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ACTUA

'Belgians Need to Believe More in Themselves!'

Howard Gutman, the American Ambassador in Belgium, Calls to More Chauvinism

Howard Gutman is the representative of Barack Obama in our country and we will have known that. The American Ambassador in Belgium does not leave a chance unused to catch the spotlights. He does not fulfill his function from behind a desk in Brussels, but by an active policy of presence everywhere in the country. Fond of Belgium and of the Belgians – that speaks for itself! – he has also an eye for our downsides: 'You often are too modest! Belgians should believe more in themselves.'

In a previous life, Howard Gutman (*53 years old*) was an attorney; he is an American of the second generation, because it was his father Max Gutman who emigrated from Poland to the United States. Since his appointment to Ambassador – i.e. nine months ago – the born New Yorker has been cruising our country at a lightning fast pace. After one of his appearances – the Memorial Day commemoration at the Flanders Field American cemetery in Waregem – the diplomat takes out ample time for an interview.

Q: 'Yesterday you were in Neuville-en-Condroz and in Aube. Do you stick with your intention to visit every city and every commune of this country?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'There is a big map of Belgium in my office and I stick a magnet on the spots which I have visited in the meantime. Sure, I want to have been everywhere once. (*smiles*) Even if in some cases, that does not go beyond arriving in a village, shaking hands with the mayor and taking off again. I have been here nine months now. There are already quite some magnets on my map.'

Q: 'Last year in March you were called with the line 'Hold for the President'; it was Obama on the line who asked you if a U.S. Ambassador job would be appealing to you and five months later you were here. That is how it went right?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'Exactly. Now, of course it is not correct that Obama just called me out of 307 million Americans, 'out of the blue'. In 2007, I became part of team Obama. I am entitled to call myself a confidant of Barack, but still his question to become ambassador came unexpected. My predecessor in Belgium was 80 years' old and one of the richest Americans. A completely different profile as I have as a matter of fact. Now, it is so that Obama had prepared a list with some 25 names of people he wanted to send out as U.S. ambassadors. I had a choice between seven countries. Before making the decision, I have consulted with my wife. China, Japan or India? We did not immediately feel like it. As far as the European list was concerned, Belgium stood out right away, because I already knew that country a little bit. I had already been here, together with my wife, as a tourist.

Q: 'Do you have Obama's cell number?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'I have his personal e-mail address. If I really want to talk with him urgently, I call his operation center, and I get on the phone with him in a matter of seconds. But most of the time, we communicate via e-mail. I even do that with my son. Do not forget that there is a six hour time difference between the United States and here. You cannot just like that disturb someone in the middle of the night. So I send Barack a message when I need him, from my blackberry to his. I have the guarantee that within five minutes he sends me a message back. Let me tell you something: except from his wife Michelle, there is nobody who calls the President just like that. The 'operation center' filters the

calls he gets, if not Barack had a day job consisting out of answering calls. A fun anecdote: during the 2008 campaign, I organized a fundraiser with Ben Affleck, the actor, and John Kerry. I sent Barack a little e-mail to report that to him. Half an hour later, my phone rings. Obama! Just at that moment, Ben Affleck is addressing the crowd. What do I do? I go on that stage and pass my Blackberry on to Ben. All attendees could just follow his conversation with Barack. Everyone went through the roof and cheered: 'Yes we can!' Unforgettable.'

Q: 'Before you, we barely knew that there was an American Ambassador in Belgium. Who was your predecessor?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'Sam Fox.'

Q: 'Never heard of him! May the conclusion be that you are fulfilling your PR job in an excellent way?! Is that strategy?'

Ambassador Gutman: (*straightens his back*) 'I will tell you why I am working in this way. Over the past eight years, the relationship between the U.S. and Belgium was not all too good, to put it softly. One of Obama's policy points was the need to start rebuilding bridges from scratch and to let people hear here what he and America stand for. As his representative in this country, I do not see myself doing a useful job here from the 'ivory tower' of my embassy. I want to spread his message, talk with people. I see it as my solemn duty to show myself and to listen and to make clear that the 'old regime', Bush's one, belongs to the past for good. The most important point I want to make is that Belgium's and the U.S.'s political views are on one and the same page.'

Q: 'Really? Guantanamo... Afghanistan...'

Ambassador Gutman: 'Glad you mention them. Obama called for 30,000 extra European military in Afghanistan (*sic*). If you do not frame that and refer right away to the Bush regime, you automatically think: aha, more war and bombings; whereas Barack's first concern is the reconstruction of the country. That is where no single Belgian – nor politician – disagrees, believe me. It was logical that I tried to discuss Obama's point of view with the government here. But I have to abide by their decision (*editor's note: not to send any extra troops – sic*). Concerning

Guantanamo Bay, I have proposed Belgium to make a greater effort to help Obama to close the prison. That is all.'

Q: "Gutman wants to become friends with all Belgians', a newspaper wrote, not without a cynical undertone. Does such criticism affect you?"

Ambassador Gutman: 'No. Because it comes from people with whom I have never met or spoken with. Am I doing something wrong when I want to talk with as many Belgians as possible – from blue-collar workers to ministers – or if I accept with great pleasure to be present at the Tour of Flanders? I do everything I do with heart and soul. There is no calculation or consideration – 'I have to become friends with all Belgians' – behind that. If I try to sell the 'brand America'? Of course I do. Because I want that people here – all people! – have trust again in the United States and realize that this is Obama's and not Bush's America!'

Q: 'In an interview you said that you were looking forward to resume the dialogue with the Muslim community in our country. In the meantime, Belgium has become the first country to issue a burqa ban. Are you able to understand that?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'Much has been said about the so-called 'Obama-care', the reform of the healthcare system in the U.S. Here, I get a tremendous amount of questions on that from people who do not understand that a trendsetting country like America has always been so much backward in that field. Then I always say: 'You have to be American to understand that'. That goes as well for your standpoint on the headscarf. In the United States, the idea lives that everyone is allowed to be himself – also as far as religion, culture, clothing etc. is concerned – and as such will become a convinced American over time. And that works! In the United States, almost nobody knows someone else's origins. My father for instance was an illegal immigrant. With a fake passport. I am his son and you will hardly find more American than me (*smiles*). Under the Bush regime, the bond with the Muslim community had also soured seriously. You know the reason: Al Qaeda, 9/11... That rigid attitude – the West diametrically opposed to the East – is something that Obama and the United States are leaving behind now. I am glad to be part of that and I am going to visit Muslim children at school, in Molenbeek

and in Anderlecht. In Molenbeek, I even got a standing ovation after my speech! At that school, 70% of students are Muslim, but never before I heard a class sing with so much conviction the Brabançonne (the Belgian national anthem). The lesson of this story is: the walls between the communities are far from as high as some may want to make us believe. That headscarf ban (*sic*)? That is Belgium's choice, not mine. It is not up to me to spell Belgians lessons in that field. I am and will remain an American in the end, a diplomat who is representing his country here.'

Q: 'We already know how fun you find Belgium and how fond you are of the Belgians. But in what are you disappointed – even if it is just a little?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'At the drop of a hat, I hear people say here: 'Oh we are just a small country'. You have to start realizing how important your country is in world politics. Or do you think that Herman Van Rompuy has been selected by accident to become European President? No he has not. He has been selected because he and the country can count on an enormous amount of credit not only with European allies, but over the whole world. Just do believe in yourself a little more. Do you know what I often repeat to my collaborators: 'Belgians are so polite that no one dares to ask the first question'. That has become a running joke. After a speech or a lecture, I now say: 'Who wants to ask the second question?' (*smiles*) On the other hand, I have to add right away that that – say – innate modesty makes you look pretty too.'

Q: 'You played in a couple of movies, like 'Fame'. Do you know Erik Van Looy?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'Eric who? (*editor's addition: after intervention from his press attaché*) Ah yes, of course. He has been to my house a couple of times.'

Q: 'What if he offers you a role in his next movie?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'With great pleasure! But then for free, because as an ambassador I am not allowed to gain something extra. I even find that something like that would perfectly fit within my mission. Just like I have agreed to do this interview, I would certainly not dismiss playing a role in a Belgian movie.'

Q: 'In conclusion, can I test your knowledge on Flanders?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'Go ahead!'

Q: 'What does the name 'Clouseau' tell you?'

Ambassador Gutman: (*gives a questioning look to his press attaché*) 'Help me! Sorry, no idea.'

Q: 'The most popular music band of Flanders...'

Ambassador Gutman: (*interrupts*) ... but a couple of weeks ago, I did have your greatest actor at my place at a reception. Jan Decler. That was when John Malkovich was in Belgium. Goedele (*Liekens, editor's addition*) was there as well. (*Apologetic*) I know every politician in Belgium but as far as culture is concerned, I am not quite there yet.'

Q: 'Tom Boonen?'

Ambassador Gutman: 'Yes, I know him. I have shaken hands with him before the Tour of Flanders. I will give you a scoop: at the occasion of the American national holiday – Independence Day on Fourth of July – I am organizing a special project, more particularly on 1st of July. After the official part, I will honor the 'Belgian-American relationship'. I do not want to involve the traditional diplomats and VIPs in that, but a number of fun Belgians. The plan is: a joint bike ride. Eddy Merckx and Greg Lemond are already sure to participate. After we return to the Embassy where there will be performances by both Belgian and American artists. Believe me: July 1 becomes a day never to forget!'

