

We Work Hard to Rebuild the U.S.-Belgian Partnership

*Interview with U.S. Ambassador Howard Gutman by
Alain Lallemand in Le Soir of June 30, 2010*

(Introduction by Lallemand)

“In Belgium, the United States is not going to celebrate its Independence Day this year but the ‘Belgian-U.S. partnership,’ which is not the same. This is why there will be a full day of public festivities in the Royal Park on Thursday, with even the unexpected opening of the Rue Zinner, which was for years a buffer-zone between an extremely protected Embassy and pedestrians. Since Obama, the tone has changed.

Q: It is a scoop: this year, the U.S. Independence Day in Brussels will be celebrated on July 1 and not on July 4...

Ambassador Gutman: ‘We do not really want to celebrate the United States. What is important is to celebrate the U.S.-Belgian partnership. The other idea is the national holidays often tend to focus on diplomats and Government officials. Yet, our objective is to have better relations between the people, and we want an event where people can participate. This being said, doing this on a Sunday in July is difficult and there were the official ceremonies for the beginning of the Belgian EU Presidency. That is why we chose July 1.’

Q: In a U.S.-style, there will be concerts in the Park of Brussels from noon to 9 p.m. and you will start with a bike ride led by Greg Lemond and Eddy Merckx. It is a strange idea, isn’t it?”

Ambassador Gutman: ‘I hope that the idea is ‘different,’ not strange. The idea was to have something around an activity that both countries like.’

Q: It is remarkable that, since you took office, you have been talking to the Belgian population and in particular to the non-Christian population, and that you have been visiting schools and cities in poor neighborhoods. What would be your message for people who still have resentment for the past?

Ambassador Gutman: 'It is not surprising that, in the eight years before President Obama, the partnership between Belgium and the U.S. suffered, mostly because of our fault. Belgium needed to have a partner which wants to listen and learn more, which shares ideas, gets involved, and works together. My first public visit was to Charleroi then Mechelen the same day, i.e. places where a U.S. Ambassador had never gone but where you can meet people, i.e. people, not the Chamber of Commerce or think tanks. Since then, I have been taking language lessons in French and Dutch and I have traveled to more than one hundred cities and villages where I meet people and rebuild a partnership. You can talk about a partnership with Ministers, but you build a partnership with people.'

Q: Isn't it more difficult to favorably represent your country than one year ago?

Ambassador Gutman: 'I do not think so. During the years before Obama, the United States' popularity was at a record low. As an individual, Obama is and remains very popular. The country is in between. More popular than in the past, when we had made mistakes in that partnership – but it remains less popular than the President. Besides, I think that people know that we work hard on that partnership. We were serious in Copenhagen, serious with our decision to leave Iraq, on progress to accomplish on Guantanamo, on progress in the Middle East, and on financial reform. The key is to remain focused on a correct scale: think about the position of our country and about the level of Belgian-U.S. cooperation on the day Obama was elected, and think about where we are today. When Obama was elected, Americans were wondering whether they should not transfer their money from one bank to the other for fear that their bank would fail. Today, we no longer talk about this but about taxing banks. In the field of peace and security, think about our relationship with Russia, the signing of START, and common work on common dossiers like Iran. In the Middle East, when Obama was elected, people were talking about bombs in busses and skirmishes on the border. Now we are talking about the pace of peace talks, no longer about the pace of violence. On each dossier, the partnership is making progress. It is true that there is still some work to do, whether climate, financial regulation, Iranian and Korean nuclear dossiers, and Afghanistan.'

Q: In the coming two years, what will be the pending dossiers between Belgium and the United States?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Belgium is a wonderful partner and this partnership is for the time being spectacular. We want to know how we can help Belgium and I ask that question at each meeting. I often hear that Belgium is a small country, that it does not have much money, etc. But Belgium is the most credible country I know. Belgium does not speak loud on the international scene, except when it has something to say. Therefore, on all these challenges that we face, this Belgian credibility can help the partner conduct some policies: helping close Guantanamo, helping enforce sanctions against Iran, helping solve the Afghan problem, and helping rally other countries around the table on climate change. Belgium can play that role because it has a genuine credibility.’