

"Gates-gate": A teachable moment whose time has passed

This blog is called *New Cambridge Observer*—so I guess I should jump into the fray over last week's arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates by Cambridge Police Sergeant James M. Crowley.

Gates, 58, who is black and walks with a cane, had gotten out of a cab in front of his home on Ware St, couldn't find his house keys and, while he and the cab driver were breaking into the house in broad daylight, someone called the police.

To begin with, I can't understand why anyone would impugn the intentions of the woman who called the police: 911 tapes reveal that she said she wasn't sure if it was a break-in and that she doesn't mention race.

I CAN understand why Crowley would insist that Gates come outside after showing proof that he lived there; it's possible, tho unlikely, that someone inside the home was dangerous, in trouble, or pressuring the owner, in some way.

I can also understand why Gates would be upset: no doubt the incident triggered memories of his own and others' experiences of deep racial prejudice between white cops and black men. I can also understand why Gates would lash out verbally, and why his resistance would trigger the officer's reflexive response to an unruly citizen: handcuffs and arrest.

It's harder for me to understand why President Obama lost his usual cool and say the officer reacted "stupidly" but I'm glad that he backed off and invited both parties to the White House to discuss the matter over a beer.

A friend rightly points out that, rather than just let things

go each of the parties took the extra step: calling the police; demanding to come inside, pushing back, jumping into a local fray. My friend suggests that behind all that is fear: of break-ins, of losing hard-won respect and status, of loosing criminals into the community, of criticism—in a time of war and heightened economic stress.

All true.

But now, news commentators are questioning everyone's motives. This morning, one of them questioned Obama's choice of drink for today's powwow and called him a racist who hates whites; another (is it politically correct to mention that her skin appeared to be dark?) that Obama is a "racial opportunist" whose administration is corrupt, and that he used the term "stupidly" to draw attention away from his difficulties in getting health reform through Congress.

This episode has often been called a "teachable moment." Might I suggest that it's a moment that has gone on too long? We get it. It's a moment whose time has passed.

Let me know what you think!

—Anita Harris

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