

The Most Important Country . . .

February 11, 2010

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Cercle Gaulois, Brussels

J'ai tellement de respect pour la langue française bien parlée que je continuerai en anglais.

Thank you so much Pierre both for your wonderful introduction and for your friendship since Michelle and I arrived in Belgium. And thank you so much to the Cercle Gaulois for the honor of appearing today. I have been to the club many times, and cherish the friendships I have made in the club. Indeed, in Belgium, to me there are only two types of people—those who have already become dear friends and those who-will-soon-become-dear friends.

I want to tell you about two recent conversations I had. Conversations that speak much about Belgium and Belgian-U.S. relations. Conversations that I believe reflect much about the future of Belgium.

The first conversation occurred the week before last, when I visited for the first time with Laurette Onkelinx. I told her that I thought she could be the most important woman in the world. I told her that if my President were first, she could be the second most important person in the world. She laughed. I was completely serious.

The other conversation occurred the week before that, when I visited with Elio Di Rupo in Mons. I told Mr. Di Rupo that I thought that Mons could be the most important city for the world's economic recovery. He smiled politely. I was completely serious.

So I came to Cercle Gaulois today to tell you indeed that Laurette Onkelinx could be the second most important person in the world. But it need not be her – it could be any one of many Belgians – Mr. Flahaut, or certain other Francophone socialists, or other Francophones or Minister Vanhengel or other members of the Kern cabinet or Mr. Vanackere or Mr. Leterme. Any could be the second most important person in the world. And I came to Cercle Gaulois to tell you also that Mons could be the city most critical to the world's economic recovery.

I imagine even before I explain that you are already wondering what sort of dreamer Barack Obama sent to be the Ambassador from the United States to the Kingdom of Belgium. And I assure you, having been a leading business lawyer and government advisor for 27 years in Washington DC, I have never been known as a dreamer. I was not dreaming when I met a young African American Senator named Barack Obama, who asked me in January 2007 to visit with him for an hour to talk about his soon-to-be-announced campaign for President of the United States. I did not want to go, but neither did I want to be rude. I went that evening to tell him that I could not support him in his run for President.

I never delivered that message. Rather, later that evening, after an hour with Senator Obama, I went home and told Michelle that I had just met the next President of the United States.

Because after spending an hour with Barack Obama, you recognize that the world can be a better place today than it was yesterday and that tomorrow can be even better still. And that was no dream.

My wife asked me whether I really thought our country was ready for an African-American president. And I told her that, in the entire hour that I had spent with Obama, it never occurred to me that he was African American. That I believed that the U.S. would finally understand that the problems that we face that unite us are far greater than any differences or prejudices that have previously divided us. And that too was no dream.

When the President called me last March to thank me for my friendship, he told me that he believed people 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 focusing on the common humanity of people from all around our planet. Would they see the integrity of our words; the transparency of our hearts. I was deeply honored by the President's call, and honored to be part of what you all see when you take a fresh look at America, along with Michelle, and the other members of my Embassy. So I have vowed during the next three years to visit each city, commune and village in Belgium, those who always see American Ambassadors and those who never dreamed of seeing one. And I have worked hard each morning, taking French lessons one day and Dutch lessons the next.

And can't you feel it already. Can't you just touch it? The feeling of renewed friendship and partnership between Belgium and America, that is traveling through the Grand Place in Brussels, up to the port in Antwerp, through the hills of the Ardennes, along the river in Dinant, to Namur and yes . . . to the Cercle Gaulois.

So where do those roads lead, and how do they lead to Laurette Onkelinx possibly being the most important woman in the world or to many other Belgians possibly being the second most important person in the world? And how do they lead to Mons potentially being the most important city for the world's economic recovery?

You see, I believe Belgium -- all of Belgium -- and the United States agree as partners on the leading issues of the day. On Afghanistan, on the need to close Guantanamo, on climate as an imperative that must be dealt with today, and on so much more.

Consider Afghanistan. As explained in detail in President Obama's recent speech about Afghanistan and in his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, the United States and Belgium agree that the problem of terror must be addressed. That no one from Anderlecht should ever be crushed in rubble simply because he chose to work in an office tower on September 11. That the United States and all Belgians agree that no one should threaten to blow up the Grand Place because of differences over head scarf policies.

And Belgium -- all of Belgium -- and the United States agree that there is no military solution to the problem of terror and of Taliban influence in Afghanistan. Rather, civilian reconstruction and enhanced civilian law enforcement are the best prospects for enabling Afghans to reclaim and maintain meaningful control within Afghanistan and preventing the export of terror. That is why President Obama has tripled the number of deployed U.S. civilians and anticipates further increasing

our civilian staffing in 2010 by another 20 to 30 percent, concentrating experts in the field and at key ministries that deliver vital services to the Afghan people.

More than 30 years of war have left Afghanistan's economic and social sectors devastated.

Recognizing that "nation-building" is best left to the Afghan people, our stabilization and economic development programs are narrowly focused on helping Afghans begin to repair this damage, rebuild critical infrastructure, and provide a foundation for sustainable economic growth. Civilian reconstruction and enhanced civilian law enforcement are the best prospects for continuing the progress that has been made – where 900,000 boys alone were allowed under Taliban rule to attend school, 6 million Afghani children, including 2 million Afghani girls now attend school. Where the infant mortality rate has dropped by 22 percent. Where over 85 percent of the population now has access to some form of health care. Where 50 percent of the judiciary has been trained through USAID-sponsored programs. Where more than 70,000 loans have been extended to women-owned businesses. The emphasis on civilian reconstruction and enhanced civilian law enforcement is the reason why the head of the United States Agency for International Development and the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture have spent so much time in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was once a thriving agricultural society, and it must return to a functioning agricultural society to allow Afghans to lock in such successes and to foreclose the paths of terror.

And Belgium – all of Belgium – and the United States agree that no agriculture worker, no teacher, no police trainer, and no civilian reconstruction worker of any sort should be placed at an unacceptable risk. That civilian reconstruction requires that fundamental security must be guaranteed and that in turn requires an increased commitment of military forces – including Afghan forces -- designed to guarantee such security for the civilian reconstruction. And thus, the call for increased military is not in the belief that a military solution will be achieved by itself, but rather to provide the protection, security and trained and effective Afghan military and police that will allow the civilian reconstruction to take place.

So Barack Obama did his part – after 7 weeks of careful study he announced the path ahead necessary to provide the best chance of achieving this success in Afghanistan. We all need to commit the police and military trainers, the agriculture workers, the civilian reconstructors to give Afghanistan its chance. And we all need to commit the increased military designed to guarantee security for such civilian reconstruction.

So how do we now rally Europe, and rally all of the ISAF partners, to achieve these goals. Many could lead the way. And certainly Laurette Onkelinx or Mr. Flahaut or many francophones could lead the way. For if a respected Francophone Socialist, or a respected Francophone minister or a respected member of the Kern, proclaimed the need to join the effort – to work together to achieve the necessary civilian reconstruction and the enhanced military presence to assure the requisite security for the reconstruction effort, then the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Defense Minister and all of Belgium would march forward.

And if Belgium marched forward, who would not join? What country would retreat if Belgium marched forward? You see, some say Belgium is but a small country. What difference, they ask, does it make if Belgium adds for example a mere 30 or 50 police trainers and 50 or 100 or 120 more military to the huge effort?

Those people undervalue Belgium. Those people sell Belgium short. I will never undervalue Belgium. I will never sell Belgium short.

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. Belgium does not speak that often or that loudly. Belgium does not speak with a hidden agenda. So when Belgium speaks, people listen. Belgium indeed leads in credibility.

So if Laurette Onkelinx marched forward, if a dedicated Francophone Socialist marched forward, who in Belgium would not join? Or Mr. De Vriendt or Minister Vanhengel marched forward? Or if Foreign Minister Vanackere or Prime Minister Leterme marched forward supported by Francophones, who would not join?

And if Belgium marched forward, if Belgium led, who in Europe, who in ISAF, would not join?

Of course, there is no demand— partners do not demand, they discuss. But given Belgium's immense credibility within the partnership of nations, Belgium's participation in the increased civilian reconstruction and law enforcement efforts – and in the increased military effort designed to provide the security framework to allow such reconstruction efforts to proceed – would be very meaningful.

And similarly, Laurette Onkelinx, indeed any dedicated and respected Belgian politician could lead on the closing of Guantanamo. You see, all of Europe has long understood that Guantanamo prison camp was morally wrong, ethically wrong and legally wrong and should be closed. President Obama well agreed and undertook to close it even as he was being sworn into office. And with all of Europe and the United States agreeing on what should be done and what must be done, one year later, we have all failed. For after handling those who must be tried and face imprisonment, and handling some particular geographic cases, roughly 50 would remain needing to find new homes. And though many countries, including Belgium, thanks, have already taken prisoners, every time a country tries to take one more by itself, difficulty ensues. The local citizens feel that they alone are being asked to assume a new burden.

So it seems far easier for none to act alone. Easier for all to act together. And with the United States agreeing to have trials for and accepting responsibility for the 40 or so who present the real danger and must be tried, those countries that have already successfully taken one can work together and divide the rest, by taking just 2 or 3 apiece. And Guantanamo would be closed in three weeks. The world would be ethically, morally and legally better by working together to relocate just 2 or 3 people apiece.

Who can lead that world progress along that moral path? Many could lead the way. And certainly for example Laurette Onkelinx or many Francophones could lead the way. For again, if a respected Francophone Socialist or a respected Justice Minister or Kern member or Foreign Minister or Prime Minister proclaimed the need to work together on a moral path, then the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Justice Minister and all of Belgium would march forward.

And if Belgium marched forward, who would not join? What country would retreat on Guantanamo if

Belgium marched forward? With Belgian credibility, never sell Belgium short.

The same analysis applies relating to almost all the problems that unite us – on Iranian sanctions, on forcing countries to work together on climate, on fundamental security. Yes, I was indeed absolutely serious when I told Laurette Onkelinx or other respected Belgian leaders could be the second most important person in the world. Could anyone here now disagree?

And I was no dreamer either when I told Mr. Di Rupo that Mons could be the most important city for the world's economic recovery. You see, we have in one year largely restored the fundamental confidence in the banking system. We have largely restored liquidity. We have put the tools in place to lift the world up. But the United States has nearly 10 percent unemployment; the EU is also at 10%; Flanders has over 7 percent and sees more layoffs in sight; and Wallonia struggles with even far greater.

We have to put people back to work. We have to get them working now. And it would be best if we got them working together. If we got them working everywhere. If we grew together because, fundamentally, prosperity breeds prosperity. Development breeds development. Spending breeds spending. And we certainly cannot afford to leave anyone behind. We can only truly succeed at the pace of our slowest runner. Yes, the challenges that we face that unite us are indeed far greater than any difference that could divide us.

So we need to put people everywhere back to work. But they cannot go back to many of the old jobs. They cannot go back to those jobs that were lost, not because of a financial crisis, but because time, lifestyle and climate passed them by. For to a large extent, the crisis was created for many not by the sudden collapse of real estate mortgages, but by the slow deterioration of industries and mines focused more on their past heydays than on their dismal futures.

So this time --for Charleroi, for factories in Antwerp, for Detroit and for so many more – we have to get it right and we have to get it right together. Clearly a financial economic recovery based on real international cooperation, transparency and lasting meaningful reform is necessary. Without such internationally coordinated reform, no lasting recovery is possible. But such financial reform is not enough. This time, we need to see a little further down the road and we need to look there together.

Thus where others see crisis, true leaders see opportunity. Inherent in the collapse is the opportunity to rebuild it and to build it better. To honor the past by transitioning to job-creating industries of the future – technology, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, agri-bio foods, clean energy. And in so doing, we can leave no one behind. Because in these fields –in a world of technology and alternative energy, of research and information – if you can build it in New York or Paris or Brussels or Mumbai, you can build it in Newark New Jersey or in Charleroi.

And indeed, they are building it in Mons – today, right now, as we speak. We are indeed building it there together. For in the past 3 years, Mons has become the home to Microsoft, to Hewlett Packard, to Google. Together, we are leaving the past and entering the future.

And where Microsoft, Hewlett Packard and Google go, others follow. Vendors and contractors – all focusing together on the future. And if they build a center in Mons or in Charleroi, they often build a

second and a third, in Bree or in Gent or Antwerp, or in Namur or in Bastogne. And when they do, local Belgian companies grow to service them, and then grow to service them as well in Silicon Valley and in Boston and in Northern Virginia. And with the companies of the future growing together on both sides of the Atlantic, our partnership, always historically strong, just grows stronger. And we all march back to work . . . together. Just ask Rudy Demotte, who has long trumpeted such a Marshall Plan 2.0. But ask as well Kris Peeters, who again next week, leads an investment pilgrimage to California. Ask technology centers in Namur and in Gent. Ask Charles Piqué who searches for such complementary solutions for Brussels and even for Anderlecht.

So, indeed, as many understand, Mons is the type of example that the whole world needs to follow. And, yes. I was indeed absolutely serious when I told Elio Di Rupo that Mons could be the most important city for the world's economic recovery. Could anyone here now disagree?

As a lawyer in Washington for the past 27 years, I had many clients at any given time. As the United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Belgium, I now have but two clients: the United States and Belgium. I revel when both thrive. I despair when either falters. And I will not request anything of either that I believe would benefit only one at the expense of the other. I will never oversell the country I have long loved, but similarly will never undersell the country I am growing to love. Having Belgium and the United States work together on Afghanistan, on Guantanamo, on global economic recovery and much more is indeed a win-win for both countries and for the planet. The problems that we face that unite us are indeed far greater than the differences that divide us.