

## Can Rio do an Obama!?

WASHINGTON — The need for President Barack Obama to conduct "beer diplomacy" between a respected black scholar and the white policeman who arrested him demonstrates that race relations have yet to fade into the background of U.S. society.

The American struggle with race flashed back into the national debate when Obama — the country's first black president — inserted himself into the angry give-and-take between the policeman and the professor.

That was in stark contrast to Obama's history-making run for the presidency, when he was at pains to play down race, prompting some to call him a post-racial candidate.

The incident two weeks ago also became a huge distraction for a president who is embroiled in trying to negotiate with Congress and cajole doubters into backing his centerpiece domestic initiative, the overhaul of the American health care system.

At issue: The arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr., a black professor at Harvard University, by Sgt. James Crowley, a white sergeant with the Cambridge, Mass., police department who was sent to investigate a possible burglary at Gates' home. Although Crowley determined Gates was in his own home, he arrested Gates anyway after their encounter grew heated.

The charges were quickly dropped, but Obama's remarks at a news conference — he said the police had "acted stupidly" in arresting Gates — inflamed the debate. The president later said he should have expressed his concerns with different language.

That's when he invited Crowley, who steadfastly denied race was a factor in the arrest, and Gates, a friend of Obama's, to the White House to thrash things out — face-to-face — over a beer. The session is set for Thursday evening, weather permitting, at a picnic table just outside Obama's Oval office.

Harvard Law School professor Charles Ogletree, an attorney for Gates, said the meeting was "an important opportunity for the moment to settle their dispute, but also create a springboard for a larger discussion about how law enforcement interacts with minority communities and how we can figure out a way to both enforce the law but also protect civil liberties and civil rights of our citizens."

"No apologies will be expected or conveyed," Ogletree said. "The idea is to extend an opportunity for people to meet others that they didn't know and they only met in the most tense of circumstances."

The incident began when Crowley was dispatched to the Gates' home after a witness reported to police that she had seen two men trying to force open the front door. Gates had just returned from a trip abroad, found his front door jammed but had managed to enter, with the help of his driver, by the time Crowley arrived. The police officer asked Gates for identification to prove he was the resident.

An argument apparently erupted and heated language was used as Gates stepped onto his porch behind Crowley, who then handcuffed the professor and took him to a police station on a charge of disorderly conduct.

The event pointed to a continuing problem in the United States — so-called racial profiling by law enforcement. Records across the country show that blacks and Hispanics face a disproportionate likelihood of a confrontation or arrest when stopped by police.

Students of race relations say that is a result of prejudice that causes police intentionally or subconsciously to assume blacks or Hispanics are more likely to commit crimes.

Obama cited racial profiling in his comments on the case, as did Gates.

"What I think we know separate and apart from this incident is that there's a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately," Obama said. "That's just a fact."

That disparity is a reminder that "race remains a factor in the society," Obama said.

Crowley said he arrested the professor — according to his report of the incident — after he "continued to yell at me, accusing me of racial bias and continued to tell me that I had not heard the last of him."

Gates claimed Crowley refused repeated demands for the officer to give his name and identifying police badge number. Crowley said Gates "exhibited loud and tumultuous behavior," causing him to handcuff and arrest the professor.

Compounding the complexities surrounding the case was a misrepresentation by the Cambridge police of the call that alerted them to the possible burglary. Police said the woman caller reported seeing "two black males with backpacks on the porch," with one "wedging his shoulder into the door as if he was trying to force entry."

When the recording of the call was later made public, it showed the caller made no reference to race. After being pressed by the police officer who took the call to identify the race of the men she saw, the woman said one of them may have been Hispanic.