

Standing Together

May 27, 2013

Memorial Day Celebrations 2013
Ambassador Howard Gutman

Excellencies,
Honored Veterans and Service Members.
Family Members and Friends, Fellow Countrymen, Fellow Lovers of Belgium:

Dear Friends

When I arrived in Belgium 4 years ago, I knew why I had come. A President I so admired had asked me to represent a country I loved, in a country that had long been a dear ally.

But back then, when I first got here, I did not understand why they had come. I looked at row after row of crosses and stars so beautiful and yet so deceptive in their serenity and beauty, masking the violent deaths of those who rest beneath. And I asked myself, why had they come?

Why had they left their homes so far away, their lives among loved ones, their safety and security, their brothers and sisters, aging parents, their children just learning to walk or to say Daddy, why had they left all they had to freeze and to fight literally to death in a land they so little knew?

Did they come for us – for the United States of America—a country they plainly loved and would have defended to their core had our shores been attacked? Did they come to you as a way to protect us? To make sure that me and my children would always know peace and freedom?

Or did they come for you, for a collapsing Europe and an occupied Belgium? For you and your children. People in trouble, good people for sure, but people whom they did not know, whose languages they did not speak, and whose families they had never met?

And I as gathered at my first Memorial Day here ten months after my arrival, I knew again why I had come to the Cemetery that day. For they had died representing a country I had long loved, fighting in a country I was growing to love. And as a head of one of our American Battlefield cemeteries had 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. And for sure, on that Memorial Day weekend, on every Memorial Day weekend, I was going to be here to be part of their mission.

But, after arriving that first Memorial Day, and seeing all of you, the thousands of Belgians who attend remembrance ceremonies, the Belgians who have adopted all of these graves and maintain them vigilantly and with love, the Belgians who collect remnants of the wars to assure that they shall not be overlooked, who document heroic episodes, who host soldiers still today, I asked myself why had you come. Why do you give up your time off, why do you incur expenses, why do you show so much love and care, remembering people you had not met, visiting the graves of fathers whose children you do not know and graves of children whose parents had grieved many years earlier and thousands of miles away.

Do you come for us – for the United States of America— to heal our wounds. So that those who perished here would know that they will always be remembered, always be appreciated? So that what they did will never be forgotten?

Or do you come for you – for a once occupied but now long free Belgium. Yes, to show your gratitude to a country that had lost its sons defending your sons and daughters, but in so doing, to build a better and more secure home. To ensure that by remembering what happened yesterday here, you shall find . . . indeed you will build here your better tomorrow?

Over the last four years, I have visited hundreds of Belgian cities and met with hundreds of thousands of Belgians. The answers grew clearer daily and are now so much clearer that the questions have become blurry. I learned over those four years what surely they knew in their hearts and today retain in their souls.

You see, they came to you . . . and now you come to them . . . because we stand together. We did then, we do now, and we shall tomorrow. There was no “them” and “you” 70 years ago and there is no “you” and “me” now. There has always only been, there is today, and there will be tomorrow always only an “us.”

We stand together. We stand together and with so many others. We stand together in a love of freedom, of democracy, of peace and prosperity for all. We stand together for respect for our fellow men and women and for the brotherhood of citizens, in love of family, pride in our children and a commitment to stand together to leave them a better world than the one we found. We stand together committed to sacrificing to build that world, like they sacrificed to build ours. So when friends ask you what you did this weekend, don't say you attended a Memorial Day service. Tell them instead that you stood together – that you worked to prevent the next world war. That you worked to eliminate a future Battle Field cemetery.

And now, as I celebrate my last Memorial Day with you, as I get ready to do what they never got to do, to return home to my sons and loved ones, but always to keep a piece of them in my heart and always keep a piece of my heart in Belgium, I know that you shall always be here, standing together. That they shall never serve a day without a mission. Wherever I am, wherever you are, wherever we are, because of them, we shall stand together to build a better tomorrow.

Thanks so much and all the best.