

“Perhaps, Just Maybe, It May Be Time To Cook Frogs Our Way”

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Tuesday Evening Group
Ambassador Howard Gutman

Goede avond. Nederlands is niet gemakkelijk voor mij; het is heel moeilijk. It heb zo veel respect for the schonheid van us taal dat ik niets meer ga zeggen in het Nederlands.

It is a pleasure to be here tonight to get a chance to chat with the Tuesday night group. It would indeed be a pleasure to chat with this group even if it were not Tuesday.

I wanted to use tonight to share some thoughts perhaps about the next step in the Belgian-American relationship. You see I have been the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium for nearly the past 3 and a half years. I am the second longest serving U.S. Ambassador to Belgium in the past 31 years.

Shortly after I got here over three years ago, I gave a speech entitled “We Cook Frogs Differently. “ Then, a few months ago, I gave an updated version entitled “We May Cook Frogs Differently, But Together We Can Change the World and We Should Never Go Back to Yesterday.”

But when I sat down to write a speech for tonight – when I thought about Belgium’s key role in Afghanistan, in Libya and in being part of the solution in helping Europe to come together to tackle the fiscal crisis, in Herman Van Rompuy’s critical leadership in Europe, in Steven VanAckere being chosen the most credible Finance Minister in Europe and so much more – but when I reflected on Belgium’s recent decision not to abstain on the Palestian UN vote, like the UK, Netherlands, Germany and others did, but to vote in favor, and about difficult choices that lie ahead on modernizing Belgium’s airforce and other issues of Belgium leadership going forward, I decided to write yet a second update of the speech – but this one entitled: “Perhaps, Just Maybe, It May Be Time to Cook Frogs Our Way.”

You see, after three and a half years here, I believe more than ever in the importance of Belgium, in the credibility of Belgium, in the need for Belgium to be part of the voices among world leadership.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

It all started over three years ago. You see, for a short while after I arrived in Belgium as the United States Ambassador, I studied the country and its role and place within Europe. I learned about the character of the country and its people, and about the buzz of the home of the EU, NATO and a vibrant country all mixed together.

I realized that there were many wonderful countries in Europe. But too often other countries and particularly Europe North and Europe South tended to speak pass one another. That sometimes they, like other countries all around the world, spoke simply to be heard, with sometimes predictable tones and messages.

But I quickly came to realize that Belgium was different. Belgium spoke past no one, but to and with each one. Belgium never spoke simply to be heard. When Belgium spoke it did so for only one

reason – it had something to say. I realized indeed that, more than the rest, Belgium, though smaller and perhaps with less total wealth, led Europe in credibility. And credibility is the most powerful force for persuasion and persuasion is the most powerful tool in diplomacy. And I realized that Belgium also had the stage when it wanted it within Europe at any and all times: the podium and the microphone of Europe are always squarely in Belgium. And I realized that together credibility and a pulpit combined to make a potentially very powerful voice.

I was then still new to the job, having arrived in August 2009, but I was genuinely excited by my conclusion. And I was convinced that, given that Belgian credibility and given that pulpit, between Belgium and the United States, we could change the world together for the better. In one of my earliest meetings still in 2009 with the then Belgian Government, I made my pitch to then Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy and to his chief of cabinet Frans Van Daele. I urged them to join with our Embassy, to join with President Obama and his then new agenda, together to help change the world. I urged Frans to use that Belgium credibility and the pulpit to have the Belgian Prime Minister speak at the Grand Place and call on Europe to act. If Belgium urged Europe to work together and with the United States, to lift what was then an overwhelming economic crisis or to get Europe participating together to then help President Obama close Guantanamo; or to then keep NATO moving in the right direction in rebuilding civil society in Afghanistan and far more, who in Europe would say no. If Belgium made the call, who would not answer? When I was done with my analysis and my plea, it was clear that Frans, too, valued the word and importance of Belgium, but I suspect changing the world together in a week seemed like a rather big hurdle. So when silence finally hit the room, as Herman paused, Frans asked me in response: "Howard, do you know the two ways to cook a frog?"

And I said "No Frans, what are the two ways to cook a frog?"

And Frans explained: "Howard, the first way to cook a frog is you heat up the water to a boil so you can quickly cook the frog. You then throw the frog in. But the frog feels the heat and immediately jumps out and you have no dinner.

But Howard," Frans continued, "there is a second way, the Belgian way, to cook a frog. You fill the pot with cool water. You place the frog inside and he swims happily. You then turn on the heat and slowly heat the water and the frog never reacts, and voila, you have dinner." Having listened to the story, I immediately responded: "But Frans, there is a third way to cook a frog, the Belgian and American way. You boil up the water so that you can cook the frog quickly. You put the frog in the water and before he can jump out, you slam a lid on the pot. And voila, the frog goes nowhere. Help me slam a lid on the pot, Frans."

Believing always in the power of Belgian credibility, our Embassy website for the past three years has urged: "If You Want to Be Heard, Say It In Belgium." And, as you all know, Europe took steps to prove us right by selecting then Herman and Frans to lead the European Council. Truth be told, Belgians along the way have questioned whether we were sincere in our belief in the importance of Belgium or whether we were just saying that. But now that more than three years have passed, history has removed much of the doubt.

Belgium has been heard about Afghanistan. In 2010, President Obama asked for surge troops in Afghanistan, promising to foster civilian reconstruction and stability and promising to draw down troop levels when conditions permitted us to do so. While other allies struggled, Belgium responded favorably, went in with additional troops and indeed has supported NATO's efforts to begin the transition to an Afghan-led security effort. While some other new leaders have announced the complete withdrawal of all troops from Afghanistan this year, the new Belgian government announced that Belgium will remain side by side with America as we initiate the transition through 2014 and has pledged the full amount of the NATO ask for post-2014 financial support to the Afghan security effort.

When human rights were at risk in Libya, Belgium helped lead flying 620 air to ground bombing missions in Libya while the United States flew none. Instead we armed and fueled allies like Belgium who put their pilots in harm's way in defense of the citizens of Libya as they demanded democracy and their human rights. Belgium has been heard about Iranian sanctions, closing the Port of Antwerp to the Iranian state shipping line and denying the regime in Tehran access to its financial system. On the need for compromise and action in the eurozone crisis with its credible Finance Minister. And on so much more. And we, the U.S. and Belgium, have fixed our problems of the past, gotten by our very rough patches, and today form the strongest of partners. We have progress and we have momentum.

Of course, we had the strongest roots for a relationship as dear allies and partners, roots dating back to the two world wars. The liberation of Belgium by the United States and our allies after the devastation of 2 world wars is and will always remain a preeminent and unifying part of our history. Among the images that will always stay with me when my days here are done are the throngs that come out to our commemorations in Bastogne and to our three moving Memorial Day remembrances. Images of museums in peoples' homes dedicated to the American GI. The crowd every single night at the Menin Gate in Ieper for The Last Call. I shall always be moved by the fact that Belgians never forget; by the fact that they today still tend to the graves that they have adopted of American boys who died over a half century ago.

But particularly because of how deep and how strong our roots are, the yesterday that existed when I arrived here in Belgium over three years ago – the yesterday of the mid 2000's is a place from which we may learn a great deal about foreign relations but to which we should never return. We should not return to that yesterday no matter who leads Belgium, no matter who leads the United States. No matter who the ambassador. No matter whether he or she studies French and Dutch daily and tries to build a friendship with the Belgian people by visiting every city, village and commune or, alternatively, spends more time at the Embassy and is less known to the public.

You see, despite our history as the dearest of allies and the bonds that followed the world wars, in the mid 2000's, that relationship between us was widely described in the press as "frosty." As a result of policy differences, particularly over the handling of the Iraq war, the Belgian government considered closing the Port of Antwerp to U.S. ships, closing Belgian airspace to U.S. planes and subjecting U.S. officials to its law of universal jurisdictions for criminal charges in Belgium. There is a temptation now to ask how could Belgian officials and politicians have formulated and undertaken such unfriendly actions? To ask where did that leadership come from? But the lesson from Belgium -- a lesson that should resonate through foreign policy circles or business circles or academic circles -- is

that politicians and officials don't create opinion. Citizens create opinion. Politicians and leaders don't create opinion; opinion creates politicians and leaders. Politicians and officials follow the voice of the citizenry. Leaders of course lead, but they still must head in the direction that others tell them that they want to go. And however the U.S. and Belgium got so far off track with each other, the U.S. had faltered in the minds and hearts of the citizens of Belgium. We separated from the people. Indeed, the Gallup Polling Company started in 2007 to track public opinion in every country in the world concerning America and U.S. leadership. And the results of the first poll showed that in Belgium in 2007, only 8 per cent of the citizenry had a favorable view of U.S. leadership while 65% had an unfavorable view and 27% were neutral or had no opinion. Think about that. 8% favorable and 65% unfavorable. 8 to 1 times as unfavorable as favorable. Could there have been a greater call for change? For renewed leadership to rebuild the partnership? And it is not about and was never about a popularity contest. It is about results. When the citizens are frosty and cynical, politicians threaten to close ports and airspace. In that world of cynicism and mistrust, in that environment, both American interests of any sort and the Belgian-American relationship suffer mightily. Ex-pats must feel at least somewhat uncomfortable amidst their neighbors; tourists hide the tee-shirts or guide books that would identify them as American. And in that environment of those days; U.S.-based businesses play down their home roots. And an Embassy finds frustration behind many doors. Indeed, diplomacy remains stalled at the door. In that yesterday, we had lost our way with one another. We talked past each other. We failed to look each other in the eye.

We can not go back there again. That yesterday must continue to fade as tomorrow grows ever brighter. But the path of change was as identifiable as the path of destruction. It almost always is. You just need to identify causes and react with solutions. When we first arrived in 2009, we candidly admitted that the Belgian-American relationship had recently suffered and I explained the values of the then new President, the man who had sent me here. We promised to be better listeners and learners and to rebuild the partnership where it had suffered most – with the people. We outlined our plans as part of that reconstruction of the bridge with the citizens of Belgium to study both French and Dutch and to visit all of the people – to visit the 589 cities, towns and communes in Belgium.

The election of Barack Obama and the appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State in the beginning of 2009 took us a long way towards rebuilding that bridge. They were for Belgium more than a catalyst for change; they were the embodiment of change. The Gallup Poll for 2009 showed that the change in leadership raised the favorability rating from 8% to 30% - a 22% gain - and cut the unfavorability from 65% to 23%, a decrease of 42% in the unfavorability. So that the rating as of 2009 was 30% favorable and 23% unfavorable.

We have to date worked hard to reap change, to rebuild the Belgian American relationship. As a country. As an Embassy, and even as an ambassador. We still study French one day and Flemish the next and we have to date visited 583 cities, villages, and towns, leaving me 6 to go. The latest Gallup Poll of all the countries in the world came out on May 1 of this year. The eurozone crisis and Afghanistan fatigue contributed to the favorability rating for US leadership losing ground in much of Europe.

But we have been proud to note that in that same international poll released by Gallup in May --- 6 months ago –Belgium finished first in the world with the highest gain in favorability rating for the U.S. leadership. There was another 15% gain in favorability and another 8% decrease in the unfavorability so that the rating – which was 8%-65% just 5 years ago now stands at 45% favorable

and only 22% unfavorable – a more than 2 to 1 edge in favorability where a 1 to 8 rating once stood. Which means that Belgians view American leadership today more favorably than Americans view American leadership. And again, this was never about a popularity contest. With the change in public opinion, came the change in action that we discussed: among other places, in Afghanistan, in Libya, and the other advances we discussed. Rebuild a partnership and they will come. And that change also means that Boston Red Sox tee shirts and U.S. guide books have reappeared in the Grand Place. Tourists are proud to meet Belgians and to talk about their country. It means that ex-pats again proudly discuss their home. U.S.-headquartered businesses operating in Belgium recruit employees and customers by flagging their U.S. roots. The Embassy often finds smiles, not frustration, at the door, which is usually wide open for the diplomacy of discussions among partners.

And yet, I learn never to be too confident, never to stop communicating and working on mutual understanding. For we still sometimes talk past one another and often the fault for the communication gap is mine. And sometimes, it is about how we cook frogs – sometimes it is about how much we value Belgian leadership and Belgian credibility.

We had one such example just last week involving the Palestinian request for observer status at the UN. We thought Belgium should abstain and help lead Europe to vote to abstain. And truth be told, we believed for good cause right to the end that Belgium would do so. But on the day of the vote, Belgium decided otherwise and cast a ballot for membership.

Now, though many in the press did not so state, the issue concerning the Belgian vote never really was about membership – you see, whether or not Belgium abstained, whether or not Belgium led Europe into abstaining, the vote was going to admit the Palestinians.

And though many in the press also did not so state, the issue of membership was not really about how to help the Palestinians or the peace process. Because after viewing the history of tactical advances by either side and without doubt after viewing the prior vote last year on admitting the Palestinians to UNESCO, there was no doubt that the vote in favor would hurt the Israelis, hurt even worse the Palestinians, and be a devastating blow to the peace process. You see, we have learned through history and knew to a certainty, that tactical efforts by one side are met by tactical counter-responses by the others and always divert from forcing both sides to meet in true negotiations aimed at a long term peace. So it was not a surprise that the result of such tactical efforts by the Palestinians would be paired with a tactical counter-response – the announcement of new settlements and the withholding of tax revenue from the Palestinians to pay amounts long due to the Israelis – which leaves both people far worse off and the peace process, the only meaningful path here, even more distant.

So, although media and some political leaders analyzed the issue only from the perspective of Israel or of the Palestinians, lost in the discussion was the focus on Belgium and Belgium's heretofore role as a credible force in the MidEast working towards that long term peace agreement. You see, recognizing Belgium's credibility with both parties, I had seen the US leaders meet with the then Belgian foreign minister to coordinate voices in our overtures and efforts with both Israeli and Palestinian leadership. An abstention vote would not have hurt the Palestinians or helped the Israelis, it would instead have preserved Belgium's role as a credible interlocutor in the Mid East and a credible

force for peace. And in that vote as in every vote, I believe in Belgian credibility and I will never sell Belgium short.

With that issue in the rear view mirror, there will be other issues that will raise difficult choices but for which a Belgian vote to remain among the credible world leaders may be difficult but certainly will be worth the cost or challenge. As Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK have made efforts to update their Air Force – never an easy decision and ever the more difficult in a time of budget squeezes – Belgium is still considering the issue. It is far too easy for some to say why do we need some new planes. But I believe Belgium deserves to maintain its voice as a small but reliable partner in NATO, whether in protecting human life in Libya or fostering civilian reconstruction in Afghanistan, a voice among the leaders. And there is more to do in combating terrorism. In preventing Hizballah from contributing to the atrocities being committed in Syria. The U.S. has designated Hizballah, and we believe others should do so as well, in part for its material support of Assad's regime, support which has contributed to the slaughter of over 30,000 Syrian civilians. Belgium has been a strong voice in condemning the human rights violations of the Assad regime, and can help raise awareness of Hizballah's role in these atrocities.

And on more. On the leading issues today, Belgium can help and can help leading others who have to decide as well. I for one believe in nothing less.

Thanks so much and all the best.