

“We needed to improve our image”

Interview of U.S. Ambassador Gutman in regional daily L’Avenir

In about two months, the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium will have completed his tour of all 589 communes in Belgium. It was an initiative aimed at restoring America’s image in Belgium.

Howard Gutman is unique. As U.S. Ambassador in Brussels, he will have completed the challenge of visiting all 589 communes before the end of his mandate, in a few months. The objective was to restore the image of his country, which had suffered during the Bush years.

Q: Why did you decide upon your arrival in Belgium to visit all Belgian communes?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘When I arrived in Belgium, I knew that the relations between the United States and Belgium were strained. Barack Obama knew it as well. I wanted to rebuild the partnership between our two countries. I could have done this by meeting with Ministers and people from the nobility. But fundamentally, I knew that it was with all the people that it had to be done. I started by visiting Charleroi. I wanted to reinstate confidence and restore the credibility of my country in Belgium. I could never have pleaded in Parliament or in the media to obtain more Belgian troops in Afghanistan in 2010 if I did not have that credibility. And besides, it is also fabulous to be the Number One Tourist in Belgium, attending the Doudou in Mons or the Giants in Ath. It is fantastic.’

Q: But there are communes where there is almost nothing. What did you gain by visiting them?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘It is true that in some communes there are just a few houses and a pub. When I visited that type of commune, my goal was to meet with people. Paying an official visit is not simply stopping by and staying in the car and then claiming that I visited the commune. I needed to see people. In some communes, you can sometimes walk for 15 minutes without seeing anyone. So, I sometimes I would come on a visit at 6 p.m. and would knock on doors. I would be surrounded by my bodyguards and sometimes people thought that we were coming to arrest them. I introduced myself as the U.S. Ambassador, explaining that I was visiting. And frankly, I always felt welcome. In three years, I perhaps

had to face two or three aggressive questions, to which I responded without any problem. But I never met someone who told me ‘I do not want to hear about your country.’

Q: Do you think that your work restoring the United States’ image has borne fruit?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘It is not me who matters. It is the President, my Embassy, and U.S. policies. If America has recovered credibility, it is first and foremost thanks to President Obama and to what the Secretary of State is doing.’

Q: Was the image of America that bad when you arrived in Belgium?

Ambassador Gutman: ‘Before I got here, I knew from having been here in the past that, if you were wearing a T-shirt praising America, you could sometimes have a difficult time. Then there was a huge enthusiasm for the President but there was still skepticism about our policies. Today, that skepticism has gone. No one is attacking me on our policy in Libya, our policy in Iran, or on the pullout from Afghanistan. There is only still some skepticism about our electoral system. All this is going in the right direction.’

“The Challenge for our country? Creating Consensus.”

Not surprisingly, the U.S. Ambassador makes a very positive balance sheet of the Obama Presidency. ‘For the economy and for jobs, the President has done an incredible job. Obama has also brought an end to two wars and restored our country’s image. In Europe and especially in Belgium, the U.S. now enjoys a much more favorable opinion than in 2007. Of course, there is still some work to do, on energy independence, on the withdrawal from Afghanistan, on unemployment, and on education reform.’

The Ambassador also considers that the main challenge for the next U.S. President will be to build a consensus, which is culturally difficult in the United States where social differences are profound.

‘My country is a great democracy. In Belgium, you think that you are divided but, fundamentally, differences in opinion on societal issues are small. In the U.S., it is much broader, there is more division and the challenge is to build consensus, especially on the best way to grow our economy. But we remain a democracy where people can discuss. You know, the best consensus you can find is in North

Korea. My country will never be North Korea. So it is true that people discuss, but this is what creates the richness of the United States. We are a very diverse country on the political field.'

A proof thereof is that even the health care reform is dividing the country. Yet, the Ambassador considers that it is the greatest success of Obama. 'It is a huge success that gives coverage to all. Of course, there are some constraints without which a system cannot work and some consider that this infringes on fundamental freedoms. This is what the debate is about.'