WASHINGTON - President Obama, weighing in on the arrest of Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., said last night that Cambridge police “acted stupidly” when they handcuffed Gates even after he showed proof that he lived in the house.

Calling Gates “a friend,” and acknowledging he didn’t “know all the facts,” Obama said during a nationally televised press conference otherwise devoted to healthcare that he didn’t know whether race played a role in the arrest of Gates, who is black and a noted authority on race relations, by a white Cambridge police officer investigating a burglary report.

But the president added that it is “just a fact” that African-Americans and Latinos are disproportionately stopped by police - evidence “that race remains a factor in our society.”

Obama, the first African-American commander-
in-chief, won office by running a campaign that tried to transcend race. His remarks on Gates’s arrest are perhaps the most pointed comments he has made on the subject since his election.

America has made progress on race relations, and his election is testimony to that, the president said, but the Gates episode suggests there’s still more that needs to be done.

“I think it’s fair to say, number one, any of us would be pretty angry; number two, that the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home; and, number three, what I think we know separate and apart from this incident is that there’s a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately,” the president said. “That’s just a fact.”

Cambridge Sergeant James Crowley, who arrested Gates last Thursday, declined to respond to the president. Asked at a softball game in Natick last night about Obama’s remarks, Crowley shook his head and said, “I think I’d be better off not commenting on that one.”

Cambridge police referred requests for comment to a spokesman, who did not respond.

Obama’s account of the incident did not precisely mirror what Gates and police have said. Gates was arrested for disorderly conduct after he forced open the jammed front door to his home, and a neighbor reported it as a break-in. Gates said the police handcuffed and booked him even though he showed his driver’s license and Harvard ID to prove that he lived in the house, but the arresting officer said the professor was loud and abusive.

Authorities dropped a disorderly conduct charge against Gates on Tuesday in connection with the incident, but Gates is demanding an apology from Crowley and is considering legal action. Crowley said yesterday he has no plans to apologize.

Obama said that when he was an Illinois state senator, “we worked on a racial profiling bill because there was indisputable evidence that blacks and Hispanics were being stopped disproportionately.”

Race “still haunts us,” he said. “And even when there are honest misunderstandings, the fact that blacks and Hispanics are picked up more frequently and often time for no cause casts suspicion even when there is good cause. And that’s why I think the more that we’re working with local law enforcement to improve policing techniques . . . the safer everybody is going to be.”

Even as he made a serious point, beginning to suggest that the same thing could have happened to him if he had tried to jimmy his way into his old house in Chicago, Obama joked about what would happen if he tried to jimmy into his current home - the White House.

“Here,” he said, “I’d get shot.”

_Erica Noonan of the Globe staff contributed to this report._

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