

If Barack Obama Were A Country, He'd Be Belgium

September 10, 2010

Ambassador Howard Gutman

Jaycee Annual Convention in Genk

Michelle and I are delighted to be here today. It is a truly exciting day for us.

And it is an exciting day for the Genk Jaycees.

For in addition to hearing from the Mayor and from the businessmen who combine music and technology, you have two other speakers today.

One is a revered comedian, famous for his role in movies, and beloved both in the U.S. and throughout Europe.

And the other is . . .

John Cleese.

. . . And they said that an Ambassador should not try comedy with John Cleese on the program.

It really is exciting and an honor to be here today. I am thrilled to appear with young businessmen, young entrepreneurs, young leaders in a day dedicated to entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity. For this group is indeed a very important group. Whether or not you know it, you have a very critical mission. You have the most important job in the world.

It is your job to save our planet.

I realize it is not an easy job, but somebody has to do it. And if someone is going to save our planet, it will be through creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

Unlike my lead in joke, this time I am completely serious.

Let me explain.

For far too long, my generation has made a mess of things. My generation got it wrong. On so many fronts.

And as a result, we have left the economy, our security, and the environment in disarray. We have left them upside down, standing on their heads.

We had been bailed out once. Following the Second World War and up to the end of the 1970's, my country—and most of the world -- had been dependent on old industries and natural resources – steel, coal, heavy manufacturing. But the industries slowly withered. We had not invested in the future—our formerly grand cities had instead reminisced fondly about the past. Just ask Newark, New Jersey or Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, or Charleroi or the Winterslag mine. The economy seemed to have

no place to go. And workers may have been faced simply with going home.

Who bailed us out in the late 1970's, 1980's, and early 1990's? Who put my country back to work? Who saw the future when so many were still focused on the past?

People who at the time looked just like you. People who thought just like you.

Bill Gates. Steve Jobs, Michael Dell . . . people creating companies like Microsoft, AOL, Apple, Dell, Cisco.

At the time, my generation thought Yahoo was something cowboys said when they chased horses and Google was a noise babies made when they finished with their bottles.

But that generation of entrepreneurs and creators saw a little further down the road. And we thrived.

Did it last? Did we learn our lesson? The lesson about the path to continued success? The lesson about creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship?

Hardly.

Through most of the first decade of this new century, my generation continued to make a mess of things. Continued to leave our economy, our security and our environment in disarray.

It was all too easy to get there. All it required was the cozy life, the path of least resistance. We needed to drive our cars and fuel our lifestyles. Simple.. Buy fossil fuels from the middle East. Even when some of the countries we were thereby supporting were less than friends of ours. We needed to pay for it. Easy again. Borrow heavily, often from China.

So we ended up borrowing from China to pay \$800 million/day for oil to folks who often meant us harm thereby undermining our national security and our financial stability;

And in so doing, we failed to invest in new technologies and alternative energies that could fuel the next generation of employment opportunities, thereby destroying our employment prospects;

While we at the same time contributed to the physical destruction of our planet choked in carbon.

Could we get it more wrong?

More importantly, who will bail us out this time? Who will save our planet by using creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship to get off fossil fuels, create job opportunities, enhance our national security, and clean our planet.

That is where you come in.

Is the next Bill Gates, Steve Jobs or Michael Dell in this room? How can't he or she be? Of course you are.

Along with your brothers and sisters in the innovation zones of Boston, Silicon Valley, Northern Virginia.

For we know now that there is one critical truth. Quite simple actually.

There is simply no doubt that this time, we have to get it right. And we have to get it right together. This time, we need again to see a little further down the road and we need to look there together.

Indeed, that is our only hope. You and your entrepreneur brethren in the States are our only hope. The fact is that over the past three decades, firms less than five years old — new companies, start-ups, entrepreneurial enterprises — have accounted for nearly all increased employment in America's private sector.

Could there be a better time than now, in the middle of a crisis?

Of course not.

For where others see crisis, true leaders see opportunity. Entrepreneurs see upside. Creators see new horizons. Inherent in the collapse of an economy is the opportunity to rebuild it and to build it better. To honor the past by transitioning to job-creating industries of the future -- biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, agri-bio foods, clean energy. American bellwether companies, such as IBM, Disney, CNN, Microsoft, Whole Foods and Genzyme, are just a handful of firms that were founded during times of great economic difficulties.

And in so doing, we can leave no one behind. Inherent in a better world – even for entrepreneurs—is a socially just world. And in these fields –in a world of technology and alternative energy, of research and information – if you can build it in New York or Paris or Brussels or Mumbai, you can build it in Limburgh, in Charleroi, in Newark and in Detroit. We can only succeed at the pace of our slowest runner.

Do we have any time to waste?

Not much or not any. For most of my life, tensions have been between the haves and the have nots. But there are for the first time in my memory virtually no haves – there are instead a lot of have-a-lot-lesses and have nots. Go to any political gathering, to any business conference, to any church, and the conversation, the dialogue is about our failures, not our successes. About crisis, about unemployment, about shrinking pies and growing layoffs.

Now in the past couple of months, it seems to begin to be turning around. Belgian GDP grew by 0.7% in the second quarter, having stagnated in the first quarter. This was the best quarter to quarter growth in Belgium since the third quarter of 2009, and pushed annual growth up to 2.2%.

But plainly, we have to put people back to work. We have to get them working now. And it would be best if we got them working at the same time, if we got them working everywhere, perhaps even together. At the C-Mine and in Boston. In Charleroi and Detroit. Because prosperity needs and

breeds prosperity. Development breeds development. Spending breeds earning and earning breeds more spending. Yes, the challenges that we face that unite us are so much greater than any difference that may divide us.

Okay Mr. Ambassador, we hear you. We get it. And we understand that perhaps it can happen in Boston. Perhaps again in Silicon Valley.

But can it really happen in Belgium? Can it really happen in Limburgh? At the C Mine? We are not Americans. We are Belgians.

Indeed we are different. But partners often are. And potential for creative and entrepreneurial success has many styles, many looks.

I well understand as well as any that there may sometimes be differences in style and approach. Perhaps we even cook frogs differently.

You see a year ago, I came to Belgium after over a quarter of a century as a high powered lawyer in Washington DC.

I took a huge paycut and moved my family across the Atlantic. But after 27 years of making money, I wanted instead to make a difference. I moved and took that cut for the honor of having a chance finally to make a real difference in the world. Finally to help make tomorrow for many better than today. For me, as a matter of mission, as a matter of style, there was so much to do, And I had no time to waste.

So early on, I had a meeting at the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with one of Belgium's top diplomats. A friend of mine now whom I will call Piet.

So in that early meeting, I urged Piet to join with me to change the world. I urged Piet that if Belgium took the lead in Europe, and brought all of the nations of Europe along with it, there was nothing we could not achieve together.

For example, I explained, my President had tried to close Guantanamo Prison by asking European nations one at a time to relocate one or more former detainees. It was a slow process and it was exhausting.

But, thinking far bigger, I explained that Belgium could indeed lead the European nations in meeting together at once, and deciding among themselves at once to divide up all of the remaining Guantanamo prisoners together. In one diplomatic exercise, much like one entrepreneurial effort, Belgium could close the Guantanamo institution when my country could not do it by asking countries one at a time.

Having listened intently, the leading Belgian diplomat to my surprise answered: "Howard, do you know the two ways to cook a frog?"

And of course I said, "no, Piet, what are the two ways to cook a frog?"

He replied, "The first way is to heat the water till it boils and then throw the frog in. But the frog feels the heat and immediately jumps out and there is no dinner."

The leading diplomat in Belgium went on to explain: "But the second way, the Belgian way, is to put

the frog in nice cool water in a pot. He swims around happily. You then turn on the heat and it slowly cooks the frog and voila . . . there is dinner.”

And, without missing a beat, I immediately replied: “Piet, there is a third way. You throw the frog in the boiling pot and grab a lid and slam it on the pot. Voila. The frog goes nowhere and we eat immediately.”

So indeed we are different. But partners often are. What matters is that through our joint skill, creativity and innovation, we both get to eat. Whether we are dealing with a new product, a new means of production, or even a new formula for closing Guantanamo Prison.

But isn't lid slamming more effective for an entrepreneur? For innovation? If Belgians are not good lid slammers, can CMine really matter? Can we really save the planet?

To tell you the truth, there was a time when I thought lid slammers like me were always the most effective.

Two people or groups since taught me otherwise. They taught me that lid slamming is one way, but it need not be the only way. The first person who conveyed that lesson by actions and deeds and not by words was Barack Obama. And the second group who reiterated that lesson by their successes are the endless entrepreneurs whom I have met in Belgium.

And as I thought about these similarities between these two groups, and realized that I was going to be giving a speech today with John Cleese, the title of this speech indeed emerged:

If Barack Obama Were A Country, He'd Be Belgium

Indeed, 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 lids. Never rushes to judgment. At every meeting, staff gathers around the room to consider an issue. The lid slammers usually 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.

As well, Barack Obama understands that you should never let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Compromise is progress, so always compromise and move in the right direction. Obama takes what he can get and then will return for more.

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.

All those qualities. Sound familiar? In short, in a sentence, indeed, . . .

If Barack Obama Were A Country, He'd Be Belgium

And as with Barack Obama, when you are discussing Belgian creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, you need note only "Yes We Can." For the path of successful Belgian entrepreneurs is long indeed. I meet them all the time. I marvel in their understated success. Typically Belgian – understated, modest, thoughtful and completely successful. They are out there. They can be succeeding in any area. They can be making copper pipe or wood flooring or taco chips or bricks or process pigs. They make sausage casings and roof top planters. They make tech applications and new cures.

Yes We Can. Yes You Can. Indeed, We Must. You Must.

Some Belgians sometimes seem to have a stronger fear of failure than entrepreneurs in the States. True, good judgment should always prevail. But in today's world, success is simply the other side of the coin from failure. You have to be willing to flip the coin nonetheless. In today's world, there are no failures. Just stops on the way to the ultimate success.

But can new business really be done in Belgium? Haven't I heard about the high cost of labor, the endless regulation, a climate that directs businesses to Germany or the States? Can we be entrepreneurs here?

Indeed entrepreneurs need to plan smartly and indeed there are certain challenges for certain businesses in Belgium.

But that is just the start of the analysis, not the end. The advantages here – a skilled work force, multilingual population, attractive lifestyle, central location and far more – provides opportunities unavailable elsewhere. Why open in Germany, France, England and the Netherlands when you can get them all in Belgium? So capital intensive and idea intensive new efforts can find no better home. And governments in Belgium are eager to lend support. The key is to think about, negotiate through and plan for the hurdles that may exist – not simply bemoan that they exist.

Can new ventures succeed in a climate of such political turmoil? Don't I know that Belgium does not even have a government?

Whereas others sometime despair developments in the last several months in Belgium, I marvel at it. All countries and people have disagreements and divisions. Just ask right-leaning Fox News and left-leaning MSNBC in my country. The question is not whether disagreements and divisions exist, but how a nation responds to them.

And in the past several months, I have seen a model of democracy. Legitimate disagreements followed by a vigorous election season. A population uniformly interested in its future and the choice of its government. Everyone energized. Forty days and election results. And then dedicated leaders working hard to bridge the gaps that exist in every nation.

No one will accuse democracy of being efficient and swift. But it is always worth its cost. Of course the quicker a government is formed and can focus more directly on the problems of the day, the quicker the problems of the day can be addressed. But the business of creating, innovating and moving forward need not pause.

You have the opportunity of tomorrow. For thousands of years, entrepreneurs have found ways to

transcend national, political, economic, physical and spiritual boundaries to create opportunity and prosperity for us all. When innovators and entrepreneurs can turn their ideas into businesses, jobs and economic opportunity follow closely behind. Entrepreneurs are a powerful force for change.

And there is no better way to pursue that powerful force of change than right here at C-Mine, or Creativity Mine. The space, equipment, resources and synergies here help young entrepreneurs, like yourselves, develop fresh ideas into new services and products and eventually commercialize them. Regional Innovation Clusters have experienced great success in getting good ideas more quickly into the marketplace. We know that when you get business, government, academia and non-profits situated in one place pulling towards similar goals, good things happen. Just ask Silicon Valley, the Route 128 corridor in Boston and the Research Triangle in North Carolina.

Our future rests with you. Right here.

Best of luck and all the best.