With Vigor, Obama Wades Into a Volatile Racial Issue

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Americans got a rare glimpse Wednesday night of what it means to have a black president in the Oval Office.

In response to a question at his prime-time news conference about the arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr., the black Harvard professor, in his own home over the weekend, Mr. Obama declared that the Cambridge, Mass., police had "acted stupidly."

Mr. Obama's response was his most animated performance of the hourlong news conference, and represented an extraordinary plunge by a president into a local law-enforcement dispute. And it opened a window into a world from which Mr. Obama is now largely shielded, suggesting the incident had struck a raw nerve with the president.

In the public spotlight, Mr. Obama has sought to transcend, if not avoid, the issue of race. As a candidate, he tried to confine his racial references to the difficulty of catching a cab in New York, although he was forced to confront it directly during the Pennsylvania primary when his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, became an issue. And last week, at the 100th convention of the NAACP in New York, he spoke in uncharacteristically personal terms about his rise to power as a black man, while warning black Americans not to make excuses for their failure to achieve.

Wednesday night's press conference seemed to be a different deal as the president leaped into a highly charged controversy that has ignited passions across talk radio, the blogosphere and the old-fashioned water cooler.
But in fact, racial profiling was a major issue for Mr. Obama when he was in the Illinois legislature. He was the chief sponsor of a bill, which became law, that requires police to record the race, age and gender of all drivers they stop for traffic violations and for those records to be analyzed for evidence of racial profiling.

And so the substance of his response was not as surprising as the fact that a president so quickly joined the fray.

The police were called to Mr. Gates’s house after a report of a robbery in progress. Mr. Gates, saying he was jimmying open a damaged front door, said he told the police he lived in the house. Still, the police report said he was arrested for “loud and tumultuous behavior in a public space.” He was held in police custody for four hours, after which disorderly conduct charges against him were dropped. Mr. Gates said he was the victim of racial profiling and has demanded an apology but the police officer involved has said he has nothing to apologize for.

Mr. Obama, asked Wednesday what the incident said about race relations in America, noted up front that Mr. Gates is a friend and that his comments might be biased. He said “words” had been exchanged and added:

“Now, I don’t know, not having been there and not seeing all the facts, what role race played in that, but 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 is a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. And that’s just a fact.” He added later that the incident was “a sign of how race remains a factor in this society.”

He also used biting humor, grinning broadly as he imagined being in Mr. Gates’s seemingly preposterous circumstance of being arrested after trying to get into his own home.

“He, I’d get shot,” Mr. Obama said, referring to his new address of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

The statement was a bit of political jujitsu that acknowledged the intense security that surrounds any president while letting sink in the image of what would happen to a black man who might seem to be breaking into the White House.

Mr. Obama’s response lit up the blogosphere immediately after the press conference. The debate developing overnight was whether Mr. Obama had gone too far in his response.

On nytimes.com, one commenter had this to say:

“I agree that there was probably some stupidity involved here, but I just don’t think him weighing in on it benefits anyone. ... by the end of the week this will be spun so ridiculously that you’d swear he called the Cambridge police pigs while eating brie and sipping pinot noir.”

Another commenter posted this: “Why should the president remain neutral about anything? He’s the PRESIDENT, for god’s sake. The last thing anyone wants is a president who refuses to take a stand.”
It could not be determined how well Mr. Obama knows Mr. Gates. But the professor, a widely respected expert in the field of race relations, had very kind words for Mr. Obama’s pivotal speech on race relations after the Wright affair threatened to sink his candidacy.

“I think it was brilliant,” Mr. Gates said of the speech in an interview with Tavis Smiley at the time. “It is a great speech about race, and race relations, particularly between black people and white people at the beginning of the 21st Century.”