

“Some Day . . . The Last Birthday”

November 19, 2011

Remarks of Ambassador Howard Gutman
Marine Corps Ball

Ambassador Daalder, Ambassador Kennard, Lieutenant General Gaskin, Lieutenant General Hanlon,
Members of the Marine Security Detachment,

Dear Colleagues and Friends:

It is a genuine thrill to be here tonight with all of you this year.

By tradition, the bilateral ambassador is known as the Honored Guest at The Marine Ball. And I thank the Marines for that.

But in truth, who are the honored guests in this glorious room tonight?

We are joined tonight first by 16 current heroes. They wear the uniform of the most talented and the most at risk among our military. In such a crowd, how could another be considered honored?

We are joined tonight second by all of you.

You who have dedicated your careers to serving the United States government – often at great sacrifice to yourself, your family, your loved ones? You who have travelled the world, going where you have been told, to do the right thing; and you who have stayed with the U.S. Government in Belgium not just when your neighbors respected you for it, but when some thought less of you for it. You who year after year make sure to acknowledge and honor the country’s Marines. You who remember to say “hello” as you walk by a Marine ensuring your safety at their post; you who always remember to say “thanks.”

You know, Ambassadors come into a room and people stand. We enter a ballroom in a fancy tux and all applaud. Can you imagine? A room full of heroes and a room full of people who have devoted years to the United States government and all stand and applaud for the guy from Washington. So, in truth, I am here tonight not as an Ambassador and certainly not as an Honored Guest.

Rather, I am here tonight just as a representative.

I have the honor of being one of two who get to represent you tonight as we struggle to find appropriate ways to thank people for whom the word “thanks” can never carry a sufficient payload. For whom a Ball, or a week of Balls, or a year full of Balls would not begin to approach the mark. To thank 16 people in Brussels, an elite group of 1300 Marines who stand not just at Post Ones, but who stand for America at Embassies worldwide; and a corps of 203,000 Marines who have agreed to be the first in harm’s way no matter what threat might approach us. We are here tonight to thank and honor them.

As the representative for all of us, let me first acknowledge just a few among all of you tonight though each of you deserve as well to get your individual recognition for all you do.

First, it is my honor and privilege to welcome Lieutenant General Gaskin. Now the Gunny told me that Lieutenant General Gaskin had asked not to be included in the acknowledged guests. But I have never been very good at following orders. When you have led as many Marines as Lieutenant General Gaskin has to so many places where the rest of us would dare not venture, and when you are in Brussels, you are sure going to hear our gratitude. Thanks for a lifetime of service, Lieutenant General Gaskin.

Next, my fellow ambassadors here in Brussels. Now the truth is that even if I did not think Ambassadors Ivo Daalder and Bill Kennard were among the finest who ever have represented America at NATO and with the EU, I would have to say something nice about them tonight. That is the nature of a Marine Corps Ball. So don't take my word for it; trust your own instincts. Think about the diplomacy involved as Europe went from being divided about action in Libya and the framework within which it should go forward, to having a unified determined NATO force efficiently resolve the humanitarian crisis in Libya, with the United States and our Marines finally getting to do its part, but not having to do virtually the whole part. And when a flap emerged about which direction our leadership came in, Ambassador Daalder got in front of that issue as well. Welcome, Ivo and Elisa.

And as for Ambassador Kennard, the US has never faced such European wide challenges as we have since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. But Ambassador Kennard remains one of most genuinely liked and admired people in Europe. Heck, I thought I was pretty cool when the Belgian town of Buggenhout erected a statue to commemorate my visit. But Ambassador Kennard has had a concert dedicated to him.

Not to be competitive, but there is a reason that Ellen has now put Mick Jagger on the bilateral Executive Office speed dial.

One of the true joys of tonight is to share this honor with Bob Clifford. In an Embassy of fine gentlemen who love their country, Bob is at the top. His selection shows the wisdom of our Marines.

My father-in-law, Michelle's dad, now age 92, is a fine and decent man, who served in World War II. For the last 35 years, no one has really had to ask grandpa what he wished for on his birthday. You see, for 35 years in a row, Larry has made the same wish on every birthday. He wishes simply each year for one more birthday. And so far, it has worked.

Well, on this the 236th Birthday of the Marines Corps, I would like to make the anti-Larry wish. That a time come, sometime, when we finally reach a world where Marines are no longer needed.

Oh, of course, we will let you always say "oohrah," remain "always faithful" and cut a cake. I am not crazy you know.

But how about a world where we no longer had to put Marines in harm's way?

Because the world we have now has demanded way too high a price for the annual birthday cake.

In World War I, Marines fought Germans in Belleau Woods in 1918 earning the respect of the Germans and the planet. Yet one in 6 Marines ended up dead or wounded. Nearly 12,000 of our fine boys destroyed fighting a country today we call a dear friend.

In World War II, we sent Marines to battle the Japanese. Again they performed magnificently but this time again 1 in 6 ended up dead or injured. 90,000 of our wonderful sons destroyed battling the Japanese. Yet 55 years later we asked Marines to lead our efforts into Japan again, this time to save Japanese lives from the devastating earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown.

Can't we do better?

Michelle and I had breakfast with Brussels' finest last week – our Marines. Looking at those shining faces, I realized that, according to history, at the next confrontation for which we turn to Marines to bail us out, 3 of those shining faces at the table would not come out of that confrontation.

Can't we do better?

So far the answer is "no". Somehow evil can exist today where the brotherhood of man will decades later likely form.

And wishing it to be so will not make it so. It will not stop dictators from trying to develop nuclear capabilities contrary to the interest of our brotherhood of man.

So for now, we wish the Marines and Larry Loewinger the same birthday wish.

I once chased down a camera snatcher and thought I was a hero. And on that birthday message video, we watched Major Lauren Edwards protest "we are not heroes, we are just today's Marines."

How can you sufficiently thank people like that? People with faces shining as brightly as their futures, but who along the road chose to join the branch of the military where casualties come at a rate double the rest of the military services?

We in this room know how much they do.

We in this room know where they have been.

We in this room know where they could be sent on a day's notice.

We in this room know that for all our effort to prevent confrontation, we need someone to step up and protect.

We in this room know each and every one of them has said "I will."

We thank you for every foot of road you drove in Baghdad, in Al Anbar and in Salah Ad Din wondering whether to look down for improvised explosive devices or look up for rocket propelled grenades. For every time a kid approached you and you wondered whether they were looking for candy or martyrdom.

And many of us in this room know the love of a parent for a child. And thus to me, there is also no way to thank parents in Craig, Colorado or Irwin, Pennsylvania or hundreds of thousands of other homes for every time they looked at the phone and prayed it would not ring. And we will never forget those for whom the phone did ring.

But do not be confused. The mission of our Marines did not end and our gratitude, did not abate when the dust of the battlefield at dawn was replaced by the plexiglass of a watchful post amidst the dark hours of the night.

So we together thank them for every moment we chat on the phone in our offices without even thinking who might mean us harm.

And Michelle and I thank them for every night Chase sleeps comfortably in his bed on Rue Zinner without worrying whether his father's decision proudly to restore two American flags on his home might have been a mistake.

And it is because of you that Deborah and Elisa never worry when Robert's dad or Michael and Marc's dad stay late at the office.

Yes, Tri-Mission Brussels' finest citizens have not just helped to win the last war; they work daily to prevent the next one.

We owe you one and your country will not forget.

Thanks so much and all the best.