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Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
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July 30, 2009 - Issue 335

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Cover Story
Obama and the Gates-gate
The African World
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On July 22nd when President Obama spoke publicly about the stupid manner in which the Cambridge, MA police handled the arrest of Dr. Henry Louis Gates, many of us breathed a sigh. In that moment it was clear that the President understood and verbalized the anxiety that most African Americans feel in encounters with law enforcement. More than anything else we understand that we are presumed guilty and the President seemed to recognize this publicly. Unfortunately, shortly after surfacing what so many of us in Black America feel and/or experience, Obama backtracked and has now resolved that he, Sergeant Crowley and Prof. Gates should have a beer.

I am as much in favor of having a beer as the next person, but a cold brew does not resolve the underlying issues. The Cambridge Police Department, which should be sufficiently trained to deal with volatile situations, arrested a black man trying to enter into his own house. More to the point, a black man who had just returned from China, was exhausted and had sufficient identification to prove that he was a distinguished professor from a local and slightly well-known university. Irrespective of Gates' attitude, and even if he had carried out handstands, insofar as he did not assault the police and incite a riot, there was no reason that he should have been arrested. None. In that sense, there was no reason for President Obama to step away from his cogent comments.

Fox News Commentator Juan Williams (an African American) offered a very contradictory analysis. On the one hand he acknowledged that he trains his children to be very careful around the police. Juan does not seem to want to come right out and say that disproportionate violence is perpetrated by the police against people of color. He then went on to say that he welcomes the police entering his house and looking around to ensure that there are no problems if they have been called to the scene of an alleged break-in.

True to form, Juan Williams misses the point and instead gives cover to the more right-wing pundits who are disingenuously arguing that President Obama overstepped his bounds in speaking out and that Sergeant Crowley took legitimate action. Can anyone say, with a straight face, that they would ever have expected the Cambridge police to have taken such actions against a white professor from Harvard? Of course not. While it is absolutely the case that there is resentment in Cambridge on the part of many residents against Harvard, there is a particular form in which that resentment plays out when it comes to Black people who attend or teach at Harvard. In other words, the attitude from many whites in Cambridge is clear: we should not be there in the first place.

The actions against Gates were as stupid as they were racist. Leaving race aside for a moment, however, there is no reason that a well-trained police department should arrest anyone under the circumstances that everyone agrees took place. If the police cannot handle tense and emotional circumstances they should find other employment. Yet when one adds race to the matter it becomes a subject that should be discussed with the entire country and the 'educator-in-chief' should take the lead in offering an analysis. While his off-hand comments were emotionally satisfying to many African Americans, Latinos and others who have witnessed racially biased law enforcement, it was not enough. It was not enough because Black America and White America have vastly different views and experiences, not to mention expectations, when it comes to law enforcement. Few white people, for instance, would be trained, from early years, on how to actually look at police in order not to be harassed. Few white people have been trained to verbally explain every physical action they are ABOUT TO TAKE to a police officer if stopped. Very few white people would assume that in driving through certain areas that they will be pulled over by an officer inquiring as to their intent. These are precisely the matters that the educator-in-chief could have explored with this country. Instead it was a missed opportunity. More importantly, by backing away from his legitimate outrage, Obama once again conceded ground to the other side.

Another dent in the armor.

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