

**HOWARD GUTMAN, AMERICAN AMBASSADOR IN BELGIUM**

## **“Obama Is Sincerely Looking for Peace”**

**He is easy-going, friendly and knows what he wants. ‘Just like his boss Barack Obama’, many people would say. His name is Howard Gutman. Gutman is American Ambassador in Belgium. *Wablieft* talked to him about President Obama, Iraq, security guards and Starbucks’ coffee.**

America is one of the most powerful countries in the world. You notice that a little when the Ambassador comes visiting. He has always assistants and bodyguards around him.

**Wablieft: How does your job as an Ambassador look like?**

**Ambassador Howard Gutman:** Each day of the week I talk with ministers or officials of the government in Belgium. Those talks can be about Iraq, Afghanistan, trade and about so much more. I go speak in schools, companies, on dinners and events. I talk with journalists. I lead meetings in our embassy. We have hundreds of employees in different offices. Once or twice per week, I leave the embassy for visits throughout Belgium. Meeting people is the best way to get to know a country better.

**You have a busy schedule...**

My day starts early. I try to do sports between 7h and 7h30. Then I listen to a review of the French and Dutch-language papers in Belgium. After that, I take class. One day I take French class, the next day, I take Dutch. As of 10 pm, the rest of my day starts.

**You are learning Dutch and French. Is that mandatory for an ambassador?**

No, but as an Ambassador, I came to a country with multiple languages. I do not want to force anyone to speak English with me. No single language is worth more than any other one. I can only apologize for my bad French and Dutch.

**You are always surrounded by bodyguards. Do you ever get used to that?**

The agents you see are from the Belgian government. The government arranged that before my arrival here. So, it has got nothing to do with me personally. (laughs) That protection simply comes with the profession. Still you never get used to it. Sometimes, we go out for dinner with our family. The agents are always seated at the table next to us. In the movie theatre, they sit one row behind us. Hopefully they like the movies we pick. (laughs)

**You have been an Ambassador in Belgium for a year now. Have you already gone back to America?**

Yes. Twice a year, I return to Washington. All our Ambassadors gather at the U.S. Department of State then. On other moments, I am talking with all sorts of other services in our administration. Can companies from Belgium help with that oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico? That is the kind of matters we discuss. We want prevent or quickly solve problems.

**You know U.S. President Barack Obama. You already worked for him when he was still a senator. Do you see or hear him often still since he has become President?**

I can call him. But those calls are only about work. This summer, I was in the White House. I had an appointment with David Axelrod. He is the most important adviser of President Obama. His office is next to the one of the President. Not a lot of people come there. Obama's door went open for a moment. He was sitting at his desk with two people in front of him. He was on the phone in the same time. He saw me and started waving. And I waved back. So I recently saw Obama, but did not talk to him. (laughs)

**Things were different once?**

For sure. Everyone wants to see the President now. I used to work for him before his election. In those months, there were sometimes quiet moments. Then we talked about the children or the last game of the basketball team the Chicago Bulls.

**Barack Obama is popular in a lot of places in the world. Does that make your job easier?**

I have an easy job. I work in a country that has maintained good ties with America for years. At the same time, the time before President Obama was not an easy one. Those were the eight President Bush years. For him I could not have been an Ambassador. The policies and the plans of Obama make my job easier. He is sincerely looking for peace in the world.

**The U.S. army has been present for years in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Obama is criticized for this. Will it not become hard to continue to defend Obama?**

Obama is very clear on Iraq. He said when America would leave from there. He has kept his word. (*Wablieft: Obama just withdrew the last combat troops from Iraq. Still there are soldiers left. One of the things they do there is training soldiers there.*) It is an important step towards a solution without violence. Afghanistan is a different story. Obama wanted more soldiers in Afghanistan. He said that at night on American TV. The Belgians get to hear that the following morning. Then they think of fighting, bombs and casualties. But Obama actually wants to help the civilians in that country better. The soldiers are needed to protect that aid.

**And you needed to explain that to the Belgians?**

Explaining that is my job, easy or not. The terrorists from the Taliban for a long time were the boss in Afghanistan. Then 900,000 children went to school. They were all boys. Today 6 million children are going to school there. 2 million of them are girls. That is quite some progress. That is why I am doing what I do. Sometimes soldiers are needed for giving aid. I noticed the same with the earthquake in Haiti early this year. Belgium sent a team there with doctors and nurses. One day later, I heard that the team could not work in safety there. I put them under temporary protection of American soldiers.

**Are Belgians hard to convince when it comes to American plans?**

Belgians are the best audience that you can have. They read papers. A lot of Belgians watch the news on TV. Things are different in America. Here people are talking every

day about politics and the government. Convincing Belgium is important. You do not hear Belgium a lot in world politics. But does your country say something about Afghanistan? Then the leaders of other countries listen.

**In the meantime, Belgium still has no government. The parties do not come to an agreement. Does it worry you?**

No. I am an outsider. I talk with Francophones and with Flemings. I speak as often with the Walloon politician Elio Di Rupo as with the Fleming Bart De Wever. The different parties before the elections had strong opinions on how Belgium should look like. Now the parties try to come to agreement and to form a government. They have not worked it out so far. Still that is for me democracy at its best. You know, Belgians do agree about many things with one another. That is different in America. Democrats (*Wablieft: President Obama's party*) and Republicans have strongly different opinions. For instance on health insurance and healthcare, on climate and environment... No, I am not concerned about Belgium.

### **"I try to bring America closer to the Belgians"**

**Ambassador Gutman travels throughout Belgium. He seems to be different than other ambassadors. By education, he is not a diplomat either.**

**Wablieft: Most Ambassadors stay in their embassy. You are traveling around Belgium. Why are you doing that?**

**Ambassador Gutman:** I am trying to bring America to the Belgians. On July 4, we celebrate U.S. National Day. In the past, that was always 'America celebrates America'. Why not a party celebrating the bond between America and Belgium? Well, we took a bike ride with Eddy Merckx. We gave a beautiful concert in a park in Brussels. And Manneken Pis got a 'Yes we can'-outfit. (*Wablieft: with the slogan 'Yes we can' Barack Obama became President*).

**You want to visit all towns in Belgium. Does that work?**

Yes. I am not only driving through towns. I also meet with inhabitants and the mayor. I have now already visited 176 cities and towns (*Wablieft: that was at the end of August*).

And I have already visited 19 of the 20 biggest cities.

**Which visit impressed you most?**

That was certainly the visit to the Athenaeum Serge Creuz in St.-Jans-Molenbeek in Brussels. The students cheered me loud and long when they saw me. They sang the American and Belgian anthems. Nowhere people knew the lyrics of the Brabançonne so well as in that school. Over half of the students were Muslim. Boys and girls of Moroccan origin mostly. Still they are proud to be Belgian, and they love America too. Then I realized: if we all work together, we will have a bright future.

**You have left the United States since a year now. What do you miss most?**

That is the Chinese restaurant around the corner from our home. On a Sunday night, I sometimes long for it. Starbucks' coffee is something that I can also drink here. But I like differences. So a tasty Belgian pastry with my coffee is delicious too. (laughs)