



Written by [Steven Yates](#) on July 24, 2009

Obama Remarks on Gates Arrest Offend Many in Law Enforcement

President Barack Obama expressed some contriteness in an impromptu appearance at a White House briefing earlier today for contending that Cambridge, Mass., police “acted stupidly” when they arrested a prominent black scholar at his home on July 16 on disorderly conduct charges.

Police had come to the home of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. following a phone call reporting two black men trying to force their way into the house. Sgt. James Crowley, the first to respond, asked Gates for identification to prove he lived there. Crowley arrested the scholar and charged him with disorderly conduct after Gates yelled at the white officer, accused him of racial profiling, and refused to calm down.



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Gates, who directs Harvard University’s W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African & African American Research, had just returned from an overseas trip. He stated that the door had been jammed and his key refused to work. He and his driver had been trying to force open the door. Gates had gone in the back way and was in the house when police arrived.

Crowley, who teaches a course on racial profiling, agrees that “heated words” were exchanged, but denies any wrongdoing.

What had been an incident of mainly local interest grew in magnitude Wednesday evening when President Obama — who said almost nothing about race during his presidential campaign and has maintained relative silence on the issue since assuming the presidency — weighed in during a question-and-answer session ostensibly devoted to healthcare. Admitting that he was unaware of “all the facts race played in the incident” and also admitting that “Skip Gates is a friend, so I may be a little biased here,” Obama went on to say, “The Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home.” Obama added that “race remains a factor in our society.”

Obama’s remarks drew immediate fire from professional police organizations around the country. David Holway, president of International Brotherhood of Police Officers (15,000 members), stated, “The President has alienated public safety officers across the country by his comments.” Holway’s letter to the president seeks an apology: “You not only used poor judgment in your choice of words, you indicted all members of the Cambridge police department and public safety officers across the country.” Dennis O’Connor, president of the Cambridge Police Superior Officers Association, called Obama’s remarks “misdirected.” O’Connor added that the Cambridge police “deeply resent the implication” that race was



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a factor in the arrest.

The president's critics say that he crossed the line by handing down a judgment against the police in this case [after admitting he did not have all the facts](#).

Sgt. Crowley's superior has defended him. Stated Cambridge Police Department Commissioner Robert Haas in a news conference, "Based on what I have seen and heard from the other officers, [Crowley] maintained a professional decorum during the course of the entire situation." He added that Obama's comments had stunned his officers. "They were very much deflated. It deeply hurts the pride of this agency."

At first, Obama stood his ground in the face of criticism. On Thursday he told [ABC News](#) he has "extraordinary respect" for the men and women who serve in law enforcement, but maintained that this arrest was unnecessary. He stated he was "surprised by the controversy" his remarks had generated. "I think it was a pretty straightforward commentary that you probably don't need to handcuff a guy, a middle-aged man who uses a cane, who's in his own home."

He called it his "suspicion" that "words were exchanged between the police officer and Mr. Gates and that everybody should have just settled down and cooler heads should have prevailed."

He had stated the night before, "There is a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. That's just a fact."

Today, however, Obama announced that he had spoken over the phone with Officer Crowley and came away convinced that the man was a good man and an outstanding officer. While maintaining that both Officer Crowley and Gates had overreacted during the incident, he expressed regret for some of his own comments. "This has been ratcheting up, and I obviously helped to contribute ratcheting it up," he stated at the briefing. "I want to make clear that in my choice of words, I think I unfortunately gave an impression that I was maligning the Cambridge police department and Sgt. Crowley specifically. And I could've calibrated those words differently."

Gates has demanded a public apology from Crowley, who has refused. Crowley has maintained from the start that he is not a racist and that nothing he did stepped outside the boundaries of required police procedure, which obviously includes obtaining identification from anyone at the scene of possible criminal activity.

Crowley stated Thursday, "I support the President to a point." He added on a radio program later, "I think he was way off base wading into a local issue without knowing all the facts as he himself stated before he made that comment."

The charges against Gates were dropped, with Cambridge officials calling the incident "regrettable." Gates has threatened legal action against the Cambridge Police Department.



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