

August 24, 2009

Book Report
“Survival”—Lt. Gen. Russell L. Honoré

Who is the author?

Early days...

The book dedication includes acknowledgement of his wife, Beverly, contribution to help him understand, “...I need to let other people do their jobs and not try to do those jobs for them.”

1. The book surrounds Gen. Honoré’s role in Hurricane Katrina when it hit New Orleans on August 28th, 2005. And the goal of the book surrounds a need to increase emergency preparedness when it comes to weather events.
2. Mother’s name—Eudell St. Amant Honoré
Father’s name—Lloyd “Chief” Honoré
12 Children in the family. Russell was 8th child...and 8th consecutive boy.
Born at home in Lakeland, Louisiana Sept. 4, 1947.
Father was a farmer...grew cotton / sugarcane...and raised cows for milk...pigs / chickens and a vegetable garden to help feed the family.

Father was a natural mediator / negotiator...and storyteller. Family “stories” were a big part of their culture.

Oldest brother, John—master brick mason
Clarence—Master carpenter
Marshal—farmer
Tony—Carpenter
Lloyd Jr.—electrician
James—VP postproduction Sony/Columbia TrisStar Studios
Jude- electrician
Alvin—electrician
Mary Joy—Healthcare industry
Loretta / Lorraine (twins)—Healthcare industry

Wow....quite a family.

Hobby—gardening.
Mantra- “Always look at the bright side”

3. When growing up it was an era of self-sufficiency. People expected to fend for themselves and prepare themselves and their families for disasters, natural or man-made.
4. When you are poor you learn how to innovate to survive.

5. His family is “Creole”. This is a racial mixture of French, African, Spanish and Native American. For many years they were considered neither “black” nor “white”. Honoré’s family was of “mixed blood” and therefore considered “colored or black”. His brand came through the port of New Orleans by way of the West Indies and ended up in the Pointe Coupee Parish. “White” Creole’s were considered a mixture of Spanish & French. There were two distinct ‘groups’ within the Creole community.
6. At least 3 members of the Honoré family fought as “free men of color” in the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 to fight the British in their efforts to capture the City.
7. There is a difference between being “educated” and “wise”. Lloyd Honoré was considered incredibly wise even though he didn’t have a great deal of formal education.
8. In building structures in this part of Louisiana they “planned for the worst and built for the worst”.
9. At age 12, Russell Honoré had a defining moment in time. He was hired by a nearby dairy farmer to work for him. This fellow was creative and innovative. He ran a good operation that was best in class in the region. Honoré worked right through into college for this farmer. He learned all about hard work and doing everything to a precise standard. There was a direct connection between the time and effort you put in and the results you would eventually get back.

Teamwork was also a big part of young Honoré’s learning curve. You don’t necessarily have to like everyone you are put together with but when you are given a job to do you have to learn to work together as a team.

10. Some of Russell Honoré’s youth were trips where he was exposed to segregation in the southern USA.
11. He was the first member of his family to attend college. Financing was a continuous issue with a series of loans and part-time jobs involved along the way. Jobs included a car wash / diner / and Reserve Officer Training Corps.
12. His initial thought was to be a dairy farmer and not to enter the army. But as he neared graduation it was either be subject to the draft or go to ROTC. By going the ROTC route he got a draft exemption that would allow him to finish college. He followed into the army for the next 37-years.
13. A key lesson he learned at ROTC—no one was going to outwork him. He knew he was never going to be the brightest guy around BUT he wasn’t going to be outworked! He wanted to earn the right to lead while others were content to follow.

(I wonder whether or not the respect he saw others giving his father, “Chief”, while growing up had an impact on him in pushing for the respect of leadership?)

14. Another fundamental lesson he learned from ROTC was that if you expected to become a leader...you HAD to become a “teacher”. The concept of leadership is teaching. Great leaders teach their ideas and get people to follow them.

The army

1. His career started in 1971...the same year he got married.
2. His initial officer training was at Fort Benning. There was a mixture of lieutenants commissioned out of college and West Point graduates who had already spent 4-years in a military-type environment.
3. Russell Honoré was very honest in this book on revealing a shortcoming he had with the skill of "writing". He simply did not have a strong early foundation to build upon. His oral communications skills were excellent...but clearly he wished he could express himself in writing beyond just "getting by". This issue popped up several times in his career.
4. He always felt that he 'connected' with the enlisted soldiers who like him, had grown up poor and disadvantaged educationally. He spoke their language –blunt, straightforward...clear!
5. Learning how to be "proactive" was also a large feature of his early learning curve. The military tends to look ahead. It tries to find solutions to problems that it believes it will face.
6. Doing "worst case scenario planning" is important to do. In a true disaster nothing works! No telephones / computers / communications...the infrastructure is gone. A true disaster wrecks everything. Disaster preparedness rarely takes it to the extreme that can happen.
7. Honoré took a 22-week course on Organizational Effectiveness which left a lasting impression on him.

A good part of the course was querying how well the officers were "listening" to their front line troops. Were the officers meeting the expectations of the troops?

The army tried to use this course to turn them into the direction that the private sector was going....and they learned that they could NOT run themselves like this and the project was abandoned. BUT, young officer Honoré did learn how to engage asking open ended questions and leading questions to gather information from people who might be reluctant to open up. He also learned how to 'sell' his ideas to people using "earthy" language.

8. At age 35, he began to discover the skills he had as a "trainer" and as a "leader of soldiers". It was around this time he was required to write "tactics examinations". He failed the exam twice as a result of misspelled words. He recognized he had no one to blame but himself. He focused on improving his writing skills and passed the examination. Three years later he was the "tactics instructor" at the Command and General Staff College.
9. When he first had exposure to media training it was in the early 1980's when the media was not as pervasive as they are today. Several fundamental rules came

from this early training:

1. No matter what question is asked of you respond with the most important thing you want to get across in the interview.
2. When the second question is asked respond with the second most important thing you want to get across.
3. Rule three—same thing.

Bottom line...no matter what question you are being asked get out the most important things YOU need to get out in the interview. Decide beforehand what those 3 key things are you wish to get out. Get the message you wish to get out regardless of the questions.

10. At age 49, he became a 1-star General. He entered a selective group in being promoted. It was a long way from rural Louisiana. Hard work was the foundation of his achievements. Less than ½ of 1% makes the 'general' grade.

Being selected by the army for promotion is made in part by past efforts but it is also based upon potential and the army's future needs.

11. Units that Honoré led were known for "readiness and performance". He was known for his street smarts and ability to motivate people. The foundation of this for him....was speaking your mind
12. General Honoré also served time leading the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea. He had constant issues finding resources to accomplish his goals. He was left with a lasting lesson relating to media and the leadership. In June 2002, two young Korean girls were killed when hit by a USA armored vehicle in a tragic accident. General Honoré put his media officer in front of the press but he learned the hard way that this was NOT part of the Korean culture. If you or someone you are responsible for does something wrong you should profusely apologize. Honoré's press officer was in an "explaining mode" not an "apologizing mode". That sent the wrong message to the Korean people.

In any crisis the leader should be out in front speaking. He should explain from the heart...not from a printed statement. The leader should be explaining what he knows...not how he feels or thinks.

13. His last command was leading the First Army. They were stationed in Georgia. It is a HQ unit with a few hundred staff. The commander was a general without soldiers. When they needed soldiers for a mission then Forces Command would go searching for staff. Their primary role when Honoré took over was training all Army National Guard and Reserve forces east of the Mississippi River. Given they were training resources for Iraq or Afghanistan he brought into a level of "preparedness" to the soldiers daily training activities. At its peak months they had as many as 19-21,000 soldiers in camps.
14. The First Army's slogan—"See first. Understand first. Act first." Simple, easy to remember...

Hurricane Katrina

1. For 6-weeks after the Katrina hit General Honoré was the commander of Joint Task Force-Katrina. He was the officer on the ground of all active-duty military forces sent to Louisiana and Mississippi to:
 - a) Save lives
 - b) Facilitate evacuations of at-risk civilians
 - c) Provide an environment in which civil control is restored so recovery and rebuilding efforts could begin within the damage areas.
2. General Honoré's entire career prepared him for this unique role he found himself in. His reputation and relationship building with many different agencies were critical to him in doing what he had to do.
3. His style involved:
 - a) Straight-talking
 - b) Forceful guidance
 - c) Focus on moving forward and getting things done rather than trying to figure out who to blame.
4. Katrina did expose the inability of the 'poor' and 'elderly' to prepare for a weather event. They simply can't afford to make the necessary preparations. It's simply part of the human condition of our society that people are busy daily with so many other things than preparing for a potential disaster. Until they become a victim or know someone who is it is an abstract thought that does not attract any 'action'. Therefore, this pushes the focus towards the government filling in this void.

Growing up poor meant you didn't have money. The poor learn to have patience. They learn how to wait. They learn how to do without. These dynamics were all at play in this event.

5. When the levies broke and massive flooding took place many people in New Orleans headed to the safety of the 'Superdome'. Thousands were packed into this structure. Many were poor and African-Americans. They did not have vehicles to drive out of town and escape the storm like the 80% of the population base that did so. The Superdome became home to upward of 16-17,000 people and with part of the roof breached...power knocked out...which killed lighting & toilets...this became quite a situation to try and manage. These people were surrounded by water and jammed together. There was no place to go.
6. The first meeting with the City Mayor revealed his prime focus to be on evacuating the Silverdome. His view was that they could use the 300 helicopters to begin this task. His own calculations were that this task would take 30 hours.

But, these helicopters were heavily involved already in "search and rescue".
And...did the 'numbers' make sense on evacuating this number of people?
And...where do you take the people as there was no nearby place to take anyone?

So, General Honoré's view was that the Silverdome evacuation was not the key priority but rather this resource needed to be focused on saving people.

7. A "Response Plan" is just that...it is NOT a preparedness plan!
8. Anyone responding to this kind of an event must be bringing with them a strong dose of "empathy" for the victims. These people had lost lives / homes and had just survived a major event. They haven't done anything wrong. Helplessness / despair were everywhere. The storm had broken their morale. They were willing to wait for the "system" to help them... but the system was very slow to get working for them.
9. One early issue was the communication vacuum within the area. People had no idea what was going on ...on the ground. BUT media resources used their ability to get on the ground and inform the world what was going on BUT didn't use any of their abilities to provide information to the locals.
10. To create the right level of preparedness this is going to require a cultural shift from governments, businesses, and educational system... and from individuals.
11. There comes a time when people who are poor enough and hungry enough will do whatever it takes to survive. If this means breaking into a store to get food when in a disaster zone then they will do it because, "they need to eat". People will do what they have to do to survive until help arrives.
12. A plan rarely survives first contact with the enemy.
A plan is basically good intentions.

The key question is NOT, "Do you have a plan?"
The question is, "Are you executing on that plan?"
"Can you take the plan and adapt it to the real on the ground situation?"
13. In New Orleans some people said the plan failed. That wasn't the case. It was rather that the plan was NOT designed to work in the environment that was created by the storm. The conditions were different.
14. Creating a "culture of preparedness" means looking down the road and anticipating what may happen and then being willing to spend the money to make the necessary preparations.
15. People in the Gulf of Mexico states track the eye of the hurricane. When they see where the eye might hit then they begin moving out of the area. Evacuation is easy for those with cars and money. But when the storm hits in the last week of the month when welfare money may be running low this hurts the ability to evacuate. Most people don't have a preparedness kit of "storm money".
16. If you get into mandatory evacuation who does this apply to? Transit workers who drive buses? Telephone / cable workers? Public servants? Who should go and who should stay?

17. Managing a crisis can be impacted by legacy issues including friction that existed between federal, state and local factions within government agencies.
18. It was the storm surge that caused a massive amount of the damage. It hit the levees and water not only went over the top but it undermined the foundation in several places. It was like punch a hole in the bottom of a bathtub and the water runs out.
19. It is difficult to get some people in a disaster like this to take the initiative and take action without someone issuing an order. Too much waiting around for someone to approve activity. Don't wait for someone else to make decisions.
20. In wartime conditions it's not advisable to having a general out front because he has to be in a position to command and control broad areas on the battlefield. Katrina was PERMISSIVE environment. They were dealing with US citizens not enemy soldiers. This was a constant theme in the book...to remind themselves as the army they were not dealing with an enemy trying to kill them but rather citizens sitting in an emotionally charged environment.

Therefore, for General Honoré felt he should be on the ground assessing the situation and making rational decisions rather than having them filtered through staff officers and federal bureaucrats.

21. In a disaster, those in charge should be the public face of the response. In a permissive environment people want to see their leaders at the front.
22. The #1 priority in any disaster situation is to "save lives". That is your top priority.

#2 is evacuating people from the disaster zone whose lives may be at risk.

You need capacity to do either—that is, tools and resources available to pluck people out of harms way.

In New Orleans, they were faced with both priorities –at the same time. Effective leadership takes capability and capacity to get things done.

23. It takes time to build capacity especially in a situation where the pre-planning as been to the level of the 'best case scenario' not the 'worst case scenario'.
24. The blame game with the media started early. In these early days, the media opened a one way dialogue with America. They did not focus on the reasons behind what happened but were hitting on the emotional side of the event. When Honoré got in front of the media he tried to put things into 'context' for people. The media was injecting their own "feelings" into the equation and not on how bad this event had been. The media should have been focusing on the failure of the infrastructure in this event. This failure caused major, unexpected ripples that compounded numerous problems New Orleans was dealing with before the storm.

The unfortunate bit is that the media provided a daily drumbeat of hysteria when this was NOT the on the ground reality.

The media ensured that the American public got a healthy dose of rational tensions and economic disparity in New Orleans after the storm. This created a negative impact on the law enforcement officials and National Guard. This didn't need to happen.

25. Some media stories relating to "snipers" and "vandalism / theft" were not accurate. This spin created its own problems for the authorities on the ground. It also impacted the many volunteers who were looking to help but fearful of what the media was portraying was happening.

Yes, there were a few fires in New Orleans. But, only a few. The media showed constant repetition in their newscasts on the few that were burning. It looked like much of downtown New Orleans was burning. That wasn't true.

And, yes there were some people breaking into food stores. But, they were trying to feed their families. They were in survival mode.

26. There was a lot of attention paid post event on the activities that took place by General Honoré...he continually emphasized that the first goal was getting people 'out' of New Orleans...NOT bringing people in. Some of the local authorities completely missed this key point.
27. General Honoré was also aware of the culture of Louisiana. The people have a tendency to overexaggerate. It's not a matter of outright lying...it's simply stretching things reflecting how they view things and express themselves. So, when it came to some of the "stories" emerging in the media, Honoré was aware of this dynamic and knew he had to take what he was hearing with a grain of salt.
28. Creating a sense of urgency was important. Getting things done was critical. When hearing about delays, General Honoré's typical response was, "You're looking at a calendar and I'm looking at my watch."
29. One thing they learned early on was that "text" messages were working. How many people knew how to use their cell phones to send "text"? This was a simple skill that could mean the difference between life and death.
30. A dynamic that also emerged was that public employees, like police officers, lived in the City and their families were impacted by the disaster. So, while they were trying to do their job in keeping civil order they were also dealing with their own family issues.
31. Ignorance can be fixed...stupidity is for life. A disaster can make you look ignorant and stupid. And the media is there to keep score and let others know where you fit.
32. As the event unfolded, General Honoré took on becoming the Army's face with the media. He had to constantly dispel the fact he wasn't in charge of the entire effort as his role was one of collaboration and coordinating the activities of others. The fact that Honoré's style "got things done" did put him in the limelight...and it was a key role someone had to fill. Slowly but surely he got the message across that no one had a plan for the levees breaking and the city being flooded. Much like a battle, the "enemy had a vote" and it was necessary to improvise a new battle

plan—daily. Good leadership required being “adaptive” and “thinking out of the box”. This occasionally meant stepping around some rules that simply didn’t apply to the situation at hand.

General Honoré recognized the media had a role to play in what was unfolding. The media was initially confused by the fact there did not seem to be one person in charge of what was happening. But, the reality is that it wasn’t necessary to have one person in charge as long as everyone was willing to “work together” to get things done.

33. It is an important postscript to think of how the government can provide some comfort to people who have evacuated their home in a storm to ensure their property left behind is being protected. And, at the same time, providing an “alert” to people that they have vacated the premises. This would assist in the speed to doing “search and rescue” activities. In New Orleans this resulted in searching over 250,000 structures.
34. Being prepared is certainly something all of us can think about. One wonders what we might do in our own organization to be better prepared for this kind of event.
35. In participating in this kind of event there was considerable usage of email to communicate. Remember—“The ‘E’ in email means ‘evidence’”.
36. No matter what you do in situations like this you need to expect that everything you do will be ‘second-guessed’ by others sitting 1,200 miles away. These people are sitting there with 1,200 mile “screwdrivers” adding in their two cents. At this point in the game, General Honoré was into “execution not planning”. And...they
37. It’s important to stay on task with what needs to be happening tomorrow as opposed to what happened yesterday.
38. Not to be missed in everything was looking to take care of ‘pets’ that had to be left behind.
39. When addressing one news conference General Honoré spoke to the media about preparations underway relating to another potential hurricane hit to the area (RITA). When discussing this issues the press were beginning to bring forward questions relating to the preparation relating to Katrina. He told the group, “*You’re asking last-storm questions for people who are concerned about the future storm. Don’t get stuck on stupid, reporters. We’re moving forward.*” His concern was getting the media to focus on the future not what happened in the past. The intent of that media conference was to get people focused on what they needed to do to help protect themselves with the new storm arriving yet some media were stuck on the wrong message.

Storm Preparation

1. Florida is also a high risk area for hurricanes. Their cultural dynamics are different than Louisiana. They do NOT want to leave their homes when a storm is about to

hit. They do not evacuate. And there are questions about the strength of their level of preparedness. It is important to be proactive and on the offensive.

2. Honoré's view is that they have to embrace a "push" model. To him, that means that when an event is about to occur you "push" resources into the area. The current "pull" method is you wait for the event to take place and then seek resources to help. Yes, being "proactive" can be more expensive but what's the alternative—get left with a New Orleans situation? The solution to all this requires a collaborative effort in light of the expense involved. What role might insurers play in this?

Accountability

1. Any significant event like this should be subject to a proper post mortem. And, this is really what this book is driving readers to do. Given what happened how can we better handle a similar situation in the future?
2. The US Fed's commissioned a congressional investigation on Katrina. This result in General Honoré being questioned for 6 hours. They asked tough but thorough questions. The blame game was underway but the outcome for Honoré was that while they may have questioned some things –he got things done!

Given General Honoré's public image as the "voice of calm and reason" no one on the government committee was prepared to ask any questions that suggested they were going after the General.

3. Honoré makes it clear that he did not set up the media image that emerged on him. And, he constantly credited what success he did have to the front line work of the troops. They did a superb job.

The media don't like to be used. But in a situation like Katrina, General Honoré and the media HAD to use each other.

4. Command is not a place: it's a function.
5. Some thinking pushed towards the need for a unified command in these situations.
6. Leaders are accountable for:
 - a) What you say.
 - b) What you do.
 - c) What you fail to do.
7. Leaders don't pass blame. They take responsibility for the good, the bad and the ugly.
8. If you don't worry about who gets credit, you can get a lot done.
9. A key leadership challenge is to get people to do things they do not want to do. Convincing people to buy into a common goal for the greater good...is critical.

10. Are you the thermostat or the thermometer?

A thermometer tells you the temperature.
A thermostat allows you to CONTROL the temperature.

Which role should the media play? Obviously that of the thermometer—they should not be looking to 'dial up' the emotional temperature of people. Report the facts....

11. The media should have a seat at the table in all disaster preparedness roundtables. The media can help people get through the crisis. Find ways to make the media part of the solution...not part of the problem.

SUMMARY

This is an interesting book from a few different perspectives:

1. The success of the entire Honoré family is quite remarkable. It shows how growing up poor doesn't stop success if the core values you saw everyday from your parents involved the benefit of "hard work". This flies in the face of the research done by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, "The Outliers".
2. For those that work hard and become life long learners there can be a defining moment in time when everything comes together and you are thrust into a rather remarkable moment of leadership.
3. The 5 P's--Proper planning prevents poor performance.
4. "Fail to plan...plan to fail". Many corporations and individuals can learn a lot by taking their current disaster recovery preparation to an entirely new level of "worst case scenario".
5. It will be interesting to see the take up by the government in enacting the suggestions made in the book.
6. The personal preparation tips would be useful to all our employees & those we touch in our daily work.

Glenn Gibson