

Memorial Day 2012

"Why Are We Here?"

May 28, 2012

Memorial Day Commemoration Ardennes
American Cemetery
Ambassador Howard Gutman:

- The Representative of His Majesty, the King;
- Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and my dear friend The Honorable Didier Reynders,
- The Honorable Jean-Claude Marcourt
- Brigadier General Johnson
- Mayor Cortis,
- Superintendent Amerlincks
- Dr. Jerry Sheridan a
- Excellencies
- Honored Veterans and Service Members
- Family Members and Friends, Fellow Countrymen, Fellow Lovers of Belgium
- Dear Friends:

This is the third year in which I have the honor to address you at the annual Memorial Day Commemoration at the Ardennes American Cemetery;

In which I have the honor of representing my country on its most important day in Belgium;

In which I have the honor to help carry the torch of gratitude from a devoted nation, Belgium, which never forgets what these 5323 American boys did on this soil, in their last act in this life.

But I have an admission. Truth be told, each year, in the quiet of my home back in Brussels, as I think of this day, I am not sure exactly why we come. I am not sure exactly why I am here. Why we are here.

Are we here for them? For they seem so still. They seem to say nothing. Do they know we are here? Do they know we still care?

Or, are we here for us? What do we hope to learn? What do we hope to gain?

Or, yet again, are we here for our children, and for their children, and for the future we hope to build together?

But each year, when I arrive, when I look over the serenity of the rows of these white stone tributes to their bravery, when I listen to their voices with my heart and not with my ears, I know why I am here. I know why we are here. For with our hearts, we can hear them telling us why we come.

We come first for them. Whether they were called private or general; mom or dad; or son or

daughter. To us, they are all heroes and we honor them all. And we honor their parents who lost children. And we honor their children who lost parents.

They may seem still, but of course they know we are here. Because of course they knew that if they did not return home, if they perished, we would come to honor them. That we would always cherish their service and never forget. For they knew how important their mission was, how important their service was. That is why they got on the boat to Europe in the first place. That is how they could leave the comfort of loving homes in Cheyenne Wyoming or Racine Wisconsin or thousands of other communities across America to which they would never return. That is why they travelled to a country that they did not know, to the aid of a people whom they had not met. In their hearts, they knew you needed them; they knew we needed them. They knew that freedom depended on them. Maybe they even knew that Max Gutman was hiding in the woods in Poland after every other Jew in his small town had been slaughtered. Maybe they knew that his dream one day to come to America, to raise a future U.S. Ambassador to Belgium, was about to be extinguished along with the future for so many Poles and Catholics and Jews and other Europeans. So in their hearts, they had to know that I would never forget; that I would always come; that we would never forget, that we would always come.

As a head of one of our American Battlefield cemeteries once told me: For those buried in his cemetery, they remain each day on active duty. . . And on each day that we fail to remember them . . . that we fail to honor them . . . they have served a day without a mission. Every soldier is entitled to his mission. We -- Belgians and Americans, parents and children -- we are that mission.

And we come also for us. For by coming we proclaim that we support decency and will not tolerate tyranny. That we welcome all to join the brotherhood of man. To those who have hesitated, to those who think about threatening our future, we will meet you far more than half way. We and our allies will send our diplomats, we will help feed your poor, and will treat you with respect. We will build bridges where pools of hatred previously existed. But we will insist that you threaten none, harm none. And that too is why we are in Belgium. That too is why you joined the State Department, why you joined the military. That too is why as a family member you travelled so far to be here; why as Belgian citizens you adopt the graves of fallen U.S. soldiers; why as a Belgian citizen you have come today to pay your respect. To build that better planet together as partners. When asked what you did this weekend, don't say you attended a Memorial Day service. Tell them instead that you worked to prevent the next world war. That you worked to eliminate a future Battle Field cemetery.

And, thus finally, we come as well for our children. You see, because of their service, and because of our hearts . . . because we shall guarantee that they never will have died in vain, Memorial Day is also about the future. It is not simply about the planet they lived on or about the planet that we now live on. It is also about the one we want to leave to our children. We come today also to make the planet safer, more tolerant, and more harmonious for our children. Because that is our mission daily. That is our duty. That too is why we are here.

Those who are buried here deserve nothing less.

Thanks so much and all the best.