

‘Belgium is somewhat like Washington’

New U.S. Ambassador Howard Gutman begins tour of Belgium in Charleroi

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It is not in a city hall or in a dull press conference but in a full auditorium of the Université du Travail in Charleroi that the representative of Barack Obama in our country delivered his first major speech. Howard Gutman also answered questions from students, who appeared to like the Ambassador a lot, and who will remember that ‘Microsoft, Johnson & Johnson, and Caterpillar, are creating jobs in the region.’

Gutman chose Charleroi, sister city of Pittsburgh, because, like many areas in the U.S., it must struggle to get out of the economic crisis. ‘I want to talk about the future, and you are the future, as you will give this region a boost thanks to your technological knowledge,’ Gutman said. The local firemen, who are obsessed by 9/11 as well as the Harley Davidson Club agreed: ‘he is a cool guy,’ they stated, as if it was Obama himself.

Several men with earplugs, photo camera flashes, women who nervously adjust their dress and hair: it was somewhat as if the rock star that Obama has become was coming to the Université du Travail himself.

‘He picked Charleroi! We had never thought about it. He wanted to meet with the people of a city where, like in the U.S., people need to struggle to survive but which is also the engine for the future. And this is what we are, with our tradition of industries and technology,’ according to proudly smiling alderman for Culture and Tourism Antoine Tanzilli.

The old auditorium was filled with students, personalities, and Veterans in uniform. When the small man with red square glasses entered the room, everyone stood up.

Gutman, who in a previous life was a lawyer, anti-terrorism expert at the FBI, and actor, wants to have a lot of contacts with average Belgians. ‘I grew up in the Bronx, yet I am now Ambassador. I can certainly learn as much from the people of

Charleroi, from immigrants, from fathers who would gladly work two jobs to support their family, but often cannot find even one, and from diplomats whom I meet. Here as well you should think that 'yes we can!' he said.

Yves Lardinois, Director of the Université du Travail could think of no better statement. 'Our university is based on a mix of people from the working class and from the 'studying elite.' Students here graduate as electricians as well as as engineers, and here there is no separation between vocational and academic education,' he explains.

As a boost, a huge technological campus with three higher education schools will be built in 2012, which will provide technical and industrial training from the lower to the higher level as well as extra-training to people from 16 to 65. And there will be close collaboration with industries.

'This is a huge step we could not make without the Americans,' Lardinois says with a great smile and looking to Ambassador Gutman. The biggest sponsor is Caterpillar, one of the oldest and biggest investor in the region.

'Yes, we have something in common,' Gutman said. 'Just like the people in Michigan and New Jersey, you know that the crisis has existed for a long time and just like Americans, you know that genuine leaders view a crisis as an opportunity. That is why Johnson & Johnson is investing in Gosselies and Microsoft in Mons. These are examples of how we need to address the crisis together,' Ambassador Gutman said.

According to the Ambassador, the graves of thousands American soldiers who died on Belgian soil also show the bonds between Belgium and the U.S. 'But I must admit that my main mission is to improve the image of my country. My President is half a God but something must be done to the U.S. tarnished image and to restore confidence,' Gutman said. This is what he wants to do by being transparent and plain-spoken.

A student wanted to know why he had chosen a small country like Belgium. 'Belgium is perhaps a little country but it is somewhat like Washington. The latter is the eyes and ears of the United States, while Belgium is Europe's eyes and ears. If you want to be heard, then you need to be in Brussels,' Gutman said.

Another student wanted to know how he paid for his studies. The response was that he washed dishes. Other students wanted to know how they could study or work in the U.S. but the most popular question was ‘how does it feel to work with Obama?’ ‘He is like a man without blood pressure and without creases on his suit. He radiates so much wisdom, calm, and confidence that, if I were facing an enemy with a nuclear bomb, I’d call him and tell him ‘Barack, you deal with it!’ Ambassador Gutman explained.

The Ambassador did not shun questions on Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo. ‘Belgians and Americans are helping on Afghanistan’s reconstruction and on closing Guantanamo, and my President is withdrawing troops from Iraq. I know that you wonder whether this time you can believe what the Americans are saying. And you are right to ask that question. But while Obama’s inauguration was still going on, his Council already began the procedure to shut down Guantanamo,’ Ambassador Gutman explains.

A student asked ‘why do I see on TV that the money we are giving to Afghanistan is being used to build luxury houses rather than schools?’ ‘I have no idea, but this should not take place. But thanks for your question, I’ll pay special attention when I visit Belgian troops there,’ the extremely fast-speaking Gutman said.

The Ambassador plans a similar town hall event with Belgians in Mechelen on October 19, also intends to visit ‘all cities and villages,’ and will deliver a letter from President Obama at the Father Damian ceremonies in Tremelo on Sunday.

In Charleroi, he was also received by the local firemen, who commemorate 9/11 each year and work with the U.S. Embassy to forward all the letters and gifts that are received around the anniversary date. At the end of his visit to the fire brigade where U.S. flags were displayed in his honor, Gutman was presented with a giant helmet and, to the dismay of his security agents, offered an astounding concert of roaring Harley Davidsons. Cool, Gutman shook hands with each rider. ‘American diplomacy new style,’ a staffer concluded.”