

## **AmCham Speech 2012**

September 10, 2012

"Never Go Back to Yesterday"  
Ambassador Howard Gutman  
Annual Amcham Belgium Gala  
Metropole Hotel

The American Chamber of Commerce was hoping that Mitt Romney or Paul Ryan or Barack Obama or Joe Biden could address you tonight at this wonderful gala.

But for some reason they were all busy.`

So in the words of Jack Nicholson in the movie The Shining . . .

"I'm baaacck."

Indeed it is an honor, a privilege and a true joy to serve even a single day as the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium.

It is an honor and a privilege and a true joy to get to share this evening and to express some thoughts even once with such leaders of the Belgian-American business community and with such good friends.

But Michelle and I have had the joy to now serve in Belgium for over three years -- I have become the second longest serving U.S. Ambassador to Belgium in 31 years.

And I now have the honor and privilege to share some thoughts with you, the keepers of the Belgian-American business relationship, for a fourth time.

Since this will almost certainly be my last time speaking at this dinner -- more on that later -- I would like to take the opportunity to thank Amcham, Marcel Claes, and Scott Beardsley first for the wonderful work they do fostering Belgian-American business relations and even moreso for the friendship they have shown to Michelle and me over the past 3 years. We look forward to that friendship continuing long after my ambassadorship has concluded.

And I would like to take this opportunity to thank Foreign Minister Didier Reynders. Minister Reynders was the 17 year Finance Minister when I arrived, shepherding Belgium and me through the economic crises and teaching me the ropes. He is now the face of good government throughout the world as Belgium's Foreign Minister. We have shared football at the Standard Liege matches -- please again send my apologies to your wife for the time I trampled her after Standard's last second winning goal on the header by the keeper and explain again that it was then Prime Minister's Yves Leterme's fault for jumping on me. And we have even shared film festivals. Again, I look forward to that friendship continuing long after my ambassadorship has concluded.

And I would like to thank each of you for your service in building the Belgian-American business

relationship, for all of your kindness to Michelle and me, for your help on our July 4 and election night festivity fundraising – more on that as well later –for the visits to your facilities and for your friendship as well. And again, we look forward to that friendship continuing long after my ambassadorship has concluded.

Now a huge advantage of being back here to speak for the fourth time is that we have a track record together. We know what we experienced in the past and what we expected together in the days thereafter. We now know how far and where we have come and in which areas we have up to this point been right or wrong. We have history together. We have results. And with our track record, with our history, with our results, we can together be wiser in looking towards tomorrow's future.

I have indeed looked back. I have looked back at each of the three previous speeches and seen where we were at the time of the speech, where I thought and we thought we were headed, and where we have in fact come. And about where we should be going; indeed where we must go. I have learned much. About Belgian-American relations. About the economy and economic crisis. About foreign policy and the challenges we have faced in places like Iraq and Afghanistan and still face in places like Iran. About energy policy. About the role of Belgium and of the United States within the leadership of the brotherhood of man. I hope to review this evening some of what that look back has demonstrated.

#### The Belgian-American Relationship

The biggest lessons learned concern Belgian-American relations and diplomacy. I recently met in Brussels with a delegation of 16 United States Senators and Congressmen and women. And I told them that I was convinced that if you could study the history of only one country to learn about diplomacy, about foreign relations, and about why foreign relations matter -- that that country should not be China or India; Mexico or Canada; or even France, Germany or England. It should be Belgium.

And I got the same looks of disbelief from these U.S. officials as I am getting now from this audience.

But plainly the lessons from Belgium and about the Belgium-American relationship are critical ones. Those lessons are vital to our future. To our shared future together – whether you or I are in Belgium, in the U.S. or even somewhere else within the brotherhood of man. And those lessons have given rise to the title of this talk "Never Go Back to Yesterday."

Indeed, when discussing Belgium, America and particularly Belgian-American relations, we must never go back to yesterday.

For what did yesterday mean for Belgium, for America and most importantly, for Belgian-American relations?

Well if yesterday for you is 95 years ago after the end of World War I or 65 years ago after the end of World War II, it is of course safe to return to yesterday. And indeed, when focusing on the

foundations of the Belgian-American relationship and of the prevailing world order, the yesterday of the war eras must never be forgotten and the roots of our relationship as dear allies and partners must always remain firm in our minds and in our hearts. The liberation of Belgium by the United States and our allies after the devastation of 2 world wars is and will always remain a preeminent and unifying part of our history. Among the lessons that have most impressed me over the past three years here as Ambassador is the lasting influence of the wars in shaping present society here. Among the images that will always stay with me are the throngs that come out to our commemorations in Bastogne and to our three moving Memorial Day remembrances. Images of museums in peoples' homes dedicated to the American GI. The crowd every single night at the Menin Gate in Ieper for The Last Call. I shall always be moved by the fact that Belgians never forget; by the fact that they today still tend to the graves that they have adopted of American boys who died over a half century ago. Yes, if yesterday goes back to these foundational moments, it is always safe to return.

But particularly because of how deep and how strong our roots are, the yesterday that existed when I arrived here in Belgium over three years ago – the yesterday of the mid 2000's is a place from which we may learn a great deal about foreign relations but to which we should never return. We should not return to that yesterday no matter who leads Belgium, no matter who leads the United States. No matter who the ambassador. No matter whether he or she studies French and Dutch daily and visits every city, village and commune or, alternatively, simply sits in an embassy office and writes cables. For that yesterday is a place which dear allies and partners like Belgians and Americans need never revisit.

You see, despite our history as the dearest of allies and the bonds that followed the world wars, in the mid 2000's, that relationship between us was widely described in the press as "frosty." As a result of differences over the handling of the Iraq war, the Belgian government considered closing the Port of Antwerp to U.S. ships, closing Belgian airspace to U.S. planes and subjecting U.S. officials to its law of universal jurisdictions for criminal charges in Belgium.

There is a temptation now to ask how could Belgian officials and politicians have formulated and undertaken such unfriendly actions? But the lesson from Belgium -- a lesson that should resonate through foreign policy circles no matter what the situs – is that politicians and officials don't create opinion. Citizens do. Politicians and officials don't serve as the inspiration for policies. Popular opinion does. Politicians and officials disregard the voice of the citizenry at their peril. That is a beauty of democracy, a virtue possessed both by Belgium and America.

And however we got so far off track, we faltered in the minds and hearts of the citizens of Belgium, we separated from the people. Indeed, the Gallup Polling Company started in 2007 to track public opinion in every country concerning America and U.S. leadership. And the results of the first poll showed that in Belgium in 2007, only 8 per cent of the citizenry had a favorable view of U.S. leadership while 65% had an unfavorable view and 27% were neutral or had no opinion.

Think about that. 8% favorable and 65% unfavorable. 8 to 1 times as unfavorable as favorable.

When the citizens are frosty and cynical, politicians threaten to close ports and airspace.

In that world, in that environment, both American interests of any sort and the Belgian-American

relationship suffers mightily. Ex-pats must feel at least somewhat uncomfortable amidst their neighbors; tourists hide the tee-shirts or guide books that would identify them as American; and U.S.-based businesses play down their home roots. Amcham finds fewer ears to listen, and an Embassy finds frustration behind many doors. Indeed, diplomacy remains stalled at the door.

In that yesterday, we had lost our way with one another. We talked past each other. We failed to look each other in the eye.

We can not go back there again. That yesterday must continue to fade as tomorrow grows ever brighter.

And so, when we first met in 2009, I candidly admitted that our relationship had recently suffered and I explained the values of the man who had sent me here. We promised to be better listeners and learners and to rebuild the partnership where it had suffered most – with the people. We outlined our plans as part of that reconstruction of the bridge with the good people of Belgium to study both French and Dutch and to visit all of the people – to visit the 589 cities, towns and communes in Belgium.

The election of Barack Obama and the appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State in the beginning of 2009 took us a long way towards rebuilding that bridge. The Gallup Poll for 2009 showed that the change in leadership raised the favorability rating from 8% to 30% - a 22% gain – and cut the unfavorability from 65% to 23%, a decrease of 42% in the unfavorability. So that the rating as of 2009 was 30% favorable and 23% unfavorable.

When we returned for this speech in 2010, we had notched a year of visiting Belgian villages and towns – we were up to 186 in a year – and building the bridge. And we reported that the Belgium that had once considered closing ports and airspace was now instead actively engaged in the NATO Mission in Afghanistan, and had agreed to provide the extra surge troops that President Obama requested that year, even while other allies struggled with that request. The partnership bridge was well underway.

We were over 300 cities visited when we met last year. But rebuilding that bridge in Europe met challenges in parts of Europe in the last year or two. The latest Gallup Poll of all the countries in the world came out on May 1 of this year.. The eurozone crisis and Afghanistan fatigue contributed to the favorability rating for US leadership losing 10% in Germany and 15% in France.

But we are proud to note that in that same international poll released by Gallup in May 2012 ---4 months ago –Belgium finished first in the world with the highest gain in favorability rating for the U.S. leadership. There was another 15% gain in favorability and another 8% decrease in the unfavorability so that the rating – which was 8%-65% just 5 years ago now stands at 45% favorable and only 22% unfavorable – a more than 2 to 1 edge in favorability where a 1 to 8 rating once stood. Which means that Belgians view American leadership today more favorably than Americans view American leadership or, I think, than Belgians often view Belgian leadership.

And it also means that Boston Red Sox tee shirts and U.S, guide books have reappeared in the Grand Place. Tourists are proud to meet Belgians and to talk about their country. It means that ex-pats again proudly discuss their home. U.S.-headquartered businesses operating in Belgium recruit

employees and customers by flagging their U.S. roots. The Embassy finds smiles, not frustration, at the door, which is always wide open for the diplomacy of discussions among partners.

And the change in opinion has been followed by a continuing change in action. Belgium, the country that 5 years ago thought of indicting our Secretary of Defense was one of the first countries in the air in the Libyan mission. In fact, Belgium flew 620 air to ground bombing missions in Libya while the United States flew none. Instead we armed and fueled allies like Belgium and watched the partnership of the brotherhood of man restore order and human rights in Libya.

And in Afghanistan, while some other new leaders have announced the withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan this year, the new Belgian government announced that Belgium will remain side by side with America as we transition out of Afghanistan through 2014 and has pledged the full amount of the NATO ask for post-2014 financial support to the Afghani security effort.

Rebuild a partnership and they will come.

As of today, we have visited 539 out of the 589 cities with 50 to go. We will complete the pledge to visit all amidst rebuilding the bridge.

And so I maintain I was correct when I told those 16 stunned U.S. legislators recently that Belgium was the best and most important country in the world to study if you want to learn about foreign relations, and about why foreign relations matter.

Now given where we are, given where we have gotten back to, and especially given where we had been yesterday, we must all fight – me, Marcel, Scott, and each of you, and the chocolate shops and the waffle vendors and the Belgian business leaders and journalists, the poets, the politicians and all others– we must all fight never to go back to yesterday. No matter who may be in the White House. No matter which party has how many seats in the Belgian Parliament. No matter who may live in the glorious Residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium.

You see, Ambassador Sam Fox, my dedicated predecessor, and President George Bush did not define America any more than Howard Gutman and President Barack Obama define America. America is 310 million citizens dedicated to the same values shared by 11 million Belgians – freedom, democracy, respect for our fellow men and women and for the brotherhood of citizens, love of family, pride in work, curiosity about tomorrow and much more. America is not about the guy on the lectern giving the long speech every September when we meet, but about all of you in the audience.

Sure we – Belgians and Americans -- may from time to time diverge in tactics – for dear friends and allies always do -- but we will always share our passions, our values and our sense of decency. So matter where the lanes lead in the years ahead, we must always, always remain on the same highway. We can not go back to yesterday.

Indeed as we head into tomorrow, the distinctions between Belgium and America, between Belgians and Americans, between Belgian businesses and American businesses, daily grows more blurry. In a world of international companies and international citizens, the analysis of "us" and "them" becomes more obsolete. You in this room may perhaps best demonstrate that fuzziness. Is Delhaize, a

company with 70% of its turnover and much of its workforce in the United States, a Belgian company which has spread to the U.S. or an American company with Belgian roots? Is it "us" or "them"? When the number one American beer Budweiser is led by a CEO from Latin America, with leading shareholders in Belgium in a world where more Budweiser is sold in China than in the U.S., where does the "us" line end and the "them" line begin? The world is growing smaller and it will continue to do so and as it does, we must inch towards the tomorrow and away from yesterday.

#### The Role of Belgium and the United States

As part of my look back over our past three years together, I have also looked at the issue of the role of Belgium and the United States within the leadership of the brotherhood of man. At the issue that so many Belgians have asked me over the past three years – does Belgium really matter on the world stage? Isn't Belgium but a small country?

For three years, we have explained that Belgium never shouts and it doesn't speak often. So when it does speak, it has credibility. People listen. Europe north may often times disagree or ignore Europe south and vice-versa. But Belgium has the ear of all. And thus for 3 years, we have advertised on our website that "If You Want to Be Heard, Say It in Belgium." Belgium has been heard about Afghanistan and about post-conflict support. It has been heard about Libya. On Iranian sanctions, closing the Port of Antwerp. On the need for compromise and action in the eurozone crisis. And on so much more.

#### The Economic Crises and Energy Policy

My look back over the past three years showed we have long spoken about the economic crisis and the progress that has been made in the United States, but also about the work that remains ahead, as well as the still prominent challenges faced in Europe. I have expressed the view that in many respects, the U.S. faced a one year economic crisis, followed by a stalemate from a political crisis for two years and now enhanced by the European and international financial and economic crisis. Indeed we faced three major economic crises when we met and all three have largely been tackled – faulty financial regulation, health care costs and our dependence on foreign oil and our ever expanding carbon footprint. But with an increased emphasis on natural gas and the focus on shale, we have reduced our carbon footprint since my first speech more than any Kyoto country and we have decreased our dependence on foreign oil from over 60% to under 45% and the trend continues today. So while political stalemates and international financial crises continue to add stress to our economic recovery, the U.S. has made real economic progress. When I first spoke in 2009, the unemployment in the U.S. coming from the inherited crisis had hit 10.1%. But the U.S. has created increased private sector jobs for 30 straight months. When I returned here in September 2010, unemployment had fallen to 9.5%. Last year, on my return on September 2011, it had continued to fall to 9.1%. Today, a year later, it has continued to fall to 8.1%. But there is a long way to go and perhaps progress on the political gridlock may be found after November no matter what the outcome of the elections, and progress on the international front may come from our European partners.

#### ELECTION NIGHT PITCH

Now with the election approaching --- and I don't mean Patrick Jansens against Bart de Wever –

many of you have been wondering what the Embassy will be doing for election night. And, by State Department practice and rules – an Embassy is expected to have a significant event on July 4 and every four years on Election Day and can raise private funds from businesses on those two occasions to pay for those events. In Brussels, the American ex-pat community has a tradition of putting on a party and selling tickets on the night of the election and well -- but with the time difference, there are no results to watch during the actual evening of the election on November 6.

So we will have an Embassy event after the expat event and when returns actually are rolling in. We will start at 3:00 in the morning of November 7 and last, depending on results, till roughly 11:00 in the morning that day on Wednesday. We have been lucky enough to have secured a fabulous venue in Brussels for his event. We thank Mayor Freddy Thielmans and the City of Brussels for making that majestic and venue available.

By starting at 3:00 am and continuing to around 10 or 11 am, we hope to give a choice to all of you and to the American-Belgian community. If you like me want to watch the returns and the analyses come in, state by state, you can come early and stay as long as you like and share the experience and some food and drink. All three U.S. Ambassadors here – myself, Ambassador Kennard of the U.S. Mission to the EU and Ambassador Daalder of USNATO will be present from 3:00 am. Or you can stop on your way to work for a ½ hour. Or anything in between or after that works best for you.

We do need the help to fund the event. The State Department does not provide the funds and, and as with July 4, counts on us to raise it. So if you would like to attend and/or if you can help, please contact my Embassy. You should ask for Protocol or for my assistants Beverly or Gusti. Or you can always call me. Thanks so much.

#### MY FUTURE PLANS

Finally, with Election Night approaching and with our having already served three years and longer than anyone else in over 30 years other than Alan Blinken, many have asked about our plans. I serve at the pleasure of the President and so if there is a change in administration in November, we will leave by the end of the year and allow the new President to pick his own representative. If the President gets re-elected, we have been asked to stay till our successors are confirmed and so our tenure will continue likely to the Spring and maybe the summer.

But our hearts will always be here, with you.

Thanks so much and all the best.