



July 24, 2009

Gates arrest growing 'legs' around country

Despite dropped charge, incident has sparked debate nationwide

The Cambridge police commissioner Thursday defended the officer whose arrest of a prominent black Harvard scholar has ignited a furious national debate and even prompted controversial remarks by President Barack Obama.

Obama's comments Wednesday that police "acted stupidly" in the July 16 arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr. set off a flurry of activity Thursday. Sgt. James Crowley, the cop who arrested Gates, called Obama's remarks "disappointing," while Commissioner Robert Haas said Obama's comments "deeply pained" the department.

In an interview with ABC News, Obama defended his comments but dubbed Crowley an "outstanding police officer." Crowley has reportedly taught a class on racial profiling at Lowell Police Academy for the last five years.

Haas admitted he hoped dropping the Gates charge on Tuesday would diffuse the situation — one that has instead blown up much larger than most anticipated. Public relations officials say what's next is tough to predict.

"I think it will end when people stop talking about it, but by Obama surfacing this on a national level ... it gives the story major-league legs and elevates it way beyond a level it should be," said Richard Nicolazzo, managing partner of Nicolazzo & Associates, a crisis management PR firm.

GREG ST. MARTIN