

Other than that Professor Gates how was the vacation

Written by Joseph Phillips
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In the age of Obama, the arrest of a prominent Black Harvard Professor on the steps of his own home was sure to ignite a discussion about the state of race relations in America.

Upon his return from an overseas trip Henry Louis Gates and his driver were attempting to open the front door, which was jammed shut. A passer-by noticed the men forcing the door open and phoned the police. By the time Sergeant James Crowley, the responding police officer, arrived Gates was inside his home. Crowley asked Gates to step out of his home and show some identification, which according to Crowley, the professor produced only after accusing the police of hassling him because he is a "Black man living in America" and saying something about Crowley's mamma. The situation continued to escalate until finally Gates was arrested for creating a public disturbance.

Unfortunately, rather than using this incident as an opportunity to have an honest and substantive conversation about stereotypes and race, racialists of every stripe have high-jacked the discussion in order to continue a one-sided discussion focusing on Black victim-hood. One such racist is our post-racial President Barack Obama.

During his Wednesday evening press conference the President claimed that Gates was the victim of racial profiling and that the Cambridge Police "acted stupidly" in arresting Gates for breaking into his own home. Alas, the president was tall on rhetoric, but short on facts, which was surprising (or perhaps not) given that the conference questions were pre-approved and he knew to expect it. Contrary to the President's assertion- Gates was not profiled. The police were responding to a report of a possible break-in at Gates home. Nor was Gates arrested for breaking into his own home. He was arrested for disorderly conduct.

And lest anyone assume I am deaf to Gates complaint- make no mistake, I have walked in his shoes and understand his outrage completely.

At the time I was living in West Orange, New Jersey, a quiet, middle class community west of Newark. I was walking about two or three blocks from my home one morning when I was stopped by a white police officer. He informed me that there had been a report of an attempted break in and that the description was that of a woman and a well dressed Black man. I thought it odd that he stopped me in that I was by myself and wearing a raggedy sweater and a pair of shorts. The officer then asked if I had any identification. I did not. I was walking in my own neighborhood! Further this same officer had answered a call at my home when my home security system had gone off not one week prior. It burned me up that he didn't recognize me.

Clearly, I was being hassled because I was a Black man living in America. How else to explain my inability to walk through my own neighborhood without being questioned? Other patrol cars soon arrived. I continued to protest; my voice rising. As the situation escalated one of the other officers threatened to arrest me for disorderly conduct, which of course only increased my outrage. Just when things were going to get really ugly something happened; it could have only been the hand of God slapping me in the head. I shut my mouth. I bit my tongue till it bled. The officers let me go. I poked out my lips and stalked off home, cursing the concrete beneath my feet.

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Two weeks later I was driving down the street in my fancy sports car (those were the days) and who should pull up alongside me at the red light? The same officer. He did a double take and commented, "Nice car."

"Oh you recognize me now?" I replied.

He smiled and asked if I wanted to talk. We pulled into a parking lot and had a friendly conversation. He understood my anger, he said, but asked me to understand that he was simply doing his job and could never remember every person he encountered on the job in a town of more than 50K people.

Fair enough. However, as a Black man I want him to understand that I am/was, (like Gates), conditioned to suspect such interactions with the police as being motivated by latent or overt racism.

Would the cop have recognized my white neighbor? Would a neighbor have called the Cambridge police if two white men were forcing the door to a home open? I have no idea. And it is only wise for Police departments and the officers that man them to recognize that the history of this country places serious doubt in the minds of most Black folks.

That said every interaction with the police is not tinted with racism and Black folk are just as guilty of stereo-typing white cops as is true in the reverse. Moreover, we are often guilty of appeals to being victims of profiling when it is clear the police had legitimate reasons for detaining us or asking us questions. Like Gates I was stopped because there had been a legitimate report made to the police and like Gates I didn't like it one bit. Like Gates I became irate and loud when legitimately pressed by the police officer to produce identification. Like Gates my outrage was based not in any real transgression by the police, but in a perception -- a stereotype -- of a white racist Cop working in league with my racist neighbors. (Do we really want our neighbors to ignore suspicious behavior and for police not to follow up on those reports? As much as we may dream it to be so, criminals of every color tend not to be down for the cause. Indeed, Gates front door was jammed because it had been damaged during a burglary at his home. But I digress.) Like Gates I protested the perceived injustice. Unlike Gates I had the benefit of Gods huge hand on my mouth before I got into trouble.

The interaction between blue uniforms and black skin is the final hurdle to overcome in our nations striving to become truly post-racial. Once we conquer it there will be little to stop us or slow us down. However, in order to succeed we need to have an honest, two sided conversation about race in America. We certainly aren't ever going to overcome if we view the arrest of Harvard professors engaged in boorish behavior as evidence of racial profiling as opposed to proof of the desperate need for mutual respect and better communication.

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