

The Road Ahead Is On Your Shoulders

October 18, 2011

Ambassador Howard Gutman
AmCham Young Professionals Reception

I am delighted to be here today. It is a truly exciting day for me.

You see I often get to speak to today's leaders. At Parliament. In Minister's offices. At conferences and meetings and closed door sessions.

And I often get to speak to yesterday's leaders. At cocktail parties. At operas. If only I hunted. But there is nothing more important than speaking with tomorrow's leaders. Those charged with building a better tomorrow for us all.

Mr. Ambassador, we think you have the wrong speech. This is not the speech to the Young Christian Democrats or other novice politician groups. This is the young businessmen, the Amcham section. No, this is indeed the right speech. You indeed are tomorrow's leaders. Whether or not you know it, you have a very critical mission. You have the most important job in the world.

It is your job to save the planet.

I realize it is not an easy job, but somebody has to do it. And if someone is going to save our planet, it will be through creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and business leadership. And it will have to come from people who grew up at a time when their favorite book was Facebook and for whom, tweets do not refer to the sounds of birds.

Let me explain.

For far too long, my generation has made a mess of things. My generation got it wrong. On so many fronts. Reliance on that system is largely broken.

And for far too long, we as a society have looked to politicians, government officials and a free media to fix most messes. Reliance on that system is also largely broken.

And as a result, we have left the economy, our security, and our environment largely in disarray. And we have led to the breakdown of two of the leading institutions of our time – number 1, politics and government and number 2, the media.

We have left our economies, security, environment upside down, standing on their heads and our political system and media broken down on the side of the road.

We had been bailed out once. And indeed, it was young entrepreneurs then who came to the rescue.

Following the Second World War and up to the end of the 1970's, America, Belgium and much of the world had largely been dependent on old industries and natural resources – steel, coal, heavy manufacturing. We all watched the 7:00 o'clock news and read a paper a day, and both were more factual than sport. Political rivalries existed but all knew that country came before even party.

But the industries based on consumption like coal, steel, heavy manufacturing slowly withered. We had not invested in the future—our formerly grand cities had instead reminisced fondly about the past. Just ask Newark, New Jersey or Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, or Charleroi or the Winterslag mine. The economy seemed to have no place to go. And workers may have been faced simply with going home. Who bailed us out in the late 1970's, 1980's, and early 1990's? Who put America back to work? Who saw the future when so many were still focused on the past?

Democrats? No. Republicans? No.

Entrepreneurs. Young business people. It was people who at the time looked just like you. People who thought just like you.

Bill Gates. Steve Jobs (may he rest in peace) , Michael Dell . . . people creating companies like Microsoft, AOL, Apple, Dell, Cisco.

At the time, my generation thought Yahoo was something cowboys said when they chased horses and Google was a noise babies made when they finished with their bottles.

But that generation of entrepreneurs and creators saw a little further down the road. And we thrived.

Did it last? Did we learn our lesson? The lesson about the path to continued success? The lesson about creativity, innovation, leadership by example and not by word, and entrepreneurship?

Hardly. It indeed led to a faster-paced world of fast money, big scores, and credit everywhere.

So, through most of the first decade of this new century, my generation continued to make a mess of things. Continued to leave our economy, financial system, security and our environment in disarray.

And we headed right to the political chaos of today, accompanied by the media circus of politics as sport.

It was all too easy to get there. All it required was the cozy life, the path of least resistance. We needed to drive our cars and fuel our lifestyles. Simple. Buy fossil fuels from the Middle East. Even when some of the countries we were thereby supporting were less than friends of ours. Even when many of the leaders of those countries used our dollars to fuel their suppression of democracy. We needed to pay for it. Easy again. Borrow heavily, often from the Chinese. Even when the Chinese refused to join the world of economic interdependence based on currency regulation and labor market standards.

So we ended up borrowing from the Chinese to pay \$800 million/day for oil to folks who often meant us harm thereby undermining our national security and our financial stability;

And in so doing, we failed to invest in new technologies and alternative energies that could fuel the next generation of employment opportunities, thereby limiting our employment prospects;

While we at the same time contributed to the physical destruction of our planet choked in carbon. And we used a faster-paced media cycle to convert government into sport and lead to political stalemates broadcast 24 hours a day.

Could we get it more wrong?

More importantly, who will bail us out this time?

Politicians and our political system? There is an ever-growing lack of faith in that route. And for good cause.

Who will save our planet by using creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship to get off fossil fuels, create job opportunities, enhance our national security, clean our planet, and restore confidence and civility into our daily governance?

That is where you come in.

Is the next Bill Gates, Steve Jobs or Michael Dell in this room? How can't he or she be? Of course you are.

Along with your brothers and sisters in Boston, Silicon Valley, Northern Virginia.

For we know now that there is one critical truth. Quite simple actually.

There is simply no doubt that this time, we have to get it right. And we have to get it right together. This time, we need again to see a little further down the road and we need to look there together.

Indeed, that is our only hope. You and your entrepreneur brethren in the States are our only hope. The fact is that over the past three decades, firms less than five years old — new companies, start-ups, entrepreneurial enterprises — have accounted for nearly all increased employment in America's private sector.

Could there be a better time than now, in the middle of a euro crisis, an employment crisis, a currency crisis, a crisis in lack of faith in government, a crisis in political stalemate, for young leaders in the business community to step up and right the ship?

Of course not.

For where others see crisis, true leaders see opportunity. Entrepreneurs see upside. Creators see new horizons. Inherent in the collapse of an economy is the opportunity to rebuild it and to build it better. To honor the past by transitioning to job-creating industries of the future -- biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, agri-bio foods, clean energy. American bellwether companies, such as IBM, Disney, CNN, Microsoft, Whole Foods and Genzyme are just a handful of firms that were founded during times of great economic difficulties.

I am convinced to my core that the social and political challenges of today can best be tackled and perhaps can only be tackled with solutions from business and entrepreneurs. Job creation is an easy example. But there are many more. Having seen several climate conferences and watching the debate between the developed and developing countries about how to take responsibility for the future of our climate I am convinced that politicians will never find answers as long as those solutions that save our climate hurt economic return. When battery technology advances to the point where electric cars are not only cleaner, but also cheaper and economically mandated, then we shall find a way off carbon. The key to our energy future, like the key to job creation, lies with today's entrepreneurs.

And in marching into the future, we can leave no one behind. Inherent in a better world – even for entrepreneurs—is a socially just world. And in these fields –in a world of technology and alternative energy, of research and information – if you can build it in New York or Paris or Brussels or Mumbai, you can build it in Limburg, in Charleroi, in Newark and in Detroit. We can only succeed at the pace of our slowest runner.

Do we have any time to waste?

Not much or not any. For most of my life, tensions have been between the haves and the have nots. But there are for the first time in my memory virtually no haves – there are instead a lot of have-a-lot-lesses and have nots. Go to any political gathering, to any business conference, to any church, and the conversation, the dialogue is about our failures, not our successes. About crisis, about unemployment, about shrinking pies and growing layoffs.

Now indeed, much of that is a crisis created by political rhetoric fueled too often by a media circus. Indeed, economically, both Belgium and America have made remarkable progress economically in recovering from the financial crisis. Belgium has one of the fastest growing economies in Europe and has successfully faced its budget challenges. And the U.S. has brought unemployment down over a point and has created private sector jobs every month for over a year. We have indeed created manufacturing jobs for the first time in decades.

But plainly, we have to put people back to work. We have to get them working now. And it would be best if we got them working at the same time, if we got them working everywhere, perhaps even together. In Charleroi and Detroit. Because prosperity needs and breeds prosperity.

Development breeds development. Spending breeds earning and earning breeds more spending. Yes, the challenges that we face that unite us are so much greater than any difference that may divide us.

Okay Mr. Ambassador, we hear you. We get it. And we understand that perhaps it can happen in Boston. Perhaps again in Silicon Valley.

But can it really happen in Belgium? Can it really happen in Limburg, in Mons and in Brussels? We are not Americans. We are Belgians.

Indeed we are different. But partners often are. And potential for creative and entrepreneurial success has many styles, many looks.

I well understand as well as any that there may sometimes be differences in style and approach. Perhaps we even cook frogs differently. You see two years ago, I came to Belgium after over a quarter of a century as a high-powered lawyer in Washington DC.

I took a huge paycut and moved my family across the Atlantic. But after 27 years of making money, I wanted instead to make a difference. I moved and took that cut for the honor of having a chance finally to make a real difference in the world. Finally to help make tomorrow for many better than today. For me, as a matter of mission, as a matter of style, there was so much to do. And I had no time to waste.

So early on, I had a meeting at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with one of Belgium's top diplomats. A friend of mine now whom I will call Piet.

So in that early meeting, I urged Piet to join with me to change the world. I urged Piet that if Belgium took the lead in Europe, and brought all of the nations of Europe along with it, there was nothing we could not achieve together.

For example, I explained, my President had tried to close Guantanamo Prison by asking European nations one at a time to relocate one or more former detainees. It was a slow process and it was exhausting.

But, thinking far bigger, I explained that Belgium could indeed lead the European nations in meeting together at once, and deciding among themselves at once to divide up all of the remaining Guantanamo prisoners together. In one diplomatic exercise, much like one entrepreneurial effort, Belgium could close the Guantanamo institution when my country could not do it by asking countries one at a time.

Having listened intently, the leading Belgian diplomat to my surprise answered: "Howard, do you know the two ways to cook a frog?"

And of course I said, "no, Piet, what are the two ways to cook a frog?"

He replied, "The first way is to heat the water till it boils and then throw the frog in. But the frog feels the heat and immediately jumps out and there is no dinner."

The leading diplomat in Belgium went on to explain: "But the second way, the Belgian way, is to put the frog in nice cool water in a pot. He swims around happily. You then turn on the heat and it slowly cooks the frog and voila . . . there is dinner."

And, without missing a beat, I immediately replied: "Piet, there is a third way. You throw the frog in the boiling pot and grab a lid and slam it on the pot. Voila. The frog goes nowhere and we eat immediately."

So indeed we are different. But partners often are. Some leaders slam lids. Others slowly heat up cool water. What matters is that through our joint skill, creativity and innovation, we both get to eat.

Whether we are dealing with a new product, a new means of production, or even a new formula for closing Guantanamo Prison.

But isn't lid slamming more effective for an entrepreneur? For innovation? If Belgians are not good lid slammers, can you make a difference? Can you lead? Can we really save the planet?

To tell you the truth, there was a time when I thought lid slammers like me were always the most effective.

Two people or groups since taught me otherwise. They taught me that lid slamming is one way, but it need not be the only way. The first person who conveyed that lesson by actions and deeds and not by words was Barack Obama. And the second group who reiterated that lesson by their successes are the entrepreneurs whom I have met in Belgium.

Indeed, Barack Obama is the first man I have ever met who has no blood pressure. Always calm and thinking. Did you ever notice that no matter how he moves, his suit never creases.

He never slams lids. Never rushes to judgment. At every meeting, staff gathers around the room to consider an issue. The lid slammers usually speak first. The timid tend to shy away. But if Obama had you in the room, he values your opinion. Patiently he solicits each viewpoint. He hears from all. And in time with due reflection, he finally decides.

As well, Barack Obama understands that you should never let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Compromise is progress, so always compromise and move in the right direction. Obama takes what he can get and then will return for more.

Moreover, Obama never accepts convention simply because it is conventional. What matters is not simply being able to think outside the box – it is being willing to refuse to accept that there even is a box at all. For him, great ideas can come from anywhere but need not come from the conventional. All those qualities. Sound familiar? Sound Belgian?

Some Belgians sometimes seem to have a stronger fear of failure than entrepreneurs in the States. True, good judgment should always prevail. But in today's world, success is simply the other side of the coin from failure. You have to be willing to flip the coin nonetheless. In today's world, there are no failures. Just stops on the way to the ultimate success.

You have the opportunity of tomorrow. For thousands of years, entrepreneurs and young leaders have found ways to transcend national, political, economic, physical and spiritual boundaries to create opportunity and prosperity for us all. When innovators and entrepreneurs can turn their ideas into businesses, jobs and economic opportunity follow closely behind. Entrepreneurs are a powerful force for change

Yes We Can. Yes You Can. Indeed, We Must. You Must.

Our future rests with you. Right here.

Best of luck and all the best.

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And as a result, we have left the economy, our security, and our environment largely in disarray. And we have led to the breakdown of two of the leading institutions of our time – number 1, politics and government and number 2, the media. We have left our economies, security, environment upside down, standing on their heads and our political system and media broken down on the side of the road.

We had been bailed out once. And indeed, it was young entrepreneurs then who came to the rescue. Following the Second World War and up to the end of the 1970's, America, Belgium and much of the world had largely been dependent on old industries and natural resources – steel, coal, heavy manufacturing. We all watched the 7:00 o'clock news and read a paper a day, and both were more factual than sport. Political rivalries existed but all knew that country came before even party.

But the industries based on consumption like coal, steel, heavy manufacturing slowly withered. We had not invested in the future—our formerly grand cities had instead reminisced fondly about the past. Just ask Newark, New Jersey or Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, or Charleroi or the Winterslag mine. The economy seemed to have no place to go. And workers may have been faced simply with going home. Who bailed us out in the late 1970's, 1980's, and early 1990's? Who put America back to work? Who saw the future when so many were still focused on the past?

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Best of luck and all the best.

