



Markets

BS at 50

Opinion

Elections

India News

Portf

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The compulsions and rewards of the non-apology apology



Business Standard Insight Out





Apologising is never easy. Barack Obama knows this now. He made a non-apology apology last week to a Massachusetts police sergeant two days after saying the officer "acted stupidly" in arresting Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr because he was trying to break into his own house.

Obama's decision to wade into a local issue involving an African-American friend triggered a debate on race and the US criminal justice system. The Cambridge Police Department dropped a charge of disorderly conduct against Gates and said the incident was "regrettable and unfortunate", but demanded that Obama himself apologise; in an unusually direct rebuke, it said the president had used the right words but at the wrong party.



It was ironic that Gates should be involved in a racial row. When football star OJ Simpson was acquitted of the charge of killing his estranged wife Nicole and her friend in 1995, Gates published a brilliant and critical analysis, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man" in *The New Yorker*. "Many blacks as well as whites saw the trial's outcome as a grim enactment of Richard





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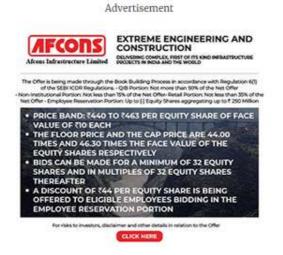
Opinion

Elections

India News

Portfolio

Yorker. "Many blacks as well as whites saw the trial's outcome as a grim enactment of Richard Pryor's comic rejoinder 'Who are you going to believe — me, or your lying eyes?'" Gates wrote. But Obama, who shot into national consciousness with his carefully choreographed "colourless" campaign, had to interrupt a White House press briefing on Friday to offer the kind of *mea culpa* that his wordmeisters must have sweated bucketfuls over. Obama said he could have "calibrated those words differently". Then he said: "My sense is you've got two good people in a circumstance in which neither of them were able to resolve the incident in the way that it should have been resolved and the way they would have liked it to be resolved." It sounded like Obama had studied the same primer as Rita Bahuguna Joshi, who said after sledging Mayawati: "I regret what I said in a fit of anger. If it is being misconstrued, if it's being misinterpreted, it is being taken out of context, then I regret it."



Apparently Obama decided to "apologise" to Sergeant Jim Crowley after talking the matter over with wife Michelle. The president has quite a few other things to mull over. His honeymoon is

= BS Home Latest E-Paper Markets BS at 50 Opinion Elections India News Portfolio definitely over. A zogby poil last week put Obama's approval rating at 48 per cent; 51 per cent of those polled felt the US was "on the wrong track". This, pollster John Zogby noted, was about where George W Bush was with voters just before the 9/11 attacks. A CBS News Poll put Obama's approval rating at 57 per cent — down from 68 per cent in April. On a range of issues healthcare reform, the way the huge stimulus package is being spent, the backtracking on Guantanamo, the growing "surge" in Afghanistan — Obama is not coming through as a blazing reformer with a flaming sword.



Actually he is having a fairly easy time of apologising. His predecessor spent his first few months in the White House feeling regretful. Very early in his first term, Bush had to apologise personally to the Japanese prime minister after a US nuclear submarine smashed into a Japanese fishing vessel carrying schoolchildren off Hawaii, killing nine of them. A few weeks later, a US spy plane with 24 crew members force-landed on China's Hainan island after colliding with a Chinese fighter jet. The Americans sent a repatriation team to bring back the crew after an 11-day standoff, and said they were "very sorry" that the Chinese pilot had died in the collision.





Markets

BS at 50

Opinion

Elections

India News

Portfolio

You would think that after Vietnam, Cambodia and Watergate, Americans had had a lot of practice in deniability. Ten years ago Nato planes bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. China's *People's Daily* commented scornfully this May that the incident had been shrugged off by the US as a "mistaken bombing". "Taking into account that this event is a page already turned in history, the alertness and latent hostility that the US holds towards China seems not to have vanished."

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Six years into its occupation of Iraq, we are only just beginning to hear a little less about the collateral damage of teenaged US soldiers shooting dead civilians who did not slow down near checkpoints. We don't hear apologies either about the civilian deaths caused along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border by unmanned drone bombings. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees said in April that 546,000 people have registered as refugees, forced to flee their homes by the relentless bombing.





Markets

BS at 50

Opinion

Elections

India News

Portfolio

Back to the art of apology. The Japanese used to have it down pat. Their language is peppered with apologetic phrases. Every time somebody brushed against me in an impossibly crowded Tokyo subway train both of us would mutter *gomen nasai* — forgive me. And Indians did not invent anticipatory bail — the Japanese routinely say *shitsurei shimasu:* "Excuse me for what I am about to do". But the coinage has got a little debased recently.

Much was made last year when Howard Stringer, the CEO of Sony, did not apologise personally for a series of mishaps in which Sony's lithium-ion batteries caused laptops to burst into flames. Observers noted that a lower-ranking Sony official bowed from a sitting position while apologising for the overheating batteries, of which Sony eventually had to recall 9.6 million. In contrast, Citigroup's former CEO Chuck Prince, apologising for problems that led to the closure of the banking giant's Japanese private banking licence, stood up and bowed for a full seven seconds. Leslie Gaines-Ross, chief reputation strategist for Weber Shandwick, writes in *Corporate Reputation: 12 Steps to Safeguarding and Recovering Reputation* that CEOs need to follow three important steps when apologising: take responsibility, act quickly, and communicate sincerity. Japan's Prime Minister Taro Aso was tearful last week when he announced early elections and the dissolution of the Lower House. "My wavering remarks caused anxiety and distrust in the public and led to a fall in the party support rate," Aso was quoted by Kyodo as saying at the start of his speech. "I'm deeply repentant." Apparently Aso had planned to apologise in the middle of his speech but his Chief Cabinet Secretary advised him to start off with an apology.





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Opinion

Elections

India News

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Maybe Obama's wordsmiths need to get together with Manmohan Singh's to craft a non-apology apology for the Sharm-el-Sheikh joint statement. Or maybe our diplomats and ministers just need to tear up a bit.