

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
Lynn Thoman
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Ep. 157: The Former Vice-Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on Our Critical Need To See “The Other Side of The Story”

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the 3 key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today I'm excited to be joined by former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Bill Owens. Admiral Owens began his career as a nuclear submariner, spending over 4,000 days, more than 10 years of his life, on submarines. He served as Commander of the United States Sixth Fleet and then was appointed Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which is the second highest military office in the United States. He's a big believer in what he calls "the other side of the story." I'm excited to find out what the other side of the story is and how he sees the US, China, and other countries today. At a time when US-China tensions run high, he's part of a group of five retired American and Chinese generals and admirals who meet twice each year. Welcome, Bill, and thanks so much for your service in the military and in government, and for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Bill Owens: Thanks, Lynn. It's great to be here with you.

LT: It is my pleasure. Bill, what do you see as the major threats facing the US?

BO: I think the major threats facing the United States are perhaps the least well understood today as compared to any time in our recent history. The first threat I would mention is the national deficit. I've been very involved in trying to do something to have a responsible federal budget come out of the Congress. So that's one threat. I think a second threat is the rise of a combination of AI and blockchain and quantum computing, all put together to eventually, probably in the next 10 years, reach a point of singularity. And few people understand where singularity is going. But, roughly, I think it means the computer is as smart as we are and also has some sort of a consciousness. So, if you have multiple computers that are able to communicate and have that kind of knowledge of singularity, then we really don't have a clue about what that world is going to be.

BO: Now, it could be that it's overblown, just like Y2K was overblown, but it could also be that it's quite significant. I think the third threat is from inside, and that's the division of America of Republicans, Democrats, left and right, and families who are no longer able to speak with each other. The days of reaching across the aisle in Congress and reaching across the dinner table at home are gone. Well, I do believe that we are very prone not to hear the other side of the story. And I have experienced that in dealing with the Chinese or with the Vietnamese or with the people of Afghanistan.

LT: Let's start with China. What is the other side of the story? How does China see itself?

BO: The people of China have become much better off in the last years. The government of China, through its various policies, has taken more people out of poverty than any other country in human history. And that's a big statement. When you go to China, you can see it. And so there are 300 or 400 million middle income Chinese now who used to be living in poverty. And you have to say that's something that we didn't really appreciate, the other side of the story, but maybe we lead China with the discussion of Taiwan. There is one issue between the United States and China, and that is Taiwan. It's good that we understand the other side of the story. And the other side of the story is that the Chinese were our friends in World War II. The Chinese, in my view, may have been the reason we won the war in World War II in the Pacific.

BO: The Chinese lost 20 million people, killed in World War II, holding down 800,000 Japanese soldiers for seven years. And if they hadn't done that, we would've been fighting those Japanese soldiers in many other countries and in the islands and parts of the Pacific. In World War II, we lost 440,000, the Russians lost 20 million, and the Germans lost a very high number, but not as much as the Chinese or the Russians. So, we have to remember that there was another side of that story. At the end of the war, we had some sympathy for General Chiang Kai-shek, and we wanted to find a soft landing for him. And so, we gave him Taiwan. At the time there was a lot of discussion about whether that was the right thing to do or not. Now, Mao was in charge of China. None of us liked Mr. Mao, but he was the other leader, and he was there fighting the war with us in World War II.

BO: So now we wind up with Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT party in Taiwan. And the policy of the United States at the time was one China, two systems peacefully. That's the way we talked about it. We signed a lot of documents about it and we agreed with the Chinese that that was our policy and the Chinese understood. And I believe it should still be our policy. It is, if you get very formal, but it's not when you go to Fox News or CNN or any politician who will tend to say the Taiwanese need to be independent. I don't believe that. I believe there should be one China, it should be a greater China, and that Taiwan should be one of the provinces and that it should be that way peacefully. And I believe it should be a democracy, free to run itself just like it always has forever.

BO: Not like Hong Kong, that wasn't the way Hong Kong was turned over. But we could stand for that in good faith with the Taiwanese people and with the Chinese. But we don't see the other side of that story. So that one is the major other side of the story that I think Lynn, is so terribly misunderstood today, and how the Taiwanese people would prosper and be much better off if we had a one China supported by the United States and supporting their freedom as a democracy, their right to mint money, their right to have their own military if they decided to do so and yet be part of a greater China.

LT: How do other countries see Putin and Russia?

BO: Strangely enough, many other countries see a very different side to the Russian story than what we tend to believe. I believe Putin is a very bad man. I believe that he has disrupted the Russian people. I think they deserve much better. Now having said that, let's talk about the Russian side of the story in the Ukraine. How did the Ukraine wind up being what it is today? Well, we all know it's a very large country, very wealthy. It's the bread basket of that part of the world. A lot of the smartest software engineers in the world come out of the Ukraine. There was, without too much question, a lot of corruption in the Ukraine. And after the wall came down, that continued to be the case. You remember the many stories of what President Trump and Rudy Giuliani and others were charging was going on in Ukraine.

BO: And I don't think it was quite that bad, but there was corruption. And at the same time, we have to remember that the end of the Cold War, when the wall came down, there were no winners. We have to remember the Russians did not lose the Cold War. There weren't victory parades. The Russians were still there as a proud people. And now we are trying to bring former Soviet bloc countries into NATO. And so, one of those countries was East Germany. And we wanted East Germany to be united with West Germany in NATO, the largest country in NATO, the strongest country in NATO. And we wanted the Russians to agree, and they did. They agreed with that. And, at the same time, we agreed that we would not do a whole variety of things with the Soviet bloc countries - Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, et cetera - and that we would generally treat them as neutral countries.

BO: I won't go into the details, but it wasn't too many years, like two or three, until Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, were all in NATO and all part of European Union. And furthermore, some of them even had American or NATO weapons on their territory and that was contrary to what the Russians thought they were agreeing to at the end of the Cold War, which they did not lose. And so, they were not very happy with that. And if you look at Russia, all of their military and their access to the Black Sea was in the Ukraine in Crimea. And so, they took Crimea and they started to look at their people in the eastern part of the Ukraine, in the Donbas area because they were not being very fairly treated. And so there was a lot of terrorism and a lot of paramilitary activity in the eastern part of Ukraine over the last decade.

BO: And America has supported that, on the side opposing Russia with weapons and a lot of money before the Ukraine war, before the Ukraine conflict. So, there was a lot of stuff going on, and the Russians took exception to that because most of those people in the Donbas are Russian and they were being mistreated, they thought by the Ukrainians, who didn't like them very much at all. And so, something needed to be done in the Donbas area to establish normal kinds of government and more favorable treatment for the Russians in that part of the country. So, if you look at all that, the other side of the story you have to say... when Russia under Putin made a decision to do something in the Ukraine, there was some justification.

BO: I'm not saying that Putin should have done that. I'm not saying he should have gone to Kiev and bombed. I'm not saying that at all. What I am saying, there is an undercurrent of reasoning that many people in the world believe was a Russia wrongly treated. And now, he [Putin] may have done it wrongly. That is with the bombing of cities, the rape and pillage of the country. But in fact, there was another side of the story that most Americans don't hear. You find that a large percentage of the people in Southeast Asia today, like 30% or 40%, I believe, believe that the Russians were right in the Ukraine.

LT: Circling back, Bill, to the other side of the story you talked about with China, Southeast Asia and Russia, very briefly, what do you think US policies should be in light of the other side of the story?

BO: Well, I think we should observe sovereignty of every nation. I think we should not get involved. We should expose the problems. We should talk about what the democratic solution would be. We should use a lot of wise diplomacy, but we should not get militarily involved or involved in overthrowing regimes or overthrowing particularly criminal activities in other countries. We need to do all we can outside of those kinds of things. I think we need to be very supportive of

international institutions and tell the American story - more money, more time on telling the American story. We have to convince Americans that that's important. Other people don't know. So, we need to tell that American story because it is a great story.

LT: Bill, what are the 3 takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

BO: Think about how great this country is and at the same time understand the other side of the story of countries and what's out there in the world and how exciting and lovely it can be if we are truly together with them. Try to understand that we're all just people, and when we become really close, we understand how much alike we are and how much we laugh together, how much we cry together, and how much we have to learn from each other. I would ask that we take away the seriousness of this national debt. That is something we can do something about, but we have to demand it because it's getting very close to being truly out of control. And when that goes away, that's going to be very disastrous for our country.

BO: And I guess I would leave the reference to China that before you criticize too much, remember that we could be great together if we can find that middle road. We're not going to reform them. They're not going to change us. We are going to live in a world that's either going to be filled with strife or we're going to be in a world where we're competing with each other, living in our own systems, respecting our own sovereignty, but in a much better world for everyone. And finally, I would just say that my faith has been enormously important in my life to give me the peace, to know that I'm not by myself every day of my life. And I hope that many of you have that same experience.

LT: Thank you, Bill. Thank you for your service in government and the military. And thank you for our conversation today.

BO: Thank you, Lynn.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

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