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A Common Retort After Insensitive Remarks by Elected Leaders: Resign

Officials have long atoned for their racist and inappropriate comments. But unlike years past, when apologies might have been enough, they have also been asked to step down.



Protesters called for Mayor Brian Henry of Pawleys Island, S.C., to resign over a Facebook post in which he characterized Black Lives Matter and antifa as terrorist organizations.

By Audra D. S. Burch

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On a tiny barrier island in South Carolina, the three dozen protesters lined up on a muggy Saturday morning this month for the third time in six weeks.

Holding signs, they marched across a highway, over a bridge and along a wind-swept beach, pushing for the resignation of a mayor whose racially insensitive remarks in late August have outraged and divided much of the community.

Brian Henry, who is in his first term as the mayor of Pawleys Island, speculated in a Facebook post that quickly ricocheted across the region that the killings of two residents had not received national attention because the victims were white and the

suspect is Black. He also characterized Black Lives Matter and antifa as terrorist organizations that were destroying American cities and challenged the nation to “rise up.”

Within days, the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. was demanding Mr. Henry’s resignation. Soon, the protests gave way to a companion mission of urging residents to vote in this year’s presidential election and next year’s local elections.

“This is about a community deserving better and needing to vote to demand better,” said Marvin Neal, president of the Georgetown chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., who has vowed to hold protests until Mr. Henry submits his resignation. “This is also about race in America.”

Across the country, dozens of similar scenarios have played out in recent months, with elected officials — from mayors to school board members to fire chiefs — forced to make amends after saying something insensitive or racist, often relating to the police killing of George Floyd. But unlike in years past, when apologies might have been enough, leaders have been stepping down in the wake of outcries and public scrutiny.



Marvin Neal, president of the Georgetown, S.C., chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., has vowed to hold protests until Mr. Henry resigns.

It has extended beyond the debate over race and policing.

At a virtual hearing of the Boston School Committee on Wednesday, the body’s chair, Michael Loconto, was caught in an unguarded moment as he joked about the Asian surnames of community members who wanted to speak.

He apologized a few moments later, explaining that he was “talking about a children’s book.” On Thursday, eight members of Boston’s City Council called for Mr. Loconto’s resignation, and by midafternoon, he had stepped down, joining a growing list of officials who did the same over the summer.

“After the ongoing discussion about racism in our country, that type of comment could no longer be accepted,” said Ed Flynn, a city councilor who represents Boston’s Chinatown, as well as parts of South Boston and the South End. “Society will no longer tolerate or accept inappropriate comments from a member of city government.”

In Carbon Hill, Ala., the mayor resigned after an uproar over his criticism of the University of Alabama’s football team’s support of Black Lives Matter.

In Harper Woods, Mich., the mayor resigned after saying he could understand the reasons a person might become a white supremacist.

And in Healdsburg, Calif., the mayor resigned under mounting pressure over her handling of questions about use-of-force police policies, which led to the appointment of the first Hispanic City Council representative in nearly 30 years. About one-third of the town’s 12,000 residents are Hispanic.

“What you are seeing is a cultural moment in which the country is trying to figure out all the forms of racism and what we expect from our elected leaders,” said Susan Glisson, who leads racial reconciliation talks in municipalities, police departments, universities and corporations.

“There is also the tension of those who feel empowered to say unacceptable things and those who feel empowered to call them out,” she added. “The horror of George Floyd’s death is leading to these cultural shifts playing out on a hyperlocal level.”

About a week after Mr. Floyd’s death and the early wave of nationwide protests, Rudy Patch, the mayor of Blackduck, Minn., a town of about 850 mostly white residents, was among the first to resign after sharing an online meme of a blood-covered Jeep that included a caption implying the vehicle had been used to run over protesters. He later said he regretted sharing the post without proper context and hoped to receive training to learn more about racism.

The unfiltered comments by elected officials — which might have landed differently before Mr. Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officers, prompting thousands of protests — were shared mostly on social media by people presiding over small, majority-white towns.

They were raw and revealing, igniting a now familiar public arc: citizen outrage; debates over racism and cancel culture; protests and petitions. And then an eventual apology and, sometimes, a resignation.

Then came the backlash to the backlash, with some mayors refusing to leave office or give in to what they called a mob mentality. Their supporters were equally defiant, lamenting a new world that they see as smothered by unchecked political correctness and gratuitous accusations.

In Petal, Miss., a town of about 10,000 mostly white residents, an incendiary Twitter post by the mayor led to daily protests outside City Hall and at his home, but no resignation.

Hal Marx, a lifelong resident and the town's mayor since 2009, batted down vociferous calls for him to quit after he wrote on Twitter, "If you can say you can't breathe, you're breathing," referring to Mr. Floyd's dying pleas while pinned under the knees of Minneapolis police officers.



Protesters outside City Hall in Petal, Miss., called for Mayor Hal Marx's resignation after a tweet referring to George Floyd's death.

For Mr. Marx, his apology was enough. "You shouldn't lose your livelihood over a stupid remark," he told *The New York Times* in an earlier interview.

On a Sunday afternoon in early August, Barry Presgraves, the mayor of a small historic Virginia town, posted a political meme on his Facebook page. To him, it was a lighthearted political dig at the upcoming presidential election: "Joe Biden has just announced Aunt Jemima as his VP pick."

But some citizens of Luray, Va., saw something else: racism served in a 130-year syrup brand.

The three-term mayor deleted the post, but the damage was done. Many called for him to step down, including Leah Pence, a town council member.

"In our community, there is a significant amount of subliminal racism, misogyny and homophobia," said Ms. Pence, who grew up in Luray. "This was a perfect outward example of that. Leaders are supposed to set the tone for the community."

Initially, Mr. Presgraves, 77, said he thought the post was humorous; then he apologized to people of color and women for any hurt feelings. But leaving the office was out of the question: “Hell no — I’m not resigning,” he told a local news organization. The Town Council eventually voted to public censure him for his “harmful words.”

In the village of Endicott, N.Y., both the mayor and deputy mayor faced calls to resign for sharing and liking a “White Lives Matter” post on their personal Facebook pages.

Linda Jackson, the mayor, and Cheryl Chapman, the deputy mayor, did not resign, and they described themselves in a statement as women “from two different political parties who made mistakes. Together, we take blame for those mistakes.” They admitted to “ignorance of the Black Lives Matter movement” and have since attended antiracism workshops.

For many, the twin forces of the coronavirus pandemic, which has disproportionately affected Black communities, and the killing of Mr. Floyd have exposed gaping disparities and ushered in a new and deeper understanding of the realities of Black life.

Black residents have opened up about experiences of racism. They have talked about sometimes fearing the police and wanting more representation in local government.

On Pawleys Island, Brandi Marshall continues to simmer over the mayor’s comments. To Ms. Marshall, a former mail carrier, what Mr. Henry shared in public was something you might expect someone to say at home at the kitchen table.

“I was struck by his words but also how bold he was about saying these things in print and thinking we would just accept it,” she said. “This is not what I expect from an elected leader.”

While Ms. Marshall, 45, was contemplating the post, Mr. Henry was holding private chats to help guide his response, which he said included creating a foundation to improve race relations, along with offering scholarships and grants.

He did not respond to multiple requests for comment but said at a news conference last month that conversations with friends, faith leaders and his staff had given him “a deeper understanding of racial inequality and the importance of diversity sensitivity, which is very much needed to heal Pawleys Island, Georgetown and our country.”



Mr. Henry said he had gained “a deeper understanding of racial inequality and the importance of diversity sensitivity.”

His supporters said an apology was not necessary. For others, his words were inadequate and resigning is the only acceptable response.

Ms. Marshall grew up on Pawleys Island. Over the years, she and her two sons have experienced racism in the community. She said Mr. Henry’s Facebook post brought renewed attention to what she saw as a clear racial divide in the community.

So although she is slowed by illness, she joined protesters on a recent Saturday afternoon, riding behind them in a golf cart. They chanted, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Brian Henry has got to go.”