

“Ambassador : The Man of the President”

Article by Valentin Dauchot in La Libre of November 3

In Brussels like in about thirty cities throughout the world, the Ambassador is directly appointed by the U.S. President. Howard Gutman arrived in Belgium in 2009 with a very specific goal: restoring the image of the United States in a country where 65 percent of public opinion was unfavorable. Herewith a report on the daily life of a colorful personality who made it a point of honor to personally visit all Belgian communes.

It is hard not to see the U.S. Embassy in Brussels: a three-meter high fence, barbed wire, austere security guards, and steel barricades on each side of the Boulevard just in case someone has the idea of coming with a rocket-propeller. ‘All security measures are decided upon by the Belgian authorities,’ we were informed, thereby dismissing any hint of possible American paranoia. Even if the Embassy represents part of the U.S. territory on Belgian soil, its protection is the responsibility of Belgium and the 9/11 attacks as well as the recent attack of the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi explain why the Embassy now looks like a bunker. After having gone through security and the traditional questions, all the buildings look the same and are interconnected by long and secure corridors that connect the Embassy offices to those of the FAA, the DEA, the FBI, and the residence of U.S. Ambassador to Belgium Howard Gutman.

Perfectly on time for our interview, this committed Democrat who is close to Barack Obama entered the room in an energetic manner, closely followed by his press staff. The man is affable and friendly and in a few seconds confirmed the flattering reputation which he has acquired in Belgium since his arrival in August of 2009.

‘Here I am with Hillary Clinton,’ the Ambassador explained, showing us an impressive gallery of photos. ‘Here I am at home in Washington with my wife and George Clooney who asked me to pose as if I was catching them by surprise in the middle of a conversation,’ Gutman said. There are photos with Joe Biden, Steven Spielberg, Tim Robbins, Ben Affleck, John Malkovitch and so many movie stars that one wonders if one is not in the house of a Hollywood producer. But this impression of casualness should not make one forget that this man has an impressive résumé which highlights a success story.

The son of Polish immigrants, Howard Gutman grew up in a poor New York neighborhood where he went to public schools light years away from a possible political career. 'I did not know anything about such things,' the Ambassador recalled. 'In my neighborhood, no one ever considered working for the government, and it was only when I began getting good grades at school and got admitted to top universities that the idea of becoming a lawyer became realistic.' From the Bronx High School of Science, he went to Columbia University and then to Harvard Law School, before becoming a lawyer and then working at the Supreme Court and the FBI. 'In Belgium, people tend to have a career in government, in the public sector, or in the private sector. In the United States, careers are less separated and a career often means working both for the public and private sector, and for me, the FBI presented itself as an opportunity. I wanted to spend a year or two in a government agency to strengthen my résumé, and it was hard to find an agency willing to take me as a Democrat during a Republican administration. The only agency totally separated from any political orientation was the Federal Bureau of Investigation,' Gutman explained.

At 30, Howard Gutman has built his career and spends the rest of his time in the Democratic Party, where he supported Gary Hart, Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and, lastly, Barack Obama, for whom he did media work, fundraised, worked on policy, and - 'just like everyone else' - knocked on people's doors in the swing states. A good way to get appointed Secretary of State or Ambassador? 'There are about 185 U.S. Ambassadors in the world,' Gutman explained. '150 of them are State Department employees who are sent every three years to a different country. In about thirty strategic countries like Brazil, Canada, China, Mexico, and Belgium, the President appoints his representatives himself. These are countries where it would be too difficult to work one year under one President and then to have to change all of one's positions when a new president is inaugurated.' In other words, the President's men come and go with their mentor and share his political views.

It is the case of Howard Gutman in Brussels, where there is also a U.S. Ambassador to the European Union and a third U.S. Ambassador to NATO. All three are in permanent contact but each works at his own level on a different goal. 'I always have to convince Belgians of the importance of their country' Howard Gutman underlined when we asked him what strategic importance Brussels might have for the United States.

Having undertaken a charm operation at which he is excellent, our interlocutor explained with impressive conviction that Belgium does not speak much (but when it does, speaks well), never shouts, but is listened to by all Europe. What is even more interesting for the Ambassador is that 'the [Foreign] Ministries in London, Paris, and Berlin are in direct contact with Washington. In Brussels, I

serve as the direct representative of my country before consulting the President.’ More support needed in Afghanistan? The U.S. Ambassador to NATO works to convince 28 member countries while Howard Gutman works on the opinion of 11 million Belgians and of their elected officials, who themselves have an influence within NATO.

‘My first mission was to rebuild a favorable public opinion,’ the Ambassador explained, sipping homemade ice tea. ‘A poll that was conducted worldwide in 2007 indicated that 65 percent of Belgians had an unfavorable opinion of the United States. When two thirds of the population is hostile, the government takes difficult positions. It considered closing the port of Antwerp to our ships and Belgian airspace to our aircraft, and even prosecuting U.S. officials in Belgium based on the law of universal competence. And what happen when relations are so difficult? American tourists no longer feel comfortable, American entrepreneurs have a harder time exporting, and our expats are under tension. I was sent to Belgium to rebuild the bridge between the two countries, and once this began taking place, the rest followed naturally,’ Howard Gutman said.

And how to charm a Belgian? First by taking French and Dutch lessons every morning from 9 to 10 and by making it a point of honor of personally visiting each of the 589 communes, an initiative that has become his trademark. ‘It is rather fun because some communes are so small that there are no houses,’ Howard Gutman explained with an enthusiasm which is contagious. ‘In that case I walk around and as soon as I meet someone we take a picture with him. I have always wondered how a man who is quietly at home feels when he opens the door and sees a man in a suit with five bodyguards and who says ‘Hi, I am the U.S. Ambassador. How are you? Would you mind taking a picture with me?’ But after a moment of surprise, it seems that Belgians have been welcoming since the Ambassador is proud to show a map of Belgium where a pin indicates each commune that he has visited.

When he is not visiting communes, the Ambassador is busy with his language classes, with setting up the agenda of the day, and with analyzing all that might involve the United States: a statement by a Minister, the installation of a company, or any event that he needs to attend, as well as two almost daily receptions, at 6:00pm and 7:30 p.m. , before a working dinner at 8.30 p.m. He is usually back at the Embassy by 11 p.m., at which point he exchanges e-mails with Washington to inform the U.S. Administration of the various dossiers, taking the time difference into account. ‘Being Ambassador is the best job in the world but it is not good for one’s health,’ Howard Gutman admits. ‘My days are very long and everything happening in the United States takes place in the middle of the night,’ he pointed out. The Presidential debates? 3 a.m. The

weekly match of the Washington Redskins which the Ambassador never wants to miss? 5 a.m. So he is awake day and night and takes time to rest in the car in between two visits.

In early 2012 , as if a reward for his action, a new poll showed that Belgium ranked first in terms of popular support for the United States. ‘You are a small but reliable partner,’ the Ambassador underlined. ‘To me, Belgians are united,’ he even added as a conclusion, in spite of a context that does not really justify such a statement. ‘It is even one of the most united countries I know,’ he continued, with a conviction that we did not share. ‘You are talking about a possible split? These discussions are necessary and divisions are much greater in the United States. Americans are divided on climate, on social security, and on women’s right to choose. These are issues on which Belgians globally agree.’

Howard Gutman, 56, is getting to the end of his tour. He does not work directly for Barack Obama - there are different offices at the State Department in between, such as the Bureau of Western European affairs – but his future directly depends on the President. If Obama is reelected, he will stay in the job until his successor is appointed. If Obama is not reelected, Howard Gutman will return to Washington in the course of the year. What life does he envision after his time at the Embassy? ‘I would like to stay in international circles,’ the father of two kids - who will be back in the United States by the end of the year - answered. ‘I do not have specific plans yet but I would like to live in Washington while regularly coming back to Europe,’ he explained. No plan for a political career so that he might become President one day? ‘If someone calls me I will in any case listen to what he has to say, but our political situation is rather complicated at the moment and the idea of pursuing a political career is not very appealing to me,’ the Ambassador concluded. He will leave, but three quarters of the 430 employees of the Embassy (who are Belgians) will stay and will continue to promote the United States under another Ambassador.

Note: the four-page spread includes numerous photos with captions.

(1) Photo of Ambassador in entry corridor of CMR

Caption : Besides his offices, the FBI and the DEA, the Embassy also houses the personal residence of the Ambassador.

(2) Photo of Ambassador’s U.S.-Belgian flag

(3) Photo of Ambassador Gutman in front of map in his office

Caption: Ambassador Gutman has built a solid reputation in visiting the 589 Belgian communes.

- (4) Photo of Ambassador Gutman in the 6th floor corridor
Caption: Portraits of former ambassadors reign in the corridor leading to the hyper-secure office of Ambassador Gutman
- (5) Photo of Ambassador Gutman looking over Beverly Fenwick's shoulder in the Executive Office
Caption: Only 25% of the Embassy's employees are American; some of the others have been working there for 40 years
- (6) Photo of Ambassador Gutman on Rue Zinner
Caption: Once past the rigorous security checks, the Embassy is an impressive succession of buildings connected internally by secure corridors
- (7) Photo of 3 photographs: Ambassador with President Obama, Ambassador with Michelle Obama, Ambassador with Hillary Clinton
Caption: The Ambassador claims an impressive photo gallery, from Barack Obama to George Clooney
- (8) Photo of Ambassador during a city trip
Caption: "My first goal is to rebuild the friendship between Belgium and the U.S. That is achieved by being present on the ground (i.e., among the people.)
- (9) Photo of Obama –themed items in Ambassador's display case in CMR office
Caption: A display case of treasures in the Ambassador's office contains a collection of various objects with President Obama's image