

## Understanding July 4th

July 4, 2012

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U.S. Embassy Brussels

Good Afternoon. Welcome. Welcome.  
Excellencies, Ministers, Fellow Citizens, Dear Friends –

Michelle and I are honored to be here in Belgium with all of you on this July 4th to celebrate together.

And I am always honored to share a stage with our dear friends Bill and Deborah Kennard. Ambassador Kennard represents the U.S. at the EU with wisdom and grace and I learn from him daily.

But the reason I am most thrilled to be here today, the reason that I am most honored to have the opportunity to share this day with each of you, is that it is here and with you that I have truly understood the meaning of July 4th.

You see, it has taken serving my country in Europe for me truly to understand the meaning of Independence Day.

Indeed for 52 years, the Independence Day Celebration to me meant barbeques and beaches . . . fireworks and hot dogs.

Sure, the day stood for "Freedom" and "Liberty".

"Freedom" and "liberty." Marvelous words. But for 52 years, simply words nonetheless.

For how could I truly cherish such values as "freedom" and "liberty" when I had never tasted nor truly witnessed "oppression," "occupation," or sacrifice?

Amidst the joy and laughter of a childhood spent on the streets of New York and of a legal career focused on the halls of Washington DC, July 4th's words --- even sacred words like "liberty" – tended to blur into images of barbeques and beach fronts.

But "liberty" and "freedom" should never be confused with lemonade and sand castles.

Being here in Europe, in Belgium, travelling through American battlefield cemeteries in the Ardennes and Ieper, where so many American boys died to protect the freedom and restore the being liberty of others, and where a grateful Belgium never forgets;

Being here in Europe, in Belgium, spending time visiting with so many for whom the word "occupation" referred not to their job but to the invasion of their homes.

Being here in Europe, in Belgium, annually visiting the Belgian town of Mortsel, where the Belgian price in that restoration of liberty was so high;

Being here, getting a chance to serve my country by travelling with a dedicated Defense Minister and talking with our joint troops in Afghanistan, in Kunduz, Kabul, and Kandahar;

Being here, indeed this week, joining 125 wounded American veterans participating at a bike ride known as Ride 2 Recovery, meeting together with King Albert and watching the finish of the Tour De France in Tournai with young soldiers shaking hands with their left arm because they don't have a right one and explaining how they lost their legs finding a landmine intended to destroy their brethren;

Getting to meet those who have sacrificed lives and limbs so that their children and grandchildren -- our children and grandchildren -- one day could laugh free at barbecues and on beaches celebrating their Independence Day. . .

Here and now, I have come truly to understand the values at stake. It is the values that define July 4th -- whether July 4th comes on November 11th in Ieper; or Memorial Day at Henri Chappelle Cemetery, or even in Tournai on July 2nd. July 4th is never found on the beach or at a barbecue; it is always inside us all.

We thus understand that July 4th is not simply about celebration, but it is also about obligation. And so today, our Embassy and many of you our friends, engaged in a day of service before this evening of celebration. We joined together with Carlton Deal and his Serve the City project to give back -- cleaning a Belgian refugee center and tending to refugee children who one day we hope can spend such days at the beach and hosting barbecues. We want to thank Carlton and Serve the City for today and for their service every day.

A party of nearly 1500 of your closest friends is an amazing amount of work. We want to thank the SHAPE International Band for providing several music ensembles for us to enjoy: the jazz combo Ambassadors of Groove; the NATO brass quintet who played the anthems, and The Gruntz rock band. We want to thank our sponsors and supporters. Their names are listed prominently on the large banner at the entrance to the tent and their logos are scrolling on the 5 screens throughout the party. Take the time to read them, and thank them personally for their assistance. Each such U.S.-Belgian company is a true Ambassador fueling the engine of employment for both of our countries and building bridges between us as they supply products or services to us both.

A heartfelt thanks to the many volunteers from our Embassy with a special shout-out to some who have focused particularly hard on this event: my deputy Rob Faucher; my new assistant Beverly, who has already worked three months in the three weeks that Ellen has been gone; our Protocol head Florence Vanholsbeeck and the assistant Kim Reaux; and the head of our management team Martin Hohe and his fantastic staff, particularly Chris Pixley, who handled the massive logistics of this event. The Marines for all they do and all they have done today. You are all terrific.

But a special shout out of thanks to three people who have worked endlessly on this event. My special assistant Paige Williams who has worked endlessly in fundraising and budgets and planning. The absolutely greatest house manager on record Inge Smets who has aged 20 years this week with

headaches. And finally, a truly special thanks from us all to Tania Chomiak-Salvi. Already holding down two full-time jobs, Tania volunteered to lead this year's planning and she brought her well-known and well-respected energy, judgment and wisdom to the task. Tania is completing her three years and returning to Washington with Luca and the boys and words cannot describe how much we will miss them. And please check the embassy social media websites – our ning site and facebook sites – for photo albums of all that the Embassy is doing and for a special shout out to all of our sponsors.

And last, but Americans always save the best for last, I want to thank each and every one of you, not simply for being here today, but for your friendship each and every day. Indeed our thanks as an Embassy runs much deeper. Although the Belgian press did not really pick up on the story, we were delighted last month when the Gallup International Poll reported that of every one of the 140 countries in the world, Belgium finished first in the world this year with the highest percentage increase in its favorability rating for the United States and its leadership. Belgians now have a more than 2 to 1 favorable viewpoint of the United States leadership. When it comes to reflecting on the value of freedom and liberty, there is no where I would rather be and no one I'd rather be with than right here, with each of you.

So enjoy the evening, thanks so much and all the best.