

Belgium and the U.S: A Partnership That Respects Rights and Preserves Security

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Thank you so much for your wonderful introduction. Mayor Vandenhove has been a friend of mine since near to my arrival in Belgium and I thank him for his friendship.

And thanks so much to the "Police Academy" for the honor of appearing today.

It is indeed an honor. For I have researched the previous 7 speakers since the founding of the speaker series at the Academy in 2003 and they have all been Belgians with long roots in the law enforcement community.

I am the first American, the first Ambassador.

But the truth is that in 2010, an American ambassador and the European law enforcement community, the security community, have a great deal to discuss. We both share much concern about a still far too dangerous planet.

And the painful truth is that for much of the past 8 years, before the election of President Obama, we had not really spoken to one another. It has been a long time since we listened to one another. Since we have heard each other.

And that is what Barack Obama knew, when he called me last year and told me he wanted me to represent him and the United States in Belgium. He told me that he believed people in Belgium, in Europe and around the world were taking a new look at America.

The question was what would they see. Would they see our renewed commitment to dialogue and to partnership? To listening and not always speaking, and to never lecturing?

Would they see our commitment to a better planet not just for our children, but for theirs, and for all among the brotherhood of man? Would they see the integrity of our words; the transparency of our deeds? Would they believe what we had to say?

And even if they did see it, even if they did believe it,
Even if you do see it, even if you do believe it in Belgium, at the Police Academy, what then?

Would you accept our openness as a sign of admiration and respect, or mock it as weakness?

Would you trust us and come for the ride even when what we ask is difficult, as I hope we always will do for you? Will we be there for each other?

Will we be able to work together to make the planet safer - or police officers in St.-Truiden or Detroit, for families in St. Truiden or Detroit, and will we be able to do so in a manner which makes us both proud?

We of course will never demand, and indeed never really ask. Rather, we will discuss. Partners discuss. And we can only march forward as partners.

But when we discuss, will we as partners get to "yes?"

Not to "maybe." Not to "we are busy, come back later." Not to "let's see what others do."

But to "yes." Will we get to "yes?"

History instructs that these should not be difficult questions. The graves of hundreds of young American soldiers at Flanders Field who died fighting with Belgians in World War I; the more than 13,000 American soldiers buried in Belgium in World War II, and the devotion of the thousands of Belgian families who have adopted those gravesites stand as a daily tribute to our past as the closest of allies.

But the past ñ even for dear allies -- does not automatically become prologue. Allies must always renew their bond through mutual respect and mutual interest. In the last several years, we had caused that bond to weaken. So history alone would not get us to "yes, together."

And I knew from the crowds in Berlin and from the roar of the cheer that swept across Europe that President Obama was rightfully respected, rightfully admired, rightfully beloved. He is indeed a rock star. But that left a gap between feelings for the man as opposed to for the country that he leads . . . or for the policies he must pursue.

Can we close that gap as partners so that support runs not just to individuals, but to the collectives that they lead? To be about policy ñ sometimes difficult and never certain -- and not just about personality?

And those questions are particularly important when we talk about and with law enforcement. Because we share that common concern for a still far too dangerous planet -- one in which networks of criminals and terrorists are now global and not local; where threats exist in a part of our solar system that none of us learned about in school called cyberspace; where technologies provide potential for immense destructive power;

And yet where citizens -- in Detroit and St.-Truiden -- still value their privacy and deserve respect for their individual dignity.

I have spent ten months learning the answers to these questions about whether we can close the gap that erupted over the past 8 years and left our relationship headed in the wrong direction. I have spent 10 months learning how strong the Belgian-American partnership can and should be.

I have spent and will continue to spend an hour each morning, each day, studying French one morning and Dutch the next, to be a better listener and a better partner.

I have travelled through all of Belgium, from Knokke to Bree, from Tournai to Dinant to Bulligen,

shaking hands and listening to Belgians, in search of these answers. For partnerships can be discussed in Minister's offices, in Parliament and in chateaus . . .

But partnerships are built with the people . . . all people. With counts and barons, CEOs and lawyers, and with mothers who would gladly work two jobs to provide for their families, but cannot find even one. And perhaps at the top of the list, partnerships are built with those in this room -- those charged with ensuring our mutual security while respecting our mutual passion for privacy and liberty.

Along this path, I have been greeted warmly by most. Long welcomes. Huge ovations.

And, yes, I have been mocked by a few . . . still skeptical about who we are and what we want . . . about whether anything has changed.

And from the skeptics I have thereby learned that I must work only harder. We must work harder together.

Because the answers are there. . .

The answers are about our future . . .

Our future together. About our mutual pursuit of security. About our mutual passion for privacy and liberty.

The answers about our future and our partnership are everywhere I have travelled -- on the beach in Oostende, in the port of Zeebrugge, under the monument in Ieper, at the Carnivale in Aalst, near the Krackling in Geerardsbergen, with law students in Kortrijk, on the port in Antwerp, next to Kim Clijsters in Bree, mourning lost school children in Mortsel, by the canals in Ghent, next to the Belfry in Brugge, under the carillon in Mechelen, at the racetrack in Waregem, at a designer's shop in Hasselt, next to Fonske in Leuven . . . The answers are there.

Amidst the Cathedral in Tournai, at the Dou Dou in Mons, at midfield at the Standard Game, in the Christmas Village and Sunday market in Liege, at a corporate headquarters in Wavre, in a café in Nivelles, along the Meuse in Dinant, at a fair in Namur, with the Gilles in Binche, among technical students and firefighters in Charleroi, in the underground garage at Louvain-La-Neuve, in the town square in Malmedy, in a housing project in Amay, standing at attention in Neupre . . .

At Memorials in Bastogne, and Bullingen and Butchenbach . . .

At the Mannekin Pis, Cinquantenaire, in Molenbeek and Cureghem. And so much more.

The answers are there. I heard them. I saw them. I hear them and see them daily.

I learned that Belgians and Americans today indeed share common values. We share common goals. Common ends. A belief in common means to those ends.

We share not just a history on the battlefield. Not just undying gratitude particularly among a generation too close to dying.

We share not just respect for a transformative figure in history. Not just applause for a rock star.

But common values. Common goals. Common ends. A belief in common means to those ends.

And with proper communication and understanding, sharing common values, sharing common goals, common ends, a belief in common means to those ends, it means we should be able to tackle together the common problems . . . the world's problems that we face together.

Given who we each are and what we believe, if we fully understand each other, we should agree on what we need to do.

Indeed, common values and common policies, leading us to tackle common problems . . . together. .

America under Barack Obama shared them with Belgium under Verhofstadt, with Von Rompuy, with Leterme, and with . . . tomorrow.

Two countries, one script, one page.

Whether your name is di Rupo, or De Wever or de Obama . . .

Who does not believe in the dignity of mankind? In peace before war? In social justice? In women's rights? In saving our planet for our children?

Who does not believe in climate and the need to pursue a binding and lasting agreement to limit our carbon? In the need to close Guantanamo and to do so now? In finalizing the withdrawal from Iraq? In ending gender violence in the Congo? In seeking peace and security for all in the Middle East?

Who does not seek to prevent nuclear threats from North Korea and Iran? Who does not support the restoration of functioning civil society in Afghanistan?

And as this audience well understands, who does not believe in the pursuit and prevention of terror, in making our streets safe, in a manner which makes us not simply secure but proud about our shared values?

Can it really be true? Do we share common policies? Surely you know Mr. Ambassador that we value our privacy from government intrusion? Surely you understand that that is why we have had a problem with the Terrorist Financing Tracking Program. With sharing information about bank transactions even though the information could help track terrorists?

Of course, I understand and Barack Obama and his America value the privacy of the individual as well. In fact, the new National Security Strategy that President Obama released in May discusses this very issue ñ the importance of protecting civil liberties and privacy as integral to the vibrancy of our democracy and the exercise of our hard earned freedom.

And the negotiations that have produced a proposed resolution on SWIFT have indeed protected such liberties and privacy. But that proposed SWIFT agreement needs to be adopted and implemented now ñ and I emphasize now.

No one should be a louder chorus supporting moving forward now with this agreement than this group

in front of me today. We sometimes forget that the financial data that had been gathered about the financing of terror by Swift provided leads not just to protect Detroit or New York, but also provided 1300 leads about potential terrorist events right here in Europe.

And such terror has not taken a vacation during this period when our ability jointly to track the financing of potential terrorist events has been blinded. We were all saddened in March when the terrorist group ETA claimed the life of a French policeman in Paris.

We need to move forward on the SWIFT agreement now and your voices could help ensure that we do.

Can it really be true? Do we share common values and common policies? Should we really be tackling common problems together? Surely you know Mr. Ambassador that our ports of Antwerp and Zeebrugge are part of the lifeblood of who we are. The UN and the US have announced sanctions of Iranian ships this week, and Europe will soon be adopting sanctions as well. Sanctions require host countries to be responsible for the identity of cargo, undertaking searches and thereby subjecting commerce to additional regulation. Restricting commerce that way can harm the pocketbooks of some given our ports of Antwerp and Zeebrugge.

Yes I understand. In fact the problem is a serious one. Unbeknownst to many Belgians, 72 Iranian ships are serviced at Belgian ports each year ñ more than one a week. The story finally broke publicly this week on Saturday in Le Soir, in an article headlined "Who Will Stop the Sepanta?"

I quote from the article: "At the moment when new commercial sanctions against Iran are being decided, a hide and seek game is taking place between Iranian ships and Western authorities. And this game is also taking place in Belgium: this Wednesday, June 16, at the moment when the U.S. Treasury published its list of sanctions targeting, among others, the new Iranian front HDS lines and its cargo ships ñ whose names had been changed to elude the sanctions ñ one of the ships on Washington's list, the Sepanta, formerly named Iran Ardebil, quietly left the port of Antwerp without being stopped. But it might be a different story on August 4, when the Sepanta will again try to enter the port of Antwerp." The article describes as well the Sewak, former known as Iran Fars which will be at Belgian ports on June 30 and more.

I realize that cooperating with an international effort to stop Iranian shipping presents particular challenges for Belgium given the importance of the industry here. I realize as well that there is nobody who less wants to be exploited by Iran in trying to foster its illicit nuclear program than Belgium. Indeed, here too, we share common values and common policies and we should be tackling common problems together.

Belgium and America agree together to our cores that we must do all we can to avoid the chaos in the Middle East that will ensue from a nuclear-ready Iran under President Ahmadinejad. Belgium and America agree that we must do all we can to ensure peace and stability in the Middle East. And avoid options that would not only totally undermine commerce and reap far more havoc on an economy heavily dependent on ports, but would also threaten the security of our children. Belgians and Americans jointly understand the importance of the U.N. Security Council efforts to persuade Iran to fulfill its international obligations and demonstrate the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. So we need to work together now with regard to Iranian ships in the ports in Belgium.

Given that we share common values and common policies, we have so much work to do together. We have a future to build together. And this time, we have to get it right.

And we have to get it right together.

We need each other to achieve our shared goals.

As I travel Belgium, I often hear protests that Belgium is but a small country. That Belgium has relatively little manpower, relatively little funding. How can Belgium be needed to achieve our shared goals?

You see, of course Belgium has a limited budget and limited manpower. But, though Belgium may be short on men and dollars, Belgium leads in credibility. I knew that and said that long before Europe decided that Herman Van Rompuy should lead Europe. Before Karl de Gucht was chosen as Trade representative. Before Guy Verhofstadt proved to be a leading figure in the European Parliament.

Belgium does not speak that often or that loudly. Belgium does not speak with a hidden agenda. When Belgium speaks on the international stage, it does so for only one reason: it has something to say.

So when Belgium speaks, people listen. Belgium indeed leads in credibility. It is that credibility that Belgian can provide as we work together to reach our shared goals. Credibility often expressed in actions ñ though perhaps involving fewer men and fewer dollars. But when Belgium acts, it is a clarion call to some. A shining example to all.

If Belgium made the call, that it is time to get terrorist financing information in the hands of all those in law enforcement who need it. . . If Belgium made the call that the streets of Mumbai, London deserve better. . . If Belgium made the call that threats to its welfare and the safety of its citizens must be met by tracking the funding of terror along with guarantees to protect privacy, who would not answer?

In reaching our shared goal of a peaceful and secure planet, free from the threat of nuclear horrors, if Belgium made the call by stopping the ships, if Belgium can do it, if the home of Antwerp can do it, none have an excuse. For when we are discussing a nuclear Iran, can we afford any excuse?

There are some who tell me that I fail to see the problems Belgium itself faces. They claim problems of a dysfunctional society barely able to follow, let alone lead. That is not the Belgium I see as it enters its European Presidency. I have just witnessed what every society strives for: a democratic election, with energized citizens, free and active media, and statesmanship everywhere. I have just witnessed the strength of this democracy. A democracy that can help lead.

I will keep travelling, keep learning, keep listening. I will find surprises everywhere. I will find lessons. Indeed, I found lessons two weeks ago. I found them in Molenbeek. And I thought those lessons might be of particular interest to this gathering.

Muslim community outreach is a major part of our mission. After years of East v. West being pitted

against each other, Barack Obama spent 57 minutes in Cairo and changed all of our outlooks.

We have to continue to unite East and West.

So I went once again to Molenbeek ñ my third trip. But this time to Serge Creuz School. 100% Multicultural. Perhaps 70% Muslim. Maybe 20% girls in headscarves. I did not know what to expect as an American Ambassador in Molenbeek, at Serge Creuz school.

But I know what I found. I know what I received. It surprised me. It is on YouTube. Watch it. It will shock you.

I have received wonderful greetings and ovations throughout Belgium. But none louder. None longer than at Serge Creuz. None louder or longer than in Molenbeek. For an American ambassador.

And there they sang our National Anthem. Hand on heart. Loud and clearly. The Star Spangled Banner. The camera on YouTube pans through the students, the girls with head scarves as together we sing. And then, they sang the Belgium National Anthem.

And, of all the groups I have met in Belgium, they knew it the best. Every word. Watch it on YouTube. They are part of the future of Belgium. They are part of the future of the East-West relationship. They are part of our future together, a safer and more prosperous future together.

Thanks so much and all the best.