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Lt. General Russel L. Honoré, (Ret.)

Commander of Joint Task Force Katrina

“Tough Talk About Crisis Management”

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A GMJ Q&A with Lieutenant General Russel Honoré (retired), former commander of Joint Task Force – Katrina, who oversaw the military relief efforts after hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Crises are inevitable. Every organization will find itself in a maelstrom at some point, and fortunately, most can be contained, managed, or smoothed over. But some crises can't. Some crises are so awful that they command the attention of law enforcement, the media, and maybe even Congress.

It's a possibility that keeps business leaders awake at night. It should, because a mishandled crisis can wipe out an organization with alarming speed. But such situations can be avoided. Crises may be inevitable, but disasters aren't -- and the difference is in the way they're handled.

Few people know more about leadership in crisis than Lieutenant General Russel Honoré, who retired from the Army in January 2008 after 37 years, having served as Commanding General of the U.S. First Army at Fort Gillem, Georgia. During his military career, General Honoré served in many roles in the United States and overseas, from Commanding General, 2nd Infantry Division in South Korea to his final assignment as Commander of the Standing Joint Force Headquarters, Homeland Security, U.S. Northern Command. But he will always be remembered as the "John Wayne dude" -- so dubbed by New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin -- who was called in to command Joint Task Force - Katrina and to coordinate the military relief efforts after hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

General Honoré learned a lot in New Orleans, and a lot of what he learned disgusted him. Not the devastation of the hurricanes -- that broke his heart -- but the lack of government and civil

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preparation for a predictable event. It's a reaction he discusses in his upcoming book from Simon & Schuster and in this interview. He also gives some well-tested, blunt advice for leadership in a bad situation -- how to set priorities, talk to the media, and communicate within the organization -- that can keep a crisis from devolving into a disaster.

GMJ: *In your upcoming book, you write that you learned in ROTC that being a leader means being a teacher.*

Gen. Honoré: Absolutely.

GMJ: *But later on, when you were a military leader yourself, you had to explain to soldiers that often, you have to work with people you don't like. And you didn't have an easy time with civilian leadership in New Orleans.*

Gen. Honoré: Absolutely.

GMJ: *So how did you square that? How do you teach a hostile team to work together?*

Gen. Honoré: You said the key word: team. In the Army or any other organization, you don't always get to pick the people on your team, and you don't always have the luxury of getting rid of them. Leaders must do more than get people to do what they want to do. The true art of leadership is to get teams and people to do what they *don't* want to do.

Many times, what makes people like or dislike others on the team is personality-driven, and you have to look beyond personality and at the other person's strengths. You might have the best intelligence officer in the Army on your team and nobody likes him. But the fact that he is the best intelligence officer is the important thing, so you work him toward his strengths, not the fact that he has an obnoxious personality that pisses everybody off every time he opens his mouth. Work toward the fact that he is good at what he does and can complement the team.

Sometimes the team just has to accept that person's personality. Hopefully, through teamwork and focus on the mission, he'll get the job done. But it's most important that the team accomplish its mission despite anyone's personality.

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GMJ: *So you try to get people to focus more on the mission and the goal than on each other.*

Gen. Honoré: Absolutely. It's good to have a happy team, but you know what? I've seen happy teams that don't get jack done. They're all nurturing to each other, they give each other birthday presents, but they're basically ineffective.

At the end of the day, you have to look at the level of effectiveness of that team, whether it's an infantry company or a brigade or a group that's doing administrative work. Happiness does not relate to mission accomplishment. It's good to work in a place where there's harmony, but competing personalities in a group can be healthy as long as those competing personalities are not dysfunctional and people recognize for what purpose *you're* sitting behind that desk.

Accomplishment of the goals trumps the environment where other people may dislike each other. Would I go drink a beer with that intelligence officer? Probably not. But the role of the leader is to treat everybody the same based on their abilities and their accomplishment of the mission.

One of the dangers of focusing too much on personal relationships is that leaders can unintentionally get drawn to the person they like the most, then that person gets designated as the leader's pet. If you want a pet, go buy a dog. There shouldn't be any pets on the team because you can't run an organization based on personalities; you have to base it on competence and mission accomplishment.

GMJ: *When you were in New Orleans as an active duty military officer, you were constitutionally unable to take charge of the situation. Nonetheless, thousands of people were looking to you to do just that. So how do you operate effectively when you're accountable but not in charge?*

Gen. Honoré: That's an interesting role. Again, we're talking about the *art* of leadership here, not the science. The science would tell you that by law and by statute, you're not the leader. But when people think you are the leader and they accept you as the leader, then you have to show leadership.

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Now in a case like New Orleans, the mission was focused on doing search and rescue. [The leader's role was] to provide a voice that people would listen to and to provide clear tasks. But [the leader's role] was also to fight some of the misinformation that was coming out of the city from a whole stream of reporters who were capturing sound bites and putting them on television. For example, a reporter had gotten some information from someone, which had not been investigated or corroborated by anyone, that people were being killed in the Superdome and at the Convention Center. In another case, a reporter reported that the police chief of New Orleans said that [doctors and soldiers] had been shot at by snipers.

Now, those two reports almost caused the government to federalize the city of New Orleans because the responsibility of the state and federal government is to maintain some civil control. Under that scenario, I worked hard doing follow-up interviews to address questions and dispel rumors like those of snipers, which I knew were not true, although it had been said by the police chief.

GMJ: *How could you be sure?*

Gen. Honoré: I challenged the police chief first. I said, "Chief, let's go look at the helicopter. If a sniper was shooting at you, there will be a hole in the helicopter. I don't doubt that someone could have shot while you were in the helicopter, but for you to use the word sniper, you've taken the conversation to another level." Precision fire -- shooting people to either harm or kill them -- is a lot different than coming close to a bunch of dopers trying to protect their stash who might put some bullets up.

GMJ: *In your book, you say you rely on the Zumwalt rules. Can you explain them?*

Gen. Honoré: Ah, the Zumwalt rules. I learned them as a major. Admiral Zumwalt was probably one of the smartest officers who has served in uniform. Zumwalt said that when you go before Congress or reporters, be prepared with the three most important things to your organization. [When you're asked the first question], tell them the number-one most important thing that you need them to do or you need them to know, regardless of the question. To the second question they ask, you say the second most important thing that's critical to your troops and your mission.

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And when they ask the third question, you answer the third most important thing. *Then* you can get to what they want to talk about.

If it's fifty reporters, tell them you're glad they asked this or that question; that's a tough question. Then tell them the most important thing that the American people need to know because they are a medium to talk to the American people. When I talk to the press, I'm not talking to the press. I'm talking to the American people who hold me accountable for taking care of the troops and accomplishing the mission. Regardless of what question [the press] asks, I'm talking to the American people. And they should be watching me to make sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing.

GMJ: *When you're in a position of leadership and you realize a bad situation is becoming a crisis, what's the first thing you should do?*

Gen. Honoré: Try to quickly assess the number-one priority, then what's number two and what's number three, so that you can tell your people. If the number-one priority is to save lives and people understand that, then that will trump a lot of the other conversations or good ideas that come up.

The role of the leader is to quickly establish a priority of work, maintain it, and adjust it as the situation changes. And then while you focus on that priority, look for some low-hanging fruit -- it shows some degree of progress. You also do what you can to take care of the people -- show some compassion. But get the quick wins. Every crisis has its own personality, so you have to work fast to establish the priorities.

You're constantly learning, and you never have full situation awareness, I can tell you that. You never have full situational awareness, never. And if you think you know everything that's going on, even in your own house, you don't -- nor should you. It would probably drive you crazy.

GMJ: *You note in your book that Americans used to have a culture of preparedness but don't anymore. What do you mean by that? How do we create a culture of preparedness?*

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Gen. Honoré: First, we'll need a culture shift. When we have a cultural shift about something, it's generally accepted by the majority of people because business, government, and academics get involved.

Take the AIDS crisis, for example. First, we *called* it a crisis, which identifies it as a problem. Now, when these three institutions -- government, business, and education -- get focused on something, it becomes ingrained in the culture, and solutions get made. Second, government created policy and resources to attack the problem. Business got involved and made drugs that saved people's lives and made money. Business solves problems. That's what businesses do; they take care of problems -- they look for opportunities to make money, but that solves problems. And third, education -- we started teaching kids in *first grade* about AIDS.

That's how we get prepared. So we need a cultural shift where academics, government, and business and the biggest players -- people themselves -- redefine what it's going to take to live in this new world. Why on earth aren't we teaching kids what to do in the event of the bird flu epidemic, the N5 virus? Why isn't that a question on the SAT? How do you protect yourself in the event of a smallpox outbreak?

In the 1960s, we had a culture of preparedness. Why did we have it? I'm asking *you* the question.

GMJ: *The threat of nuclear war?*

Gen. Honoré: Right. Because we were worried about mutual destruction between us and the Soviet Union. What did the 1960s look like? We had bomb shelters. The United States had three years' supply of butter -- in the event the Soviets popped a nuke off in California or out in Wisconsin and radiated all the cows -- and other food stocks stored. Then the Soviet Union went away. Then Congress said, "Why are we spending ten million dollars a year storing butter?" We stopped looking at the nation from a survival standpoint because we were no longer worried about mutual destruction with the Soviet Union. We become enamored with economy,

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with saving money, and we adapted a culture based on the automobile industry. But we took that as our model for government.

And we said, "We can outsource things." The cry for outsourcing hit our local and state and federal governments, so we could save money and do it cheaper. Guess what cheaper has bought us? We stopped storing that ten million dollars a year worth of butter, that three-year supply of food, because we're cheaper, better, quicker, and we're going to rely on the supply chain. That permeates the federal government but also state and local government, where we got into this enormous outsourcing of things, like EMT services. And by and large it works -- until the supply chain gets disrupted.

GMJ: *And that's your point. Inevitably, the supply chain will be disrupted.*

Gen. Honoré: Absolutely. In a crisis, you can't get what you need to survive. And there will always be a crisis, whether it's a hurricane or an attack. You can be assured that there will be a disaster. Whether or not you survive it depends on whether or not you're prepared.

-- *Interviewed by Jennifer Robison*

In Case of An Emergency

The ongoing threat of terrorist attacks and the reality of increasingly turbulent weather makes it mandatory for organizations everywhere to be vigilant and prepared. Here are General Russel Honoré's recommendations for readying your workplace for an emergency:

- > Have a plan that covers a full spectrum of natural and man-made disasters, including tornadoes, earthquakes, and terrorist attacks.
- > Determine where everyone in the office would be safest if the building is in danger. This might be in an adjacent building or even an underground parking garage. Rehearse evacuation annually.
- > Have an emergency kit ready for every worker, all the time. The Red Cross has recommended inventory and can provide kits as well.

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- > Be informed. Keep a weather radio during storm seasons, and assign one person to monitor it.
- > Find out who is trained in first aid – there won't be enough first responders during a widespread emergency. Many organizations pay volunteers to train; this is especially common in Great Britain. Check with local and state governments to see if your liability is covered by a Good Samaritan law.
- > Make a policy decision – now, and before an emergency adds thinking – about sending people home before storms hit and whether they'll be paid for their time off. The US Army does both, and some states have legislated it.
- > Have generators that can provide heating and air conditioning for 24 hours. If the power goes out, people may be trapped for that long, and some won't survive intense heat or cold.
- > Offer a "preparedness" day for employees and their families. Show them what to keep in an emergency kit, how to escape a dangerous building or find a safe place in it, and basic first aid. Detail evacuation strategies for the city if your state or local governments have them.
- > Consider buying a defibrillator. The companies that sell them train users. It takes about an hour to learn – and defibrillators save lives.