



‘I am here to reinforce the partnership between Belgium and the United States’

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But did he do it?

Almost four years ago, Howard Gutman, who was then a prominent Washington lawyer, was named U.S. Ambassador to Belgium by Barack Obama. It was an honor for this longtime Democrat who had participated in the new President’s campaign as an advisor and a fundraiser. He arrived in Brussels in mid August of 2009.

Obama’s foreign policy priority during his first mandate was to restore the United States’ image after eight years under George W. Bush. The latter’s policies had shocked Europe: refusal of the Kyoto Protocol, Guantanamo, statements on the ‘axis of evil,’ invasion of Iraq, etc. A climax was reached when Defense Secretary

Donald Rumsfeld made fun of ‘Old Europe’ – i.e. Germany, France, and Belgium – which he criticized for allegedly not doing enough in the war on terror.

To restore the U.S. image, former State Secretary Hillary Clinton spent more than 400 days abroad between 2009 and 2012, which is a record. In Belgium, Howard Gutman also set a challenge for himself: visiting all 589 Belgian communes. The reason was that he did not only want to engage with political leaders but also with the people.

Thanks to his communication skills – he played in TV series – Belgians saw him shrimp fishing in Oostduinkerke, carrying the Meyboom in Brussels, throwing nuts in Bastogne, discussing with students at the Serge Creuze school in Molenbeek, applauding the Doudou combat in Mons, having fun on Flemish TV talks shows, and arriving incognito in small villages. On May 5, the Ambassador concluded his U.S.-Belgian Partnership Tour with a visit to Fourons, followed by a reception in the presence of Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo. To prove that he had visited all communes, the Ambassador each time got his picture taken together with someone he had met.

While he has successfully completed his tour of Belgium, did Howard Gutman contribute to restoring Uncle Sam’s image? He claims he did, pointing out polls by Gallup. In 2007, 8 percent of Belgians had a favorable opinion of the U.S. leadership in the world while 65 percent had an unfavorable opinion and 27 percent had no opinion. In 2012, 46 percent had a favorable opinion, 22 percent had an unfavorable opinion, and 32 percent had no opinion. And it is in Belgium that the increase in favorable opinions was the highest. ‘What was important was to highlight what fundamentally shapes our relationship. We share the same values of freedom, democracy, and prosperity,’ the Ambassador explains.

Tanguy Struye, Professor of international relations at UCL, considers that ‘this initiative did indeed contribute to reinforcing the relationship, even if it was more about style than substance. And on substance, it is different. There are things on which we agree but there are also disagreements between the United States and Europe.’ GMOs, hormone-treated beef, and a tax on financial transactions are just a few examples. Another important element in the future will be a possible free trade agreement.

Actually, it is in the economic field where there still remain gaps in Belgian-American relations. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce continues to consider that the

Belgian (investment) climate is not very exciting: high labor costs, high taxes, and high energy costs. U.S. investments in Belgium are on a downward trend. Besides, two American businesses who have been present in Belgium since 1965 will shut down or undergo a major restructuring, i.e. Ford Genk and Caterpillar in Gosselies. The Ambassador considers that one should not view this as the U.S. pulling out but as an economic necessity. 'Ford was forced to cut its capacity in the U.S. by 22 percent between 2006 and 2009,' Howard Gutman points out.

Howard Gutman will leave his job at the end of July and will become a consultant. For sure Buggenhout will remember him. Indeed, the commune has built a monument for him and in honor of the Belgian-U.S. friendship.