

July 4th and Farewell

July 4, 2013

Ambassador Howard Gutman
U.S. Embassy Brussels

Good Afternoon. Welcome. Welcome.

Excellencies, Ministers, Fellow Citizens, Dear Friends –

Michelle and I are thrilled and honored to be here in Belgium -- still --with all of you on this very special July 4th to celebrate together. We are of course always honored to share a stage with my dear friends Bill and Deborah Kennard and Ivo and Elisa Daalder. Ambassador Kennard has represented the U.S. at the EU with wisdom and grace and I learned from him daily. Ambassador Daalder helped bring NATO to a 4 year record of unmatched success. But beyond their roles as Ambassadors, Bill, Deborah, Ivo and Elisa have been dear friends to us. It is a friendship that Michelle and I look forward not merely to continuing but to growing as we enter the next phases of our lives.

Those of you who have been here before have heard me describe how truly special it is to celebrate July 4 with you here, in the heart of Europe, and now, when so much of the world is in turmoil in pursuit of basic liberty and freedom. It has taken serving my country in Europe, as well as spending the past two remarkable years in front of the television and watching YOUTUBE, for me truly to understand the meaning of Independence Day.

Indeed for 50 years, the Independence Day Celebration to me meant trips to the beach and barbeques with some fireworks and hot dogs. Sure, the day stood for "Freedom" and "Liberty". And "freedom" and "liberty" were marvelous words. But for the many years, they were simply words.

But "liberty" and "freedom" should never be confused with beach vacations, lemonade and sand castles.

And, being here in Europe, in Belgium, spending time visiting with so many for whom the word "occupation" referred not to their job but to the invasion of their home. Where Belgians never forget the sacrifices of Americans on their soil. Where not a single American soldier buried on this soil is taken for granted. Being here has taught me how to appreciate the real meaning of our July 4.

Before turning to the farewell part of the evening, let me note that a party of over 2000 of your closest friends is an amazing amount of work. We want to thank sponsors and supporters. Their names are listed prominently on the large banner at the entrance to the tent and their logos are scrolling on the 5 screens throughout the party. Take the time to read them, and thank them personally for their assistance. Each such U.S.-Belgian company is a true Ambassador fueling the engine of employment for both of our countries and building bridges between us as they supply products or services to us both.

A heartfelt thanks to the many volunteers from our Embassy with a special shout-out to some who have focused particularly hard on this event: my deputy Rob Faucher; the world's greatest assistants

Beverly Fenwick and Luis Cardozo; the best household manager ever Inge Smets; our Protocol head Kim Reaux. And a special thanks from us all to Jacqueline Deley. Jacqueline volunteered to lead this year's planning and she brought her energy, judgment and wisdom to the task.

As we have mentioned, this July 4 is even more special for Michelle and me as our service as ambassador and ambassadrice will be ending in a few days. So we are here today to say thank you. Even in a country with three official languages, there are simply not enough ways to say "thank you. Thank you for every time you told us of your fondness for our President or our country. Thank you for each time you attended a war commemoration or other U.S. or Embassy function, shook hands, asked to take a photo, or gave us words of encouragement. Thank you for telling us about your trips to the U.S. or the family who have relocated or studied there. You so often thanked us and President Obama for our actions or efforts, but we knew all along that we owed you the true words of thanks.

You not only made Michelle and me feel at home these past four years; you made Belgium a home for us. From the North to the South, from the coast to the Ardennes, you met us with smiles, invited us to share a part of your lives, and taught us your customs, your languages and your culture. Upon leaving the U.S. four years ago for our first and only diplomatic posting after a 27 year legal career in Washington D.C., we thought we might miss our family, friends, and life as we knew it back in the States. You ensured that, instead, our family and friends and life just got that much larger, more meaningful, and more diverse.

People sometimes accused us of only seeing the good in Belgium. But all we did was open our eyes and see what existed. The "good" we often cited was not the product of our interpretation, spin or rhetoric; it is who you are and what you have.

We learned that Belgians are often understated, but your modesty and tact can never dim your wit and love both of life and of the absurd. So we learned to laugh with you and it always felt good. We learned that you can debate the qualities of beers, anxiously await the arrival of white asparagus, or marvel over the qualities of a new bike frame, and that this should not be taken as a sign that your concerns are in any respect shallow – for you are serious, smart and hardworking – but as a testament that, even among the serious, life should be cherished and enjoyed. Even your Red Devils never disappointed.

Together we tackled important issues -- from Afghanistan, Libya, counter-terrorism, economic recovery, trade, climate change, adjusting to a growing diverse population, and so much more – trying together to ensure that we would leave our children a better planet than the one we inherited. We agreed most times, but even when we did not see eye-to-eye, we could always see each other's smile.

Despite our long and rich history together as the dearest of allies, our relationship in the years preceding our arrival had not been at its strongest. We should never return to that yesterday. Instead, we need always to remember that Barack Obama and Howard Gutman do not define America any more than any prior Presidents and their ambassadors define America. America shall always be defined by the 310 million people who share the same values as the 11 million Belgians: love of freedom and democracy, pride in family, hope for tomorrow, and a passion for peace and prosperity. America is never about the guy at the podium but always about the folks in the crowd. We should

never get off track again.

Michelle and I leave determined, and indeed planning, to return often: for business, for our friends, and for pleasure. And wherever we are, we will always have a piece of Belgium in our hearts. See you soon, à bientôt, Bis Bald, and tot ziens.

Thanks so much and all the best.