

*from the desk of*

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30 July 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

For all the admiration that I have of your talent and abilities, I am extremely dismayed on several fronts by the way in which you have handled the Henry Louis Gates matter. Although I am black, that should *not* really be of any consequence.

The issue is not whether there continues to be racism in the United States, since no reasonable person can doubt that there does, though we must also acknowledge the enormous progress that has been made. Rather, the issue is whether what we have in the instance of the Gates matter is indeed an example of the very racism that continues to be problematic in the American society. By every reasonable standard, it is just downright foolish to think that this is what we have in the Gates matter.

What we have with Gates is not a case of racial profiling in the sense of the proper use of that term, where none other than a wild statistical generalization based upon skin color is made that overlooks other very salient features of the person. Gates was not accused of inappropriate behavior on account of the fact that he is black. Quite the contrary, anyone found breaking into a house is rightly deemed suspicious, and the onus properly falls upon the person breaking into the house to show that the seemingly inappropriate behavior is not what it appears to be. Professor Gates should have grasped this very elementary point from the very outset.

Let us concede only for the sake of argument that there was a tinge of racism on the part of Officer Crawley. What most certainly exacerbated matters was Professor Gates' bruised ego. Mr. Gates is one of the "Lords of Harvard University Square" and as such he expects unquestionable deference to him from members of the Harvard University community regardless of ethnicity. For him to expect that sort of deference from the members of society in general is for him to be more than a little besotted with himself. It is the expectation of utter deference on Gates' part that was at the very center of the difficulty. Most painfully, Mr. President, it is to this mindset on Gates' part (namely that he is automatically owed deference by any and all individuals regardless of the nature of his own behavior) to which you have wrongfully catered.

Painfully, matters only get worse. Most people in the United States, be they black

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
30 July 2009  
Page 2

or white or whatever, do not have the standing that Henry Louis Gates has. Alas, what you have unwittingly done is reinforced the view that, with regard to justice, “it is who you know that counts”; and this you have done with regard to a situation that simply cannot possibly be characterized as an egregious wrong that a minority has endured. There was no lynching or threat of a lynching. There was no stupendous miscarriage of justice. Nor, again, was there a horrendously indefensible statistical generalization based solely upon race. In a most ostentatious manner, you have wrongly allowed mere social ties and standing to have weight.

A person would have to be utterly delusional—and not just naïve—to think that your intervention on behalf of Henry Louis Gates reflects a deep concern on your part about racial equality for all. There is no 1-800-number now in place that minorities can call when they take themselves to be in a similar situation. And, of course, there should be no such number.

Finally, Mr. President, I hold that by the actions that you have taken in the Gates’ matter, you have betrayed the hope that the American people placed in you. For one thing, you have effectively trivialized the fact that Lucia Whalen did what any decent person ought to have done in the circumstances in which she found herself. For another, you have shown that you do not have the courage to do what is right if so behaving should diminish your standing among blacks (for example). Third, you have harmed race relations by trivializing the charge of racism itself. Whatever else is true, the scenario of Gates cannot possibly be construed as a paradigm example of racial profiling; and there is no conceivable way in which you could have thought that it did. Justice is never served when we pretend that things are worse than they really are. Last, but not least, if you suppose that you, Crowley, and Gates having a beer together will somehow make it all better than we have a line of thought that can only be described as an instance of naïveté par excellence.

Respectfully submitted, Mr. President, I am

Yours sincerely

*This is the signature of  
Laurence Thomas  
Affixed 30 July 2009*



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