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HOWARD GUTMAN, U.S. AMBASSADOR IN BELGIUM

“Obama’s Defeat Was a Certainty Already Two Years Ago”

Howard Gutman, the U.S. Ambassador in our country, is not surprised by the election result in his country. ‘At 14 out of the last 16 midterm elections, the incumbent party lost many votes. When Obama became President, it was already a done deal that the Democrats would lose this midterm around. There is nothing new under the sun.

“How do you explain that ‘normal’ loss of votes?”

Howard Gutman: “At such midterm elections, the voter turnout is always much less than at presidential elections. This year, the number will be at around 75 million voters. As it happens, those are the people who voted President Obama into office two years ago. The larger the turnout at presidential elections, the bigger the loss for the incumbent president at the midterm elections. The size of that loss depends mostly from the degree of unemployment. Whoever is not satisfied with the economic situation now blames President Obama and the Democrats for that.”

“What are you? Democrat or Republican?”

Howard Gutman: “None of both. I am Ambassador. Ha.”

“Are the Americans right by making Obama pay the bill for the unemployment figures?”

Howard Gutman: “Unemployment in the United States is now at 9.5%. One out of three American families has been hit by the economic crisis. When Obama started out early last year, unemployment was at 8.2%. Never before, as many people had been out of a job. Until today, he is burdened by an enormous heritage. You cannot blame him for unemployment, can you? If Obama had not intervened, unemployment would certainly be at 18%. But I do understand the people. A job is what counts for them.”

“What impact will the elections have for U.S. policy?”

Howard Gutman: “Little, I think. As far as domestic issues are concerned, the biggest projects are on the rails already. Most legislative work has been done: healthcare reform, infrastructure works, environmental policy... As far as foreign policy is concerned, there will not be a lot of changes either. The interests of the United States and Belgium for instance are quite similar. Security is on the first place and with what you see happening now – those bomb packages in

the past days, those attacks in Athens – everyone realizes how important that is. And in order to prove that that security is also important for Belgium: on the plane that almost exploded on Christmas Day last year – luckily that that Dutchman threw that terrorist on the floor – there were seven Belgians. Convinced?

“Will there be a reshuffle in the Obama administration?”

Howard Gutman: “There will, as always, but it is not a consequence of these elections. There is a constant turnover because working for government is a tough job, which requires great sacrifice from people. The turnover is logical.”

“The Republicans have already said that solid government spending cuts will need to be made...”

Howard Gutman: “Do you think that Obama does not know that? Discussions over the budget have never been easy, so they will not be easy now either. But the harder the economic times, the easier you can push through political decisions. Both Republicans and Democrats agree on this one: the economy needs to be repaired.”

“Does this midterm election say anything about Obama’s chances at the next presidential election?”

Howard Gutman: “Not in the least. The next presidential election (editor’s note: planned for 2012) will as always be a race between two candidates and from the past we know that in most cases the incumbent president is re-elected.”