

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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Ep. 168: Karl Rove Takes A Riveting, No-Holds Barred Look At The Frightening State Of American Politics

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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 Karl Rove. Karl is credited with George W. Bush's successful campaigns for Governor of Texas, and then for president of the United States. He held the title of Senior Advisor and Deputy Chief of Staff during George W. Bush's presidency. He is also one of the most insightful political analysts anywhere in the world today. Welcome Karl, and thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Karl Rove: Thanks, Lynn. Good to be with you.

LT: It is my pleasure. Karl, how do you see the current political landscape?

KR: Well, both parties are disrupted and broken. There're big arguments going on underneath the surface in each party. The left of the Democratic party is in war with traditional Democrats and the populist wing of the Republican parties is in combat with the traditional conservative wing of the Republican Party. Both parties are broken, and our political system is exemplified by enormous distrust. Americans distrust the media, they distrust their government, they distrust each other. They hate the other political party more than they love their own. As a result, we are in a tribal moment where you attack my guy, even if I don't like my guy or gal, I'm going to prepare to their defense and I'm going to hate the other party more than I love my own party. And that's not sustainable. At some point the system reverts because people are just sick of what's going on. But yeah, we're in an ugly moment.

LT: And how did that ugly moment develop? And it seems to have developed over what, the last 15 or 20 years?

KR: Well, I'd say the last 10 or 15. Situations like this are not the result of one factor, in my opinion. They're the result of multiple factors. Part of it was the economic collapse of 2008. It caused people to fundamentally distrust the institutions of our economy, the pillars of our society. How come the bankers got bailed out? How come the car companies got bailed out? But how come ordinary Americans had to suffer? There was distrust on the right and left. You saw the growth on the Democratic left of people like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. The relationship between the little man and little woman and their government is messed up and we need to rebalance it so that the little man and the little woman get a fair shake. And on the right, you saw the growth of the

Tea Party movement, a group of people who said, the relationship between our government and the little man and a little woman has been corrupted.

KR: The big boys get bailed out with a loophole or a bailout. And the little man, little woman they have to suffer. So, this populism on the left and right arose. The actions, and I don't mean to be overly critical, but I think the actions of President Obama contributed to it. In February 2009, the House Republicans came in to discuss the proposed stimulus bill, and they had a series of recommendations to make. And President Obama cut off Eric Cantor, who led the delegation by saying, "I won." Yeah, you won. You are the president. But that means you need to find a way to bring the country together. And the best way to bring the country together was to say, "I'm going to listen to some of your ideas and we're going to see if we can't incorporate some of them and arrive at something that gets, if not votes from the Republicans, at least begrudging respect that we listened to you."

KR: And then we had increasingly populism on the left and right of the Democratic Party that began to take root and to gain strength. And we saw it in 2016 where the Republican party nominates a populist who had voted for John Kerry in 2004 and had invited the Clintons to his most recent wedding. And the Democrat contest goes long because we have people on the left of the Democratic Party, typified by Bernie Sanders who make the contest go and go and go. And so I think that was additive, that these populous players were able to feed on the anxiety and angst of the American people in both political parties and rile them up. And then the Trump years where we went from yin to yang with a very contentious personality who had no interest really, I don't know - maybe he had an interest - but he had no ability to bring people together.

KR: And then we had COVID, which discombobulated this from top to bottom. Then we have this contest, which I think adds to the moment. Think about this. We have in an AP, NORC, National Opinion Research Poll, 76% of the people surveyed, including 69% of Democrats say that Joe Biden is too old. And in another poll, I think it was NBC, you have nearly two thirds of the people saying that they don't think he has the mental ability to do the job. And nearly six out of ten saying that the Republican front runner is corrupt. These are not good numbers that instill confidence and trust in the American people that things will get better if their guy or gal gets elected. It's like things will get better only if we defeat that other person on the other side.

LT: It's truly horrifying. How do you think that government has changed?

KR: Well, in some ways it hasn't, but the media and the coverage of it have. We've had scandals involving the FBI in the past, but now it looks like the FBI starting in 2016 involved itself inappropriately in politics. Look, I'm a Republican, but what Jim Comey did to Hillary Clinton was beyond the pale. Think about it. We have, since the founding of our country divided the responsibilities, the police, in this case, the FBI investigate crimes, and the decision to charge somebody is made by the prosecutors, who are separate and apart. And in 2016, we had Jim Comey as the Director of the FBI hold a news conference and say, I've deeply examined the handling of classified material by Hillary Clinton and I've decided not to charge her, but then I'm going to excoriate her for inappropriate activity and for being thoughtless and stupid in her handling of classified material. Well, first of all, it wasn't his decision. It was the Justice department's decision to charge or not charge, but they were happy to wash their hands of it and have him make the decision, which says something about the broken system. But second of all, if we're going to say somebody is not worthy of being charged, do we really want the police to go out and hold a news

conference - in this case, the Director of the FBI hold a national of the news conference - and trash a candidate running for president, and then 30 days before the election he reemerges.

KR: That is a sign of how broken the system is. So all of this has sort of continued to add to a lack of confidence in the government. And then we have January 6th and the efforts of the President of the United States to encourage people to overturn the election. And today, now - trying to depict the people who bashed in the heads of police and broke through police barricades and used chemical sprays and flagpoles and weapons, and grabbed shields and went for the guns of the police - we've now got the former president of the United States saying, these are the victims, not the violent criminals who attempted to stop a constitutionally mandated joint session of Congress to receive the votes of the electoral college. This is where we've come as a country and it's a sad moment.

LT: You're one of the few people that will look at both parties and not just say positive things about one party and criticize the other. How do you see the confidential documents issues on both sides?

KR: Let me talk first about Trump and then talk about Biden and Hillary. I was in the White House for nearly seven years. I had a top security clearance. If I handled classified documents in the way that Donald Trump handled documents, you and I would be speaking on a Zoom link and I'd be in a cell in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The Presidential Records Act of 1978 is very clear. No president has a right to any document that is created while during their time in the White House.

KR: Those documents are the property of the American people under the stewardship of the National Archives and Records Administration. Now, there is no criminal penalty for violating that, but that law was passed in the aftermath of Watergate and Congress felt if we simply established the clear rule, every president would abide by it. But we had a president who lost the election of 2020, who on January 20th of 2021 left town with the hundreds of classified documents in boxes.

KR: Now, this is all of his own creation. He could have abided by the rule and left those documents behind, but he didn't. And your listeners may not know this, there's a little office inside the White House called the Office of Staff Secretary. It sounds like a pretty meaningless job, doesn't it?

LT: It does.

KR: The Staff Secretary sees every document that goes to the president. The White House Staff Secretary has a log of every document that goes to the president. That log is maintained by a small office of professionals called the Office of Records Administration, ORA. They literally keep a log of everything that goes to the president classified and unclassified. In addition, there's a secondary log kept by the National Security Council of every classified document that goes to the president. So if the president says, I'm going to declassify it, or I have a question about it, and that question results in material changes to that classified documents findings, they know who to share that information with.

KR: So when President Trump left the White House in January of 2021, the ORA and the NSC had a list of every document he'd received. So shortly thereafter, the National Archives of Records administration began to realize there were plenty of documents that were listed in those records, the ORA and the NSC, that were not there in the boxes that they got. So they knew, they knew there were hundreds of documents.

KR: And so that's why in the spring of 2021, they began to ask the former president, will you please return them? Will you please return them? Finally, in January of 2022, he returned some documents, but again, they've got a log. They know they got a bunch of stuff that they should have that is no longer there, which is why they continue to ask for documents and why the Director of the FBI counter-terrorism operation shows up in June of 2022.

KR: And remember, the attorney for President Trump says, to the best of my knowledge, but again, they know, they know, they know that there are hundreds potentially of classified documents that they should be able to have gotten back that they haven't, which is why they then go to the judge and ask for a warrant to search.

KR: This wasn't a raid, it was a search. There's a big difference and, this was brought on by the former president, simply having this narcissistic desire to hold onto things that were not his to hold onto. What about the Democrats? There are mitigating circumstances for Joe Biden, just as there are for Mike Pence. They both had classified documents. When the question was raised, they went through, found the classified documents and returned them. But nonetheless, how the heck did Joe Biden's senatorial classified documents make it into his private archives?

KR: Because when you're a senator and you have a classified document, when you leave the SCIF [the Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility is a secure place where sensitive information can be viewed by government officials], they say to you, are you clear? Which means, are you walking out of here with any classified material? And he had to answer in the affirmative, no, I'm clear, meaning I don't have any classified documents. So how did he end up with all those classified documents in his archives at the University of Pennsylvania Center in Washington DC? And how many of them were there?

KR: Over what period of time? Did he tell people, I'm clear? Did he mislead federal officials? But I will admit there clearly are not as many as there were with Trump, and we don't know exactly how they got there. But that is a problem because if you're going to treat one guy with severity, you better treat everybody with severity.

KR: Hillary is another thing entirely. She, in my opinion, did violate the law. She used unclassified email to transmit classified documents. We know that - that was carelessness and disregard of protocols and a problem, and we know that she took steps to cover it up. That to me, shows deliberate obstruction. But I think, again, uneven treatment, we're going to let Hillary off, but we're not going to let Trump off. Now I grant you, they're not exactly equivalent, but she did things that were deliberate as well.

LT: How do you see democracy in America now?

KR: Politics is really bad, but it's been worse before and it really has been. So I look at us today and say, boy, we got to get out of here. But we lose something if we don't understand that we have been in worse places before and we have found ways out of it.

LT: What seems different though now, from the prior times, is that prior times were before we were also connected with phones, with email, with 24 hour news. And now the acrimony, the bitterness, the divides just seem constant and overwhelming.

KR: Yeah, well look, I don't want to diminish the impact particularly of social media, but I do want to say again, we've been here before. Think about the revolutions in technology that we've undergone. Can you imagine how discombobulating it would've been in 1844 to suddenly now receive the news instantaneously from the opposite end of the country via telegraph? The problem with social media is we think that Twitter is reality. It's not. Social media brings out the worst in most people, particularly Twitter and Truth Social, and to a lesser extent Facebook. And it certainly allows for the dissemination of really incredibly stupid things quickly. One of the things I think is good is that Elon Musk is now going to charge people on Twitter a monthly fee. I'm all for that, and I'll tell you why. In 2016, one of the most commonly seen Twitter feeds was Tenn GOP, T-E-N-N GOP which people thought stood for Tennessee Republican party. And in reality, it was a fake feed run out of St. Petersburg, Russia. If you start saying to people, okay, you've got to pay, \$5.95 a month for your Twitter feed, or \$3.95, you've got to put up a credit card and suddenly it's a lot easier to find the fake bots.

LT: Wow. How have the Republican and Democratic parties changed?

KR: Both parties have become more populist, the Republican party, more visibly so, because we have a leader in the form of Donald Trump, who is non-conservative, not conservative, but is populist in trying to impose his populist vision on the rest of the party. But the Democratic party has also become, there's a battle between traditional Democrats like Joe Biden and the Democrats like Elizabeth Warren and AOC and Bernie Sanders. It's interesting, my friend James Carville and I, a couple years ago, he said, God, the problem with my party. He said, "my problem is I got a lot of people in my party that are like the German Communists of the 1930s, after Hitler us." And we were in the room behind the stage and I said, "James, I get the point you're making, but I don't think you ought to call the left wing of your party German communists."

KR: And I don't think you ought to equate Donald Trump to Hitler, but is there a better way that you could put the point? Because I think it's a good point." He said, "Yeah, good point. Good, good argument. Yeah, yeah, good point. I'll think about that." About 15 minutes later we're out on the stage and he said, "you know, the problem with my party, I got a lot of people that are like the German communists in the 1930s, after Hitler us"... And I'm like, oh my God. It is true. You do have a lot of people on the Democratic Party, the sort of the progressive wing that are saying on big questions, whether it's the nature of our economic system or climate or Israel or foreign policy or healthcare or taxes, that have a distinctly different view than the Democrats that we've seen in the form of Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Bill Clinton, and so forth.

LT: What do you think a positive strategy would be, both for Democrats and for Republicans, to win the White House in the next election?

KR: The party that puts forward a new face is the party that gains a distinct advantage. We saw after the first Republican debate, a poll that showed Nikki Haley six points ahead of Joe Biden. While Donald Trump is a point up for a point down. Nobody knows who she is. All they know is that she's a new face and seemed to do well on that first debate. And wasn't she the governor of a state? And wasn't she at the UN... I don't know much about her, but she seems to be a bright young figure on the stage. Therefore, I'm for her against Joe Biden. The party that figures out that these two men are the least attractive front runners for their party's nominations in the history of polling and wakes up and says a new face. The recent polls, 76% of Americans, Joe Biden, they think he's too old.

KR: 69% of Democrats, 67% I think... of people in a CBS... excuse me, an NBC poll, said that Joe Biden is not mentally up to the job. 34% think that if he's elected to a second term, he won't survive until he is 86. And then the numbers for Trump, one out of every six Republicans today thinks that he violated the law. And between 24% and 31% of Republicans say they don't have enough information about the four indictments - hush money in New York, classified documents, January 6th, Jack Smith and Georgia - that 24% to 31% say they don't have enough information to offer an opinion. Those are people who are saying, you know what, I've been asked a question where I feel like I should distance myself from my party's leader, and I'm not going to do that to an anonymous person who's calling me on the phone on behalf of a polling organization. Both parties are in trouble, and the party that figures out that the way to get out trouble is to put a fresh face onto the ballot is the one that's got the upper hand for 2024.

LT: Do you think there's been a decline in morality of the leaders of both parties? If you analyzed the family income of senior members of government, both Republicans and Democrats, what would you find in terms of their wealth?

KR: Well, look, we know about the foibles of Donald Trump. We have a lifetime though, so this is the guy who famously said he could kill somebody on Fifth Avenue and his people stay with him. But with all due respect to Joe Biden, he was Vice President of the United States. He was in charge of encouraging Ukraine to crack down on corruption. I have a special interest in Ukraine. I went there for the first time in 1993 as a member of the Board for International Broadcasting that oversaw Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. So I've spent a lot of time there. My last trip, my fourth trip over there was like three years ago, four years ago. There's only one reason why Devon Archer is hired in January of 2015 to go on the board of Burisma. He has no experience in corporate governance or in Ukraine or in the energy business, but he's the longtime bag man and political advisor to the then sitting Secretary of State, John Kerry formerly the Senator for Massachusetts. Three months later, Devon Archer says to his business partner an equally unqualified person...

KR: "[Hunter] Biden, why don't you go on the board with me, now." Joe Biden says, "I don't have anything to do with my son's business". Well, he should have picked up the phone and said, "what are you thinking? I'm the guy in charge of making certain that Ukraine cracks down on corrupt businesses. You are the guy who just went on the board of a highly corrupt business under investigation by the central authorities in Kyiv. You don't have any business being on that board. You don't know anything about energy, corporate governance or Ukraine. Get the hell off of there". And, instead what happens is in the fall of 2015, Vice President Biden goes to Ukraine to lecture them on the importance of getting their act together on corruption. And NGOs [non-governmental organizations] involved in the fight of corruption criticize them by saying, "what the heck are you doing lecturing us about corruption and letting your son serve on that board?".

KR: I understand he loves his son and I understand his son is a troubled person who has had huge addiction problems and was out of control. But that doesn't excuse the Vice President of the United States, now President, from saying to his son, get your act together and then to turn a blind eye over the coming years to 20 shell companies and a hundred whatever it is, 170 payments to members of the family and to those shell corporations. It stinks. And the Vice President should have said to his son, "I'm the Vice President. I want to run for President at some point. Don't do this to me". But instead what's going to happen is we're now going have the president's son - he's already been indicted on a gun charge. The statute of limitations has run [out] on the vast sums of money that he

got in the first two years that he was on the Burisma board. But it stinks. And the ordinary Americans look at him and say, "We expected better from you, uncle Joe. We voted for you because we thought you'd return normality to the White House, and instead it turns out your son is a grifter and you were participating in it". Now, this is a side question, but one thing we haven't answered and hasn't really been asked is, what did President Obama know and when did he know it? I cannot imagine that President Obama didn't say to somebody, Susan Rice, the National Security Advisor or the Secretary of State, somebody better go talk to Joe and find out why his son is on that board to get him the hell off. I can't imagine that that didn't happen.

LT: How about senior members of Congress?

KR: In September, we just saw a longtime member of Congress whom I actually knew when I was in the White House. Stephen Byer of Indiana sentenced to jail for after he left the White House for engaging in insider trading. I do have a concern, I want people to be able to participate in the American economy and not become monks when they go into government. So they should be able to invest. But when I went into the government, I was told you have to sell all your individual stocks and you only can invest in broadly based mutual funds. And so this idea of members of Congress trading stocks and making investments... In my opinion, they again ought to be bound by the same rules that they apply to members of the executive branch, that if you are a political appointee to the president or a member of the cabinet, that you can only invest in broadly based mutual funds. But I worry less about that than I worry about the President because the President is the example that's set for the rest of the country. If you have shenanigans going on inside the White House and inside the President's official and personal family, then you're likely to have shenanigans going on elsewhere in the government.

LT: What are the three takeaways you would like to leave the audience with today?

KR: Politics is broken. Our systems, our trust in government is low. Our trust in the parties is negligible. We hate the opponent of our views more than we love the advocates of our views. The second point is we've been here before. This is not new, this is not unusual. It's happened before. And the third point would be we've always found a way out. And the way that we find a way out is by ordinary people using their power as voters to say, enough is enough. And we want to put somebody in office whom we think will do a good job and put the country and the interests of the people first, and will be willing to at least treat the opposition with respect, if not work in an aggressive fashion, to make them feel part of the process. It's up to us and we can have an effect by participating in the politics of our country and whatever party we want to identify with and trying to find people and encouraging people and supporting people who will help heal our politics.

LT: Thank you. This has been wonderful. It is also great to end on a positive note. So, thank you so much.

KR: Thanks.

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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