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Obama's teaching moment was his own

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 31, 2009 NCR Today

President Obama said he hoped the controversy surrounding the arrest of Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. would become a ?teaching moment.? Unfortunately, by saying he thought the police had acted ?stupidly? he guaranteed that the moment would have little to do with teaching anything and much to do with reinvigorating racial stereotypes.

The President forgot to remember the context. His remark was undoubtedly true: Once the police realized Gates was in his own home, they should have walked away. But, what might have been said unremarkably in a private conversation has dominated the news for over a week. As the first black President, of course people were going to judge his remark as taking sides in a situation that is by all accounts murky.

The entire episode recalls a moment in August of 1944. Winston Churchill was in Rome meeting with representatives of all the different Italian political parties which hoped to get a foothold in the government the Allies were setting up. He writes in his memoirs, ?None had any electoral mandate, and their party names, revived from the past, had been chosen with an eye to the future. ?What is your party?? I asked one group. ?We are the Christian Communists,? their chief replied. I could not help saying, ?It must be very inspiring to your party, having the Catacombs so handy.?? But, recently, the Gestapo had committed mass executions in those ancient, hallowed Catacombs, so a light-hearted joke missed its mark. Know your audience.

President Obama is a gifted speaker. And, I applaud his courage in claiming that addressing racial issues is part of his portfolio. But, that courage conflicts with his program, which was pushed from the airwaves by the controversy. I do not doubt the President can do two things at the same time, address race relations and conduct negotiations for health care reform. But, the media can?t. His verbal gifts need to be used a little less often and a lot more carefully in the future.

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