

## **"If Barack Obama Were A Football Club..."**

### **"If Barack Obama Were A Football Club, Perhaps He Would Be Standard de Liege"**

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Ambassador Howard Gutman

Rond Central, Liège

Mr. Prime Minister, Mr. Duchâtelet, Mr. François, Mesdames and Messieurs, Cher Amis:

I am honored and thrilled to be here tonight. For me, this is a very important night.

First and foremost. It is the night I get to meet all of you. I have long said that there are only two types of people in Belgium, those who have already become dear friends and those who will soon become dear friends. The people at Standard de Liège have been terrific friends to me.

Second, this is the first time in my two plus years in Belgium that I am giving a speech entirely in French. In Belgium, I take language class 5 days/week. I study French one day and Flemish the next and alternate between them. In speeches, I usually speak a little French and a little Dutch and then I continue in English. But I have never given a speech all in French.

How did it happen that I am now giving my first speech in French? I have been asked before but always responded that I am more comfortable in English than in French or Dutch. But for this talk, the Prime Minister asked me if I would speak with this group. I told him I would be delighted to do so. He texted me and asked whether I would speak about U.S. Foreign Policy since 9-11. But I was worried that discussing foreign policy and with two glasses of champagne, I might put this group to sleep before the football match. And the truth is that most of that foreign policy was under the Bush administration and Belgium had differences with the U.S. at that time. I was a private lawyer in Washington then. I came to Belgium only when President Obama asked me to do so.

So I texted the Prime Minister back and suggested an alternative topic for tonight's talk. I called it: "If Barack Obama Were a Football Club, Perhaps He Would be Standard de Liege." The Prime Minister texted back that he thought that topic would be fine. And then my eyes focused on the last line of that text that sent shivers of fear up my spine and put the future of the French language in peril. It said, "And, Howard, can you please do the speech in French." You see, the Prime Minister was worried that this crowd would not understand me if I spoke my English. But what the Prime Minister did not realize is that I was worried that this crowd would not understand me if I spoke my French.

Before I discuss my main topic – that of the similarities between Barack Obama and Standard de Liege – I should explain the origins of my difficulty speaking French. It goes back to my wasted youth. You see, when President Obama told me that he wanted to send me to Belgium, I started studying French and Dutch. But at the time I started I knew no Flemish and almost no French. You see, I had had some French in high school and university, but had not spoken a word in over 30 years. And the truth is that I had not really done all I could properly to study French back at school. I recall well that in

New York when I grew up, there were two newspapers – the NY Times that was published in the morning and the New York Post that was published in the afternoon. In my last year of high school at a special school for smart kids known as “The Bronx High School of Science”, I recall my French teacher was a huge African American man named Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith loved the French language, but he was not an exciting teacher and could not keep my interest. Class started at 9:00 o’clock in the morning. So every day during French class, I would cut the NY Times Crossword puzzle from the newspaper and would hide it under my French book and would do the crossword puzzle in class. I recall one day, Mr. Smith walked up behind me as I was doing the puzzle and not paying attention, and he grabbed the puzzle from under my book. And in front of the whole class he held the puzzle high in the air and, in a loud deep voice he asked me: “Mr. Gutman, how come every day you do the NY Times crossword puzzle in my French class?”

And I looked up from my desk at the towering , huge Mr. Smith, and I knew I should remain still. Had I been Belgian, I would have politely refrained from talking. But I did not know those diplomatic lessons back in my youth. I had not learned the Belgian example of restraint. So I gathered a deep breath and said out loud for the whole class . . . “Mr. Smith, the reason I do the NY Times crossword puzzle every day in your French class is that the NY Post crossword puzzle does not come out until the afternoon.” And with that, the giant Mr. Smith began to shake and with one motion, he grabbed me by the collar and proceeded to propel me through the air and outside of the classroom. And today, nearly 40 years later, I must therefore struggle to give this, my first speech, in French.

Third, today is an important day for me because I have the honor of appearing with the Prime Minister. Prime Minister Leterme has been one of my teachers here in Belgium. I have learned history, culture and even patience and diplomacy. When you want to get something done, it is generally a good idea to learn from Belgians – they find ways to get to “yes.”

And the Prime Minister has also been one of my teachers when it comes to football. Of course, I have seen matches in Anderlecht and in Gent. I have watched Genk. I have become friends with Sacha Klejstans, the American who plays for Anderlecht. I have seen the Belgian National team several times and am friends with George Leekens. But most of the time my football home in Belgium has been right here – with the Rouge—at Standard de Liege.

Which brings me to the topic of tonight’s talk – the similarities between my President and the Rouge. You see my introduction to Standard de Liege was dramatic indeed. The Prime Minister brought me to my first match. Standard was in desperately trying to qualify for the Europa League Finals. They needed a win or a draw that evening against AZ Akmaar.

I was honored to be there. I was sitting next to the Prime Minister on my right and the wife of Didier Reynders on my left followed by Didier.

But, through most of the match, the score remained nil to nil. Yet the Prime Minister and Didier kept leaning over and commenting how well Standard was playing and what an excellent match it was. And there I was, an American sports fan for 50 years, used to American football where the score is usually 35-28, thinking: “What are these men talking about – that Standard is playing well, that it is a good match. For Heaven’ sake, the score is nil to nil—nothing has happened.”

But since that time, I have reflected on the lesson that Standard taught me in the first half that night. I have well realized that Standard de Liege and Barack Obama both understand that very important lesson from that evening: namely, that you don't always have to score to be doing well. That in difficult times, progress itself is a virtue and that compromise may often be the most meaningful result.

At a time of severe world economic difficulties, and in a year in both Belgium and in the United States when political madness tends to obscure economic progress, this lesson is important indeed.

Who would have thought that I could arrive this night and explain that I live in a country called Belgium that has long had no government but has always had a budget, and that I represent a country called the United States that has long had a government but nearly has no budget?

Who would have thought that Belgium with no government has always been open this year, but the United States with a government came within 24 hours of closing?

You see, the parallels between Belgium and the United States this year have been extraordinary. Never before have two countries done so relatively well in such difficult times simply to self-impose extraordinary challenges on themselves through political chaos. And yet such political chaos in both countries is a luxury that they have chosen to endure at least in part because they can. And such political chaos is at its heart caused by the inefficiency of democracy, an inefficiency that I would submit is ultimately not a source of embarrassment but of pride. Indeed, many throughout North Africa this year risked their lives or paid with their lives in the hope of one day attaining the inefficiency of democracy. Now clearly, both countries – Belgium and the U.S. -- can and should do better – and it appears that Belgium finally has fully hit that path. Leaders in all countries can and should look to the greater good, rather than to the political good that will make them greater. But, just as clearly, for all the pessimism that has reigned in both countries, for all the jokes and discussions of the Guinness book of records, for all the attention to rating agencies as if they were some divine determiner of prosperity, Belgium and the U.S. today remain models of success. They are two democracy glasses that are half full, not half empty.

But plainly Belgium, Europe and the United States today face enormous challenges. The predictions of difficult times are everywhere.

But that gets us back to our story of Standard de Liege. For the match against AZ Almeer too continued that night and in the second half, disaster seemed to strike as Almeer scored to go ahead 1-0. Standard faced a great challenge and could have given up. But Standard de Liege and Barack Obama both understand that the question is not the challenges we face. The question is how we respond to those challenges.

And for the most part, President Obama and Standard de Liege respond alike. President Obama and Belgium share a common temperament. For Barack Obama and Standard de Liege, challenges unite us and make us do better. Challenges are not to be feared; they are opportunities to lead to prosperity.

I was with Barack Obama in October 2007, almost exactly four years ago today, when we had campaigned already for nearly a year, it was three months before the first democratic primary in Iowa and we trailed by thirty points to then Senator Clinton. He gathered a group of 60 of us together in Iowa and told us that we always knew we were not the favorite. But if we stuck together and our message was just, surely the score would turn in our favor.

Barack Obama and Standard de Liege each understand that you have to keep your eye on the true goals. I was with Obama again during the election in February 2008 and witnessed what I thought was the greatest speech I had ever seen delivered. Obama had won the first primary and 48 hours before the second primary – this one in New Hampshire – he had a 12 point lead. Were he to win that night, the improbable would be achieved—he would win the nomination and likely the presidency. But although he was favored right till the end, he lost that night. And it looked like the whole season was crumbling.

After conceding defeat in that second primary to the nation on television, he finally had the opportunity to come by a pub where the 60 or so top friends and supporters had gathered that evening. Picture the scene at midnight, on a cold New Hampshire night, when Barack Obama went from thinking he was about to win the presidency, to having seen it look like it all crumbled. And think about the 60 of us in that tavern. I was just disheartened. I couldn't even look up.

And in came Barack to the tavern, and he strolled to the mike, and he said he would speak briefly because we had just seen him on TV, and he had only two things to say. The first one was he wanted to thank us in his typical way. And of course when Barack wants to thank you, he thanks you in paragraphs and it was eloquent.

But the second part was what I will always remember—of what I call the greatest speech I have ever heard. Because Barack then said, "This is going to sound like spin to all of you, and I assure you it's not, I am as disappointed as any of you: I am disappointed to my core. But I've been thinking all week that we had our eye on the wrong goal. We have been so excited about winning easily, that we have never been tested. If we win this easily, then we will face real problems when we try to govern. Because when we hit a time of crisis, the press will try to say that we won too easily and never had to be tested in tough times.

'And he said: "never forget our real goal." "Never forget that what we're doing has nothing to do with winning an election, it has to do with governing and changing the world. It is not enough that we win. If we win, we need to do so in a way where we can govern and change the world.'" He was at peace with the loss that night, because it meant that if he ultimately won, it would make governing easier. And the darndest thing is, as I looked into his eyes, he believed it. So when I saw inside that man that night, I knew we could do no wrong. I knew he could win, and I knew he would change the world.

Somewhat like Standard de Liege, Barack Obama is the first man I have ever met who has no blood pressure. Always calm and thinking. Did you ever notice that no matter how he moves, his suit never creases? He never slams doors. Never rushes to judgment. At every meeting, staff gathers around the room to consider an issue. The loud ones speak first. The timid tend to shy away. But if Obama had

you in the room, he values your opinion. Patiently he solicits each viewpoint. He hears from all. And in time with due reflection, he finally decides.

Moreover, Obama never accepts convention simply because it is conventional. What matters is not simply being able to think outside the box – it is being willing to refuse to accept that there even is a box at all. For him, great ideas can come from anywhere but need not come from the conventional.

Which brings us back to Standard de Liege and AZ Alkmaar. For convention said the Rouges had no chance that night. You see, after regulation time and virtually every second of extended time, Standard still trailed nil to one. There they were – just one play left; the goal standing empty; the keeper standing in front of the Alkmaar net. One the final play, the corner kick came sailing and the Standard keeper Bolat jumped high in the air, scoring the impossible goal as the gun sounded to propel the Rouges into the Finals.

In response, the “Hell of Schlessin” went wild. The Prime Minister jumped on me and knocked me into poor Didier Reynder’s wife, and we all got piled up on the ground, with poor Ms, Reynders getting crushed somewhere beneath the joyous pile of bodies. When we finally got back up, I turned to my 3 Belgian surete agents and noted that I had just been attacked by a Belgian and all they did was stand and cheer.

We stayed for hours that night in the reception room at the Stadium where a tv in the corner replayed that winning goal first once, then twice, then ten times, and then over twenty in a row. To my amazement, each time the goal was replayed, the Prime Minister and all of the celebrants cheered as if they were watching it for the first time. I remember thinking that they all knew precisely what would happen as we had watched the goal nearly two dozen times. But as we cheered together for the twenty-fifth time, I remember thinking that there can be few things better to witness than a joyous Standard de Liege fan.

Except maybe a joyous American President.

To many more of both. Good luck to all.

Thanks so much and all the best.