

Amid death and racial tension, Baton Rouge mayor struggles to hold city together

By NIGEL DUARA JUL 20, 2016 | 3:15 AM | BATON ROUGE, LA.



Kip Holden, mayor of Baton Rouge, La., in his office. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)

From a distance, his tie looks to be a seamless monochrome. Up close, it reveals itself as a speckled pattern of ocher dots on a cream background.

That has always been Kip Holden's talent — to make the crowded, messy integration of disparate elements look, from a distance, united.

But as mayor of Baton Rouge, Holden's ability to hold together a city he has cajoled, flirted with and chided for a decade as its leader is being tested.

A black man named Alton Sterling is dead, killed by police here. Three police officers — one black, two white — are dead as well, gunned down while on routine patrol. The suspected gunman also was fatally shot by police.



For some residents, racial tensions invoke reminders of a segregation-era Baton Rouge

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The coalition of black Democrats and white Republicans that powered Holden to his first election in 2004 and had long stood by him splintered quickly after Sterling was shot.

Meanwhile, the rich, white enclave of south Baton Rouge has launched a campaign to split off from the poor, majority-black north, into a new city called St. George.

Holden has fought the separation in every way possible, even annexing the land under the stores at the Mall of Louisiana to keep their massive sales taxes in the

city of Baton Rouge if the secession is successful.

The break would prove devastating to the remaining city of Baton Rouge, according to a Louisiana State University economics study. It would also be a major blow to the legacy of a mayor who has preached unity.

Unity to Holden means the kind of peace and quiet that fosters business growth and keeps simmering racial tensions far from the public square.

He has long tread a cautious line between supporting the right of people to demand better treatment from their government while refusing to endorse the protests.

But few areas of Baton Rouge are neutral anymore.

So Holden finds himself largely sequestered in his home and office, taking calls, speaking to victims' families, taking the occasional midmorning nap after early-morning meetings, and mostly staying out of the spotlight.

"Where is Mayor Kip Holden?" asked local ABC affiliate WBRZ, which sent a reporter to track him down after Sterling's death. The story suggested the mayor had only made a single brief appearance to comment on Sterling's death despite marches and rallies that had devolved into skirmishes between protesters and police in Baton Rouge. The mayor was also a no-show at Sterling's July 15 funeral.



The three officers killed in Baton Rouge, La.: Who they were

JUL 18, 2016 | 12:30 PM

At the start of a new week, Holden walked from television tent to television tent in front of the Baton Rouge Police Department on Monday, raising expectations he would confront his critics and discuss the violence and death that had been heaved upon the city.

In an even voice he told CNN, "Right now we're actively in the investigative stage."

At the NBC News tent, he said, "We must go forward," jabbing his finger — "not back," thrusting an outstretched thumb behind his head.

In a decade in office, he retains most qualities from his initial run for mayor. He is still given to delivering rambling allegories. He is more hunched, his belly a little rounder, his hair a bit thinner, but he maintains the ephemeral, giddy nature of a retail politician, seemingly shaking every hand at once and grinning widely while eyes dart from person to person.

"Look at this man. Isn't that one of the greatest smiles you've ever seen?" said then-Gov. Kathleen Blanco at Holden's January 2005 inauguration. "To me, that smile just exudes optimism."

Eight months later, Holden would be forced to rely on that optimism when all else failed, including the city's traffic system, and again when evacuees were driven north from New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina.

But the killing of Alton Sterling has challenged Holden in ways for which he was not prepared. Protests have pressured him to choose a side. And, so far, he has chosen silence.

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"He's just not there for us," said LaQuake Brown, eating lunch in one of the eateries in Holden's crown jewel, the city's waterfront. "When Sterling was shot, where was he? Police get shot and he's giving them [condolences]. Where is it for that poor boy?"

Holden's reign has been focused on improving the infrastructure and livability of Baton Rouge, but few would call him an ardent administrator. Instead, he turns to people around him who help lead the city — a criticism his opponents have used against him.

Voters didn't seem to care. Holden won reelection in 2008 with 71% of the vote. Under his administration, Baton Rouge's languishing downtown riverfront has flourished. He built a new sewer system, supported improvements to the city's fine library system and rebuilt roads under Project Green Light.

He could also be thin-skinned and crushingly sensitive to even the hint of criticism, said Lanny Keller, a Baton Rouge Advocate political columnist. With a quick wit and acid tongue, Holden presents a formidable opponent in public settings.

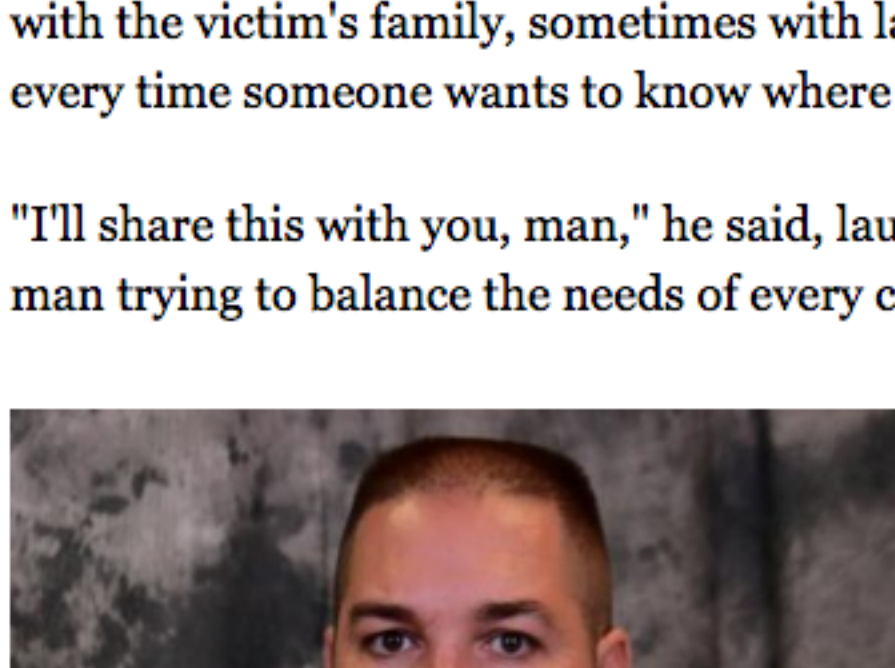
"I may not have graduated magna cum laude; I graduated 'Thank you, Lordy.' But look who's the mayor," he said at a contentious 2008 debate.

Now, he's preparing a run for Congress. He hasn't filed his papers yet — the deadline is Friday at 5 p.m. He hasn't raised very much money, just as he failed to raise much during a failed campaign for lieutenant governor in 2015.

The larger stage has rejected him so far, but at noon on Monday at WBRZ's studios in his hometown, Holden was in his element.

"They don't know where I am all the time," he told The Times. "I'm in meetings, sometimes with the victim's family, sometimes with law enforcement. I'm not going to go broadcast that every time someone wants to know where I am or where I'm going."

"I'll share this with you, man," he said, launching into a defense of himself, a 63-year-old man trying to balance the needs of every citizen, black and white, in this city.



'Good morning, my love' was the last text from her husband, a Baton Rouge police officer

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Then he was on camera, neither defensive, combative nor sensitive. Smiling and joking with the news anchor, John Pastorek, Holden asked for prayers for the officers not just every day, but every hour.

He asked for patience and unity. "Yea though he slay me, I shall rise again," Holden said, combining quotes from the books of Job and Micah.

"History will regard him as a great mayor," Keller suggested. "He's more successful than he is popular. There just hasn't been enough time and space to see

that."

Outside, a towering bodyguard opened the car door and Holden escaped into a cool blast of air in the back seat. The bodyguard slammed the door and squeezed into the driver's seat.

On television, the WBRZ weatherman stepped into the frame. Local weather on Monday was unpredictable. A series of tiny storms were forming in dozens of tiny green, red and yellow pockets over a map of the state, what the weatherman called "speckled showers."

On Monday in southern Louisiana, even the clouds couldn't seem to stay together.

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