

Remarks Prior to Press Secretary Robert L. Gibbs's Briefing July 24, 2009

The President. Hey, it's a cameo appearance. Sit down, sit down. I need to help Gibbs out a little bit here.

Audience member. You're the new Press Secretary?

The President. If you got to do a job, do it yourself.

I wanted to address you guys directly because over the last day and a half, obviously, there's been all sorts of controversy around the incident that happened in Cambridge with Professor Gates and the police department there.

I actually just had a conversation with Sergeant Jim Crowley, the officer involved. And I have to tell you that as I said yesterday, my impression of him was that he was a outstanding police officer and a good man, and that was confirmed in the phone conversation. And I told him that.

And I—because this has been ratcheting up—and I obviously helped to contribute ratcheting it up—I want to make clear that in my choice of words, I think I unfortunately gave an impression that I was maligning the Cambridge Police Department or Sergeant Crowley specifically. And I could have calibrated those words differently, and I told this to Sergeant Crowley.

I continue to believe, based on what I have heard, that there was an overreaction in pulling Professor Gates out of his home to the station. I also continue to believe, based on what I heard, that Professor Gates probably overreacted as well. My sense is you've got two good people in a circumstance in which neither of them were able to resolve the incident in the way that it should have been resolved and the way they would have liked it to be resolved.

The fact that it has garnered so much attention, I think, is a testimony to the fact that these are issues that are still very sensitive here in America. And so to the extent that my choice of words didn't illuminate, but rather contributed to more media frenzy, I think that was unfortunate.

What I'd like to do then is make sure that everybody steps back for a moment, recognizes that these are two decent people, not extrapo-

late too much from the facts, but as I said at the press conference, be mindful of the fact that because of our history, because of the difficulties of the past, you know, African Americans are sensitive to these issues. And even when you've got a police officer who has a fine track record on racial sensitivity, interactions between police officers and the African American community can sometimes be fraught with misunderstanding.

My hope is, is that as a consequence of this event, this ends up being what's called a teachable moment, where all of us instead of pumping up the volume, spend a little more time listening to each other and try to focus on how we can generally improve relations between police officers and minority communities, and that instead of flinging accusations, we can all be a little more reflective in terms of what we can do to contribute to more unity. Lord knows we need it right now, because over the last 2 days as we've discussed this issue, I don't know if you've noticed, but nobody has been paying much attention to health care. [*Laughter*]

I will not use this time to spend more words on health care, although I can't guarantee that that will be true next week. But I just wanted to emphasize that—one last point I guess I'd make. There are some who say that as President I shouldn't have stepped into this at all because it's a local issue. I have to tell you that that thing—that part of it I disagree with. The fact that this has become such a big issue, I think, is indicative of the fact that race is still a troubling aspect of our society. Whether I were Black or White, I think that me commenting on this and, hopefully, contributing to constructive, as opposed to negative, understandings about the issue is part of my portfolio.

So at the end of the conversation, there was a discussion about—my conversation with Sergeant Crowley, there was discussion about he and I and Professor Gates having a beer here in the White House. We don't know if that's scheduled yet—[*laughter*]*—*but we may put that together.

He also did say he wanted to find out if there was a way of getting the press off his lawn. [*Laughter*] I informed him that I can't get the press off my lawn. [*Laughter*] He pointed out that my lawn is bigger than his lawn. [*Laughter*] But if anybody has any connections to the Boston press as well as national press, Sergeant Crowley would be happy for you to stop trampling his grass.

All right. Thank you, guys.

Remarks on Signing a Proclamation Honoring the 19th Anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act

July 24, 2009

The President. Thank you. Please, everybody be seated. Thank you. First of all, how about my Secretary of State? Give it up for Senator Hillary Clinton. She is doing an unbelievable job. She's traveling all around the world delivering a message that America is back and ready to lead. And everywhere she goes she is representing us with grace and strength, and we are very fortunate to have her.

I'm also lucky to have an outstanding Attorney General in Eric Holder, so I wanted to make sure that we thank him for being here; my Secretary of Labor, who's committed to these issues, Hilda Solis. We've got a couple of Governors in the house—at least I see one of them over here, Governor David Paterson of New York. And I think that Christine Gregoire was here. There she is, right here—from Washington State.

I want to thank the outstanding Members of Congress who are on the stage: Senator Dan Inouye, Representative Steny Hoyer, Representative Robert Andrews, Representative James Sensenbrenner, Representative Jim Langevin, thank you so much. Please give them a big round of applause.

And not on the stage, but extraordinarily important, are three key figures who helped to get the original ADA passed. I want to acknowledge them. First of all, not able to attend, but this guy is a fierce warrior on behalf of the disabilities community, Tom Harkin. He couldn't be here, but give him a round of

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:33 p.m. in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., director, W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University; and James Crowley, sergeant, City of Cambridge Police Department, MA.

applause. Another person who could not be here but was instrumental in guiding the passage of this landmark legislation, Bob Dole, but his wonderful partner, Elizabeth Dole—Senator Elizabeth Dole—is here, so please give her a round of applause on behalf of Bob Dole. And Attorney General and somebody who worked very hard on this issue, Richard Thornburgh; please give him a big round of applause. Where's Richard? There he is.

Well, welcome to the White House. We are thrilled to have you all here for a historic announcement regarding our global commitment to fundamental human rights for persons with disabilities. I'm also honored to mark the anniversary of a historic piece of civil rights legislation with so many of the people who helped make it possible, and I'd like to reflect on that for a few moments.

I'm reminded today of my father-in-law—some of you have heard his story—Fraser Robinson. He was Michelle's hero. When you talk to her about her dad, even today she just lights up. He was a vibrant and athletic man who provided for his family as a shift worker at a water treatment plant in Chicago. And in his early thirties, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. And even as it progressed, even as he struggled to get dressed in the morning and used two canes to get himself to work every day, despite the fact that he had to wake up a little bit earlier and work a little harder to overcome the barriers he faced