

## **A Tour That Never Really Ends**

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Chief of Mission Residence

Mr. Prime Minister, Dear Mayors, Dear Friends, Beste Vrienden, Cher Amis :  
Bonjour. Goede middag.

Nederlands is niet gemakkelijk voor mij; het is heel moeilijk. Et mon français est mauvais aussi. J'étudie les deux langues, un jour le français and l'autre Nederlands, mais je vais continuer en anglais.

Michelle and I would like to welcome you to our home, which is America's home here in Belgium.

I began this tour in 2009 to change something.

I finished it because I loved it.

We had historically had a dear partnership through two World Wars, but partnerships can never be taken for granted. When we arrived in 2009, we knew we could do better, we knew we had to do better. Public opinion polls about the views of Belgians towards U.S. leadership ran 8 to 1 unfavorable. We had had our share of tension – whether over the closing of the Port of Antwerp to our ships, the closing of Belgian airspace to our planes or even possible indictments in Belgium of our defense department officials. And I was tired of coming to Europe as a tourist and not being able to wear my Boston Red Sox tee-shirt or carry my guide book face up, identifying me as an American. American businesses in Europe needed again proudly to discuss their roots.

I knew that you could discuss rebuilding partnerships in Labermont and the Parliament, but we had lost the confidence even more so of the people. We had to rebuild our partnership with the people.

And so we set out to do so, by pledging to visit every city, village and commune.

But truth be told, under President Obama and Secretary Clinton, the change arrived long ago. The 8 to 1 unfavorable ratings moved in 2010 and 2011 and then in 2012, Belgium finished first in the world with the highest increase in its favorability towards the United States. We serve shoulder to shoulder in Afghanistan, we protect human rights together in Libya, we strategize together to build a safer and more prosperous future in Central Africa, we watch each other's backs to make sure that terror threatens neither of us, and so much more.

So truth be told, although I began this tour in 2009 to change something, I finished it because I loved it. I loved my first visit to a city, to Charleroi, where a career firefighter was retiring that day after a thirty plus year career and wanted my country to have his hat. I loved my second visit the next day, to Mechelen, where a young Belgian college student, a recent immigrant, asked me about U.S. military aggression. Some Belgians reacted with horror, but I was delighted, for I knew the conversation had started. We have loved that conversation for four years and both countries are

better for it.

We loved your cities, with their commerce of daily life, amidst the beauty of history. From Brugge, to Ghent, Antwerpen, Ieper, Kortrijk and Hasselt, to Brussels, to Charleroi, Liège, Namur, La Louvière and Dinant and so many more.

We loved your folklore, your carnivals, your giants and your celebrations, from Aalst, Dendermonde, Eeklo, Fisherman on Horseback, to the Meyboom and Ommegang, to Binche, Ath, Malmedy, Stavelot, the Doudou and so many more.

We loved learning at your universities, from Leuven, to Louvain La Neuve, Ghent, Antwerp, to Namur, Liège, Mons and those in Brussels and more.

We loved visiting your religious communities, from the Archbishop and glorious churches, to I believe every synagogue in Belgium, to the Mosques at Cinquantenaire, in Beringen, the Community Center in Verviers, to the Sikh Gurdwara in Liège and more.

And a special thanks to the students at Serge Cruz in Molenbeek, from around the world, with girls in head scarfs and boys named Mohammed singing both the Star Spangled banner and the Belgian national anthem, hand on heart.

We loved the beauty from the coast, from Koksijde to Knokke, or across to the Ardennes, walking the streets of Durbuy, kayaking in Coo and so many places in between.

I cannot thank the mayors enough for always planning and always caring . . . and I sure as heck love the monument dedicated to our visit that now stands in Buggenhout.

But we mainly loved the people. . . the Belgians North, South, East and West. Belgians who have told us about their fondness for our President, and our country; who shared the stories of their studies or visits to the States, of their relatives back their now, and who educated us about America's service in the Wars. Belgians who adopted American graves and who come to our Memorial weekend services, and who appear each night at The Last Call. Belgians who have always made Michelle and me feel at home.

A special thanks to a special embassy. Starting with Brian Dick who set up and went on nearly every visit, to Serge Vandendriessche, who so often photographed – they have given up countless weekends. Tania, Jacqueline and Jason for leading the world's best public diplomacy section and to Dick Eason and Rob Faucher, DCMs who so well knew what they were doing and how to do it at an Embassy that any Ambassador had to look good.

Thanks so much and all the best.