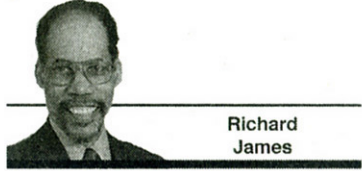


My teachable moment of acting stupidly



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On July 16, Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a black man, was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct by a white police officer, Sgt. James Crowley of the Cambridge Massachusetts Police Department. Sgt. Crowley had responded to a possible “burglary in progress” at the professor’s home. According to the police report, Crowley wanted Gates to come outside the house and Gates became irate and refused. Eventually, Gates did step onto his porch where he was handcuffed and taken to jail. Later the Cambridge prosecutor dropped the charge. The media picked up the story and Barack Obama, the first African-American president, became ensnared in the controversy when he said he thought the police “acted stupidly.” A firestorm of commentary and opinions followed.

When I was a young boy growing up in Philadelphia, I was taught to be wary of the

cops. If the police interfered with my liberty, I was told, “Don’t resist!” As a youth, I didn’t understand circumstances in life were often unfair but I heeded the wisdom of my elders. To survive a run-in with police, young black males had to be submissive and non-confrontational.

In Philadelphia 40 years ago, there were plenty of stories of young black men dying while in police custody. Former Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo was the mayor and he was perceived as a powerful friend to police officers. Cops could do no wrong. Black suspects were found hanging in jail cells or shot in the back while wearing handcuffs. I don’t recall officers ever being charged and convicted of police abuse. In 1968, I came home

with an honorable discharge and the Air Force Commendation Medal for meritorious service. I got a job and after a few years bought a used gas-guzzling 1965 Pontiac. Life was good. I lived with my Aunt Sug in a small two-story rowhouse in South Philly.

One afternoon, returning from work, I ran out of gas. I managed to maneuver the massive automobile to a safe parking space then I ran home. I needed a gas can. My aunt gave me a glass gallon jug that she used to fill the water trough in the coal furnace. The water kept the deadly coal gas fumes from accumulating in the small rented house. She said, “Be sure you bring my water jug back!” I promised that I would.

The gas station was only two blocks away from my car. The station attendant informed me, “No gas in glass! Wait a minute and I’ll loan you a plastic jug.” (During those revolutionary times, Mayor Rizzo was

afraid that someone would make Molotov Cocktails so he passed a law forbidding the filling of glass containers with gasoline.)

I was waiting patiently with my aunt’s empty gallon jug under my arm when cops pulled up. They got out of the cruiser and my heart skipped a beat. The officer that approached me already had a bad attitude. He had his hand on his holstered revolver. He wore the uniform of the dreaded highway patrol unit. He ordered me to throw away the glass jug. I refused. His face turned to stone and he repeated the order to throw it away. I tried to explain the situation to him.

In my mind, I was a decorated veteran and a law-abiding, hard-working citizen that had done nothing wrong. I looked him squarely in the eye and explained the promise to my aunt. Trying to inject humor, I told him that I would rather deal with him than her. I was willing to die, right then and

there, as a matter of principle.

The officer sized me up. He read my body language and knew that I was not afraid. It was late afternoon of a bright summer day. The officer spoke in a low threatening tone, “You one of those smart-aleck Negrões, ain’t ya?” He said he would be on the lookout for me. The cops got back in their patrol car and drove away. Afterwards, I was shaking like a leaf. I finally got the gasoline in the plastic container and retrieved my car. The police officer that harassed and threatened me was black. I never saw him again. Moral of the story?

While most police officers are decent men and women, some are racists and, more to the point, some are tyrants. Adhering to procedure does not make the Gates’ arrest morally right.

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