The Policeman, the President, the Professor, an Apology, and a Round of Beers

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The recent incident in Cambridge involving Henry Louis Gates Jr. is indicative of the way we have talked, if not always thought, about race in America, at least white America, for the past few decades. Race is rarely a topic that is explored directly, even though it remains a constant, perhaps even defining issue, in the U.S. Instead, we only discuss race when specific cases or incidents occur and become stories in the media. Thus, the Rodney King beating led to discussions of police abuse and race, O.J. Simpson to race and the judicial system and even Barack Obama's campaign to a discussion of race and politics. Similarly, the Gates incident, has brought on another discussion of race and police profiling.

One major problem with this approach to discussing and understanding race is that the specifics of the case often get in the way of addressing the broader and more significant problem of which the case is only one example. The question of what exactly Gates said to the police may be interesting to some, but it not exactly relevant to the broader problem of racial profiling and African Americans being treated differently by police.

The Gates incident has become a different kind of story because President Obama commented on it by describing the police officer involved as "acting stupidly." It is not common for presidents to get involved in issues that are so local in nature and almost unheard of for presidents not to back the police. Equally significantly, this was the first high profile racial incident to occur during the presidency of America's first black president, so Obama's comments took on additional import.

Obama's remarks that the police "acted stupidly" were a rare example of the wrong words from a man who almost always chooses his words carefully. This does not mean that the police acted wisely -- they did not, or that Professor Gates should have been arrested -- he should not have been. However, by suggesting the police "acted stupidly" Obama, perhaps deliberately, sought to reinforce one of the standard views that we often hear from our elected officials, particularly conservative ones, whenever there is a case of police misconduct of any kind. This view might be called the "few bad apples" paradigm, which suggests that any police misconduct can be attributed to a few individual police who are racist, corrupt or too violent, rather than a broader problem within the police force. This is a good way to get the issue quickly out of the media and avoid a serious examination of policing.

Obama's remarks were consistent with this approach because the remarks suggest that Sgt. Crowley made a bad decision, but somehow it was an isolated case. The unfortunate use of the word stupidly drew attention away from the rest of what Obama said. "Separate and apart from this incident is that there's a long history in this country of African-American and Latinos being

stopped by law enforcement disproportionately." This is much more relevant and closer to the heart of the issue.

While it can be argued that Sgt. Crowley did not exhibit extraordinary intelligence by arresting an unarmed 58-year-old man in his own home who was not breaking any law, the issue is not the relative intellect of the arresting officer. The question here, which Obama addressed explicitly, but which was overshadowed by his other remarks is that this was a case that was unusual only because of the high profile of Professor Gates, not because of assumptions made or the conclusions to which the arresting officer jumped. These assumptions and conclusions still are systemic problems in police work, not just in Cambridge, but throughout the U.S. Suggesting that it was one officer acting stupidly downplays the serious of the issue and ends up being a more liberal, racially sensitive take on the "one bad apple" paradigm. It also makes it more difficult to consider possible ways to address this problem. Instead, a highly personal solution seems to be in the making, one that focuses more on Obama's words than on the arrest itself. If Obama, Gates and Crowley ever get together for that beer, it will be a good photo and probably an interesting discussion, but it will not change how African Americans are treated by police.

President Obama can probably be forgiven for taking this approach. Because his initial response, was essentially to see it from Gates' view, Obama was unwilling to take the expected approach of calling for time and more investigation or simply refusing to comment on the case at all. The amount of anger his comments provoked from police officials and police organizations around the country indicates that had he made a broader statement condemning police practices more broadly, he would have ignited an even larger and politically costly firestorm.