

Perverse discrimination (or The Gates of Hell)

Monday, July 27, 2009

I've never been especially respectful of authority – in or out of uniform. Respect, so far as I'm concerned, isn't a reward for years lived or elections won or careers chosen or degrees earned. I don't think that police officers or soldiers or firemen are heroes, either. Unless they're very unlike everybody I've ever met in my life, they do what they do for selfish reasons – as do we all – and, to that extent, deserve no more respect or admiration than the butcher, the baker or the candlestick maker.

Nevertheless, when Harvard professor Henry Louis "Skip" Gates Jr. was arrested at his home recently by Cambridge Police Sgt. James M. Crowley, I have little doubt that it was Professor Gates, not Sgt. Crowley, who turned what should have been a routine police matter into a heated referendum on race relations in which both the Governor of Massachusetts and the President of the United States are now participating.

Can we take another look at this?

Why are we so quick to assume that the "prominent black scholar" was wronged? What is it about Gates that makes his account of events more credible than the police report? Even when Crowley's black partner, Sgt. Leon Lashley, said that Crowley had "played it by the book," the media continued to shade its coverage in favor of Gates. The president, admitting as he did so that he didn't have all the facts, said that the Cambridge police had acted "stupidly." Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick called the incident "every black man's nightmare." And the day after the incident, CNN.com's top headline was "The 'unfathomable' arrest of a black scholar," referring to Spelman College professor Jelani Cobb's characterization of the arrest of the man he calls "one of the most recognizable African-Americans in the country."

(Well, I'd never heard of him, but I live under a rock, so ...)

As I write this, a peaceful resolution does seem at hand. Disorderly conduct charges against Gates were dropped almost immediately and now the president has invited Gates and Crowley to the White House for backrubs and beer. However the dust settles, though, I'm more interested in how it got kicked up in the first place, in our unwillingness to accept as accurate the police report which paints rather vividly the portrait of a college professor behaving like a belligerent punk. Why are we so reluctant to articulate the rather obvious fact that this summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Yale, this MacArthur "genius grant" recipient, Harvard professor and one of Time magazine's "25 Most Influential Americans" in 1997 showed his ass?

For the benefit of those of you who are new to this country, the answer is, "Because he's black."

No American with a brain and a soul in the year 2009 wants to see a prominent black man make a fool of himself. We have far too few extraordinary black role models. They are precious to our society, even those who, as Gates has said of himself, are the 56% white progeny of 75% white fathers.

Continued ...



They're precious to the black community because they're proof and promise of triumph over decades of adversity. And they're precious to the white community because they're proof and promise that we may someday be forgiven.

So let's be clear about one more thing ... I, too, feel a twinge of sickness at the sight of a black professor being led away from his home in handcuffs. I'm a baby boomer. I can't help it.

But if we take the police report at face value – and I'm inclined to do so – Gates loudly defied the police officer who'd come to his home to investigate a suspected break-in. When the officer arrived at Gates' house, he found the front door forced open and two men inside and when he asked Gates, whom he did not know, to identify himself, Gates shouted "No, I will not." Crowley and another officer, Patrolman Carlos Figueroa, attest to this and even Crowley's black partner at the scene says that he supports Crowley's handling of the matter "one hundred percent."

When first asked by Crowley to step outside, Gates shouted "Why? Because I'm a black man in America?" And later, when asked again to step outside after his identity had been verified, Gates shouted, "I'll speak with your mama outside." And as Gates became increasingly agitated, he warned Crowley, "You don't know who you're messing with." By the time he was in the police car, Gates had invoked both his race and social status as defensive weapons. He'd verbally assaulted the man who'd come to ensure the safety of his property. Shame on him. Shame on the prominent black scholar. He was wrong. And the American media was wrong for its subtly skeptical coverage of the testimonies of three Cambridge police officers, one of whom, Crowley, has for the past five years been teaching Lowell Police Academy cadets how to avoid racial profiling. President Barak Obama was wrong for injecting himself into the controversy at all and what he said was, to use Jelani Cobb's word, unfathomable. Likewise Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick's comments. To quote Gates himself, none of them knew who they were messing with and, what's more, they didn't care. They knew that Crowley is a relatively inconsequential white man and that he'd upset a black man who is simply "too big to fail." Case closed.

In reference to racism during an interview with Tavis Smiley, Gates said, "When you're desperate and scared, you scapegoat people."

So let me say what few if any major media outlets seem capable of saying ... A black professor threw a self-righteous tantrum, baselessly accusing a white police officer of racism. A black governor and a black president piled on. And Al Sharpton was in the locker room tightening his jock strap. The high-profile black people involved in this incident embarrassed themselves. They embarrassed all of us. Deeply. And now one of them – Henry Louis Gates, Jr. – is scapegoating the Cambridge police department ... and arrogantly basking in the fallout from his careless deployment of one of the most deadly weapons in the political arsenal – race.

Length: 7:35

Music: "Don't Come Around Here No More" by Tom Petty, plus actual 911 and police dispatch tapes released by the Cambridge police department

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