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those who will
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Idaho Common Sense™



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Claiming racism can be racist

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Four police officers and two men; one black, a noted Harvard professor, and one Jewish, a famous singer —each with a recent police encounter.

Returning from a trip, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates found his front door jammed. He tried to force it open and then he and his chauffeur got in through the back door. According to Officer Figueroa's police report, a neighbor called the police saying she saw "a man wedging his shoulder into the front door as if to pry the door open." And contrary to media reports, she did not identify the men by their race. Further, Figueroa, the second officer on the scene, is also black.

The first officer on the scene, Sgt. James Crowley, teaches a class on racial profiling and race relations, picked to do so by a former police commissioner who is black. Sgt. Crowley was responding to a possible "crime in progress" and found two men inside the house. Shortly thereafter, Figueroa arrived and witnessed the professor's behavior. According to his report, professor Gates was yelling at Sgt. Crowley, calling him a racist and saying, "This is what happens to black men in America" and "You don't know who you're messing with."

The encounter ended with the professor's arrest. The next day President Obama issued a surprise summary judgment that the police "acted stupidly," this following an

admission that he did not know all the facts.

Although overlooked by most media, the president is a friend of professor Gates' which explains why Obama berated the police. The next day when the president felt the backlash of his statement, rather than apologizing to the police as he should have, he said, "I unfortunately gave an impression that I was maligning Sgt. Crowley." Is that true or was the president intentionally degrading the sergeant?

The second man is Bob Dylan, a famous singer who is Jewish. He was killing time before a concert in New Jersey and left his hotel to take a walk. The Associated Press reported "a resident said a man was wandering around a low-income, predominately minority neighborhood."

The resident called the police and a young officer arrived who had never heard of Bob Dylan. He asked Mr. Dylan his name, what he was doing, and for some identification. By then a second officer arrived, just as with professor Gates.

Because Mr. Dylan did not have identification with him, the officers asked him to accompany them back to his hotel to verify his identity. He willingly complied even though he had not done anything to justify this attention. In contrast, in professor Gates' case the police believed they might be responding to a crime.

We have four police officers interacting with two men who

reacted differently. Professor Gates shouted racism while Bob Dylan, a world famous singer, cooperated with the police.

He did not shout, "Racism." He did not shout, "This is how Jewish men are treated in America." He did not shout, "You have no idea who you are messing with."

I agree with the president; this is a "teaching moment." It's just that the president missed the lesson.

Who reacted racially, Sgt. Crowley or professor Gates? Who behaved appropriately, professor Gates or Bob Dylan?

Perhaps professor Gates was unable to bury past hurts and still sees racism everywhere, even when it does not exist. Perhaps the professor's past brought him to this encounter with an attitude that the officer did not have the right to question him?

Was professor Gates modeling how to ease racial tensions or was he, perhaps unknowingly, acting racist?

The real lessons to consider? Can past hurts lead to present misconceptions? Can people of any skin color be racist? Can shouting racism when none exists be racist? Can viewing today through the window of the past be unproductive? Can we move forward if we spend all our time looking backward? It's worth some thought.