

The harsh spotlight on Black women leading big cities

In the wake of the George Floyd protests, the mayors of Atlanta, Chicago and D.C. were challenged perhaps more than any others.

By **MAYA KING**

05/25/2021

The summer of 2020 thrust Black women center stage as mainstays of the Democratic Party with the power to help swing a presidential election. But for Black women leading the nation's biggest cities, 2020 was an often rude introduction to the limitations of that power.

Nine Black women mayors now lead big cities, a historic high. All hold office in the midst of a deadly pandemic that has laid bare systemic inequities — and only heightened demands for police reform.

But as the country commemorates the one-year anniversary of George Floyd's murder, three mayors have been challenged more than any other: Atlanta's Keisha Lance Bottoms, Chicago's Lori Lightfoot and the District of Columbia's Muriel Bowser.

The demonstrations in Atlanta, Chicago and D.C. were among the nation's largest, highlighting the cities' histories of systemic racism — and challenging their Black mayors' relationships to activists. As the protests grew, so, too did the profiles of Bottoms, Bowser and Lightfoot. All three were leading voices on police reform and public safety, regularly appearing on cable networks and featured in magazines, lending their expertise to other mayors and, in one case, making it on to Joe Biden's vice presidential short list.

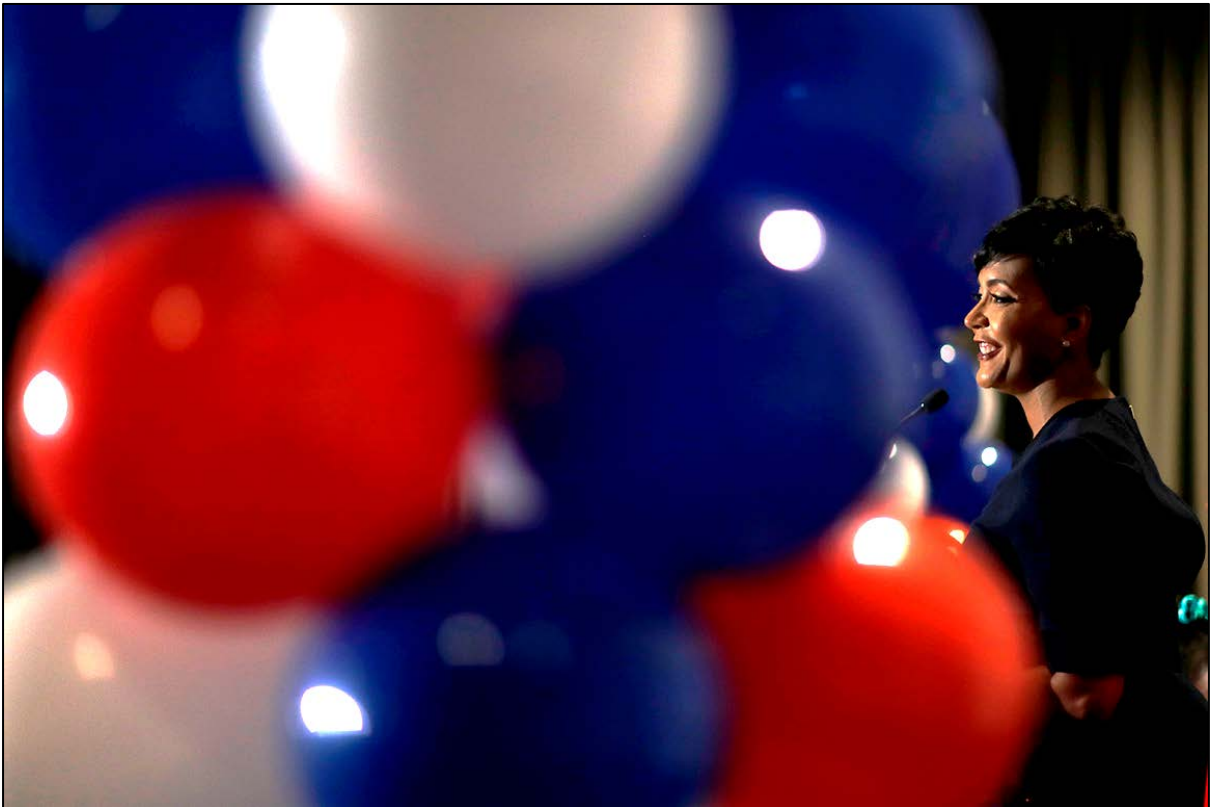
But now, Bottoms has announced she won't be running for mayor of Atlanta again. And last week, as Lightfoot commemorated two years in office, protesters demonstrated outside her Chicago home, bearing placards that read, "#2Years2Much." She also faced criticism last week when she announced she'll conduct sitdown interviews only with journalists of color. Meanwhile, Bowser, no stranger to protesters agitating against her home, has been criticized by activists who say she's not doing enough to improve the lives of Black Washingtonians.

"You're always trying to establish trust. And when trust has been broken, at so many levels of government, it's a difficult thing to do," said Karen Weaver, former mayor of Flint, Mich and interim executive director of the African American Mayors Association, the national organizing body of Black mayors. "As a Black person, and let me just add as a female, you're always having to prove yourself a little bit harder, a little bit stronger."

"I could never run or hide"

As Black women, and as mayors, Bottoms, Bowser and Lightfoot faced extra, often bruising scrutiny. They all lead cities with historically large Black populations, populations that turned out en masse to elect them. And all three mayors, given their ties to their city's Black communities, used those connections to speak publicly about their own experiences as Black women as they navigated dueling crises.

They were expected to communicate both the magnitude of these problems to mainstream America — and their plans to fix them. Though Congress introduced a sweeping police reform package at the national level, funding and oversight of police departments ultimately sits in the hands of America's mayors.



Keisha Lance Bottoms speaks at an election night party in Atlanta on Nov. 7, 2017.

“Black mayors, we have to get it,” said Sylvester Turner, mayor of Houston who now serves as president of the African American Mayors Association. “We come from these communities and many of us live in these communities. So who better situated to address all of these needs and challenges than we are?”

Still, while the nation saw heightened attention paid to these issues, few policies changed in America's cities to reflect that awareness.

“These past four years for a lot of mayors across this country have been especially challenging,” said Tishaura Jones, the newly elected mayor of St. Louis, in an interview.

For Bottoms, proving herself was a built-in part of the job. In March 2018, three months into her mayoral tenure, a cyberattack took Atlanta off the grid and cost the

city nearly \$3 million. Six months later, a federal corruption probe from the previous administration surfaced, which Bottoms said “seemed to suck the air out of City Hall.”

By 2020, when Covid-19 cases in Black communities ballooned, unemployment rates sent many into financial ruin and millions more took to the streets in protest, Georgia was a hot spot for all three, putting even more pressure on its capital city. The state’s unemployment rate rose to 12.5 percent in April 2020. From June 2020 through Feb. 2021, Black Georgians have led all other demographic groups by monthly unemployment claims filed, per an April analysis from the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute. Covid cases continued to climb throughout the summer, putting Bottoms on a collision course with Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, who sued the city for maintaining a mask mandate after he had banned it.

These factors further heightened tensions in Atlanta and fueled the ongoing spike in violent crime in the city. Bottoms called the days following Floyd’s death a “perfect storm of disappointment.” Hundreds in downtown Atlanta took to the streets in protest the Friday after his death and some demonstrations turned violent.

“We’re used to protest in Atlanta. We are used to nonviolent gatherings,” Bottoms said in an interview. “But May 29 was something we had never seen before.”

“The anger that I was seeing in the streets of Atlanta, I was seeing it in my kitchen.”

Atlanta mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms

At the time, Bottoms criticized the protesters, saying they had gone too far and were no longer helping their own cause. The conflict made things even more difficult for her as both a municipal leader and Black mother, she said.

“The anger that I was seeing in the streets of Atlanta, I was seeing it in my kitchen, ” Bottoms said. “I was getting all of this at home and then getting it outside the door too, so I could never run or hide from that.”

But when Rayshard Brooks, a 27-year-old Black man was shot to death by an Atlanta police officer outside an Atlanta Wendy’s fast food restaurant just weeks after Floyd was killed, the city erupted once again.

Earlier this month, Bottoms announced she’d decided not to seek a second term. Her decision shocked many in Georgia’s political circles, who see the city as the heartbeat of a state that has become the center of the political universe. After all, she was one of Biden’s earliest Black endorsers, a move that landed her on his short list to be his running mate. She’s been featured in magazines ranging from Ebony to Glamour, signs of her growing national influence. Vogue magazine declared her “America’s frontline mayor.”

But amid all the national attention, Bottoms has been blamed for the city’s escalating violent crime rate — an issue she said her predecessor will need to prioritize upon taking office. In January, Atlanta City Council President Felicia Moore, who sat

alongside Bottoms on the council, announced she was running against Bottoms for mayor.

Atlanta's citizens "all feel neglected," said Moore, a five-term veteran of the City Council. "There may be differences in what people want. But what people need is pretty much the same."

Bottoms did not rule out running for office in the future. When pressed about her decision, she wouldn't say exactly why she exited the race. But, she said, she wanted to "pass the baton" to another leader in the city.

Her allies and fellow Black mayors sympathized with her decision, their understanding informed by their own experiences leading cities while navigating the past year as Black Americans.

"I can totally understand how she might just say after one term, 'I'm done,'" Jones said, adding that she texted Bottoms, who is also her sorority sister, to say, "I support you in whatever you decide to do."

She and Bottoms are both members of the African American Mayors Association. But they also make frequent use of the informal network of current and former Black municipal leaders, which has grown to be hundreds strong via group chats and offline phone calls. And among Black women, the mayoral circle is even closer knit.

"I know how they're feeling. I know those challenges," Weaver, the former Flint mayor, said. "I know how tired they are physically, mentally, emotionally. And yet they keep going. You keep going."

"The agenda is clear"

Like Bottoms, Bowser oversees a city with a rising crime rate and systemic inequities rooted in race. And like Bottoms — and most mayors for that matter — Bowser inherited most of those problems. But as the pandemic exacerbated the inequities, Bowser, who is up for reelection next year, was tasked with fixing them at their worst.

In the rapidly gentrifying District of Columbia, for example, the longevity gap between white and Black residents has grown even as the national gap has shrunk. As of 2016, Black men could expect to live 17 years less, and Black women, 12 years less, than their white counterparts.



Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser testifies at a House Oversight and Reform Committee hearing on the District of Columbia statehood bill in March.

While those statistics predated Bowser’s mayoral tenure, her administration was slow to respond to them, critics say. As Covid-19 cases in the district began to climb, its Black residents from low-income households were among the last to receive access to testing. The delay caused a sharp uptick in infections in its predominantly Black and low-income neighborhoods, which are home to nearly half of the district’s Black residents. And while Black Washingtonians make up a little less than half of the city’s population, they make up 76 percent of its Covid deaths.

Bowser’s office did not respond to multiple requests for comment. In an interview with *The Washington Post* on May 6, Bowser said she was “quite proud of the district’s response to Covid,” citing its aggressive mask mandates and restrictions on public gatherings, entertainment and restaurants.

Meanwhile, as the pandemic wreaked its havoc, widespread protests in the district put its issues of systemic inequality on the national stage — with all eyes on Bowser, for the better and for the worse.

One symbol of her tenuous position in the city lies in a stretch of two blocks along 16th Street in downtown Washington. Bowser renamed the street Black Lives Matter Plaza in June 2020, painting Black Lives Matter in iconic bright yellow lettering. Many liberals praised Bowser for her refusal to defer to former President Donald Trump, who ordered federal troops to Washington amid protests and tear gassed peaceful demonstrators to make room for a photo-op outside the historic St. John’s Episcopal Church.

But to many in the city's activist community, her efforts were empty gestures. City organizers said her public-facing commitments to racial justice paled in comparison to her actual support of the city's police department and refusal to meet with activists. Days later, activists painted 'Defund the Police' in the same large, yellow lettering adjacent to the city-sanctioned message — a direct challenge to the mayor's agenda.



DC Mayor Muriel Bowser had city employees and activists paint the words Black Lives Matter on a street leading to the White House.

Earlier this month, activists' suspicions were seemingly confirmed when the city paved over the Black Lives Matter mural during construction work on the city's electrical grid. Bowser's office said they plan to reinstall the lettering permanently later this summer to allow for vehicle and foot traffic.

In an interview with POLITICO, Kenyan McDuffie, a native Washingtonian and City Council member who marched alongside protesters during last summer's demonstrations, said racial equity is one of the chief concerns of district residents. As access to resources like affordable housing and adequate health care remain unevenly distributed by race and income, he said, it's also the issue that has put some municipal leaders most at odds with Bowser.

"The agenda is clear. The community is clear. People in no uncertain terms have said what they'd like to see their government doing," McDuffie said. "And I think the data backs that up."

"That's encouraging confrontation"

Lori Lightfoot didn't start out in the hot seat.

A former federal prosecutor, Lightfoot swept into office in 2019 on a platform of reform, Chicago's first openly gay and Black woman mayor. Her election came five years after Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke shot 17-year-old Laquan McDonald, igniting citywide protests and further scrutiny of the city's police practices. Dashcam footage showed McDonald holding a knife but walking away from police officers. The city kept the record of the case under wraps.



Lori Lightfoot delivers a victory speech in April 2019 after defeating her opponent to become the next mayor of Chicago.

Lightfoot seemed uniquely suited to helm the city at a time of increased calls for an overhaul of the criminal justice system. She served as chair of the Chicago Police Board and led the city's Police Accountability Task Force under then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel — and even led the investigation into McDonald's killing. When she took office, she promised to reform the department and improve officers' relationships with Chicago's communities of color.

Right after she was elected, she released hidden records of a probe into Chicago police's handling of the case and launched a civilian police oversight board within her first 100 days in office.

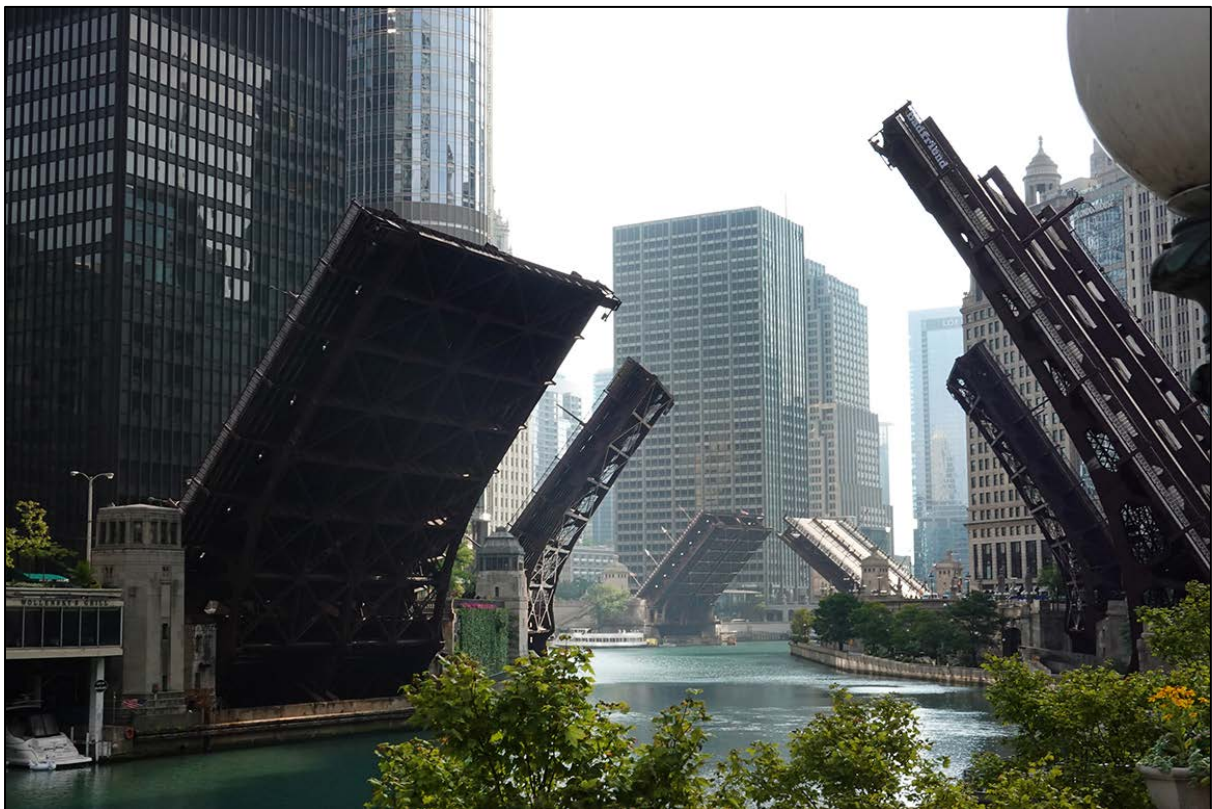
Lightfoot, who has already come out against defunding the police, spearheaded a police reform plan put together by the National Conference of Mayors that recommends minimal use of deadly force, pouring more money into social services

and hiring more diverse officers that reflect the demographics of the communities they police.

Yet two years into her mayoral tenure, many of those reforms have not crystallized. Lightfoot's administration has yet to greenlight a civilian review board, amid a series of high-profile police killings in the city. On Monday, Lightfoot delivered her own plan for oversight, but it didn't include many of the proposals from when she was campaigning. And her critics say her policing plan lacks substance. What's more, they say, her decision to step up police presence during the police protests last summer contradicted that plan. During the protests, she raised bridges and used city construction trucks to keep protesters from getting to downtown Chicago.

That's a "very conscious choice" said Brendan Shiller, a Chicago-based lawyer and community organizer. "That's encouraging confrontation, and [police] encourage confrontation."

Lightfoot did not respond to multiple interview requests.



Bridges across the Chicago river are raised to control access into downtown on August 10.

Meanwhile, her city faces a myriad of pressing issues: in addition to issues of police violence, housing segregation perpetuates the racial inequities in the city. And gun violence rose by more than 36 percent over the past year, according to an analysis by the Chicago Sun-Times.

And an email hack in April only further damaged her credibility with Chicago's activist communities and some members of the media. Thousands of leaked messages from

Lightfoot's current and former top staffers revealed, among other things, a lack of awareness of Chicago police's use of artificial intelligence software and the mayor's decision to cancel her subscription to the Chicago Tribune following reporting that was critical of her.

And in April, the specter of the city's troubled history of high-profile police killings was playing out again. Adam Toledo, a 13-year-old Latino boy, was killed by police. In the police bodycam video, Toledo appeared to be facing police with his hands up in the air. His mother was not notified until two days after he was killed.

"We failed Adam," Lightfoot said during a press conference last month.

Protesters took to the streets, once again.