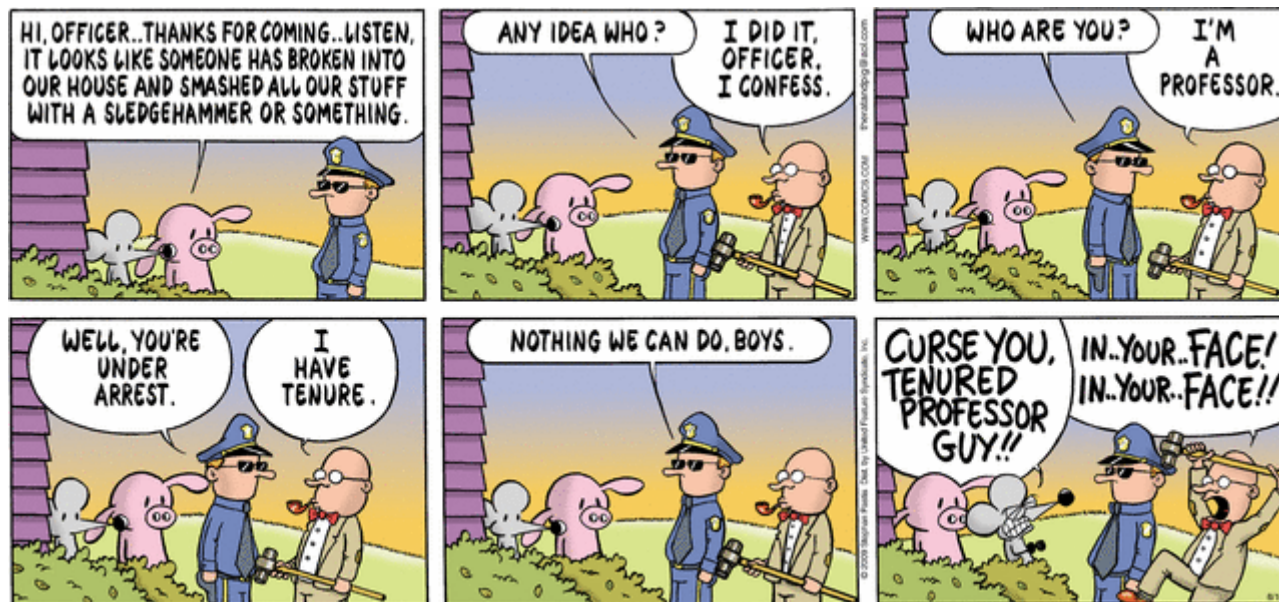


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## WHEN (VERY) HARD HEADS COLLIDE

*A professor and a cop revive the race debate. But was it really about that?*



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. It's about a quarter to one in the afternoon of a sunny spring day in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Police sergeant James Crowley is driving an unmarked car near Harvard Square. No, he's not on patrol or a stakeout. Crowley's an administrator who normally oversees functions like the property room. He probably just had lunch.

Not far away Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. is struggling to get into his house. A renowned black scholar who specializes in issues of race, Gates has just returned from an overseas trip. His front door is badly stuck and he asks the cab driver to help get it open.

Watching from a short distance away, Lucia Whalen, 40, a white Harvard professor, grabs her cell phone and dials 911.

Sgt. Crowley hears the call go out. Since he's close by he grabs the mike and announces he'll respond. Finally, a chance to do some real police work! Quickly arriving, he talks with Ms. Whalen. According to the [police report](#) she says that two black men with backpacks were trying to get in a house, and that one shouldered the door "as if he was trying to force entry." (According to her lawyer, Ms. Whalen has

supposedly denied saying the men were black.)

When I arrived at Ware Street I radioed ECC and asked that they have the caller meet me at the front door to this residence. I was told that the caller was already outside. As I was getting this information, I climbed the porch stairs toward the front door. As I reached the door, a female voice called out to me. I turned and looked in the direction of the voice and observed a white female, later identified as [REDACTED], who was standing on the sidewalk in front of the residence, held a wireless telephone in her hand and told me that it was she who called. She went on to tell me that she observed what appeared to be two black males with backpacks on the porch of Ware Street. She told me that her suspicions were aroused when she observed one of the men wedging his shoulder into the door as if he was trying to force entry. Since I was the only police officer on location and had my back to the front door as I spoke with her, I asked that she wait for other responding officers while I investigated further.

Not a patrol cop, Sgt. Crowley is unfamiliar with the rhythms of the neighborhood. But there is a credible witness. Residential burg's, he knows, usually happen during the day, when folks are at work. And there's always a whiff of danger. It hasn't been that long since three [Pittsburgh \(Penn.\) police officers](#) were shot dead responding to a domestic disturbance.

From a distance Sgt. Crowley spots a black man through a window. Sure enough, at least one got in!

Tired from the trip, irritated with the balky door, Dr. Gates gets off the phone with the Harvard fix-it crew just in time to hear someone in a police uniform yelling. A cop -- a *white* cop -- is ordering him to step outside. The professor's temper flares.



[What happened next](#) is in some dispute. Everyone agrees that Sgt. Crowley announced he was there to investigate a break-in and asked Dr. Gates to step out, and that Dr. Gates replied it was his house and he wasn't coming out. (According to the police report, the professor's response was "Why? Because I'm a black man in America?" Dr. Gates conceded that he brought up race but denied doing so offensively.)

By the time that Sgt. Crowley entered the home other officers had arrived, including the beat cop, officer Carlos Figueroa. Sgt. Crowley asked Dr. Gates for ID. But the sergeant says Dr. Gates only gave him his Harvard ID, which doesn't include

residence information, while the professor insists he also gave up his driver license, which does. Either way, as Sgt. Crowley concedes, it was soon apparent that Dr. Gates was the bonafide resident. Instead of snaring a burglar Sgt. Crowley was facing an infuriated man who seemed convinced that police were picking on him because he was black (“This is what happens to black men in America” is what [officer Figueroa](#) reportedly heard.)

Sgt. Crowley thought he was done. But Dr. Gates followed him outside, ranting about his treatment and attracting attention from curious neighbors and a small armada of police. That’s when a once-obscure officer in a once-obscure agency made a very bad decision. Instead of fleeing to Starbucks, Sgt. Crowley chose to engage. He warned Dr. Gates that if he kept it up he would be arrested for disturbing the peace. It didn’t work. Having driven himself into a self-righteous tantrum, the scholar hollered all the louder.

Might either have backed down had there been no audience? It’s possible. But there was, and they didn’t. As they say, the rest is history. (Dr. Gates was booked, and the charges were quickly dismissed.)

Many years ago, when your blogger was an ATF agent in Helena (Mont.) he got word that members of a film crew near the Canadian border had a local resident buy them handguns that they intended to take to their homes in New York City. It was irritating to travel on a Friday to tidy up the situation, and when the producer refused to have the guilty parties come in your blogger threatened to shut down the set and get a search warrant. Fortunately, his partner (who was only in training!) calmed things down and got the producer to collect the guns himself and turn them over. And there was still time to enjoy the weekend!

Every minute of every day hard heads of assorted colors and ethnicities collide. Regrettably, some of these skulls belong to cops. Officers aren’t superhuman and occasionally fall prey to provocation. That’s when we depend on their peers and superiors to step in, and they almost always do. So here’s a question: where were Sgt. Crowley’s colleagues when he tangled with an irate Harvard prof?

Here’s the answer: at the police station, where administrators normally roost. In the field, Sgt. Crowley from the property room was the Lone Ranger, and without Tonto. According to his [report](#) he alone decided to arrest Dr. Gates. There’s no indication that he consulted beat officers, on whose shoulders such decisions normally fall. Once he slapped on the handcuffs they might well have decided that keeping their distance was the wisest approach.

Dr. Gates is preoccupied with matters of race so it's not surprising that he detected racial animus from the very start. Race may indeed have had a lot to do with how he behaved. But the outcome seems much more the product of two very hard heads knocking, compounded by the absence of safety nets for Dr. Gates, whose family wasn't around, and for an overheated cop who was well outside his normal comfort zone. Considering all the rhetoric that the episode has spawned let's hope that these simple factors aren't overlooked.