

American Ambassador Howard Gutman today ends his ‘Tour of Belgium’ in Voeren.

By Paul Cobbaert *De Zondag* 05 May 2013

No American is as popular in Belgium as Howard Gutman. And no Belgian knows our country as well as President Obama’s envoy. The American Ambassador will today end his ‘Tour of Belgium’ in Voeren and has thereby visited all cities and communes personally. *De Zondag* was invited today to have coffee with him. “Kim Clijsters, now she is a great ambassador.”

“No, let’s not do the interview in Dutch,” Howard Gutman laughs as he welcomes us in the hallway of his residence in the Zinner Street. “If you were from Mechelen for example, I would understand you. But I don’t understand people from Gent, Limburg, and West Flanders.” Gutman is the first American Ambassador who has been able to conquer the Belgians’ hearts. He knows how to charm people. When he was appointed four years ago, he promised to visit all 589 cities and communes personally. And today, this voyage ends in the Flemish (or is it Walloon?) commune Voeren, a historic place that has on numerous occasions been a symbol of tensions between the Flemish and the francophones. Gutman does not understand this ancient conflict very well. “I know how these conflicts emerged, but I do not believe that the people in Belgium are that different. I told King Albert II this: Politically speaking, Belgium is the most united country in the world.

There is not a single Belgian who believes you...

I’ll prove it to you in two minutes. I know what a divided country looks like. Look at America. Obama receives 51 percent of the votes and Romney 49 percent. This means that 51 percent of the population believes in climate change, in a weapons ban, in gay marriage, in universal healthcare, and that 49 percent doesn’t. In Belgium this would always be 100 percent against 0. Bart De Wever and Elio Di Rupo are completely of one mind on these issues.

You tell everybody that you love Belgium. Is there anything in this country you do not like?

(Hesitates) I have been asked this question a lot. I am of course the American Ambassador, which means I am not always shown the negative points, but each day I am once again impressed by the people here. They are smart, they share my norms and values, they are only a bit too modest.

These are once again positive things.

Well, I'll tell you something negative. Once I am home in America, the first evening I will always eat Chinese food. That is what I miss in Belgium. Good Chinese food.

You always say that the relationship between Belgium and the United States has improved in the last couple of years. How do you know?

I look at the Gallup poll figures. In 2007 one Belgian had a positive impression of America as opposed to eight negative. Today the ratio is two positive to one negative.

How do you explain this?

Belgium and the US should fundamentally be the best of partners. But partners always have to work on their relationship. Under President Bush we embarked on a very unpopular war (ed. Iraq). Obama's values correspond with Belgium's. That's the difference. Every Belgian would be a Democrat in the United States.

Isn't Flanders' largest party, the N-VA, not closer to the Republicans?

Is the N-VA against the climate, against gun control, against gay marriage? No, the N-VA supports these issues. I don't call them Republicans, I call them Democrats.

Are you disappointed that Obama has failed in strengthening U.S. arms regulations?

He hasn't failed! But this will be a long race. We are only half way. Besides, success is never a case of all or nothing.

What should the end of this race look like?

On this issue, I support the Belgian laws. You are more active hunters than the Americans. In my country, I have never met a hunter, but you don't wear weapons in the street. This could also work in the U.S.

One sensitive issue in the relationship between Belgium and the US are the nuclear weapons in Kleine Brogel. When Wikileaks put this information online, your name emerged.

(fast) This is one of the silliest issues handled by the press. Wikileaks proves two things. First: that none of the so-called revelations of alleged American secrets caused an oh-my-God reaction. What are these so-called revelations? If you say about your neighbor that he is fat, you also prefer that he does not hear it. But I did not see a single shocking alleged revelation. And two: the texts on nuclear topics only prove that America and its allies carefully and diligently work on the protection of the West, in a socially responsible manner. That's what counts. So, the question of what may or may not be at Kleine Brogel is a non-issue.

Isn't it a public secret that there are nuclear weapons in Kleine Brogel?

Do I have any idea? No. I have never been there to check.

There is a lot of activism against these 'silly issues,' on the political level too.

No, you're wrong. The number one activist against nuclear weapons is Barack Obama. No activist in the world has done more to reduce the nuclear threat.

This debate does strengthen the U.S image as a bellicose country.

I don't think so. If someone were to ask me what the greatest power for peace is, I will answer Barack Obama.

You truly are a fan of the president.

No, I'm not. I am a fan of the Washington Redskins. I am an admirer of Obama, because he is conducting the correct policy. If he were wrong, I would no longer be an admirer. But whether or not my football team wins, I will always remain a fan.

Aren't you tired of being addressed as the man who knows Obama personally?

I will never get tired of that. I have been a successful lawyer; I do not out-and-out admire many people. But Obama is the most special person I have ever met.

The Dutch author Geert Mak wrote in his best seller 'Traveling without John' that the American Dream no longer exists. What do you think?

The only thing wrong about the American dream is its name. I would rather call it 'the dream of every parent,' the parent's dream. And this dream still exists, in America, in Belgium, everywhere. My father was an illegal immigrant in New York. When I was 16 years old, I worked as a dishwasher to make some money. Now I live in this residence (is silent for a moment). Elio Di Rupo has a similar story. And that is the dream of every parent.

Your diplomatic career will end when you leave Zinner Street this summer. Or is there a chance that Obama will send you to a different country?

No. When you have been Ambassador to Belgium, you don't want to go anywhere else (smiles). I will return to the United States, but I will often return to Belgium to maintain my contacts.

Something different. You are an expert in the American film world. Can Matthias Schoenaerts make it in Hollywood?

(Resolute) Absolutely! He was fabulous in Loft. And I know the Americans. They will cast him as the bad guy; his face alone. And with his accent he can for example play a Russian perfectly. Bad guys mumble a little. So does Schoenaerts when he speaks Dutch. I did not understand a thing of what he said in Rundskop.

Who is the most famous Belgian in the US?

Kim Clijsters! No question. America loves Kim Clijsters. She not only played tennis very well, she was also a wonderful presence on the court. Kim was a fine ambassador for Belgium.

Last question: Why did Obama not come to Belgium?

He was supposed to come here in 2010, but then the government fell. I had even put West Vleteren beer in the fridge. I eventually sent it to Portugal where he met Herman Van Rompuy for the first time at a NATO summit.

How did he like it?

Well, I never saw the beer again. But I do not know exactly what they did with it (laughs).