
Jessica Yellin x LTG Honoré

Video Interview Transcript

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Transcript

YELLIN:

I have the distinct privilege of talking to General Russel Honoré now. Your formal title was Commander of Joint Task Force Katrina. I have to say, Sir, it is such a great honor to be able to talk to you. I covered the White House during Katrina. There was so much uncertainty and anxiety at the time and when you were named to take charge, you gave the nation a sense of relief and confidence because there was such leadership. So thank you for what you did then. And thanks for talking to me.

LTG HONORÉ:

Well, it's good to be here with you.

YELLIN:

I'd like to start by simply asking, if you were in charge of overseeing COVID response for the United States of America, what would you do?

LTG HONORÉ:

Let's start from the bottom up. I would make sure everybody understands what our mission is: it's to save lives. That's number one priority. It's not the fricking economy. It's saving lives. That'll come later. Saving lives is number one.

Number two: I would make sure I'm giving accurate updates to the American people. We have all this technology. We can track every phone number in America, but we can't tell a county hospital or governor when the truck is coming with the PPE. I would get people to tell them what's coming and when it's coming and where it's going. We've got the ability to do that. So keeping people informed would be key.

I would re-institute the truth in the process. Not what you think people want to hear but tell it to them as it is, because you're getting mixed messages that this is working, that's working, our number of testing is better than anybody else, we have this great airbridge set up. All of those are partial truths. I mean, they do sound well because it causes people to do different things.

I can see since Monday when the White House said "Hey, it's turning," based on what they heard from Governor Cuomo and California settled, Washington State settled... that next day, I saw more cars on the road and I'm in Baton Rouge, and every subsequent day I've seen more cars on the road. But that's the headline. That's what people remember because you're telling them what they want to hear. You're telling them the way it was, as opposed to telling them the new normal. That even once we get past the rough spot, it's never going to be like it was for a long time and we will get out of this not based strictly on numbers. This would be conditions-based.

YELLIN:

Say more about that.



LTG HONORÉ:

Well we will have to establish some conditions. Before you can have a restaurant with over 50% of the people in it, there'd have to be a case of over 30 days of any outbreaks, any positives, in that city. Once a positive is identified, then that positive is tracked, by phone number or something to make sure that they're quarantined. If the positive is really sick, we'll take him to the hospital before we have to go get him. So we isolate them so they don't go back home and say, shelter at home. And stay away from everybody. No, we're going to take control of you and we're going to quarantine you. Those conditions have to be met before we go back to basketball games, football games, and full restaurants. That's condition-based, as opposed to a date or based on, "I'm feeling good about this." It's based on conditions.

Those are the things that I would do, to answer your question, and then I would basically turn the logistics of distribution over to the Department of Defense, not FEMA, but the Department of Defense, to handle the movement thereof of the logistics.

YELLIN:

So, let's dig into that a little more. States are currently competing with one another to purchase PPE and ventilators on the private market. Does it have to be that way? And how would it be different if it were run by DOD?

LTG HONORÉ:

It's that we would take control of all stock, based on the Defense Production Act, we would basically seize it inbound and send it where it needs to go. Right now, they're kind of doing that, but they're giving half of the stocks to distributors, private companies...so that private companies can make money. And the way they're making money is they're selling it to the highest bidder. It might be the state of Louisiana who promised them \$5 for a mask and FEMA might have promised them \$5.25, so they'll sell it back to FEMA.

So they're trying to include the private, but there are only a handful of companies getting this. It's not some liberal guy in a French Quarter suite getting these jobs. These are people who know people by name in the administration who get these sweet deals. It's called disaster capitalism, and it happens after every disaster. So when I say the Defense Department take it over, I mean FEMA with their organization, could continue to order it, but once they make that decision, then the Defense Department would distribute it.

The other thing I would do is I would direct every governor—you must have a liaison team at every hospital, and it could be three to five National Guard soldiers in every hospital in the country, to inventory all of the PPE and ventilators. And we will give them a formula. If it's a 100-bed hospital with three doctors and 50 nurses and 50 hospital staff, then that might come up to 400 sets of PPE a day. That would be identified as a one day supply for that hospital, 100-bed hospital. Then we would do that for every hospital in the country, so when they report to their governor, what they have, that 100-bed hospital said: we've got ten days supply on hand. Then the governor would have the authority, "You're a 100 bed-hospital—you've got 10 days supply; 40 miles from you, there's a 100-bed hospital, and they only have one day supply, so I'm directing you to

send 3 days supply to the one with 1 day supply. Then we'll backfill you or send you your money for what you sent. We'll do the accounting."

That's not happening now because we've never determined what stocks were on hand and where they were. The system responds more to television interviews than it does from the normal network of logisticians sending your request in. The way you get the hospital now, you go on television now and say you need it, not because you put a requisition in through the state, through the FEMA region, to FEMA headquarters. What you get is you go on television and say I need another 1000-bed hospital.

YELLIN:

To put a point on that, Sir, you're saying that for governors to get what they need in their states, it's not to follow process, but to get media exposure and that's the way to get the White House's attention right now. Right?

LTG Honoré:

Right. Go on television. Either get angry and say something bad or be smart or say something good, and you get it to the hospital that day and that's bullshit. I mean, we shouldn't be operating the government that way. That's broke, that's not sustainable and it's what you call playing politics. If you're nice to me, you'll get it the next day. If you see something bad, then you know... it'll work out. We'll get to you when we get to you.

And that's not right because that could translate into more hospital workers getting infected because they didn't have the proper gear. You know, all last week, everyone we talked to as far as doctors and nurses were all reusing PPE. I don't know if that story is going away or the press is not reporting on it because the White House has said, "We got this fixed." I would say if their governor is on television, they have a better chance to have what they need. If they're not, that's a different story.

So I would fix that. And then, I would always make sure at the beginning of the national press conference that we show a little bit more empathy when we say 10,000 people dead. I just can't accept that as a way to reach out to the American people.

YELLIN:

Have any governors or has the White House reached out to you for advice on this?

LTG HONORÉ:

No, but I tweet a lot. And you know what? I see my words coming back. They don't acknowledge, "Well I got this from General Honoré," but I see my words being used... For example: days of supply. You know the example I gave you about days of supply? I've seen that one come back several times in the last few days, to figure out the days of supply as opposed to 3000 gloves, 3000 suits and 3000 shields. Okay, we'll get that to you, but how long is that going to last you? So you've got to have a factor based on the number of beds. This only goes back to the history of United States Army.

YELLIN:



This is what the Army is expert at, yes?

LTG HONORÉ:

And we did it to win the war against the British and we fought two World Wars based on a common understanding of that doctrine. So if you got a formation, your boss knows what a day of supply is for you for your formation. That's why we got to have it fed up through the system. So, hopefully on the other side of this disaster, you will be able to open a website and see how many days of supply every hospital has. And if you want them to maintain the same level, then we've got to figure out who's going to fund it. And then we want so many days of supply in the national stockpile, and then who's going to fund it.

The other thing I would clear up with the American people is the notion that the national stockpile doesn't belong to that states.

YELLIN:

What is the stockpile? What purpose does it serve?

LTG HONORÉ:

It was primarily focused on medical. For everything from [?] to epidemics or pandemics, because for years we've been knowing, going back to 1918 that there were certain things we'd need to have. It wasn't formalized over the years until a hundred years ago where we had the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 influenza. It includes medicines, vaccine, serums. And one of them is something you give to keep people from getting it. You get your flu shot. You get your Polio vaccine when it was still active. And then, things called serums that you get to treat you if you did get it... a lot of the medicines in the stockpile are actually virtual, meaning we have so many million dosage, but we have clients and companies standing by that in a matter of hours, they can start producing and start shipping.

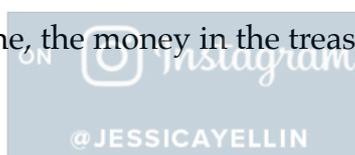
The other thing in the national stockpile is PPE, as well as hospitals. Those hospitals you saw getting put up, some of those came out of national stockpile. The ones that you saw the military putting up, the unit out of Fort Campbell, Fort Hood, those are actually deployable units. So you've got the active duty military bringing the hospitals with them, and then you've got the ones come out of stockpile, like what went into the Javits Center and those come without doctors. So you have to ask the federal government for doctors to put in those hospitals and then you've got the issue with the [?].

YELLIN:

Who does the stockpile belong to? Is it there for the states?

LTG HONORÉ:

If I asked you, who does the, the money in the treasury belong to, how would you answer that?



YELLIN:

The American people.

LTG HONORÉ:

Right. It's the same thing. It's controlled through the executive branch to HHS and CDC. They're responsible for maintaining it, which means it has to be in the budget. So if people want to know if it was properly stocked or if it was properly managed, well you could just go to see how much money we put into the national stockpile over the last few years. And then there were reports of some things coming out in national stockpile that had expired and that happens. But it happens through poor management, in that somebody hadn't rotated it, because we take things out of national stockpile and how we take things out of war stocks in VLA. For instance, if there was an outbreak, you know, we had the Ebola thing hit in Africa, well they going to need PPE. The PPE we would send is the closest, not expired, but the closest to expire. So you consume it and then you restock the national stockpile. You with me? That's how we maintain our products where they're not expired, is that we use them when opportunities come for us to send them to a place that needs them.

YELLIN:

So there's some mismanagement there too. Is it too late to create a command structure to respond to COVID?

LTG HONORÉ:

Well, as long as I'm hearing doctors and nurses not having what they need, I say yes, we need to change. It wasn't until yesterday, I did an interview two days ago and I said, where are the numbers? We go to a White House briefing and there's no numbers.

YELLIN:

What kind of numbers?

LTG HONORÉ:

We've got a lot of airplanes coming in. We've got millions of masks. Wait a minute. For thousands of years we've been figuring out how to count, so we ought to be specific enough to say there's 10 airplanes inbound, this is the tail numbers, this is where they are, and this is the bill of lading of what's on them.

It's time that the doctors and nurses have confidence something is coming, you asked me do they listen to me? They listen, because I did that two nights ago, three nights ago in an interview. And yesterday the words come in from the White House were that "We want to report these numbers 'cause we want the doctors and nurses to have confidence," so they listen. I beat the hell out of 'em, and you could go back and see some of those interviews on the MSNBC of recent and Fox News.

But those messages we've been saying for three weeks now, same thing, you got to have the supply. You've got to get logistics fixed. If you don't have the logistics fixed, you

won't get the test kits where you need them. If you don't get the logistics fixed, you won't get the PPE where you need it, when you need it. And that continues to be an issue with the message coming saying, "Well, you know, we didn't have this until, you know, the systems we inherited were not built." And there's a sliver of truth to that. The CDC, as good as they are—and I can go back to SARS and the attacks of anthrax—dealing with the CDC was like dealing with a last century bureaucracy.

For months, if we had an anthrax scare, we'd have to put it on an airplane and send it to the CDC so they could test it. How stupid was that? The same thing with SARS. All the tests had to go back to Atlanta because the big-brained people wanted to handle this and they really wanted to tear the thing apart. Well, you know what, we've got equally qualified doctors in every state.

If you want to do the advance study, in one day, the CDC did eight swab tests in one day.

YELLIN:

For the nation? During COVID? That's unbelievable. Before they decentralized the effort. May I ask, who would you have oversee the testing effort, both the COVID test and the antibody test? Would you have DOD do that as well?

LTG HONORÉ:

I think that should stay inside the CDC and HHS.

YELLIN:

But in terms of getting it out to the country and the logistics?

LTG HONORÉ:

Oh yeah, the logistics of distributing it, yes. We want to do that through the military because we've got a need for speed and we know how to make shit happen, and we don't work eight hours a day. We're a 24-hour a day operation and we know how to do this globally around the world.

Who do you want handling this? FEMA? Who has not finished the houses in Puerto Rico. Houses not rebuilt in Puerto Rico. FEMA? The houses in St Croix and Virgin Islands are not rebuilt. The houses in Houston, not rebuilt. Or do you want the organization that can fly aircrafts around the world and pick out a vehicle and either look at it or blow it up? Which organization do you want, what level of precision do you want running this?

YELLIN:

US Army precision!

LTG HONORÉ:

And that's what we do, globally. You with me?

YELLIN:



So why isn't DOD running it now?

LTG HONORÉ:

We could tell when the jet left China. Why? Because we are looking at the airports, you with me? And we could tell did that jet stopped someplace and kicked some stuff out the door. Or we could use our jets, 'cause we got jets! As opposed to hiring jets from White House friends, called UPS and FedEx, because that's friends of the White House. Now, it's good for them to use those commercial jets because they keep their people working. But we are going to pay the airlines, anyhow, so it doesn't matter. So that's why I would put the military in charge of the distribution.

YELLIN:

Why do you think the military is not currently in charge?

LTG HONORÉ:

Because we are playing a silent role in the background. I think since Katrina it has been an attitude at FEMA, "Never another Katrina, where a general will come in and take charge."

YELLIN:

It's competition among branches?

LTG Honoré:

And it's unwarranted competition. I went to New Orleans, the FEMA guy went to Baton Rouge. He wanted me to come sit with him in Baton Rouge, and I said, "Well no, the people in New Orleans are under water; if I go sit in Baton Rouge, I'll be as blind as you. I've got to be in New Orleans." So in five days, he was sent back to Washington. So that's the difference between, if FEMA is not organized... they'll tell you they're not a 911 force. And I keep telling them, stop trying to act like one. 'Cause remember when Hurricane Harvey happened? Those houses have not been replaced yet, or repaired. The poor people's houses...the rich people's houses have, because they had insurance. You remember how long ago Hurricane Maria was? Houses in Puerto Rico have not been rebuilt because FEMA has not released the money.

YELLIN:

Sir, may I ask you a different question because you are in Louisiana and one of the hard truths of COVID in America is right now it's having a disproportionate impact on African Americans and communities of color. Do you have any thing to say about that? And do you have any concern that this is not a bigger story or getting more attention in the media?

LTG HONORÉ:



Well, that story is starting to pick up some steam. And I'm proud to say Louisiana is reporting the demographics by race. But I think what we've seen is, this has kind of been happening for 400 years since our people, my ancestors and others put their foot on this ground. There's been a disparity in healthcare and it continues because the majority of our people or African Americans live in the industrial area of town. Normally the hospitals are not there. And they do the last-to-hire and the first-to-fire work. You know, they cleaned up the hotels. Or if you are a hotel person, and there's been a big party in town, then you go clean that room. You drive the buses. They cleaned up in the kitchen, they clean up the tables in the restaurants in New Orleans.

And where they live, and it's shown, they live in the most polluted areas. You don't find mega mansions next to chemical plants, but in St Charles and St John Parish, you will find subdivisions on the fence line of a chemical plant. You're more likely to find poor people of color living near the plants that burn coal. So that disparity that started off, without retelling American history, where we are now continues, but it's in a different category. And for those people who have economically grown out of that category—you deliver an economically based, you know, health care. I've got two healthcare systems: I've got Medicare and I've got TriCare, because I'm retired from the Army. I've got friends who worked in the trades and some of them are not old enough to retire. Some of them are in the donut hole — retired from a job but they can't get Medicare yet and they're paying out of the gazoo, or they couldn't afford it, and they don't have Medicare, medical insurance. So that disparity continues. Then there's American media has become comfortable with the idea, that of the Louisiana legislature as well, it's not really the pollution that's making y'all sick. It's that y'all eat fried chicken and neck bones.

YELLIN:

So blaming them, rather than our structural system.

LTG HONORÉ:

Right. And that becomes a talking point in the chemical association. It's really not that ethylene oxide that's making you sick or the chloroprene or the benzene. It's your diet.

YELLIN:

So you think that in New Orleans, in Louisiana, there's a problem of underlying lung conditions that come from exposure to these chemicals that make communities of color, low income communities that live near the chemical plants, more susceptible to a bad outcome of COVID because they have this underlying condition?

LTG Honoré:

Yeah, there was a good piece done, Jessica, a few years ago. I think it was in Newsweek; I can send to you. Or, you can look it up. It's 'Your zip code did determine how long you live.' You go by state and see where you live, and the zip code can affect your life expectancy. You throw something like COVID in there and it multiplies the

impact. Then you have the disparities in access to hospitals, access to clinics, access to healthcare.

There's one home in a place called Saint Charles Parish, in a little village called St. Rose. If you looked up St. Rose on the map, you'll see it has two chemical plants right next to it. One of those homes in St. Rose, the grandma, the daughter, and the granddaughter all have asthma. In one house. And a lot of us believe because of HgS, the hydrogen sulfide, that was released from that plant right next to that subdivision where they live because literally it is no space.

In Louisiana, you can have an oil well 500 feet from somebody's front door, courtesy of the Louisiana legislature. Now when you, or a plant as in this case, that is releasing chemicals. But we don't have the luxury of academics and data on our side because the chemical industry and oil and gas industry give money to universities that sponsor this type of research and the government is not going to do this research because they wouldn't admit that they are part of the problem.

So the research is normally done by professors and students. And then if they do come up a report, then it's smothered because the oil giants will build a building or give a great grant to the universities that can do that work. So unless we have a media or outside nonprofit come in and do your research, it's commonly accepted that the reason those people are sick you is because this slogan "eat chicken" and "eat fatty foods." I've heard the legislature say that when we were trying to get air monitors for that same area, St. Rose.

YELLIN:

When we started talking, you really emphasized the importance of honest communication. I wonder if you'd address for us, why is that so vital from the White House, and if you were speaking to President Trump today, what advice would you give him?

LTG HONORÉ:

[Holds up paper]

YELLIN:

[laughs] Leadership during disaster! What does it say?

LTG HONORÉ:

Can you read it?

YELLIN:

I can't read all of it.

LTG HONORÉ:



I'll send it to you. Yeah, it's got nineteen points on it and most of them, a lot of people see it "Well, is that common sense?" But when I show it to people now, they say, "Well damn, they should have used this."

The relativeness of the truth is big deal.

I like the idea of the second point— Let the military handle it— because by and large, we will achieve the political objective, but we are not political. It would be like the, the rift we had with Patton when he wanted to go into Russia, okay? After the defeat of Russia, let's go beat the Russians now. Well, political Truman didn't like that, you know, I mean, that didn't go well with Roosevelt in World War II. Equivalent, MacArthur, in the Korean War, MacArthur was 72 years old. Same age as I am now. He said, "We got them across the yellow. Let's keep going." Can we smash the Chinese? Well, we didn't do that and he got fired by Truman.

So, we do things based on a mission, not based on politics. And then many people said, well thank God, you know, we had Roosevelt that controlled Patton's army and we had Truman that controlled MacArthur in the Korean War. But in the essence, when we look back, because we did not keep the Soviet Union, what became the Russians, from domination of Eastern Europe for what, 60 years, 70 years. They went from Russia to the Soviet Union. Look how many billions of dollars we spent and lives lost because the commander, the military people looked at this as a mission and not through the lens of politics. And I know at the end of World War II, a lot of people were ready to just let it go. And same thing at the end of the Korean War.

But if we look in retrospect, it's kind of like two weeks ago, in the morning, Governor Cuomo said "I want to talk to the Federal Government about the Corps of Engineers. I want the Corps of Engineers." So I was on a couple of hours later, I think with Chris Cuomo, and I looked in the television set and said, "If the governor wants the Corps of Engineers, they're located in Federal Park in New York. I can give him the six digit address, but all he has to do is tell somebody to have the Corps of Engineers come see him. That next morning, guess who was at his headquarters? The Corps of Engineers General for Washington, D C. Hello!

YELLIN:

So why is raw honesty so vital from the White House, from our leadership, in a time like this, even if it's a painful truth that they'd have to share?

LTG HONORÉ:

Because a disaster, by its nature, defeats you. And there's a lot of people who don't understand that. That's why it's called disaster. In the first half of a disaster, you're going to lose the game, and everybody needs to understand that. You know, there's still people arguing about Katrina, "Well the levees weren't high enough." Well, you know what? All y'all was living down there; you didn't say a damn thing about how high the levee was. The storm came in and it defeated us, right? The city flooded and it became a disaster. If the city didn't flood, it would have been an inconvenience. You with me? But the levees broke and it's a disaster.

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You're going to lose, just like we lost on 9/11, and we lost on Pearl Harbor. That day we lost, and this virus... some will say, well, you know General, it didn't have to be that way, but right now we are losing. But for us to win we cannot, at this point, like driving a bus out of a ditch, look through the rear view mirror to get out the damn ditch. We need to look forward and get out of this and now is the time for us to look forward to see how we can, from defending against this disease, go on the offense. Because again, the nature of a disaster... We'll have people say, well, our leader was not effective. You're right. They weren't, but we're going to win the next hand.

If you looked at it as from a sports game: we are very disappointed in the first half when our team's losing, but the real fans have a faith that that the score is 15-45, that was just the first half...in the next half, we can score that plus. That's where we've got to be as Americans. At this point in time, we've got to admit the fact that we were defeated. Why we were defeated was a surprise because the levee broke. Why we were defeated in this case was political. There were plenty of people in Washington that knew, there was an entire news channel dedicated to calling it a hoax when we already had people sick and dying. They still call it a hoax. He called it an instrument of the opposition party and we had the White House calling it a hoax, even out in those campaign speeches. So it wasn't a surprise in that sense, but in the same way as in any disaster, to be called the disaster is that the disaster wins the first half. The disaster has come and has won the first half. Now, your true measure of the administration is how we handle the second half.

And I see glimmers of hope when I see the next day that the Corps of Engineers, the General flew Washington to New York, and that night he starts putting up hospitals. That's why I tell you, that's the power of the military. And we've lost the first half; how we gonna win the second half? Don't give mission assignments to DOD. Give them the mission to manage the logistics, and what does FEMA do?— they keep the books, because that's what they're supposed to be good at. But remember, FEMA has not released the money to rebuild the houses in Puerto Rico. We're going on three years. They have not released the money to repair houses in the Virgin Islands. They have not released the money to build the houses in Houston. Hello!

YELLIN:

I want to ask for one other assignment, Sir, because when you came in to take over the effort in Katrina, you didn't just manage the logistics, the process, the response, but you also gave Americans hope at a time when we didn't have hope. So what would you say to regular Americans right now who don't feel hope?

LTG HONORÉ:

Well, it's that in a democracy we've got a history of always doing the right thing late. And I think the best of this country is yet to come. And it might take until November to turn around the root causes of what's put us in this position. But regardless of what we see in the rear view mirror, this is a disaster and in a disaster we lose up front. Need to keep that in mind.



A hundred years ago we had World War I. We shipped soldiers from Kansas known to be infected with the Spanish Flu. We put them on ships. Some of them died before they got to Europe and the White House denied the press to speak about it. They passed a law that nobody would speak about it, because the White House was concerned about winning World War I and keeping the economy strong. It never stopped.

Philadelphia— everybody was told, “Wear a mask! Stay inside!” Philadelphia decided to have a parade. You can go back and look at history and the number of people that died because they exposed them. So we could go back to the lessons of a hundred years ago in 1918 and compare it to where we are today— there are a lot of similarities, and the last thing we want to do is repeat the mistakes of history.

But again, we've got to understand, Americans— every now and then, as we saw in Katrina, it won't be an instant solution. After six weeks, I was able to leave Katrina, but it took 10 years to rebuild, okay? So this is not going to happen quick, because we've got every state in the union. I visualize we will not get control of this until taking the test to see if you're positive will be like brushing your teeth in the morning. That's where we need to drive technology.

So, as opposed to going to work, you call your doctor, you have a nice hotel room, so you separate from your family. Do the test, keep you isolated for 14 days or maybe we figure out a shorter time to do that. But that's how we're going to get it. And then we've got to have a serum to give people. Once you get it it'll be like going in to get a shot for a sore throat. That's where we have to go; that's where we have to stretch technology.

Because of they crazy way that this virus transmits itself, which I'm not quite sure we understand, and we'll have to get a good understanding of that. That's why I think we need to change in government in November, because we can't spend another four years telling people we did a great job during the influenza. We need to reset the government. We need to reset FEMA. We need to reset this national stockpile and who commands it, and at what point in time does the president look to...we put more money than anything else in this organization called the United States military. That right now your main job is to save America. 'Cause in the Constitution, you know what's in the Constitution? The purpose of the United States military? Is to secure the American people. That's our number one mission. It doesn't say shit about Europe or Afghanistan or Iraq. It says to secure American people. So you want to jackass leading this or a racehorse? Both of them have a purpose. One can go up a hills slowly and can walk all day. This one can go up fast and to save lives needs speed, and that's what the thoroughbred brings you.

YELLIN:

General, I cannot thank you enough. This is one of the most special interviews I've ever had the privilege of doing. You are just an embodiment of the best of America.

