

“U.S.-European Relations: A View from Belgium”

Ambassador Howard Gutman
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Good afternoon.

I am Howard Gutman, and I wear many hats. First, I am an alumnus of the College, Class of 1977. Second, I am the husband of Dr. Michelle Loewinger, an alumnus of the Class of 1978 and who, like me, is thrilled to be here today with you. We met working Freshman Orientation at Columbia in 1976, dated that following year mainly at the Hungarian Pastry Shop, got married four years later, and recently celebrated our 31st anniversary. Third, and most importantly, like you, Michelle and I are proud parents of a current Columbia student, a freshman living in Furnald Hall. And lastly, since August 2009, I have been the United States Ambassador to Belgium. In fact, I am now the second longest serving U.S. Ambassador to Belgium in the past 31 years.

I want to chat with you today about U.S. European relations as seen from Belgium. But, particularly in light of a recent poll of Americans that showed that 85% of Americans had no opinion about Belgium, perhaps a little background about Belgium and about myself may be helpful.

First, Belgium as I hope most of you know is a terrific country at the heart of Western Europe surrounded by Germany, France, the Netherlands and Luxemburg. Its capital Brussels is the home to the European Union and to NATO and it boasts such terrific other cities as Bruges, Ghent, Namur, Liege and many others. It is probably best known for any of 5 foods for which it leads the world: chocolate, waffles, beer, mussels and fries, but it is more seriously the 19th largest economy in the world and the U.S.'s 12th largest trading partner. And by either train or car, you can get from Brussels to London, Paris, Amsterdam, Dusseldorf and Cologne in under 2 hours.

Belgium is also one of the roughly 35 or 40 countries where the U.S. Ambassador is not a career officer of the State Department but is a colleague of the President and is sent by the then sitting President to serve. You see, there are roughly 185 U.S. Ambassadors to various countries. Roughly 150 or so are part of the 10,000 State Department officers who do three year tours in various countries over their careers. But in roughly 35 or so countries where it is particularly helpful for the ambassador to be attached to the current administration, the President sends a member of his own team. These countries include Canada and Mexico, India, China and Japan, Western Europe, much of central Europe, NATO, the EU, and several others.

I had not expected to be a U.S. ambassador. Like many of the ambassadors selected by President Obama, but unlike the vast majority of predecessor politically-appointed ambassadors and unlike every previous ambassador to Belgium, I was in the middle of my career and had a school age child. In fact, the only other child ever to live in the Residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium had been Eisenhower's granddaughter in 1969, when Ike's son was the Ambassador. My path had been much different than my predecessors. After graduating from Columbia, I attended and graduated from Harvard Law School, clerked in Dallas on the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, then clerked on the United States Supreme Court for justice Potter Stewart just after his retirement from

the Court, was a two year Special Assistant to the Director of the FBI for Counterintelligence and Counterterrorism and had a 27 year legal career at Williams & Connolly in Washington, often called the pre-eminent litigation firm in the country. On the side, I have assisted candidates on their campaigns dating back to Gary Hart. I had been part of the litigation team on Bush v. Gore. And on the 2008 Obama campaign, I assisted on policy, the Jewish vote, labor unions, Maryland delegates, fundraising and was a talking head on Fox News.

After months of going through a background investigation that includes the White House, IRS, FBI, and Senate, Michelle, Chase, and I arrived in Belgium in August 2009. Over the past three years, in Belgium and in the heart of Europe, I have indeed learned a great deal. The most significant lessons learned concern Belgian-American relations and its lessons about 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. And though they will vary somewhat from country to country, they are lessons that serve to teach us a great deal about relations through much of Europe and about diplomacy generally.

It is important first to understand the roots and the true historic strength of the Belgian- American partnership. During both World War I and World War II, Belgium was overrun and occupied. And both times, American boys crossed an ocean to come to a country they knew little about and liberated the Belgian citizens. And in the process, tens of thousands of Americans lost their lives, 19,000 died and 47,000 Americans were wounded just in the Battle of the Bulge, and indeed 15,000 American soldiers are buried in the three American battlefield cemeteries in Belgium. Almost ten times the number of Americans died in a single battle in Belgium than have died in our entire efforts in Afghanistan. More than seven times the number of Americans died in this battle than perished on D-Day.

And indeed Belgians never forget. I have had the experience of walking through a restaurant, when a large table of seniors in the corner noticed me and spontaneously stood up and started applauding. When I approached, they did not say "hello", they said "thank you." They were not thanking me, they were thanking those who came back then and those who were left beneath the Belgian soil. Among the images that will always stay with me from my years as ambassador 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 Post to commemorate the end of the First World War. In Belgian villas and estates, they rarely repaint the bullet holes from the occupation but simply cover the holes with pictures, never to forget. And I well learn about the strength of the roots of our partnership when I tour our American battlefield cemeteries and see the fresh flowers on the graves -- when U.S. family members could not have come in such numbers, You see, Belgians have

long adopted the graves of our soldiers, still bring the flowers, and still honor the dignity of all who had served.

Particularly because of how deep and how strong our roots are, the yesterday that existed when I arrived 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. And I now tell Belgians in my speeches that we should not return to that yesterday no matter who leads Belgium, no matter who leads the United States, no matter who is the ambassador.

You see, despite our history as the dearest of allies and the bonds that followed the world wars, in the mid 2000's, the Belgian-American relationship was widely described in the Belgian press as "frosty." As a result of policy differences and, among the most important ones, 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. Defense Department 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 and business circles and academic circles – is that politicians and officials don't create opinion. Citizens create opinion. Politicians and leaders don't really shape opinion; opinion shapes politicians and leaders. Politicians and officials follow the voice of the citizenry.

And however the U.S. and Belgium got so far off track with each other, there can be no doubt that the U.S. had faltered in the minds and hearts of the citizens of Belgium. 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, American interests of every sort and the Belgian-American relationship suffered mightily. Ex-pats at times were made to feel at least somewhat uncomfortable amidst their neighbors; tourists risked getting a hard time when they wore tee-shirts or carried guide books that identified them as American. And in that environment of those days; U.S.-based businesses had to play down their home roots. And an Embassy found frustration behind too many doors. Indeed, diplomacy too often remained stalled at the door. And as those of you know who travelled in Europe in those days, many of those patterns existed to a greater or lesser extent not just in Belgium, but elsewhere.

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. And so we can not go back there again. That yesterday must continue to fade as tomorrow grows ever brighter.

The Gallup Poll, following the election of Barack Obama and the appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State in 2009 showed an increase in 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.

And our Embassy's efforts were complimentary to that change. When we first arrived in 2009, we discussed the difficult times for the Belgian-American relationship. We did our best 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 that I would study both French and Dutch and three years later, I continue to take French lessons Monday, Wednesday and Friday and Dutch Tuesday and Thursday. We acknowledged that you could talk about rebuilding the partnership with ministers and barons, but you had to rebuild it with the people. So we vowed to visit all of the people - to visit all of the 589 official cities, towns and communes in Belgium. The effort is widely covered in the Belgian press, and even the U.S. edition of the Wall Street Journal ran a piece on the mission. As our website attests, we have so far visited 575 with 14 to go.

And the results keep coming. The latest Gallup Poll of all the countries in the world came out on May 1 of this year. Even in a tough world faced with a eurozone crisis, our Embassy is proud to note that in the most recent international poll, released by Gallup in May ---4 months ago -out of all the countries in the world, Belgium finished first with the highest gain in favorability rating for the U.S. leadership. There was another 15% gain in favorability and another decrease in the unfavorability so that the rating - which was 8%-65% just 5 years ago now stands at 46% favorable and only 22% unfavorable - a more than 2 to 1 edge in favorability where a 1 to 8 deficit rating once stood.

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 with regard to Afghanistan, 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 Afghan security effort.

Rebuild a partnership and they will come.

And that change also means that Boston Red Sox and NY Yankee tee shirts and U.S. guide books have been more welcomed as they have reappeared in the Grand Place in Brussels, at the Mannekin Pis, and throughout the country. Belgians are more delighted to meet American tourists and more welcoming of their ex-pat neighbors. U.S.-headquartered businesses operating in Belgium now recruit employees and customers by flagging far more 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.

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 were, given where we fell and especially given where we have gotten back to, I tell Belgians in my speeches that we must all fight – Belgians, Americans, ex-pats, businesses, tourists, the chocolate shops and the waffle vendors, 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. I explain that no single President, no single Administration and no single ambassador 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. I explain that America is never about the guy on the lectern giving the long speech, but always about the people in the audience.

And I tell them that of course 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 can not go back to yesterday.

The Role of Belgium and the United States

During my years as Ambassador, I have also learned much about the role of Belgium within the leadership of the brotherhood of man. And on this question, I bring perhaps an American perspective—sometimes perhaps more optimistic than the view among Belgians -- but one that I believe in to my core. For 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?

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. Countries in northern Europe may sometimes disagree with countries in southern Europe and vice-versa. But Belgium usually has the ear of all. 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 its Port of Antwerp at great cost to itself. On the need for compromise and action in the eurozone crisis. And on so much more.

Now I speak in Belgium about a variety of topics from economic crisis and recovery, to our energy past and future, to many other stops along the way. But I would love to leave time to respond to questions so I think it best to wrap up and turn to questions.

Which is to say that having served three years and into our fourth, one way or the other our time in Belgium and our time in getting to serve and represent our country is growing shorter. It will always be the most cherished experience I have had. I am not sure what we will do next – perhaps

somewhere within international business, boards and consulting -- but whenever we go we will proudly carry America in our hearts and leave a part of that heart in Belgium.

Happy to take questions.

Thanks so much and all the best.