



Citizen Gates vs. Cambridge Police Department

When the now highly publicized case of the arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. first broke, I thought nothing of it other than a local issue—perhaps a misunderstanding. But with the untimely and admittedly inappropriate commentary by the president of the United States during his July 22nd news conference, the case quickly took on a new twist and a new life. I subsequently decided to analyze this case after a request from an Ektimis reader. It did not take long for me to confirm that this case is all about respect!

The truth of the matter, first and foremost, is that no one, with the exception of Professor Gates (a Black American) and officer Crowley (a White American), truly has the complete facts to this case—since no one else was present at the scene the entire time. Additional officers arrived at the scene shortly after the arrival of Sergeant Crowley. This leaves us all to assess the account of one man versus the account of the other—the words of a citizen versus the words of a law enforcement officer.

In my book, *Respect: Gaining It and Sustaining It*, I presented one of the methods by which we show respect; I called this method positional respect and illustrate the key factors that drive this mode of manifesting respect. One of these factors is a position of authority. I went on to list ten common societal drivers that create positions (in society) that command positional respect; and one of these ten drivers is Law Enforcement. Because a civilized society values law and order, a variety of public service roles have evolved and have been designated and assigned with authority to enforce laws and maintain order—all for the benefit of society. A law enforcement officer, a police officer, is such a role, and for this reason commands positional respect.

This aforementioned reference to a segment of my book is critical to understanding the framework for my analysis of this case—and it is an objective analysis. Now let me present an overview of the case and, indeed, the facts as we know it.

Upon returning to his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after a trip to China, Professor Gates discovered that the door to his home was jammed. With the assistance of his chauffeur the professor then forcibly entered his own home—an act observed by an innocent and vigilant passer-by who mistook the whole incident for a burglary in progress and promptly called the police. This call subsequently initiates a chain of events that would transform a simple local event into an unnecessarily complicated national headline news story.

Sergeant Crowley, an 11 year veteran of the police force, arrived at the scene first. The sergeant was not just swinging by the neighborhood, he was not just hanging around and happened to stop by, he was not there by chance; he was there specifically to



investigate an alleged burglary and to protect the property of a resident—at the request of a citizen. This fact is very important to keep in mind.

Believe it or not these facts, thus far, are the only facts that are material to my analysis of this case. Even though Professor Gates' account of what transpired after the arrival of the officer differs from the account of Sergeant Crowley (the officer), and despite the fact that the account of a fellow officer, Sergeant Leon Lashley, an African American, who arrived shortly after his colleague, supports the account of Sergeant Crowley, the truth of the matter is that all of these subsequent events are immaterial to my analysis.

By all accounts Professor Gates is an esteemed scholar and a respected Harvard educator as well as an accomplished African American citizen. By the same token, Sergeant Crowley is a well trained law enforcement officer, an experienced and respected veteran of the force, and a public servant with a clean record. However, neither individual knew these facts about the other—and to be frank neither needed to.

In my new book, *The Top Ten Laws of Respect – A Personal Guide*, due out in late September / early October I present the 9th law of respect as follows: *There is an infinite number of ways to lose respect, but a finite number of ways to earn it.* This principle is another basis for my analysis.

The 9th Law of Respect

There is an infinite number of ways to lose respect, but a finite number of ways to earn it.

Source: *The Top Ten Laws of Respect – A Personal Guide* (due for release in October 2009)

If respect was in play then the appearance of a law enforcement officer at the home of Professor Gates should have been met with gratitude and appreciation especially after the fact that the professor, along with an accomplice, moments earlier forcibly entered his own home. If there was any doubt about why an officer was at his door, all the Professor had to do was act respectfully and ask the officer what the matter may be and why he (the officer) was at his home. A courteous dialogue between the Professor and the officer, with the professor taking the high ground (as a citizen) and showing respect for authority, was the only recourse that was warranted in this case. This would have produced a different and a much better outcome. Any number of countless other ways to engage the officer, including what ultimately transpired, would be unwarranted. After all officer Crowley was at Professor Gates' home for one reason and one reason only—to perform his duty as a public servant and to investigate an alleged crime, and protect a citizen's property. There was no way for officer Crowley to know whether the professor was an actual resident or a burglar pretending to be a resident without initiating cautious steps to assess the fluid situation—steps that Professor Gates may have perceived as racially biased.



In many situations in our daily lives we are faced with decisions, and in many cases, there are always a few appropriate options and many inappropriate options. When it comes to earning respect, there are always fewer appropriate courses than there are inappropriate courses. The choice of what course to pursue is always left to each of us.

I respect Professor Gates because of his esteemed standing in the academic community and for his impressive life accomplishments; however, this same deference that I have for him is the basis for which I expected more from him—to respect authority and to act with politeness regardless of the circumstances that he alleges. This rationale is the same reason why President Obama quickly expressed regret for his hasty and insensitive remarks after he (the President) referred to the actions of the Cambridge Police Department as “stupid” during his July 22nd prime time news conference. The president clearly rushed to judgment.

It is true that there is a history of racial conflict and ongoing racial tension in the United States; it is true that many African Americans have been the object of unfair treatment by rogue law enforcement officers; it is true that there are a few bad apples (a minority ratio) in some law enforcement departments across the country, and there is no evidence of any sort that indicates that Sergeant Crowley is such; however, does this imply that we have to approach every situation through a racial lens? Would a racial lens and a presumption of guilt not put good officers, such as Sergeant Crowley, at a disadvantage and at a loss to performing their duties honorably and effectively?

If there are any lessons in this unfortunate case, they are with all due respect as follows: there needs to be a restoration of respect for authority by everyone, especially when the authority involves our security and protection; there needs to be a renewed emphasis on common courtesy and politeness between people; and there needs to be a removal of race in daily simple matters that constitute normal human interaction. All of these begin with the right frame of mind—an attitude of respect.

(Reader views welcome: ektimis@ntaiwo.com)

Cheers and thank you – N. Taiwo