

“President Obama knows that Perfection Can Be the Enemy of Good”

Ambassador Gutman is a resolute supporter of President Obama, for whom he worked during the campaign. He regrets that Europeans aren't more proactive to cooperate with his boss.

*Interview by Catherine Mommaerts in financial daily
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Howard Gutman is President Obama's representative in Belgium. Indeed, the peculiarity of the U.S. Ambassador is that, since he is not a career diplomat, it is first and foremost the President whom he represents. Howard Gutman is especially glad to do that since he is an unconditional supporter of Barack Obama. Their first meeting dates back to January 2007 when the man who was then only Senator from Illinois asked this lawyer who, just like him, is coming from a simple background, to work on his Presidential campaign. 'I spent one hour with Barack Obama. When I got home, I told my wife I had just met the next President of the United States,' Howard Gutman likes to tell. Two years and a half later and after an incredible victory, the man who has turned from a politically active lawyer into Ambassador seems as fascinated.

Q: One year after his election, one has the impression that President Obama is facing several obstacles, whether on domestic on foreign policy. Do you think that he will reach his objective in the fight against global warming?

Ambassador Gutman: 'He has only been in the White House for ten months and he has already accomplished many things, like on the economy. On climate change, we have moved from an Administration that rejected Kyoto to an Administration that has a climate czar, Carol Browner, a prominent person at the helm of the EPA, Lisa Jackson, and a Nobel Prize recipient in Physics as Energy Secretary, Steven Chu. Today, there are more people working on climate in Washington than people taking the metro! It is even no longer possible not to talk about climate change in the United States. Who has done the most in the world since January 2009? One does not even need to ask that question.'

Q: Do you have the impression that people in other countries realize this?

Ambassador Gutman: 'I am not as much worried by the fact that people are perhaps not always aware of what the United States does as I am by the politicization of the debate on climate change. We should be talking about what has been done and the way we are going. Rather than that, media focus on what political leaders are saying, on who is going to Copenhagen and who is not. Climate change is too important and our window of opportunity too narrow to turn this into a political game.'

Q: This being said, President Obama is also in a difficult situation because, if he goes too far in Copenhagen, he runs the risk of facing the opposition of Congress where the climate bill has not been voted yet

Ambassador Gutman: 'President Obama is a very patient man. He will continue to work on a new climate law. We might be able to reach our goals without such a law if need be, but the President wants to continue to work with Congress.'

Q: He is also in a tough battle with Congress on the health care reform, which might not be up to what he expected

Ambassador Gutman: 'He knows that perfection can be the enemy of good. If he cannot obtain all what he wants in the law that Congress will probably vote this year or in early 2010, he will take whatever is on the table and will try to obtain more later on.'

Q: Talking about obstacles that the President is facing, one cannot say that Guantanamo is a success, having recently announced that it will not be shut down in January as had been planned

Ambassador Gutman: 'Europe had been calling for the closure of Guantanamo for years. President Obama announced its closure the very day he was sworn in. On that moment, we showed the world the values in which we believe. We have made huge progress. The question is now who is going to help us.'

Q: Have you been disappointed by European countries' response?

Ambassador Gutman: No, I am extremely grateful to our partners and to Belgium for helping us in this dossier. But what would be necessary, in my sense, is a more proactive demarche on the part of European countries and that someone takes the

initiative of talking in the name of Europe and say: ‘we, Europeans, appreciate what you have done since the arrival of Barack Obama in the White House and we are going to help you. Let us each take six or seven Guantanamo detainees and in a few weeks the camp can be closed.’

Q: Greg Craig, the White House Counsel who dealt with Guantanamo, has resigned on November 13. Is this the first breach in the Obama team?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Greg is a long time friend. We were working in the same law firm before joining the Obama Administration. Greg is very close to the President. He is a very talented man who could have taken any job in this team, whether federal prosecutor or Ambassador. I do not know why he resigned but things were not easy for him. By joining the Obama team, each of us had to make a huge financial sacrifice. In our new job, we hardly make 6 percent of what we were making as lawyers. And Greg has five kids, several of them going to university. I guess that, at some point, he had to put in balance what he had been able to achieve in his new job and what it represented in terms of financial sacrifice.’

Q: In a few days, President Obama will unveil his new strategy in Afghanistan. Is he going to ask more troops from his Allies?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Like for the closure of Guantanamo, it is not up to the United States to ask its Allies for help nor to the latter to do it or not. Afghanistan is not a problem that was created by the United States and it will not be solved by them alone. Last week, Gordon Brown said that he wanted to gather Europe on that problem. It is the kind of initiative I encourage.’

Q: In Belgium, authorities seem to prefer an approach based on reconstruction aid or Afghan police training rather than sending additional troops.

Ambassador Gutman: ‘That is the case in all countries, including the United States. The war in Afghanistan will not be won by military might only. The country will need to be reconstructed. Besides, Belgium has already done a lot by sending troops and F-16 to Afghanistan.’

Q: Did it come as a surprise that the President appointed you Ambassador in Belgium?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Yes. After the election, I knew that the White House was thinking about me for the Deputy Labor or Deputy Energy Secretary. What I did not know is that my name was also being considered in the selection process of Ambassadors. I did not think I matched the required profile of an Ambassador. But knowing President Obama and his entourage, I should have guessed that it was not the case. They were looking for Ambassadors who are young, who have kids at school, and who had participated in the political process, which is also the case of the U.S. Ambassadors in France and Austria, for instance. And I was delighted when I learned that I was being sent to Brussels.

Q: Why?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘First because it is a city where you can have a real family life. Secondly, because it is a city where you can meet decision makers from the entire world because of the presence of NATO and of the EU. In that respect, Brussels is somewhat like Washington, DC.’