

The Gates Arrest: How Obama Moved the Participants -- Including Himself -- Beyond Anger and Humiliation

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(End of epilogue to my book on race,
fear, and shaming)
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Abstract

Last July the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., provoked a national controversy about whether he was being racially profiled. This essay argues that the case shows shaming dynamics on both sides. President Obama compounded the shaming, perhaps because he too felt disrespected after the media ignored half of his speech to the NAACP. Obama's way out of the morass provides some pointers for getting beyond mutual anger and humiliation.

The “Gatesgate” arrest provokes more vexed and unresolvable thoughts. At noon on July 16, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and another black man, his Moroccan limousine driver, were struggling to open a stuck front door in his house near Harvard when a passerby phoned in a possible burglary. A policeman arrived quickly. During the past six months there had been 23 incidents of breaking and entering in that upscale

neighborhood. Gates' lock may well have been jammed by a possible intruder while he was away. When the policeman arrived, Gates was in his foyer and the limo driver had left. Gates was 58 years old, and he walked with a cane. So far, my sympathies lay with Gates.¹

According to the police report, Gates immediately got "belligerent" when Sergeant James Crowley told him to come outside. Gates claimed Crowley never identified himself. Crowley claimed Gates couldn't hear the sergeant's several self-identifications because he was shouting. One example: "Are you not answering me because I'm a black man and you're a white police officer?" When Crowley repeated his request to step outside, Gates allegedly replied, "Ya, I'll speak with your mama outside." Besides, Gates's Harvard ID card didn't have his address. So Sergeant Crowley arrested him for disorderly conduct. Gates was led away in handcuffs for a seven-hour detention, until the charges were dropped. Four days later the case surfaced in The Harvard Crimson. It became an instant media feast of charges and counter-charges, with demands for apologies on both sides.²

I confess that my sympathies shifted to the policeman. As I saw it, Sergeant Crowley was simply trying to do his job when faced with an angry suspect. Several African American policeman, including one who arrived at the scene when Crowley called for reinforcements, emphatically said the same thing, as did his union and the police commissioner, though the African American mayor and governor took Gates's side. I also didn't feel displeased that a supremely entitled Harvard professor, an

international luminary just back from filming a PBS special in China, was momentarily reduced to exactly what he had looked like, a burglar. Welcome to the land of the ordinary, I thought. Nice to see the mighty brought low.

It irked me that for the next two weeks Gates remained on the attack, without any apology for being hot-headed. Though he had disrespected a policeman, he claimed to be a victim of disrespect. The only reason he was arrested was “spite,” he said in an interview. Snooty, I thought. It also irked me that he immediately started making plans for a PBS documentary about racial profiling. His ego didn’t even seem dented. In fact, his fame increased.³

As further information cascaded forth about the arrest, I found more and more things to dislike in his – well, attitude. Gates told an interviewer that when Crowley appeared at his door, he expected the policeman to say, “How can I help you, sir?” What entitlement that implies! Instead Crowley asked him to come outside. Gates replied, “No, I will not.” According to Crowley, Gates said several times, “You don’t know who you’re messing with.” The scene reminded me of Mel Gibson’s 2006 arrest for drunk driving in Malibu. Gibson shouted at the officer, “I own this town!” Later Gates told his daughter, “He should have gotten out of there and said, ‘I’m sorry, sir, good luck. Loved your PBS series – check with you later!’” Gates seemed almost as aggravated that the sergeant didn’t know him as he was at being taken for a suspect. Why isn’t this cop calling me “Sir”? Later he called Crowley “a rogue policeman,” though the sergeant had often taught other police how to handle race relations.⁴

Worse, Gates linked his four hours in jail with what he called the one million black men in prison. As he said to his sympathetic interviewer for The Root, the on-line magazine he edits, “On Thursday I became one of them.” Yet he passed most of that time in the company of several eminent Harvard friends, as they waited for the charges to be dropped. Even as he identified himself with every unfairly arrested citizen, he also mentioned that when Sergeant Crowley arrived he had been on the phone to get Harvard to fix his lock, since the university owns his house. What a perk! Moreover, “I was using my regular driver and my regular car service.” When Crowley asked him to step outside, “All the hairs stood up on the back of my neck, and I realized that I was in danger.” Yet his actions displayed confident rage, not fear. Nor did he try to see the situation from the policeman’s point of view. I sensed hypocrisy in his proclamations of fear and his presentations of himself as an ordinary black man harassed by the law.⁵

For Gates the case was simple: Sergeant Crowley “presumed that I was guilty because I was black. There was no doubt about that.” President Obama echoed Gates in commenting on the issue at his July 22 press conference. Identifying Gates as his friend, Obama said that “the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home.” Obama repeated Gates’s claim that the incident intimated racial profiling. African Americans and Latinos have been “disproportionately” stopped by police for a long time, he said several times. “And that’s just a fact.”

For me there was a lot more doubt. In fact, though I too was a university teacher

and scholar, I sympathized with the white policeman, not the black professor. Why?

One answer stared me in my face. How could I be more stereotypically white? I was doing just what Frank Rich later said racists do, and what I've been critiquing in this book. "Threatened white elites try to mask their own anxieties by patronizingly adopting working-class whites as their pet political surrogates – Joe the Plumber, New Haven firemen, a Cambridge police officer." Several commentators pointed out the racial divide in people's reactions. Except for some black policemen, most African Americans agreed with Gates and Obama that it was a classic example of racial profiling.⁶

To my surprise, even Mike Barnicle, whom my introduction criticizes for mocking Eric Holder's speech about race relations, came down foursquare on Gates' side. On his Boston radio show, Barnicle implied the woman who phoned the police may have been racist: "What's up with the woman who called 911?" Yes, I'd thought that too, though eventually further information revealed that in the initial 911 call, the woman had "no idea" of the men's race, and said the "two gentlemen" might live there. Barnicle startled me much more by saying that Gates was arrested for disorderly conduct "because he yelled at the cops. And who could blame him." As Barnicle concluded, "Race remains the third rail of American life."⁷

So if even Mike Barnicle and my beloved President weighed in on the side of Gates, how far had I come from my days of relishing John Philip Sousa playing Dixie in the South? From writing this book? My thinking and reading had brought me a long way, I'd thought. For my gut response to a race-based issue like this one – not so much.

Post-racial? After all my years of thinking about racial issues, I wasn't even close.

Judging by the hate mail and death threats that Gates received, I was at the gentle end of white vilifications. He had to change his phone numbers and his e-mail address, and Harvard urged him to move. As Obama concluded his calming remarks on July 22, we've made "incredible progress," not least in his election. Yet race "still haunts us." In this instance, the haunting took the form of virulent public shamings on both sides, with mutual charges of racism.

Another answer complicates the first, again to my discredit: my envy of Gates's professional distinction. That's obvious in the ways I've skewed my narrative of the incident. A third answer, which complicates my analysis still further, inches me back to the progressive side: my sense of the class war here, and my disposition to take the side of the less entitled, even when that guy has a gun. Gates's presumption does continue to roil me.

At bottom, however, all that analysis fends off a simple stark fact. When race gets involved, anyone can flip out. Here were two good men enmeshed in a reciprocal public shaming. One obviously felt disrespected because of race; the other probably felt disrespected because of class. Each man felt punked, to use prison slang. And that shared state of mind, plus Gates's status, drove them into the headlines.

Honor and shame come round again, compounded by race and class, and egged on by fear. By all accounts, Gates and Crowley were among the least likely people to have a racial flare-up. Each man had a long history of exemplary racial sensitivity. Yet there it

was. Gates saw red and talked black to a man he perceived as a white servant who was threatening him. Later, in disbelief that he had talked so indecorously, he disowned his language of “mama” and “You don’t know who you’re messing with.” Crowley heard contemptuous disobedience and shouting from a possible though unlikely suspect. As some have suggested, gut fear impelled both men into the fracas. Honor was also at stake, on both sides. Race and class jump-started the escalation.

Meanwhile President Obama might also have felt disrespected. He was annoyed at media accounts of his speech to the NAACP six days earlier. To celebrate the NAACP’s hundredth anniversary, Obama greeted his black audience as a brother who had made it to the mountaintop. In the first half of his speech he declared that “there probably has never been less discrimination in America than there is today.” Yet the “durable and destructive legacies of discrimination” persist. The “steepest barriers” now aren’t “prejudice and discrimination” but the “structured inequalities that our nation’s legacy of discrimination has left behind.” What may have sounded like boilerplate rhetoric to white people remained vividly real to black people. The barriers are also inside us, he said: “the way we’ve internalized a sense of limitation; how so many in our community have come to expect so little from the world and from themselves.”

The second half of Obama’s speech emphasized that for black people, personal responsibility can help to overcome their internalized sense of imposed limits. “No excuses,” he added to his prepared remarks, and repeated, “No excuses.” The mainstream media highlighted only the second half, especially that interjection. Headline

after headline said to African Americans, See, even the black president we elected is telling you to shape up. Whatever problems you have now, they're your fault.

Obama was dismayed at the coverage. Now that he was President, he could become more comfortable being black in public and talking about problems facing black people. But that side of him seemed either disparaged or ignored. To Eugene Robinson, an African American columnist, he complained that the media featured the "responsibility" theme while disregarding "the whole other half of the speech." So Obama was disposed to highlight the racial profiling in Gates's arrest, as he did. Stupidly. Humiliating a policeman and his entire police force didn't sound presidential.⁸

Two days later, to calm the national shouting, he appeared at another press conference to deal with the Gates arrest. As his own first gesture of respect and listening, he had just finished talking with Sergeant Crowley on the phone. Obama admitted that his "unfortunate" words had "ratcheted up" the controversy yet another notch. He had inflamed the public shamings. Now he took care to call Crowley and Gates "two good people . . . two decent people" who "probably overreacted." For him the incident shows that racial issues "are still very sensitive here in America," and that racialized interactions "can be fraught with misunderstanding." Obama hoped that the arrest would become "what's called a 'teachable moment.'" It might prompt people toward "listening to each other," and he urged Americans to "be a little more reflective." He also hoped the Sergeant and the Professor would join him at the White House for a beer.

Four days after Obama smoothed the waters, on a Fox News morning show, Glenn

Beck called Obama a “racist” with “a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture.” Jerome Corsi’s Obamanation had yet another resurrection. But the drama had passed, and Beck’s attempt at shaming preached only to the racist choir.⁹

Obama’s progression shows a way to get beyond racialized rancor. He had publicly used his authority to shame Sergeant Crowley and the Cambridge Police. Now he showed respect and listened attentively, even joking with Sergeant Crowley about the size of their lawns. It worked. The issue simmered down. On Thursday, July 30, Sergeant Crowley and his family met Professor Gates and his family at the White House, and sat down with Obama and Vice President Biden for almost an hour. When Gates first shook hands with Crowley, he said, “I would have sworn you were six feet eight inches tall.” Crowley responded, “I used to be, but I’ve lost two to three feet over the last two weeks.” Speaking to a sympathetic crowd at the Martha’s Vineyard book fair a few days later, Gates joked – maybe – that he could help get Crowley’s children into Harvard. Neither man apologized. As Crowley said later, “What you had today was two gentlemen who agreed to disagree on a particular issue.”

Gentlemen! No more need for a duel; the honor of both parties had been restored. Crowley’s statement may also have deliberately echoed the original 911 call, in which Lucia Whalen said there were “two gentlemen trying to get in a house.” In any case, the “beer summit” brought closure. Gates had the last good sound bite: “When he’s not arresting you, Sergeant Crowley is a really likable guy.”¹⁰

Even as I write about the arrest, weeks after the national debate has subsided, I go

back and forth. Maybe that's as it should be. Race does remain the third rail of American life, as Mike Barnicle said. Eric Holder was right to say we avoid talking about it, and Barack Obama was brave to move beyond his own pejorative labeling. This time he highlighted the goodness in the two men who overreacted so differently. He praised them for being able to "listen to each other," at least at the White House. He talked to us, and to them, and to himself, as adults worthy of respect and capable of dignity. I felt my own tensions ease.

Yes, race continues to haunt us. The illusion that light skin color secures superiority creates misperceptions on every side. Fears of losing that illusion still inflame race-based shamings. As I've been trying to work through here, discussions about race need to happen within ourselves as well as with each other. I hope the conversations continue.

Notes

1. In his July 21 interview with Dayo Olopade for The Root, Gates speculated that his lock had been "damaged" by an intruder, since the door seemed "jimmied" and he saw a footprint. Available on the web.

2. For these details, more complex than in the initial reports, see Don Van Natta, Jr., and

Abby Goodnough, “An Unlikely Meeting that Led to a National Talk About Race,” The New York Times (July 27, 2009).

3. Olopade interview with Gates, The Root (July 21), on web. Gates talked with Olopade from Martha’s Vineyard, where he said he was negotiating with PBS.
4. The first four quotes (help, no, black man, messing) are from Van Natta, Jr., and Goodnough, “An Unlikely Meeting,” A13. In the July 21 The Root Gates told Olopade that he first said, “Officer, can I help you?” The last three quotes (mama, daughter, rogue) come from Maureen Dowd, “Bite Your Tongue,” The New York Times (July 26, 2009), WK11. Van Natta and Goodnough first emphasized that the original 911 call did not specify race.
5. Quotes from Gates interview with Olopade, The Root (July 21), on web.
6. Frank Rich, “Small Beer, Big Hangover,” WK8.
7. Mike Barnicle, “Barnicle’s View,” on Boston’s WTKK (July 22, 2009), available on the web. On the 911 call, see Abby Goodnough, “911 Tape Raises Questions in Gates Case,” The New York Times (July 28, 2009), A10. The woman, Lucia Whalen, was calling on behalf of an older resident who had just moved into the neighborhood.

Sergeant Crowley's report noted that when he arrived, Whalen told him she had seen "what appeared to be two black males with backpacks" on the porch. Whalen and her lawyer vehemently disputed that.

8. Obama's interview with Eugene Robinson qtd. by Brent Staples, "President Obama, Professor Gates and the Cambridge Police," The New York Times (July 24, 2009), A18.

9. Glenn Beck, guest appearance on "Fox & Friends" morning show (July 28, 2009), available on web. Beck's comments were prompted by the stories about the Gates arrest. After his remarks created an angry buzz – no doubt intentionally –, he didn't repeat them on his evening news show. As Frank Rich pointed out in "Small Beer, Big Hangover," Obama's alleged hatred for white people would include his mother.

10. Gates qtd. by Helene Cooper and Abby Goodnough, "Over Beers, No Apologies, but Plans to Have Lunch," The New York Times (July 31, 2009), A10, also quotation of the day (A2). Another good sound bite came the day before, from Lucia Whalen's lawyer, Wendy Murphy: "The three highly trained guys who acted badly are getting together for a beer tomorrow at the White House, and that's a good thing. The one person whose actions were exemplary will be at work tomorrow here in Cambridge." Katie Zezima, "Caller Says Race Wasn't Mentioned To Officer In Gates Case," The New York Times (July 30, 2009), A18. On Whalen's "two gentlemen," see Kelefa Sanneh,

“Discriminating Tastes,” 21.