins, William Hurt, and Billy Baldwin. I was also auditioned for the TV series Boston Legal, for Law and Order, and for Crossing Jordan. Next came Fame. But I was a lawyer and remained a lawyer twelve hours per day. Each week I spent about 20 hours on politics and 50 hours on legal issues. As my staff will confirm, I do not sleep much.’

Dr. Loewinger: That is absolutely true. He gets messages until late at night or early in the morning.’

Q: Is this the secret?

Howard Gutman: Yes, 4 hours and a half of sleep, which leaves almost twenty hours for other daily activities.’

Q: Is being an actor a breath of fresh air?

Howard Gutman: ‘Absolutely. If you need to be serious all your life, you need a different activity on the side. Whether fashion, tennis, or being an actor, we try to bring some lighter elements to our life.’

Q: Still, a man with a prominent lawyer background, having worked at the Supreme Court and at the FBI, who ends up playing a butcher in a remake of Fame and who, on top of it, is named Ambassador by President Obama in a bureaucratic city like Brussels, this must be rather unique, right?

Howard Gutman: ‘Fred Thompson and Ronald Reagan have had that type of career. They played in movies and entered politics.’

Q: Clint Eastwood and Arnold Schwarzenegger as well, but they did not have the same background. In which circumstances did you meet President Obama?

Howard Gutman: ‘During a campaign: I have worked with Senator and Governor Mark Warner. He is one of my oldest friends. He planned on running for President. We worked on that for two years. When he changed his mind and decided not to run, I thought about stopping as well. I was in my office when I got a call from Senator Obama. He told me he was going home at 9.30 that night to write his speech in which he announced that he was running. He asked me if I could spend one hour with him. I did originally not plan to work for him but I could not be rude and say no. So I went to see him at 9.30 p.m. and I later told my wife Michelle that I just met the next President of the United States. Because, when you meet Barack Obama during one hour, you know that he can change the planet and that, when people get to know him, there is no chance he will not win.’

Q: What did you know about him before? Had you heard a lot about him?

Howard Gutman: ‘He had only been in the Senate for two years when I met him. But I knew his name and reputation from the Democratic Convention of 2004. And you know who was the first to talk to me about him? George Clooney. It was during our conversations during the shooting of K Street. I was spending my time trying to sell Mark Warner and he was trying to sell Obama. When I met the latter, the first thing that struck me and which was different from other politicians was that he was not trying to convince me or to sell anything. You felt that he did not need to win, that it was not a priority. It was not the reason he was entering the race. He was running for a good reason, because he was convinced that he could

make a difference and change things. Winning would not have been sufficient. The question was not about winning the election but about changing the world. And I noticed that there was no sense of urgency. This supreme maturity convinces you that, with such a candidate, the world tomorrow would be better than it is today, and that the day after tomorrow it could be even better still. This is what the rest of the world has seen in him as well.'

Q: President Obama has sometimes been idealized and he has been compared to a prophet. Did you have that somewhat spiritual impression that he was only the vector of some convictions, or is this exaggerated?

Howard Gutman: 'I would not talk about a prophet. But it is after meeting Obama that I began to understand what I had heard people say about Robert Kennedy.'

Q: You gave your maiden speech last September 30 at the Université du Travail in Charleroi. It was a typically 'Obama' choice if one can say. But this does not prevent you from being comfortable talking about movie stars and Hollywood. Obama himself set the example by being supported by many movie stars. What can be seen as hard to reconcile in Europe seems natural to you. What do you respond to those who would criticize this?

Howard Gutman: 'Many people criticize Ambassadors because of their wealth. My father was a Holocaust survivor. He spent the entire war in Poland but managed not to be caught. I was born in the Bronx in New York and I grew up in a three-bed bedroom. I have been working since I was 16. For my first job, I washed dishes and was a waiter. I was working Fridays and Saturdays night to pay for my college. I met Michelle at the Columbia University. And all these celebrities I mentioned were connected to Obama. It is Clooney who was the first to talk to me about him and I met Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner during a fundraising event in Boston. Ben delivered very impressive speech, drawing an excellent profile of Obama and his policies and answering all questions. So yes we know a lot of people who supported the most inspiring Government official I have ever met. I do not see why I should feel guilty.'

Q: But what would you respond to those who would call you a limousine liberal?

Howard Gutman: 'I work for a living. I was driving a Toyota every day. I have a house to reimburse and need to pay for my kids' studies. Michelle has always been

classy, and I have always been ‘the working guy.’ But I hated that contrast. That’s why I married her! The United States needed the right President. And when I met Barack Obama and came home and talked about him to Michelle, she asked me: ‘do you really think he can win?’ And I said: he must.’ Michelle and I spent the next two years knocking on doors. We never borrowed and we worked hard for this campaign. Today, my priority is to invite all communities. We recently received about a hundred representatives of the Muslim community here. I delivered a speech in which I underlined that a partnership needed to be built with everyone.’

Dr. Loewinger: ‘We want the Muslim community to feel comfortable here. And that Americans living in Belgium feel comfortable as well and have a good relationship with that community.’

Q: Let’s talk about the health care reform. The President’s popularity seems to have decreased. In any case, he has had his setbacks with the conservatives’ protests against this reform a few weeks ago. Have U.S. media reported on that as much as European media have?

Howard Gutman: ‘Media in the United States aren’t as large as in Europe. You have different networks like CNN, Fox, and NBC. These are cable TV networks. The impact is not the same. It is probably more diversified.’

Q: Which leads one to think that the perception of the size of these protests which we had in Europe was exaggerated?

Howard Gutman: ‘I think so, indeed.’

Q: Did you receive specific instructions before you left Washington because of the crisis. Do you have to manage this here in Belgium? And after a few weeks here, how would you compare the economic situations?

Howard Gutman: ‘First, it is clear that Europe is going to see America with a fresh look. And my global mission is to participate in that new image for the United States. To be better partners and better listeners. As for the economic situation, we need to work together and in partnership with Europe. There is also the climate question. We must get it right this time. It is important for our national security, for

creating jobs, and for the planet. It is essential to have a global understanding of the world.’

Q: You said you asked President Obama to come to Belgium. Has his visit to Brussels already been discussed, even if it is in a distant future?

Howard Gutman: ‘His visit is not yet on the agenda but I hope that it will be.’

Q: What has been the toughest part of your career so far? Was it in court when you defended a difficult case, or when you were on Fox News during the Obama campaign, being an actor next to movie stars, or here in this new career as Ambassador in Europe?

Howard Gutman: ‘There isn’t any doubt that the toughest job I have ever had is the one I do every day with Michelle, i.e. parenting. By far. And it is also the most important. I’d rather face twenty political journalists than a 15 and 20-year-old boy.’

Dr. Loewinger: ‘They constantly call everything into question. Their opinion really matters to us. We do not impose things on them, we propose and then we discuss if they want to. Once again, it is a very democratic process.’

Howard Gutman: ‘And each person has a role to play. My wife loves fashion and intends to promote it. See how Michelle Obama inspires other with her style. We are somewhat doing the same thing here, of course at a smaller level, but in an efficient manner. We are very fortunate.’

Q: What did you fear the most when you arrived in Belgium?

Howard Gutman: ‘The hardest is probably the time. I start my day with French lessons at 7. French one day, Dutch the next day. We alternate. Then, after one hour of language, we take our son to school. In the evening, from 7 to 8.30, we do our language homework – Michelle is also taking French lessons. Then at 8.30 p.m., it is then 2.30 p.m. on the East Coast, and I can begin phone calls. As of 11.30 p.m. it is with the West Coast. Then e-mails. It normally lasts until 2 a.m. And I get up at 6.30 a.m. for my language lesson. In other words, the sole real problem is sleep. And things obviously did not get simpler with the time difference.’

Q: You recently met the King. How did it go?

Howard Gutman: 'In Belgium, Ambassadors are received by the King when they arrive and their spouse meets the Queen when they leave. I found King Albert II absolutely wonderful. During my briefing, I had been told that 'one does not talk to the King but the King talks to you.' But here, in less than one minute, we were joking together. He is a remarkable man. When we sat, he told me 'what a beautiful day.' I said 'I told the security guys that their job was just to keep the rain away.' He burst into a laugh and we began chatting.'

Q: He has a sense of humor. Did you like it?

Howard Gutman: 'Absolutely. But he is also very smart. He knows issues very well, better than anyone. There is no doubt about it. The other thing that struck me was to see how he cared about the country. It was a very nice meeting. But I wish to point out that I do not only meet with authorities. We also go for a walk everyday to meet Belgians, people in the street, to take the country's pulse. We talk to them like American tourists would do.'

Q: As an American, how do you see our monarchy and European monarchies in general?

Howard Gutman: 'I have not met any other King so far but what I can tell you is that yours is really the Number One in the country. He goes beyond regional problems and loves this country to his core. Someone who is such a defender of his country can only lead to positive things.'

Q: Were you briefed on the history of Belgium, the political situation, and the linguistic issues in particular?

Howard Gutman: 'I have studied international issues quite a bit. So I knew about the regions and the different languages. These are part of the elements that make your wealth and diversity.'

Q: Among the Ministers whom you met, which one did impress you the most?

Howard Gutman: 'I met with Messrs. De Crem and Leterme, among others. You better be well prepared when you talk to a Belgian Minister, and you need to know your dossier. They are smart and quick-witted. I also met Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy at the inauguration in Zeebrugge. After two seconds we were joking together. He had to cut a ribbon, or rather a kind of chain for a ship. He told me he was not very skilful and I told him that, if I had to do it myself, I would have been forced to ask my wife!'

Q: To conclude this interview, what is your objective in Belgium?

Howard Gutman: 'I'd like to contribute to getting the Belgians and Europeans to have another look on America, this America led by President Obama. To show them that America is listening and that we can be good partners on various issues, whether Afghanistan, getting out of economic recession, or on climate change. I want people to be able to view America with a fresh look and I want to be part of the landscape when Belgians, Europeans, and other communities will have that fresh look on America. I want to contribute to show them that new face. The challenges that we face together are far greater than those that divide us. We must work all together, with the Belgians, the Muslims, and the Europeans. Can you imagine if we did not succeed? This time we need to get it right and we must succeed. That is why I am here.'

Q: One very last question. The headscarf ban in schools has been a debate in Belgium and in other European countries. On that issue, President Obama was very clear: there is full tolerance in the United States, where it has to do with the freedom of expression. How do you see the situation in Belgium?

Howard Gutman: In the United States, it is true that we support the right of women or of anyone in his religious freedom or other. This being said, I am new in Belgium but I know enough to say that these issues are often much more complex than they appear and that they can be seen differently depending on cultures. So I am not here to judge on debates and positions in Belgium. I only know what is good for my country.'