



Barack Obama moves to defuse White House invitation seen as right way to go

By Jessica Heslam | Saturday, July 25, 2009 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> |

They RSVPed almost immediately because, pundits say, President Obama's invitation for a beer at the White House was simply an offer Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cambridge police Sgt. James Crowley could not refuse.

"You never refuse an invitation from a president of the United States," said Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia.

True, the peace talks hosted by Obama could leave the racial profiling charge hanging unresolved over Crowley's head as he tries to go on just being a Cambridge cop.

True, it could create a public image problem for Gates if he were to pursue the lawsuit he's threatened, or appeared to be exploiting the incident in a documentary or book at Crowley's expense.

"At this point, anybody who tries to extend this controversy is going to lose the battle for public opinion," Sabato said. "Either of them would look bad refusing the invitation and trying to continue the controversy."

And the biggest beneficiary may well be Obama himself, seeking to recover from his stumble in saying the Cambridge police behaved "stupidly" when asked about the incident at a nationally televised news conference on health care.

"This was the first smart move Obama's done in three days," said Boston University Communications Professor Tobe Berkovitz, adding that the president was back to his "smooth and charming self" yesterday.

Richard Nicolazzo of Nicolazzo & Associates of Boston said accepting the president's invitation would simply be "the right thing to do" for both parties.

"If people can create a dialogue and bridge a gap that's been established as a result of this particular incident, that helps to mitigate the downside for everyone," Nicolazzo said.

Not to mention the potential negative backlash for saying no to the prez, said Berkovitz. "For the sergeant to turn that down would be an insult and stupid," he said.

Obama said yesterday that he still believes both men overreacted but admitted that he should have chosen his words more carefully when he addressed the Cambridge police on national TV.

As for Gates' plans for a documentary, Berkovitz said, "There's your B-roll. Gates wanted this to be a media cause celebre, and now he gets even more mileage by going to the White House."

The bottom line, said Sabato, is that most Americans, consumed by the racial divide many had thought was over when Obama was elected as the first black president, want this incident behind them.

"If a White House can bring Begin and Sadat together to shake hands, I'm sure that the White House can bring Gates and Crowley together to shake hands. And they will do so, and make nice, and then that will be the end of it," Sabato said.

#