

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
Lynn Thoman
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Ep. 133: These Times Demand a Clear-Eyed Look at Threats to America. Stanford's Frank Fukuyama Provides It

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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 three 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 with Stanford's Frank Fukuyama. He's one of the world's foremost political scientists and author of *The End of History*, and *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. I'm excited to talk about key questions about democracy, such as whether in today's fast-moving world authoritarian governments have an advantage because they can act more decisively and quickly, and also whether liberal democracies are in decline. Welcome, Frank, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

Frank Fukuyama: Thanks very much for having me, Lynn.

LT: It is my pleasure. Do muscular authoritarian governments like China have an advantage because they can act decisively and get things done, while their democratic rivals, to quote you, "debate, dither and fail to deliver" on their promises?

FF: It's hard to generalize, because there are cases where authoritarian governments can indeed act faster, but I think that's in a way a matter of the level of risk that a society is willing to undertake. We have checks and balances in a liberal democratic order that spread power out, require consultation, put limits on executive authority, and I think that comes in very handy, because if you leave decision-making up to a sole individual at the top of the hierarchy, they can make really disastrous decisions of the sort that you couldn't make in a liberal democracy.

FF: And I think we've seen two recent examples of that. One is Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. He apparently was extremely isolated, even more so than the Soviet leaders that decided to invade Afghanistan. You saw him sitting at the end of a long table, even with his defense minister, because he was so afraid of getting COVID, and it doesn't sound like he really vetted the idea of this invasion with anybody. He didn't understand what was going on in Ukraine, he didn't understand the weaknesses of his own military, and as a result, he made, I think, one of the most disastrous strategic decisions that I can remember, and as a result, he's weakened his own military, he's weakened Russia, he's isolated himself in his country from the rest of the world. It hasn't worked out very well.

FF: I think similarly, Xi Jinping's zero COVID policy hasn't been quite as disastrous, but it's probably shaved off a point or two of GDP growth in China, because they can't maintain this policy without shutting down major cities and affecting ordinary economic life. And again, this does not

seem to be the result of a carefully thought out plan, I think this was really very much associated with one guy at the top. So I think that you have to realize that there's good reasons why we put checks on executive authority in a liberal democracy, because sometimes it is better to have that discussion and debate, even if it does slow down decision-making.

LT: What do you see as other weaknesses of authoritarian leaders and authoritarian governments in addition to this isolation?

FF: Nobody likes living under a dictatorship. People want to have basic freedom, they want to be able to criticize the government, they want to be able to move around freely, they want to be able to marry whom they want, and if you look at what's going on in Iran right now, the women of Iran are rising up in revolt against all of these very restrictive rules that force them to wear a certain kind of clothing, that don't allow them to make economic decisions on their own, they always have to have a male protector monitoring what they do, and what woman wants to live like that. And I think that the only way that they've kept this regime going is by a lot of repression. They have Islamic Revolutionary Guard corps that basically is willing to kill protesters, but this time it's not working so well, and it's been over a month now since these protests in Iran started, and there doesn't seem to be any end to them. And they're protests not about a specific... Well, they are about a specific policy, about the hijab, but they're also calling for the end to the whole regime, and that's a pretty serious threat to the legitimacy of the Islamic republic.

LT: So do many people who grow up living in peaceful, prosperous liberal democracies take their form of government for granted, unlike people who grow up in countries without them such as Iran?

FF: I think that people that appreciate liberal democracy the most are people that either come out of war-torn societies where there's conflict over national identity, over religion, over a host of issues that are put to one side in a liberal state, or people that live under a dictatorship. And so in Eastern Europe, for example, we had a pretty heady time after the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989-91, because people had been living under communist dictatorships for the preceding several decades, and the idea of joining Europe and having a free society was very attractive.

FF: I think one of the problems right now is you've got a whole generation of young people that were born after communism, they didn't experience it, and as a result, they can take living in a relatively free society for granted, and so they then undervalue the benefits of living in a liberal order.

LT: Are countries increasingly turning away from democracy and the rule of law?

FF: Well, I don't think they're turning away from democracy as much as turning away from liberalism. You have the rise of a number of populist parties in India, in Hungary, in Turkey, in the United States, and they're democratically elected, and so they don't have a problem with democracy. What they do have a problem with is the liberal part of liberal democracy, meaning the constitutional order or the rule of law that limits power, because a lot of these populist leaders get elected and they say, "Well, I represent the people and the people want what I want, and here's a court, here's a newspaper, here's a critic that is standing in the way of the people's will." And so what they do is they erode the liberal part of liberal democracy using their democratic mandates as an excuse, and that I think has been going on in many, unfortunately in quite a few countries around

the world over the last few years.

LT: The guiding principles of US diplomacy since the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union over 30 years ago have arguably been first that everyone should have the rights and opportunities of a liberal democratic society, and second that as everyone got richer, the world would become more democratic and more peaceful. Do you think this is still true today?

FF: American foreign policy has been shaped by its own belief in liberal institutions and a liberal order from the beginning, but it really didn't have the power to realize these goals until the 20th century, and so that kind of democracy promotion was really associated first with Woodrow Wilson after World War I, and it's been the theme for very many presidents up until President Trump, who is the first president that really didn't believe in that at all. But it's never been the guiding or the dominant principle. In the Middle East, we wanted access to oil, we wanted to support Israel, we wanted security from terrorism, and as a result, we were willing to compromise a lot of those democratic principles when it was expedient, and so it's opened the United States up to charges of hypocrisy as a result.

FF: The idea that democracy would come with greater prosperity is part of something in the social sciences called modernization theory that held that as people become - I mean, it's not just richer, but I think also better educated - that they would want an expansion of their rights, and there's a lot of evidence that indicates that that is the case. But the major disproof of that, that people point to now is China, where you actually do have a very large middle class that encompasses several hundred million people, but there doesn't seem to be any particular demand for democracy on the part of that part of the population, and so that theory doesn't seem to be working in this pretty important country.

FF: It has worked in other societies, it worked in Japan and Korea, Taiwan, other places that they become more democratic as they got richer, but there are other factors that influence whether you are going to be a democracy other than your standard of living, and that seems to be the case with China.

LT: What do you think that the guiding principles of American international policy should be?

FF: Well, I think that maintaining a liberal world order is important. That has both an economic and a security dimension, and so we've created a world where you could have international commerce between countries relatively freely, and that's important for everybody's prosperity. I think on the political side, you would also like to have a world that's populated by other liberal democracies, and there are a lot of reasons for this. One is that authoritarian states tend to do things like invade their neighbors. You saw that with Stalin's Russia, Nazi Germany, we're seeing this now with Putin's Russia, so to the extent that the world and particularly the world's powerful countries are democracies, then you're probably going to have a more peaceful world and one in which you get better cooperation between countries.

LT: So far, the European Union is the most serious effort to do global governance at a regional level. What are your thoughts on global governance?

FF: Global governance means a lot of different things. I think that if it means something like global cooperation to beat back pandemics or to deal with international terrorism or money laundering,

that's very important, and because people, goods, ideas move across international borders so rapidly and so easily these days, if you don't have that kind of cooperation, they're really not going to deal with the world's serious problems. But to actually create... to move from governance and operation to actual government, I think is really a stretch because you can't have a government unless you've got a basic agreement on principles that would underlie such a government: Is it going to be representative, is it going to represent a rule of law, is it going to have a court that will limit executive authority, all of these sorts of things.

FF: And in those dimensions, there are a lot of countries that really don't buy into that. China does not have a rule of law in any Western sense, it certainly doesn't have a democracy or elections. Russia is similarly authoritarian, and therefore it's very hard to understand how you could ever get an agreement on world government. And I think, actually, even if you could get to world government, it would probably be pretty dangerous, because it's not clear who it's going to be accountable to. So I think that what you want is a world with greater international cooperation based on existing nation states.

FF: The European Union is a good experiment in regional cooperation, and that's a good thing. I think it's really accomplished its original goal of making war between France and Germany and other member states impossible, and that has really occurred. The problem is that it is more of a federation than a real state and as a result it's too weak in many areas, and in foreign policy Europe can't really throw its weight around, because a single one of its 27 members can veto the actions of the whole and, therefore, they can't criticize China, they can't do a lot of things that I think a real country would be able to do.

LT: Let's talk about the United States. How do you see the US now?

FF: I think we're at a very dangerous point in our national history. I think that the January 6th Committee made pretty clear that former President Trump had a pretty organized plan to stay in power and overturn the last election, and he's managed to convince a majority of the Republican party that that false narrative was true, and therefore you have the party rallying around a claim that's just empirically not the case. And I think that that represents a threat to basic American institutions, because the single thing, that I think qualifies you as a real democracy, is the peaceful transfer of power, and we didn't have a peaceful transfer of power last time around. And I think until we solve that problem, we're going to be very seriously divided.

FF: I would say that in general, our polarization is the single thing with weakens the United States the most. Vladimir Putin is counting on that polarization to save his bacon. He is really hoping for the Republicans in Congress to vote to stop aid to Ukraine, and that's really at this point the only way that he can hope to win this war. So that ability of foreign powers to play on these internal divisions I think is a pretty serious problem for the United States at the moment.

LT: What do you think about what the Democrats are doing?

FF: It's hard to say, because the Democratic party is much less united. It really represents a much broader spectrum of views than the Republican party, which has really coalesced around Trumpism, and so you have a far less progressive wing, you've got a much more centrist wing, and then you've got a lot of people in the middle.

LT: How do you see identity politics?

FF: There's two versions of identity politics. One of them I think is perfectly fine because it's in accord with liberal values, that is to say... And by liberal, I don't mean liberal in an American context or left of center, I mean liberal in a classical sense of believing in the equal dignity of all individuals and protecting them through a rule of law. And I think the liberal version of identity politics really seeks to mobilize marginalized groups like African Americans or women, gays and lesbians and have them enter the democratic system to advocate for their rights, and especially the right to be treated the same as any other American. And that's I think a perfectly, not just acceptable, but it's an important component, of a liberal society.

FF: There's another form of identity politics that is not liberal, that basically says that groups are so different from one another that people need to be treated first and foremost as a member of a group rather than what they do as individuals, and that resources ought to be allocated based on your group membership. And that I think becomes much more problematic, because it does undermine the liberal principle of a universal equality of all human beings, and I think leads to an undermining in a sense of the common sense of citizenship and belonging.

LT: You've thought a lot about and written about what you call the deep state, the federal bureaucracy. How does it differ in America from other major countries?

FF: The major difference with the United States is nobody likes the idea of the American state. One of the deepest political traditions in the United States is to distrust the federal government, and I think a lot of Americans don't realize how peculiar they are in this sense, because if you go to Switzerland or Germany or France or Britain or Japan or Korea, people basically trust the government. I mean, they think the bureaucracy is there to serve their public interest, that they do a reasonably good job at it, and Americans, I think, both on the left and right, do not immediately stand up and say, I like the federal government.

FF: And I think in many ways that has become pathological, because a competent high-capacity government is really critical in terms of all sorts of things, agricultural extension, public health, national defense. I mean, they're forecasting the weather. People don't understand, but the Commerce Department, for example, half of its budget, more than half of its budget, goes to NOAA, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration. You wouldn't have weather reports if you didn't have NOAA, you wouldn't be able to predict hurricanes coming if you didn't have NOAA. There's no private body that does that. AccuWeather basically is a private body that takes NOAA data and just repackages it and sells it to Americans.

FF: So there's a lot of functions that the government plays that are really very critical that people don't appreciate, they don't see it. There's a lot of federal bureaucrats that are really heroes. Now, does the government make a lot of mistakes? Is it inefficient, ineffective? In many cases, of course. But I think that there's no general conspiracy to take away Americans' rights by a deep state, the way that some people maintain. I think you can't have a modern government and a modern society without a state that has a professional, high quality, expert civil service.

LT: When a typical European parliamentary government changes hands from one party to another, the ministers and a handful of staffers turn over, but in the US, as you've noted, a change of administration opens up some 5,000-odd jobs to political appointees. Do you see that as an issue?

FF: Yeah, well, it's way too many. In the 19th century, beginning with the presidency of Andrew Jackson, we had something called the spoils or patronage system, in which basically all federal jobs were up for grabs with every election. And the federal bureaucracy, it was much smaller back then, but it could be stuffed with basically supporters of whoever was running for a particular elected office and not based on merit or competence. And we eventually got rid of that system towards the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, but it hangs on in terms of these political appointees, who are much more numerous than in any other democracy, where maybe two or three dozen people turn over when there is an election and a new administration in power.

FF: Of those 4-5,000 political appointees, I think about 1,000 require Senate confirmation. A single senator can block the confirmation of any one of those appointees, and as a result, both of the parties have played this game where they use that as kind of extortion tool to gain leverage for something else that they want, and ambassadorships, assistant secretaries, dozens of positions either take more than a year to fill or don't get filled at all because there's so many Senate-confirmed positions. And so that whole system I think seriously needs to be reformed. I think they need to reduce the number of political appointees and reduce the number of Senate confirmations.

FF: The trouble is that the Republicans are sort of moving in the other direction, they basically want to make everybody a political appointee and essentially return the system to what it was before the 1883 Pendleton Act that for the first time declared the need for a merit-based civil service, and I think that would move us in exactly the wrong direction.

LT: You've talked about some issues in the US, such as polarization and identity politics. Do you see these issues in other countries as well?

FF: Yeah, there are many countries that are extremely polarized, but I would say that by and large, the majority of other modern democracies do not suffer from the degree of polarization that exists in the United States. American polarization is not simply over policy issues, like should we have higher or lower taxes, or what should we do about immigration, it's what political scientists or social scientists call affective polarization, where you actually really hate people on the other side, it's an emotional reaction. And if you listen to the rhetoric today, people will say that their opponents represent an existential threat to America, that they don't just want a different policy, they want to destroy America. And that's very dangerous, because it justifies extreme responses in reaction to that. I would say that that's a really pretty dangerous level of polarization.

LT: How did the US get to this extreme level of polarization and how can the US recover from it?

FF: That's a complicated question to answer. Part of it has to do with big changes in the economy, there's been increasing inequality as a result of globalization, and a lot of people left behind, that's made them very resentful of the elites that promoted globalization. A lot of cultural issues are much more vivid in the United States than in other places. We still have a legacy of racial animosity that other countries don't necessarily experience, that we may have thought we had overcome with the election of Barack Obama, but it turned out that it's unfortunately not true.

FF: Americans tend to be much more religious than other societies. In Europe, most populations there are pretty secular these days, but in the United States, we've got very fervent religious believers, and that's another thing that the division... In fact, that's the same division as in Israel,

really, between extremely observant religious Jews and secular Jews, and we have our version of that in the United States, and so there's a lot of different causes to this. I've never been a strong partisan.

FF: I started out in government as a Republican, I switched to being a Democrat in 2010, but I actually am perfectly willing to vote for somebody of the other party, but I honestly think that part of the reason I left the Republican party was that already with the Tea Party that started moving in this extreme right-wing direction that then got converted into a kind of nationalist populist isolationist version of Republicanism that I just didn't believe in anymore, and I think until we work that out of our system, it's going to be very hard to overcome the underlying polarization. The country really has to decide what version of itself it wants to celebrate, and right now, I don't think that, unfortunately, there is a real consensus of that.

LT: What can we do to strengthen liberal democracies?

FF: Well, first of all, we have to recognize that democracy really depends on institutions, and if you don't respect institutions, you're not going to be able to keep your democracy. So an institution is basically a rule, it could be a formal law, it could also be a norm that's kind of informal but commonly observed. And our whole system is based on these institutions, elections, the rule of law, constraints on power, freedom of speech that are protected because people believe in them, but the moment they stop believing in them and are willing to compromise them, then the whole system gets eroded. And I think we've seen a lot of that erosion in the last few years, and so people basically have to mobilize and understand what's going on and fight back against that.

LT: Before I ask for the three takeaways that you'd like to leave the audience with today, Frank, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already touched upon?

FF: No, I think we've pretty much covered the waterfront both internationally and domestically.

LT: What are the three takeaways, then?

FF: The first is that I think it's inevitable that the United States will have an important global role. We're very dependent on the outside world, even if a lot of Americans don't feel that immediately in their lives. But things happen in a distant place, there's a war in Ukraine and all of sudden gas prices go up, and so we have to be both aware, but also I think, remain involved in global politics.

FF: The second is what I just mentioned, that democracy is important, but it won't survive if you don't respect institutions and therefore the willingness to live by common rules.

FF: The last thing I would say is Americans haven't been very good at listening to one another lately, and I think it's important if you are going to overcome that polarization to actually listen to some of the complaints. Some of them will be ones that are just unanswerable, in the sense that you can listen and appreciate, but the opinions are so extreme or violent or whatever, that it's hard to reach understanding. But with other people, that's not the case, and I think appreciating some of the complexities and subtleties of the way that other people think is an art that we've kind of lost in this country, and I think we need to hold on to it.

LT: Thank you, Frank, this has been terrific. I really enjoyed both your books, *Liberalism and Its*

Discontents, and The End of History.

FF: Thanks very much, 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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