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Race, Power and the Gates Affair

African American Leadership

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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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As a Professor who spent a some years both near Cambridge and at Harvard let me testify that student run-ins with the police were not an unusual affair, and at his press conference on health President Barack Obama was trying to say honestly that Harvard is/was no different than any other place in America. Trouble is that he is President and there is a limit to his truth-telling, exquisitely witnessed in a later visit to his press room where he "recalibrated" his initially honest sentiment in which he said that the Cambridge police acted "stupidly" in arresting Professor Henry Louis Gates. His latest statement distributed equal blame for the incident on both Gates and the arresting officer Sgt. Crowley and in one fell swoop, Gates the victim, a distinguished professor and personality, was transformed into Gates the perpetrator with the equal power of the police to have created this racist incident.

I conceive of the police action to have been racist because Gates was provably in his own home which should have eliminated the charge of breaking and entering; he posed no threat to the police given his physical disability and his diminutive stature; and in my own career, I've never heard of a white professor being arrested unless they were deliberately protesting, but I have known black professors to have been arrested in their own offices for subjective reasons. So, rather than leave, Sgt. Crowley's subjective judgment to arrest Gates was more likely to have been made on the traditional racist grounds of using his power to silence a black man, no matter how important, in order to confirm the ultimate authority of white power in society.

Indeed, the transformation of Gates from victim to perpetrator fits the dominant model of power in racial matters that profiles blacks as perpetrators, so that even if he did not break and enter, he somehow ended up with that status. In my book, [*The Price of Racial Reconciliation \(The Politics of Race and Ethnicity\)*](#), I argue that the voice of the victim of racism has been devalued and the voice of the perpetrators of racism is elevated because of the power they hold over the interpretation and treatment of racial events. This is the curious way in which whites, who by every study I have seen

experience racism far, far less than blacks, end up having the dominant interpretation over events. They control the power over the voice that interprets events and control over the resources dedicated – or not dedicated --to resolve them.

The consequence of this unequal power distribution in racial affairs is that there cannot be a “frank discussion” that can meaningfully resolve such issues because, in the power equation, the President must “calibrate” such events from the side of the dominant class. The president, even if he is a black president and probably more so, is part of and amenable to the power structure that influences racial issues because he has to get elected and to govern with the assent of the majority. The only historical link in this chain was broken during the Civil Rights movement when blacks mobilized their own power and imposed it on the political system to confront America with their interpretation of racial events and demand for resolution. This alone forced change, because if left to their devices, neither Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, nor the Congress would have done it.

President Obama, Professor Gates and Sgt. Crowley will have their beer in the White House, but it will only be a symbolic gesture, lacking the force to confront the monumental crime of racial profiling by the police perpetrators that has locked up tens of thousands of blacks in American prisons. The Senate has just passed a resolution apologizing for slavery I have been reminded. Yes, but that is a crime conceived to have been in the distant past, while the issue of blacks and the criminal justice system is current and fixing it will require current costs.

So, what we now know from the Gates affair about having a black president is that his initial honest sentiment has been interpreted as a political blunder to conform to the political power of the interpreting class, because it dared to privilege the voice of the victim and through him all black men who had been racially profiled. Does this tell us something about the limits to which a black president can go in dealing with race in a majority white country with respect to other racial issues that are crying out for resolution? I believe it does.

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