

“Where We Have Been, Where We Are Going”

October 2, 2012

Opening of Center for Creative Leadership EMEA Campus
Ambassador Howard Gutman

It is an honor and a joy to get to speak to this group on the opening of the Center for Creative Leadership’s EMEA campus.

And it is particularly a joy to get to speak to you on the topic of leadership and change. Michelle and I have had the joy to now serve in Belgium for over three years -- I have become the second longest serving U.S. Ambassador to Belgium in 31 years. And the most significant lessons I have learned in this post indeed concern leadership and change. They have been significant issues on at least two fronts. First, leadership and change in Belgian-American relations and second, Belgium’s role as a leader and in helping to foster world change.

Indeed, 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 change -- 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 the notion of leadership and to understanding change. And those lessons also teach us that we can never go back to yesterday.

Now remember, the roots of the Belgian-American relationship are deep indeed, as U.S. boys twice liberated Belgians and left tens of thousands of their numbers buried in Belgian soil. In turn, Belgians never forget what we did for them in those two world wars. Seniors will still applaud and say not “hello” but “thank you” to me when I walk by, thanking not an ambassador but our military of yesterday. And Belgians have adopted and still tend to the graves of the American soldiers buried in the three U.S. Battlefield cemeteries in Belgium. So, particularly because of how deep and how strong our roots are, the depth to which the Belgian American relationship had plummeted in recent times is disturbing indeed. For the yesterday of the mid 2000’s -- just a handful of years ago and shortly before the last U.S. election --is a place from which we may learn a great deal about foreign relations, about leadership and change, 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 builds a friendship with the Belgian people by visiting every city, village and commune or, alternatively, chooses to focus more internally on Embassy operations 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, the relationship between the U.S. and Belgium 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; and 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.

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 have to date visited 566 cities, villages, and towns, leaving me 23 to go, and we still study French one day and Dutch the next, though *mon francais est mal* and *nederlands is niet gemaclijk*. Now 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 eurozone 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 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, each of you, and the chocolate shops and the waffle vendors and the Belgian business leaders and journalists, the poets, 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 can not go back to yesterday.

The Role of Belgium and the United States

The other major lesson about leadership and change that I have learned in my past three years concerns Belgian leadership within 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 for three years, many Belgians have asked me: 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 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 the Port of Antwerp. On the need for compromise and action in the eurozone 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.

If you want to find leadership and change, just look in Belgium.

Thanks so much and all the best.