



CITIZEN FILE PHOTO

Henry Louis Gates Jr., shown here in a file photo with Oprah Winfrey, was arrested at his Cambridge home earlier this week. The police department has called the incident 'regrettable and unfortunate.'

AT HOME while black

A run-in with racism in the age of Obama

BY LAWRENCE BOBO

It's not nothing post-racial about the United States of America.

I say this because my best friend, an affluent, middle-aged black man, was arrested at his home after showing identification to a white police officer who was responding to a burglary call. Though the officer determined my friend was the resident of the house and that no burglary was in progress, he placed my friend in handcuffs, put him in a police cruiser and had him "processed" at our local police station.

This outrage did not happen at night. It did not happen to an unknown urban black man. It happened, midday, to internationally known scholar Henry Louis (Skip) Gates Jr.

I believe the officer was motivated by anger that my friend had not immediately complied with the officer's initial command to step out of the house. In hindsight, I think Skip did the right thing; he could have been injured (if not worse) had he stepped out of his home before showing his ID. Black Americans recall all too well that Amadou Diallo reached for his identification in a public space when confronted by police and, 41 gunshots later, became the textbook case of deadly race-infected police bias.

Skip, 58, is one of the most readily recognized black men in the States and the most broadly influential black scholar of this generation. And in the liberal, politically correct cocoon of "the People's Republic of Cambridge," a famous, wealthy black man was arrested on his front porch for "disorderly conduct." Whatever that means.

Even before the charges were dropped Tuesday, I knew in my bones that this situation was about the level of deference that a white cop expects from a black man. According to his own written report, this officer understood he was dealing with a lawful resident of the house when he made the arrest and

was no longer concerned about the report of a "burglary in progress" involving "two black males." No, by this point we're talking about something else entirely.

Maybe this situation had something to do with Harvard University and social class. It is possible one element of what happened involved a policeman with working-class roots who faced an opportunity to "level the playing field" with a successful Harvard professor. But even if class mattered, it did so mostly because of how, in this situation, it was bound up with race.

Imagine: An influential man, in his home, is ordered to step outside by a policeman. Naturally, he asks "Why?" or perhaps "Who are you?" The officer says words to the effect of, "I'm responding to a burglary report. Step outside now!"

If Henry Louis Gates Jr. can be arrested on his front porch, then there but for the grace of God goes every other black man. That is one sad statement, and it should be enough to end all this post-racial hogwash.

To which our confident man says, "No. This is my house. I live here. I work for the university, and the university manages this property." The officer demands identification. "Fine," our resident says, and he retrieves his state and university IDs.

The officer now knows he is dealing with a legitimate resident. Does he ask, "Is everything all right, sir? We had a report of a burglary." No. Does he say, "I'm sorry, sir, if I frightened you before. We had a report of a burglary, and all they said was 'two black men at this address.' You can understand my concern when I first got to the house."

No, he didn't do that. He also could have walked away. But he didn't do that either.

This officer continued to insist

that my friend step outside, where several other police officers waited. By now, it is clear to my friend that this officer has, well, an "attitude problem." So, as I suspect other influential, successful Americans in this situation would do, my friend says, I want your name and badge number.

The cop says nothing sensible in response. The request for the officer's name and badge number is pressed again. No response. Social scientists have plenty of data showing that African Americans across the social-class spectrum are deeply distrustful of police. The best research suggests this perception has substantial roots in direct personal encounters with police that individuals felt were discriminatory or motivated by racism. But this perception of bias also rests on a shared collective knowledge of a history of discriminatory treatment of blacks by police and of social policies with built-in forms of racial bias (i.e., stiffer sentences for use of crack cocaine than powder).

In the age of Obama, however, with all the talk of post-racial comity, you might have thought that what happened to Skip Gates was an impossibility. Even the deepest race cynic couldn't predict such an event. But when I moved into the same affluent area that Gates lives in, I wondered whether someone might mistakenly report me, a black man, for breaking into my own house in a largely white neighbourhood and how I might prove that the house actually belonged to me.

I joked to my wife that maybe I should keep a copy of the mortgage papers and deed in the front foyer, just in case.

I do now. And it is no longer a joke.

There is a larger lesson here about racial bias and misuse of discretion by police that still, all too often, works against blacks, especially poor blacks. If Skip can be arrested on his front porch, then there but for the grace of God goes every other black man in America. That is one sad statement, and it should be enough to end all this post-racial hogwash.

Maybe events will prove my cynicism and anger unwarranted. Perhaps the officer involved will be fully held to account. Perhaps Skip will hear the apology he so richly deserves. Perhaps a review of training, policy and practice by police in my fair city and many others will move us closer to a day of bias-free policing. But if you're inclined to believe all that will happen, I've got a shiny new post-racial narrative I'd be happy to sell.

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THE CITIZEN INDEX BY BRUCE DEACHMAN

350,000: Estimated attendance at Bluesfest this year.

136: The volume, in decibels, that KISS's concert at Bluesfest reached.

130: The sound level, in decibels, of jets taking off and shotguns firing.

\$9.5 billion: The amount that the Public Sector Pension Investment Board's portfolio — the pension funds for the public service, Canadian Forces, Reserve Forces and RCMP — lost in the last fiscal year.

\$3.8 million: The amount paid in annual and deferred incentive bonuses to six of the PSPIB's top six executives.

28: The City of Ottawa's newly enacted age cutoff for eligibility for a student discount on OC Transpo bus passes.

\$20: The approximate amount a student saves each month on a bus pass.

\$220,000: The estimated annual savings for OC Transpo by enforcing an under-28-only policy on student discounts.

700: The number of people worldwide who have died of influenza A (H1N1), as of July 21.

429: The death toll as of July 6.

5: The average number of H1N1 deaths per day between April 12, when Mexico responded to a World Health Organization request for verification of an outbreak of respiratory illness in La Gloria, Veracruz, and July 6.

18: The average number of H1N1 deaths per day between July 6 and July 21.

2,000: The percentage increase in sales of antiviral drug Relenza in the past year.

47 million: The number of U.S. residents who have no health insurance.

1: The number of Canadian sites (the Bay of Fundy) among the 28 shortlisted as part of a global campaign to crown seven new wonders of nature.

1: The number of American sites (the Grand Canyon) on the list.

\$199: The application fee hopeful sites were required to pay to be considered for the list, causing cost-conscious U.S. officials to not submit the American side of Niagara Falls.

4: The percentage decrease in Ottawa's violent crime from 2007 to 2008.

18: The percentage increase in Gatineau's violent crime from 2007 to 2008.

30: The distance, in centimetres, by which New Zealand and Australia became closer following a recent 7.8 magnitude earthquake.

7.5 million: How many similar earthquakes it will take before the two countries meet.

610: The distance, in kilometres, that Ottawa's Ali Howard plans to swim in 28 days as she navigates B.C.'s Skeena River to draw attention to its threatened status.

21.8: How many kilometres, on average, she'll swim per day.

52: The distance, in kilometres, that Marilyn Bell swam in two days when, in 1954, she became the first person to swim across Lake Ontario.



BRIAN HUNTINGTON

Ali Howard tests the waters of the Skeena.

\$30 million: The decrease in revenues from government-run gambling in Canada from 2007 to 2008.

0.2: The percentage of the total 2007 revenue that that represents.

1: The number of years in the last 16 that gambling revenues have fallen.

34: The percentage of Canadians with an annual income of less than \$20,000 who gamble.

58: The percentage with annual incomes over \$80,000 who gamble.

2.3: The percentage by which the Bank of Canada says the country's economy will contract this year.

3.0: The amount of contraction it estimated three months ago.

300,000: The estimated number of backyard pools in Quebec.

222: The number of people who drowned in backyard pools in Quebec between 1986 and 2005.

156: The length, in pages, of Sheila Weatherill's report on the listeriosis outbreak at a Maple Leaf Foods plant that killed 22 people.

5.8 million: The number of pages of information that went into making her report.

267: How many copies of the most recent 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary are required to use up 5.8 million pages.

3-2: The final score by which Manchester United defeated Malaysia in a match last weekend.

2: The number of times a Malaysian woman stabbed her husband in the chest after he returned home late after watching a soccer match between Malaysia and Manchester United.

About your shoes, Mr. Thoreau ...

A walk in the woods? Not without bells, whistles and blinking reflectors

BY LORI BORGMAN

Henry David Thoreau said he could not preserve his health and spirits unless he spent at least four hours a day walking. I'm guessing he had to give up his day job.

Wouldn't it be something to take Thoreau along on what we consider a walk today?

"About your shoes, Mr. Thoreau. Are those walking shoes, aerobic shoes or running shoes? They're regular shoes? Sir, we have different shoes for different sports these days. "You say you walked 10 to 20 miles

in those shoes every day and you're not about to trade them in now? Fine by me, but I hope you don't get shin splints.

"Sir, since it is early morning and dark outside, I was wondering if you'd mind clipping this reflector to your jacket? It flashes three speeds: steady, blinking and intermittent. If you clip one to the front of your jacket and I clip one to the back of mine, chances are we won't get hit by a car.

"Why are cars in the wilderness? We won't be in the wilderness, Mr. Thoreau. We walk on concrete these days.

"Wildlife? We'll hear some birds

and a few dogs, but don't worry, I have pepper spray. I've never used it and always worry that I might shoot myself in the face with it, but if we need it, we've got it.

"Mr. Thoreau, I know you were big on sauntering, ambling and meandering, but we walkers today are about speed.

"Whose dumb idea was that? The heart people, the lung people, the fat police. We walk to burn calories, get the old cardio going, lower bad cholesterol, raise good cholesterol and turn flab into muscle. What's your best mile, Mr. Thoreau?

"Walden Pond was your best mile? I mean what's your best mile for speed. Two hours, you say. And a really good mile would take you three?

"I see. I wonder if you could pick up the pace, Mr. Thoreau — yes,

that is a sycamore. It's the tenth one you've stopped to admire.

"The reason my walking buddy and I walk so early is because we have to squeeze it into the day. We can't all hang out in a cabin in the woods, sir.

"Yes, I did read that you liked to walk after the morning papers had been read and before the afternoon papers arrived. Mr. Thoreau, we don't get two newspapers a day delivered anymore. Just be glad we're not in Detroit. The *Detroit News* only delivers on Thursdays and Fridays!"

"No, sir, that's not a bog up ahead.

Walden Pond was your best mile? I mean what's your best mile for speed.

It's a retention pond. I wouldn't go any closer if I were you. It's not a natural habitat; it collects run-off and has nasty sludge at the bottom.

"You find this walk unsatisfying? It entirely misses the point? But look at you! I bet you're up to a 55-minute mile! You can really hustle when you put your mind to it. What's your pulse rate? A man your age should aim for 135. We turn here, sir.

"What? You're heading back to Walden — to the mink and fox, the rustle of the trees, the earth beneath your feet? That's the real way to walk?"

"Would you mind if some of us came —"

Judging by the lightning speed with which he left, I will take that as a no.

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