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Ambassador's Corner

WEEKLY MESSAGE FROM AMBASSADOR JOHN BRUTON March 8, 2006

Meeting the Michigan Congressional Delegation

In the last week or so, in preparation for a planned visit to Michigan, I had a series of meetings with Members of the Congressional Delegations from the state.

I met Bart Stupak (photo below, left), who represents the Upper Peninsula, the northernmost district in the state and a place of immense natural beauty. It is also one of the coldest climates in settled North America. Bart served as a policeman before getting a law degree and entering politics at national level in 1992.

Candice Miller (photo below, right) has been in politics since she was 25 and was elected a trustee of Harrison Township. She was first elected to Congress in 2002, having previously served as Secretary of State for Michigan. She is Chair of the

Committee on Regulatory Affairs and is a very important politician from an EU point of view because we want to work together with the United States to simplify regulations so that American and European companies can do much more transatlantic business and create more jobs.

Congressman Joe Schwarz, a medical doctor, is a proud alumnus of the University of Michigan and the current president of the alumni organization. He advised me that to get a warm response to my speeches at the university, I needed to end them with the phrase, "Go Blue!"; the rallying cry for all university sports enthusiasts.

On a more serious note we had an extensive discussion on the so-called "Crystal Meth. Crisis" or the growing problems with the illegal production and sale of methamphetamine, sometimes referred to here as "farming country's crack cocaine." While FBI and US agencies are just beginning to get a handle on small US meth. shops, there has been apparently a huge swing of production into Mexico where the drug is cheaper still to make and transport in large quantities to the US. One of the problems is that one of the compounds used in anti-allergy medicines sold over the counter in the US is a key ingredient of methamphetamine, along with anhydrous ammonia (plentiful on US farms for fertilizer).

More effective control is being sought through stricter sales of the medicines, something Dr. Schwarz has been working on. We discussed the EU commitment to controlling precursor drugs.

Congressman Mike Rogers invited me to the Speaker's Lobby just off the floor of the House of Representatives to meet with him. The House was actively debating a piece of legislation he had drafted to simplify food labeling standards across the United States. We had an intense discussion on reducing the duplicative testing and certification between the US and the EU. Following our discussion, the Congressman arranged for me to view some of the floor proceedings on his legislation from the Diplomatic Gallery in the House of Representatives itself.

John Dingell, the Dean of the House of Representatives, the second longest serving member of the House, at age 80, is still looking forward to his campaign this fall with as much enthusiasm as he did when he began his career in the Congress in 1955. He ascribes the "dark times" of Michigan to some degree to unfair foreign competition, particularly from Asia, where he believes China and Japan are manipulating their currency rates to disadvantage US exporters to their markets and to increase the appeal of their products in the US through low prices. He appreciated the EU's support on the Chinese currency issue and hoped the EU and the Administration could continue working together on a wide range of trade-related issues, especially the intellectual property problems. He did say that sometimes EU regulations, like the ban on beef hormones or the policies on Genetically Modified Organisms were seen in the US as protectionism, but at least the EU and US could work things out.

In Congressman John Conyers's office, I had the opportunity to stress to the Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Committee, which oversees both copyrights and immigration policy, the importance of 2 issues pending with the US Government, both the Administration and the Congress, the Visa Waiver Issue and the so-called, "Irish Music Copyright Case," where in both instances damage is being done to EU citizens. Mr. Conyers, a champion of civil rights in the US, was the employer of Mrs. Rosa Parks who is remembered as the woman who ignited the US civil rights movement by refusing to yield her seat on a public bus to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama.

I urged Mr. Conyers to consider changing US laws so that Irish and other European artists receive fair compensation for their work when their music is played in the US.

I also discussed the need for all of the citizens of the European Union to be treated equally by the US when they want to travel to this country. Citizens of 10 EU countries must obtain a tourist visa to come to the US, while the citizens of the other 15 countries can come to the US without a visa. The EU feels this is an unfair dual tracking of EU citizens.

Senator Carl Levin is the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services Committee in the Senate which oversees the operations of the Pentagon and the Intelligence operations of the US Government. My discussion with the Senator focused on the economic situation in Michigan and the EU/US Economic Initiative.

We discussed the Middle East Peace Process and in particular the situation regarding Hamas. The Senator appreciated the EU's paying the immediate bills of the Palestinian Authority and the money to aid some charities in the Gaza Strip. For Levin the issue of dealing with Hamas was clearly based on the need for Hamas to renounce violence against all neighbors. Without that there could be no fundamental progress.

We had an interesting discussion on avian flu since he had a contact at the University of Michigan teaching hospital where I was visiting later this month to discuss the need for global cooperation in combating pandemics of all kinds. Please send me your comments about this or any of my weekly messages or other EU matters. I look forward to hearing from you!