

Never Go Back to Yesterday

October 6, 2012

Ambassador Howard Gutman
Keynote Speech
LeadersMeeting@Paris
Salon of the President of the Senate
Paris, France

Goedeavond. Bonsoir.

Nederlands is niet gemakkelijk voor mij; het is heel moeilijk.

Et mon français est très mauvais aussi. Voilà trois ans que j'étudie les deux langues: le français le lundi, le mercredi, et le vendredi; et le néerlandais le mardi et le jeudi, mais je deviens vieux et donc même après trois ans d'études, je trouve les deux langues encore très difficiles,,,
Et donc, je continuerai en anglais

I want to thank Eric for that wonderful introduction.

And I want to thank Jeroen Wils and the group LeadersMeeting@Paris and all of you for inviting me to speak here tonight. I have spoken in hundreds of places but I really never thought I would make it to giving a speech in the Senate in Paris. And I know LeadersMeeting@Paris was hoping that Mitt Romney or Paul Ryan or Barack Obama or Joe Biden could address you tonight at this wonderful dinner.

But for some reason they were all busy.

One story before we get too serious. Having noted how poor my French and Dutch are and knowing that you heard yesterday from Yves Leterme, I am reminded that I vowed when I started studying the languages three years ago that before leaving Belgium, I would give one speech entirely in French and one speech entirely in Flemish.

Well, I still have not done the Flemish speech but ik heb teveel respect voor de schoonheid van uw taal, dat ik vandaag niets meer ga zeggen in het nederlands.

But I have done my French one. More than a year ago and thus way before I was ready. People are still recovering down in Liege from the trauma.

But it wasn't my fault. I got cornered into that disaster. You see, Yves Leterme is a huge Standaard de Liege fan. And one day when Leterme was Prime Minister, I received a text message from Yves telling me that each year at the start of the season, Standard has a booster's banquet with a recognized speaker. He texted me that he had suggested me as the speaker and wondered whether I would agree to do it.

Well, I don't often speak to sports clubs but he was the then Prime Minister and diplomats don't say no to Prime Ministers, so of course I agreed to do so.

And then in classic fashion, after I agreed, Leterme texted me and said. Oh, and Howard, it is in French.

I had fear in my heart, but I will always try my best. I wrote a good speech in English. I then sat down with my francophone staff and went over the whole speech. I explained not just the words but the texture of what I was trying to say. We worked hard to preserve the humor. And the tone and the pace. And we got it into French perfectly.

So I was well equipped. In the days leading up to the speech, I began to practice to myself. And as I practiced to myself, I heard a perfect French in my ears and in my mind. To me, as I read it to myself, it sounded like Jacques Cousteau and Cecile de France.

I knew I could do this. But just to be sure, we arranged to have a huge screen behind me in the front of the room, which would simultaneously show my text in French.

And then came my big day. And as I began the speech, the opening words flowed out. *Mon français était parfait.* Jacques Cousteau and Cécile de France would have been proud.

On I went, 2, 3 maybe 4 minutes. But with over 15 minutes to do, as I labored to form each word just perfectly and get the pace and the flow of the sentence just right, I tired. I began at first to stumble. Then pause. But I plugged on. I continued ahead through the text.

And I noticed in the audience, slowly as my words and efforts began to decay, that slowly, politely- for Belgians are always polite – one by one – the Belgians were casting their eyes up on the screen so as to be able to read what I was saying and follow along. Nut I plugged ahead. “Not so bad, I thought at first.”

But I continued to tire and to fight for each word and by the ten or fifteen minute mark, as my brain kept reading and my mouth kept talking, the words coming from my mouth started sounding Ukrainian one minute and Hindi the next. And the poor Belgians – who had done nothing wrong but try to support their football club, were politely reading the screen but now covering their ears as they read in self-defense, no longer able to listen to the shrill that was coming from the front of the room.

So I live today in total fear of keeping my pledge and one day trying the speech in Dutch. Indeed we are all blessed that I will continue in French.

And indeed it is an honor, a privilege and a true joy to get to be with you tonight and to share some thoughts with leaders of the Belgian business community and opinion leaders.

You know, it really is an honor to get to serve even a single day as the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium, to get to represent my country and President Obama, and to get to build bridges with the wonderful people in Belgium. Michelle and I have in fact long said that there are only two types of people in Belgium, those who have already become our good friends and those who soon will become our good friends. And given that it is an honor and a joy to serve even a single day, we have now had the pleasure to serve for over three years and thus to be the second longest serving U.S. Ambassador

to Belgium in 31 years. And since this will be either my last few months or certainly my last year – more on that later – I would like to thank you all for the many kindnesses to Michelle and me, for your help with our embassy and our mission and note that I look forward to our friendships continuing long after my ambassadorship has concluded.

Now a huge advantage of having that length of service, of having given dozens and dozens of speeches on a huge variety of topics over more than 3 years is I can now see where we were and where we have come, and thus better understand where we are going, where we should go and indeed where we must go as we build our future together. We have history together. We have results. And with our track record, with our history, with our results, we can together be wiser in looking towards tomorrow's future.

In that over three years and in that look back, I have learned much. About Belgian-American relations. About the economy and the economic crisis. About foreign policy and the challenges we have faced in places like Iraq and Afghanistan and still face in places like Iran. About energy policy. About the role of Belgium and of the United States within the leadership of the brotherhood of man. I hope to review this evening some of what that look back has demonstrated.

The Belgian-American Relationship

The biggest lessons learned concern Belgian-American relations and diplomacy. I recently met in Brussels with a delegation of 16 United States Senators and Congressmen and women. And I told them that I was convinced that if you could study the history of only one country to learn about diplomacy, about foreign relations, and about why foreign relations matter -- that that country should not be China or India; Mexico or Canada; or even France, Germany or England. It should be Belgium.

And I got the same looks of disbelief from these U.S. officials as I am getting now from this audience.

But plainly the lessons from Belgium and about the Belgium-American relationship are critical ones. Those lessons are vital to our future. To our shared future together – whether you or I are in Belgium, in the U.S. or even somewhere else within the brotherhood of man. And those lessons have given rise to the title of this talk "Never Go Back to Yesterday."

Indeed, when discussing Belgium, America and particularly Belgian-American relations, we must never go back to yesterday.

For what did yesterday mean for Belgium, for America and most importantly, for Belgian-American relations?

Well if yesterday for you is 95 years ago after the end of World War I or 65 years ago after the end of World War II, with regard to Belgian-American relations, it is of course safe to go back there. And indeed, when focusing on the foundations of the Belgian-American relationship and of the prevailing world order, the yesterday of the war eras must never be forgotten and the roots of our relationship as dear allies and partners must always remain firm in our minds and in our hearts. 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 lessons that have most impressed me over the past three years here as Ambassador is the lasting influence of the wars in shaping present society here. Among the images that will always stay with me 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. Yes, if yesterday goes back to these foundational moments, it is always safe to return.

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. For that yesterday is a place which dear allies and partners like Belgians and Americans need never revisit.

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 differences 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 don't serve as the inspiration for policies. Popular opinion does. Politicians and officials follow the voice of the citizenry. Leaders of course lead, but they go where they can succeed. Leaders are required to get out in front, 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 – I remember that Michelle and I came to Europe once during this period and someone asked us where we were from. And I just did not want to be given a headache. So I said “near Canada.” And it worked. 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 cannot 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 566 cities, villages, and towns, leaving me 29 to go. By the way, for the largest cities, 100 or 150, we have receptions with the mayor, visit major businesses and sites, talk to press. But for the smaller cities, they just have a pub and some houses. To be an official visit, I take a picture at a known landmark and have to say hello to someone. Now my favorites are the towns with the Police stations where I go up to say hello and there is a note on the door that says “Open Tuesday and Thursday from 9:00 am to noon.” Which makes me wonder if you are a criminal, do you come to that town on Monday, Wednesday or Friday since there are no police available? Now in some towns there are just houses, and not even a pub. I have looked around some days or eves for 15 minutes and found no one to say “hello” to. So there I go, I have walked up to houses, followed by three large bodyguards with earphones and knocked on the door to say “hello”, I am the

American Ambassador. The people have thought they were being arrested or deported or something.

Getting back on track of the trends of popular opinion, rebuilding that bridge in Europe met challenges in parts of Europe in the last year or two. The latest Gallup Poll of all the countries in the world came out on May 1 of this year. The euro zone crisis and Afghanistan fatigue contributed to the favorability rating for US leadership losing 10% in Germany and 15% in France.

But we are proud to note that in that same international poll released by Gallup in May ---4 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 a change in action. The Belgium that had once considered closing ports and airspace became actively engaged in the NATO Mission in Afghanistan, and agreed in 2010 to provide the extra surge troops that President Obama requested that year, even while other allies struggled with that request. Belgium, the country that 5 years ago thought of indicting our Defense Department officials, was one of the first countries in the air in the Libyan mission. In fact, Belgium flew 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.

And today in Afghanistan, 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 transition out of Afghanistan through 2014 and has pledged the full amount of the NATO ask for post-2014 financial support to the Afghani security effort.

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 finds smiles, not frustration, at the door, which is always wide open for the diplomacy of discussions among partners.

And so I maintain I was correct when I told those 16 stunned U.S. legislators recently that Belgium was the best and most important country in the world to study if you want to learn about foreign relations, about diplomacy, about why foreign relations matter and about change.

Now given where we are, given where we have gotten back to, and especially given where we had been yesterday, we must all fight - Belgians, Americans, LeadersMeeting@Paris, each of you, and the chocolate shops and the waffle vendors and the Belgian business leaders and journalists, the ports, the politicians and all others- we must all fight never to go back to yesterday. No matter who may

be in the White House. No matter which party has how many seats in the Belgian Parliament. No matter who may live in the glorious Residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium.

You see, Ambassador Sam Fox, my dedicated predecessor, and President George Bush did not define America any more than Howard Gutman and President Barack Obama define America. America is 310 million citizens dedicated to the same values shared by 11 million Belgians – freedom, democracy, respect for our fellow men and women and for the brotherhood of citizens, love of family, pride in work, curiosity about tomorrow and much more. America is not about the guy on the lectern giving the long speech when we meet, but about all in the audience.

Sure we – Belgians and Americans -- may from time to time diverge in tactics – for dear friends and allies always do -- but we will always share our passions, our values and our sense of decency. No matter where the lanes lead in the years ahead, we must always, always remain on the same highway. We cannot go back to yesterday.

Indeed as we head into tomorrow, the distinctions between Belgium and America, between Belgians and Americans, between Belgian businesses and American businesses, daily grows more blurry. In a world of international companies and international citizens, the analysis of “us” and “them” becomes more obsolete. The concept of “trade and trade balances” even becomes less relevant. You in this room may perhaps best demonstrate that fuzziness. Is Delhaize, a company with 70% of its turnover and much of its workforce in the United States, a Belgian company which has spread to the U.S. or an American company with Belgian roots? Is it “us” or “them.”? When the number one American beer Budweiser is led by a CEO from Latin America, with leading shareholders in Belgium in a world where more Budweiser is sold in China than in the U.S., where does the “us” line end and the “them” line begin? The world is growing smaller and it will continue to do so and as it does, we must inch towards the tomorrow and away from yesterday.

The Role of Belgium and the United States

As part of my look back over our past three years together, I have also looked at the issue of the role of Belgium and the United States within the leadership of the brotherhood of man. For leaders can come in many packages; they can use many styles. What is important is not how they look or sound, but that others follow. So I have looked at the issue that so many Belgians have asked me over the past three years – does Belgium really matter on the world stage? Isn't Belgium but a small country? How can I say Belgium is an important leader?

For three years, we have explained that Belgium never shouts and it doesn't speak often. So when it does speak, it has credibility. People listen. Europe north may often times disagree or ignore Europe south and vice-versa. But Belgium has the ear and the respect of all. Why do you think when the impossible task arose of finding one leader to head the European Council – one person who could herd strong willed cats used to roaming in every direction – that the group settled on Herman Van Rompuy? And thus for 3 years, we have advertised on our website that “If You Want to Be Heard, Say It in Belgium.” Belgium has been heard about Afghanistan and about post-conflict support. It has been heard about Libya. On Iranian sanctions, closing the Port of Antwerp. On the need for compromise and action in the euro zone crisis. And on so much more. Belgium's voice will thus be critical going forward: in fighting terrorism, protecting human rights, securing financial security and so much more.

The Economic Crises and Energy Policy

My look back over the past three years showed we have long spoken about the economic crisis and the progress that has been made in the United States, but also about the work that remains ahead, as well as the still prominent challenges faced in Europe. I have expressed the view that in many respects, the U.S. faced a one year economic crisis, followed by a stalemate from a political crisis for two years and now enhanced by the European and international financial and economic crisis. Indeed when I first came to Belgium, the U.S. then faced three major economic crises and all three have largely been tackled – faulty financial regulation, health care costs and our dependence on foreign oil and our ever expanding carbon footprint. But with an increased emphasis on natural gas and the focus on shale, we have reduced our carbon footprint since my first speech more than any Kyoto country and we have decreased our dependence on foreign oil from over 60% to under 45% and the trend continues today. So while political stalemates and international financial crises continue to add stress to our economic recovery, the U.S. has made real economic progress. When I first spoke in 2009, the unemployment in the U.S. coming from the inherited crisis had hit 10.1%. But the U.S. has created increased private sector jobs for 31 straight months and unemployment today stands at 7.8%, a drop of 2.3% and the lowest it has been in four years. But there is a long way to go and perhaps progress on the political gridlock may be found after November no matter what the outcome of the elections, and progress on the international front may come from our European partners.

MY FUTURE PLANS

Finally, with Election Night approaching and with our having already served three years and longer than anyone else in over 30 years other than one, many have asked about our plans. I serve at the pleasure of the President and so if there is a change in administration next month, we will leave by the end of the year and allow the new President to pick his own representative. If the President gets re-elected, we have been asked to stay till our successors are confirmed and so our tenure will continue likely to the Spring and maybe the summer.

But our hearts will always be here, with you.

Thanks so much and all the best.