

Toespraak minister Hoekstra (Financiën) bij the American Chamber of Commerce in the Netherlands

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you. Let me first say that it is a privilege to be here with you today, even if it's only briefly. For which I apologize.

It gives me a lot of energy to see so many people here around the table who see opportunities rather than problems. People who boost our prosperity. Enterprising people. I see many familiar faces.

Mister Ambassador, or should I say: uncle Pete. It is good to see you again and it was great having you at the ministry last week. As you and I know, there is no such thing as too many Hoekstra's in the room.

Jasper van Ouwerkerk, I have managed to avoid you for a while, but today we might even meet twice. So I'm already preparing for your unsolicited feedback.

Lot Jens and Birgit van Etten, where are you? Fantastic that you are here for the *Prinses Maxima Centrum*. I applaud AmCham for supporting the Center, and I'm sure each of you will have very fruitful interactions with these two great ladies who promote this dear cause.

Thanks to Wouter Paardekoper and to Patrick Mikkelsen for inviting me here today.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is much that binds us as we stand together. It is our spirit of enterprise, it is our ideal of freedom, it is our history. Things great and small. Let me start with the small things.

It was in the summer of 1992, at the age of 16, that I spend a month with an American family, in York, Pennsylvania. I was often asked that summer why I didn't play basketball. I was already a bit oversized at that age.

It was also the time that I discovered my passion for American politics and American history. It is in this type of audience that I dare to admit that I know more American presidents than Dutch prime ministers. But maybe that's also true for many of you.

Washington, Lincoln, the two Roosevelts: presidents that shaped the US, but frankly also shaped the world.

There is the one we always mention, Martin van Buren. Maybe not the one with the most impact on history, but clearly the one with Dutch ancestry. And still the only president that learned English as his second language.

And of course there is Alexander Hamilton, who wasn't a president, but a first class nation builder. And he was secretary of the Treasury, so you can imagine he is someone I very much admire.

So for me it may have started in 1992: just over two centuries after the death of Isaiah Robinson. Does anyone know his name?

He is important. It was captain Isaiah Robinson, who, you could say, started the official US-Dutch relations.

It was in 1776, the second year of your war of Independence, that captain Robinson set sail on the brig *Andrew Doria*, a small ship with a crew of over a hundred men. With that ship he was bound for St Eustatius, or Statia as we often call it: a Dutch island in the Caribbean. He went there because he wanted to buy blankets, cannons and gunpowder.

After entering the blue waters of the Caribbean, he hoisted a flag of thirteen red and white stripes, lowered his sails and fired a thirteen-gun salute. Precisely the way it should be done in military tradition. And what did the Dutch governor Johannes de Graaff do? He ordered the commander of Fort Orange, to return the salute.

With that response, the Dutch were the first to recognize the United States of America. And ladies and gentlemen, let me assure you, the British were enraged! They even went to war over this, but I will not go into detail on that. It was a significant moment for the Netherlands, and clearly it was a significant moment for the US.

It was actually no coincidence that this small event that had such a big impact, happened on St Eustatius. This tiny little dot on the map that causes so many governments headaches, I must admit, even today.

Because back then, this small volcanic island was extremely prosperous. It was known as the Golden Rock. And small as it was, the island was the epitome of free trade. While other countries remained the trade barriers that were common before the days of Adam Smith, Golden Rock held to the principle of free trade.

So this little rock became one of the keys of US independence. Because it was from there that Washington's army imported around half of the ammunition that was used for American cannons and muskets. It was Lord Stormont who exclaimed in British Parliament: "If St Eustatius had sunk into the sea three years ago, the United Kingdom would have already dealt with George Washington."

So free trade as the foundation of freedom for all. That's why Benjamin Franklin, one of those great Americans, once said of Holland: "In love of liberty and bravery, and the defense of it, she has been our great example."

Just as the United States was, and is, the great example of freedom, and may I say, a beacon of light to the world. In the First World War, in the Second World War, and in the decades thereafter.

The United States and the Netherlands are allies to this day. We are trade partners, committed to free trade, as once at the Golden Rock. We are protectors of freedom and opponents of terrorism worldwide. And we are like-minded partners, with our shared history, our shared standards and our shared values.

Clearly our international clout is very different. You might know that only nine of the American states are smaller than the Netherlands. There are nearly 20 times more Americans than Dutch. It is a bit like the mouse and the Elephant. But even when you are the mouse, it is a good story.

Now I must admit that the ropes that tie us together have loosened a little in recent times. I would say that is unfortunate. Since the end of the World War we have relied on the US as a superpower, holding the world together and making sure it is not being set on fire. Multilateralism and free trade have been the cornerstones of this success. And especially in a world that is unpredictable and unstable, American leadership has kept us out of harm's way.

The United States have been a dominant force of good in the world for over 70 years. In its own interest and in the interest of the world it has chosen multilateralism as its main strategy in world matters. And with good reason, because that was what created stability and prosperity in the US and across the globe. And furthermore, this approach has fueled our acceptance of, and our desire for American leadership.

As the Ambassador and I have discussed, recent decisions of the American government have made us feel a bit uneasy. The withdrawal of the Iran Deal is an example, but the same is true for the US governments proposals to curtail free trade.

Naturally, I can understand the irritation that some in the US feel about the imbalances in trade between the US and China. But I very much hope that these frictions will not put us on a path to a trade war between the US and Europe. Because that,

ladies and gentlemen, would be a lose-lose situation. We have to do everything in our power to prevent it.

So for the sake of our welfare and our well-being, we hope the United States will continue to be, as it always has been, the champion of free trade.

And then there was recent news about US tax reforms. Many have articulated the logic of lowering corporate tax rates in the US. They may open the way for repatriation of foreign profits, more investments and a higher labor supply. But it is also fair to recognize that European multinationals, and particularly banks, might well feel harshly treated by the Base Erosion and Anti-Abuse Tax Reform.

I am very much aware that when I talk about tax, I have to be fair. Because the reverse is also true. In the US, there are concerns about the European plan to tax the digital economy. Now I see the logic of that tax. The digital economy is there, whether we like it or not. And to be clear, I like it. And therefore, it makes sense as a policy maker, to think about taxing it. In my mind, it is not so much a matter of 'if', but a matter of 'how'. But perceptions on the other end of the Atlantic are very different, let us be fair on that.

My point is, ladies and gentlemen, good partners don't always agree. But my more important point is, and that is the one I would like to articulate here: let's stick together. If there are two areas in the world with a shared history, with shared values, with shared beliefs, with the willingness to defend democracy, *and* with a deep understanding of the crucial importance of the rule of law, then it's North America and Europe.

So indeed, we very often, but do not always agree for the full hundred percent. But as in every good marriage, you discuss an issue, and then you seek to solve it.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude. Let us continue to find the things that bind us in the years that are ahead of us. As we are doing today. And as we did seventy five years ago, when the US was here on that crucially important moment in history.

In our longing for democracy, and in the spirit of that first moment of understanding between us, over two hundred years ago, in that little bay of the Caribbean, near Fort Orange.

Thank you very much.