

Dream Builders

November 10, 2012

Ambassador Howard Gutman
Marine Corps Ball

Ambassador Kennard, Assistant Secretary General Dirioz, Lieutenant General Gaskin, Lieutenant General Hogg, Commodore Hijmans, DCMs Manso, White and Faucher, Members of other Foreign Services, of the Marine Security Detachment, of the Tri-Mission,

Dear Colleagues and Friends –

When I sat down to write for tonight, I typed the first line. It said and still says, “It is a thrill to be here tonight with all of you to celebrate the Marine Corps.” And then later, when I looked back at my speech that I had written for last year, 2011, it too started “It is a genuine thrill to be here” and I looked back at 2010 and it too started “It is a total thrill to be here.” And so I began to edit my very first line. For wouldn’t it sound like just a throwaway opening line?

And I then realized that the problem was even worse. You see, in truth, every and any speaker that you would have asked to address you tonight would have started their speech noting that it is a thrill and an honor and a privilege to be here. Those words are for many, and sometimes in other speeches even for me, just part of the standard speech opening. They are often routine phrases on the way to the substance of the speech.

But for me, at this dinner, at the annual Marine Corps Ball, those words are never just a standard opening line. They are never a platitude on the way to the substance. To get the chance to address a ballroom full of Embassy people, military members, and Marines, who have dedicated their lives to public service, to get the chance to represent the United States in thanking young men and women who have volunteered to go into harm’s way so that people like me could sleep at home without concern, to get the chance to put into words what their actions and the legacy of all who have come before means to us, is a true honor, a deep privilege and a thrill I will always cherish.

But why? Why make such a big deal over the Marines? Over our military? Why do I and in truth so many Americans feel so much more indebted to our military – and to the Marines as the first always there and the last to leave as well -- than to lawyers or doctors or other fine citizens?

You know, funny thing, I best learned the answers as to why when I came here to Belgium.

You see, when President Obama named me to be U.S. Ambassador to Belgium in 2009, and I think I can speak as well for Ambassador Kennard, my dear friend and a star of judgment and wisdom both among those at the EU and in our State Department, when we became Ambassadors in 2009, one of the things we were most proud of is that we had lived the American dream. But as I made my rounds around Belgium, as I absorbed their worn torn history and witnessed the scars of those who had not had their own Marines but had relied on ours, I began truly to understand what many Belgians already knew first hand, which is that whereas I was blessed to have lived the American dream . . .

Whereas I was blessed to live the American dream . . .

You . . . the Marines in this room . . . and those who came before you who proudly wore the uniform . . .

You built that dream. You built the American dream. And you preserve it daily.

And for that, and to you and those who preceded you for 237 years, we shall always be indebted.

I have seen not only felt but seen that indebtedness, and not just at home,, but in Belgium and around the world. One day after having lunch in the eastern part of Belgium, as I left a restaurant, there was a table of older Belgians in the corner. I was just walking to the exit. But as I walked, I heard an ovation from the corner and saw that the group of older Belgians had risen to their feet and were applauding. And as I approached to say hello, they said not "hello", but "thank you." I realized quickly that they were not greeting me; not cheering me; not thanking me; they were standing and applauding for you and for those who came before over the past 237 years. For those who had liberated them from oppression not once, but twice in the name of decency and freedom, and who then and thereby had built their dreams.

I learned when I visited Belgian villas and estates, that they never repainted the bullet holes from the Nazi occupation but simply covered the holes with pictures, never to forget you and what you had done.

I learned when I toured our American battlefield cemeteries and saw fresh flowers on the graves -- when U.S. family members could not have come in such numbers -- that Belgians have long adopted our graves and still honor the dignity of all who had served. I learned that Belgians bring flowers not for my ceremonies, but for your service.

And it is a true honor and a privilege and thrill tonight as well because, when I decided to accept the position and to leave the private sector where I had been a successful lawyer for 27 years, I realized that although I had in my life made money, I had really never gotten to make a difference. I had not gotten to serve. I had not gotten to give back.

But each of you, everyone in this room each day, and throughout your careers, you have gotten to make a difference. You have gotten to serve, to give back.

And after a 27 year largely private sector career, as I spent the past three years meeting with Marines, visiting at the Marine house, chatting with U.S. forces in Europe at EUCOM, at bases outside Belgium, at our many memorial services, at SHAPE, at USAG, throughout NATO and in traveling with the Belgian Minister of Defense to visit troops in Kunduz, Kabul and Kandahar; from the Marine newly arrived at the Embassy, to the DAO's office, right up through Admiral Stavrides and Lieutenant General Gaskins, and Lieutenant General Hogg, I have learned how rich getting to serve and make a difference truly makes you. I have learned that the chance to participate in building a more secure, more prosperous planet is a priceless opportunity.

And it is a great honor, privilege and thrill to be here in this room, standing before the best of our military and the best of our Department of State because through your joint service, you are

taking the dream that you built and that I and so many Americans have gotten to live because of you . . .

A dream long "misnamed" the American dream, but a dream in fact shared by mothers and fathers everywhere. . . .

By mothers and fathers today in Afghanistan who now watch their children including their daughters going to school, and even going to University. . . . You know, a decade ago, the life expectancy for women in Afghanistan was just 44 years of age; today it is 62 years. Where less than a million Afghan kids including almost no girls went to school under the Taliban a decade ago, more than 8 million kids including over 3 million girls are in school today. There are more than 15,000 Afghan girls in university, where not a single one was so enrolled before. And when those girls go to build their dream, they are now taught by more than 500 female university professors who already live theirs.

A dream shared by mothers and fathers today in Libya . . .

A dream shared by mothers and fathers, wherever Marines have gone . . .

You are taking that dream to others and helping to build that dream for them and by so doing, to build a safer, more prosperous, planet for us all . . .

For us and for them. And more importantly, for our children and for theirs.

One final reason why it is an honor, a privilege and a thrill to get to stand before you at this wonderful occasion tonight. You know, a little while back, the Gunny came to me and asked me for a favor. He asked me in this speech unlike in past years, not to focus on the Marine battalion here in Brussels, but on the Marines everywhere and through history. Always respecting the Gunny and our Marines, I agreed to do so. And then, days later, we suffered the terrible tragedy in Benghazi. And on that Friday, the local Belgian security warned us of a planned demonstration that could get violent against the Embassy and USEU. So taking no chances, we sent everyone home that day. But when you send everyone home, every Marine comes to work. When all others leave to be safe, 16 start their day at the office. Sorry Gunny . . . some promises are meant to be broken.

So take it from me and my dreams. Take it from the Afghans and their dreams. Take it from the Belgians and their dreams. For our peace and prosperity is nothing more than the sum of those dreams.

Happy birthday Marines. Happy birthday dreambuilders.

Thanks so much and all the best.