

The Partnership Tour: Completing Walloon Brabant

May 22, 2012

Ambassador Howard Gutman
Castle La Hulpe

Madame Governor, Dear Friend President Flahaut, President Michel, Mayors, Aldermen, Distinguished Guests and Good Friends—

Madame le Gouverneur, Cher Ami le Président Flahaut, Cher Président Michel, Chers Bourgmestres, Chers Membres de Conseils Communaux, Chers Invités d'Honneur et Bons Amis-

Michelle and I are delighted to be here today among such wonderful friends and in this magnificent setting to continue to celebrate the Belgian-American partnership and the completion of this first phase of my Belgian-American Partnership Tour. What a fabulous setting in which to celebrate the completion of my having visited every city in a province, the wonderful and young province of Walloon Brabant. I have now visited 436 cities throughout Belgium, and with our visit to Orp-Jauche earlier today, I have visited every official city, village or commune in Walloon Brabant, making it the first province I have completed. Let me also apologize for my poor French that I hope is not too difficult on your ears. Since I arrived almost 3 years ago, I started taking language lessons for an hour per day, 5 days a week, one day French and the next day Dutch. I am obviously not a good student, but I will continue to work on both languages and will also use English to rescue us all for part of my brief comments today.

Michelle et moi sommes ravis d'être ici aujourd'hui entourés d'amis formidables et dans ce cadre magnifique afin de continuer à célébrer le partenariat belgo-américain ainsi que l'achèvement de cette première phase de ma tournée de partenariat belgo-américain. Quel décor fabuleux pour fêter l'achèvement de ma visite de toutes les villes d'une province, la magnifique et jeune province de Brabant wallon. J'ai maintenant visité 436 villes à travers la Belgique, et avec notre visite à Orp-Jauche plus tôt dans la journée, j'ai visité toutes les villes, tous les villages ou communes dans le Brabant wallon, ce qui en fait la première province que j'ai terminé de visiter. Permettez-moi aussi de vous présenter mes excuses pour mon mauvais français qui j'espère n'est pas trop pénible pour vos oreilles. Depuis mon arrivée il y a presque 3 ans, j'ai commencé à prendre des cours de langue, une heure par jour, 5 jours par semaine, le français un jour, le néerlandais le lendemain. Je ne suis clairement pas un bon élève, mais je vais continuer à travailler sur les deux langues et j'utiliserai également l'anglais pour nous sauver tous pendant une partie de mon bref discours aujourd'hui.

There are two reasons for our decision to visit every Belgian city. The original reason and the more official reason was to rebuild our partnership—the Belgian-American partnership. After I arrived in Belgium in 2009, I noted that our partnership had historically been rock solid, having witnessed American soldiers dying on Belgian battlefields during two world wars, the efforts of the Commission for Relief in Belgium to prevent Belgian suffering during World War I, and much more. Yet I recognized that partnerships could never be taken for granted and that partners have to always continue to work hard with mutual respect for the good of both to keep the partnership thriving. I acknowledged back in mid 2009 that, truth be told, our partnership had suffered and had diverged on such issues as the then Kyoto climate talks, the then war in Iraq, or the tactics that had been once used at Guantanamo. I noted that American tourists, ex-pats or business people had become reticent to be identified as Americans and I looked forward to the day when Americans would once again

proudly wear Boston Red Sox tee shirts in the Grand Place and carry their American guide books face up.

I noted when I arrived that we were here to be better partners, better listeners and better learners than we had been. To do that, to rebuild the partnership, we had to meet the people, not just in the capital but everywhere. I noted that bridges can be discussed with Ministers, but they are built with citizens, with the people throughout Belgium. So we vowed to visit every official Belgian city, village and commune.

Quand je suis arrivé j'ai noté que nous étions ici pour être de meilleurs partenaires, pour mieux s'écouter et mieux apprendre (que pendant les dix années qui ont précédé la présidence d'Obama.) Pour ce faire, pour reconstruire le partenariat, nous devons rencontrer les gens, pas seulement dans la capitale, mais partout. J'ai noté qu'on peut discuter de ponts avec des ministres, mais la construction de ponts se fait avec les citoyens, avec le peuple à travers la Belgique. Nous nous sommes donc engagés à visiter chaque ville, chaque village et chaque commune belges.

Today we have finished visiting every official city in Walloon Brabant. And now, not only back in the Grand Place, but on the mighty steps in Waterloo, at the market in Nivelles, throughout Walloon Brabant and throughout Belgium, Americans are again wearing their Boston Red Sox tee shirts. Although it has not yet gotten much attention in the Belgian press, I am proud to announce that in the recently released poll by the Meridian International Center and Gallup, that of every country in the world, Belgium finished first in the world with the highest percentage increase in 2011 in its favorability rating of US leadership. Only three countries in the world recorded double digit increases in 2011 in their favorable views of US leadership and Belgium had the highest in the world with a 15% increase. From a seemingly low favorability-unfavorability of 8% favorable and 65% unfavorable before the last election, Belgians now have a 46%-22%, more than 2 to 1, favorable view of U.S. leadership. Our partnership is back.

Which brings me to the second and less formal reason for our decision to visit every Belgian city. As Michelle and I began our travels, we soon learned that there is nothing more enjoyable than being the number 1 tourists in Belgium. On every trip, we see beauty in town squares, in castles, in folklore, and mainly in the people. We often get to meet the mayors and government officials who are working hard for a better future for their citizens; we meet proud parents and eager students and Belgians everywhere who always bring such warmth that we never have to worry about the weather.

Ce qui m'amène à la deuxième raison -- moins formelle celle-là -- pour notre décision de visiter toutes les villes belges. Quand Michelle et moi avons commencé nos voyages, nous avons vite appris qu'il n'y a rien de plus agréable que d'être des touristes en première loge en Belgique. À chaque voyage, nous voyons la beauté dans les places, dans les châteaux, dans le folklore, et surtout dans les gens. Nous avons souvent l'occasion de rencontrer les bourgmestres et les responsables gouvernementaux qui travaillent dur pour un avenir meilleur pour leurs citoyens; nous rencontrons des parents fiers et des étudiants désireux d'apprendre, et des Belges partout qui apportent tellement de chaleur que nous n'avons jamais à nous soucier de la météo.

In Walloon Brabant, we have for example many times seen the battlefield and climbed the steps at Waterloo, we have several times toured, spoken and even just gone for dinner in Louvain-La-Neuve, we spent a wonderful morning at the Abbey at Villers-La-Ville; I have learned a great deal about the Belgian military from our friends at Beauvechain Air Force base; I have come many times to Wavre and spent good times with Governor Laloy. And whenever I am hungry or just need some advice, I

always can find a hot meal and a good shoulder in La Hulpe at our dear friend's Mimi Solvay. And on our journeys we always also see a better future. We often get to visit Belgian-American, American-Belgian businesses that are rebuilding our joint economies. In Walloon Brabant, we have such U.S. companies as Pfizer, Baxter, Wyeth, Johnson & Johnson Medical, Pittsburgh Corning, Mastercard, Kodak, Electronic Arts and many more.

While we have visited dozens and dozens of cities with formal visits to sites or with officials or with businesses, many of the official cities in Belgium are smaller – there may just be a pub and homes or sometimes just homes. We have at least taken a picture in almost all of the cities, and in every city and on every visit, we have met at least one citizen and told them that the U.S. Ambassador was there. So there have been some cold days, amidst an empty stretch, where I have even knocked on doors to find someone to say that I have been there and to keep the pledge.

And in Walloon Brabant, I have also many times come incognito as a father to pick up my son when he visited a good friend in Nivelles or just to enjoy a Christmas market or even a good meal. So thanks again to the Governor, the mayors and to a fabulous province – our first province to be completed on the Partnership Tour.

Thanks so much and all the best.