

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #417

Shadows and Signals: The World of Back-Channel Diplomacy

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn dive into the shadowy world of back-channel diplomacy to answer a listener's question about how warring nations communicate. From the "honest brokers" of Oman and the Vatican to the high-stakes use of "validation signals" like specific tie colors or coded phrases in public speeches, the brothers unpack the mechanics of trust in an environment of total suspicion. They discuss the successes and risks of Track Two diplomacy, explaining how secret talks can both prevent catastrophe and create dangerous political bubbles.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

I'd love to learn more about back-channel diplomacy. How exactly is it initiated? When two countries aren't speaking to one another but want to exchange messages, how does each side verify the other's legitimacy when there are no official channels?

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am here in our home in Jerusalem with my brother.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, at your service. It is a beautiful day outside, but we are heading into some pretty shadowy territory today.

Corn

We really are. Our housemate Daniel sent over a prompt that feels like it is straight out of a Cold War thriller. He was asking about back-channel diplomacy. Specifically, how do countries that are not on speaking terms actually start a conversation? And more importantly, how do they know the person on the other side is actually who they say they are?

Herman

It is such a fascinating question because it touches on the absolute fundamental problem of international relations, which is trust. Or rather, the complete lack of it. When two nations have severed ties, or are even in a state of conflict, they still need to communicate to avoid total catastrophe. But they cannot just pick up the phone and call the embassy because the embassies are closed.

Corn

Right, and that is where this whole world of back-channels comes in. You will often hear this referred to in academic circles as Track Two diplomacy. Track One is the official, high-level stuff that happens in suits at the United Nations. Track Two is the unofficial, deniable, and often very messy stuff that happens in hotel bars or through academic conferences.

Herman

Exactly. And the most important word there is deniable. If a diplomat from the United States meets with a diplomat from Iran in a public setting, it is a massive political event. It can cause a domestic backlash or anger allies. But if an academic from a university in Washington meets a former official from Tehran at a conference in Muscat, Oman, the governments can say, oh, they are just private citizens talking. We have nothing to do with that.

Corn

So, let's get into the mechanics of it. How does it actually start? If I am a world leader and I want to send a message to an adversary without it leaking to the press, what is my first move?

Herman

Usually, you look for a third party that both sides trust, or at least respect. These are often called honest brokers. Historically, certain countries have made this their entire brand. Switzerland is the classic example, of course, but in the Middle East, Oman has been the go-to for decades. They are the quiet neighbors who everyone is willing to talk to.

Corn

I remember reading about the role of Oman in the lead-up to the Iran nuclear deal years ago. They were essentially the post office for secret letters between Washington and Tehran.

Herman

That is a perfect example. In that case, the channel was initiated through a series of quiet meetings in the capital of Oman, Muscat. The beauty of Oman is its geography and its foreign policy of being a friend to all and an enemy to none. They can host a secret meeting and the world would never know.

Corn

But how does that first contact happen? Does a Sultan just call up the White House and say, hey, I have a guy here you might want to talk to?

Herman

Sometimes it is that direct. But often it is more subtle. It might start with a businessman who has interests in both countries. Or a religious leader. Actually, Corn, you mentioned the Vatican earlier. That is a huge one. Back in two thousand fourteen, Pope Francis was a key figure in the thaw between the United States and Cuba.

Corn

Right, and I should clarify something because there was some confusion about this recently. Pope Francis is very much still with us here in early twenty twenty-six, and his legacy of diplomacy is still a major factor. In that two thousand fourteen deal, he actually wrote personal letters to both President Obama and President Castro. He invited their delegations to the Vatican for secret talks.

Herman

And that resulted in the release of about fifty-three Cuban prisoners and an American contractor. It was a massive breakthrough that started with a religious figure acting as the intermediary. The Vatican is unique because it has a global diplomatic network but no military or economic agenda that threatens other states. It is the ultimate neutral ground.

Corn

So that covers the how. A trusted third party steps in. But Daniel's second question is really the one that gets me. How do you verify legitimacy? If a guy shows up in a cafe in Zurich claiming to speak for the North Korean government, how do I know he is not just a con artist or a rogue agent?

Herman

This is where it gets really clever. In the world of intelligence and secret diplomacy, they use something called a validation signal. It is basically a way to prove that you have the ear of your leader without actually showing a badge.

Corn

Like a secret handshake?

Herman

Not quite a handshake, but more of a public gesture. Let's say I am the secret envoy. I tell you, if my message is truly from the President, he will use a specific, slightly unusual phrase in his public speech tomorrow. Or he will wear a specific color of tie during his televised address.

Corn

That is brilliant. It is a signal that is visible to everyone but only meaningful to the two people in the secret meeting. It provides absolute proof of access.

Herman

Exactly. I remember a story from the Cold War where a secret contact told an American official that the Soviet leader would mention a specific historical date that had no obvious relevance to the speech. When he said it, the Americans knew the contact was legitimate. It is a way of bridging the gap between a private conversation and public power.

Corn

It also protects the channel. If the guy is a fake, the leader just gives his normal speech and nothing happens. No harm done. But if he is real, the signal is sent.

Herman

There is also the verification through action. This is more common when things have progressed a bit further. For example, the United States might share a very specific piece of intelligence with an adversary through a back-channel to prove they are serious.

Corn

Oh, like that incident in January of twenty twenty-four. The U S actually warned Iran about a planned bombing by I S K in the city of Kerman.

Herman

Precisely. Even though the U S and Iran do not have official diplomatic ties, the U S used a back-channel to warn them about a specific terrorist threat. Now, think about that from the Iranian perspective. If you get a secret message saying an attack is coming at a specific time and place, and then it happens, you suddenly have a lot of reason to believe that the channel is real and that the other side has some level of credible information. It builds a very narrow, very specific kind of trust.

Corn

It is a weird kind of trust, though. It is not like they are friends. It is more like they trust each other to be rational actors who want to avoid certain outcomes.

Herman

Right. It is trust in the channel, not necessarily trust in the person. You are trusting that the mechanism works.

Corn

What about the risks, though? Daniel's prompt makes it sound like a useful tool, but surely there are massive downsides to doing things off the books like this.

Herman

Oh, the risks are enormous. The biggest one is the lack of accountability. When you have official diplomats, there are records. There are notes. There are other officials watching. In a back-channel, it is often just two people. If one of them misinterprets a message, or worse, if one of them starts freelancing and making promises they cannot keep, the whole thing can blow up.

Corn

That reminds me of the Oslo Accords in the early nineteen nineties. That whole process started as a secret back-channel between Israelis and Palestinians in Norway. It was mostly academics and mid-level officials at first.

Herman

And it was incredibly successful in the short term because it allowed them to talk about things they could never discuss in public. But one of the criticisms later was that because it was so secret and so detached from the official bureaucracies, the people who actually had to implement the peace deal were not fully on board. The back-channel moved faster than the reality on the ground could handle.

Corn

So you end up with a disconnect between what is agreed upon in a secret room in Oslo and what the people back home are actually willing to accept.

Herman

Exactly. It creates a bubble. You also have the risk of the channel being exposed. If a secret meeting is leaked, it can look like a betrayal to the public. Imagine if a country that has been calling another country the Great Satan for twenty years is suddenly found to be having secret dinners with them. It can topple governments.

Corn

I suppose that is why the verification and the secrecy go hand in hand. You need to be sure who you are talking to, but you also need to be sure that the secret stays secret until you are ready for it to be public.

Herman

And sometimes it never becomes public. There are probably back-channels operating right now between countries we think are on the brink of war, and we might not hear about them for another thirty years when the archives are declassified.

Corn

It makes you wonder about the current state of things. We are sitting here in Jerusalem, and the regional tensions are obviously very high. You have to assume there are channels humming in the background between various players who officially do not even recognize each other's existence.

Herman

Almost certainly. In fact, we know that even during the most intense periods of conflict, there are often channels through intelligence agencies. The heads of intelligence services sometimes have a more direct and honest relationship with their counterparts than the politicians do. They speak the same language of risk and capability.

Corn

That is an interesting point. Intelligence officers are used to dealing with secrets and verification. It is their whole job. So it makes sense they would be the ones to manage these channels.

Herman

There is a famous story about the head of the C I A and the head of Russian intelligence meeting in Turkey a few years ago. It was official in the sense that we knew it happened, but the content was entirely secret. It was a back-channel to manage nuclear risks. When the stakes are that high, you cannot afford a misunderstanding.

Corn

So, to go back to Daniel's question about how they know it is not just some random guy who has had too many beers, as he put it. The answer is a combination of trusted intermediaries, public signals like the color of a tie or a specific phrase in a speech, and the sharing of sensitive information that only a government official would have.

Herman

And let's not forget the old-fashioned way: the physical handover. Sometimes a secret envoy will carry a letter that has a specific seal or a handwritten note from a leader. Even in the age of digital encryption, there is something very hard to fake about a physical object that has traveled through a secure chain of custody.

Corn

It is like the modern version of the king's signet ring.

Herman

Exactly. Some things never change. The technology of communication has evolved, but the psychology of trust and verification is still very ancient. You need a sign, you need a witness, and you need a reason to believe.

Corn

It is also worth mentioning that sometimes these channels are initiated by people who are not even in government. We call this Track Three diplomacy. This is where ordinary citizens, like artists or athletes, start breaking the ice.

Herman

Like Ping-Pong diplomacy between the U S and China in the early nineteen seventies. That is the classic example. A simple sports exchange paved the way for Henry Kissinger's secret trip to Beijing, which then led to Nixon's official visit. It started with a bunch of table tennis players.

Corn

It is a way of testing the public's reaction. If the public is okay with a sports team visiting, maybe they will be okay with a diplomat visiting. It is a slow, incremental way of building a bridge.

Herman

And it provides that same deniability. If the Ping-Pong team is treated badly, the government can just say, oh, that was a mistake by a private sports organization. We are not responsible.

Corn

It is a very sophisticated game of chess. But instead of just two players, you have thousands of players, and many of them are wearing masks.

Herman

It really is. And for those of us watching from the outside, it can be frustrating because we only see the official moves. We do not see the whispers in the hallway or the secret letters being passed in Muscat or Zurich. But those whispers are often what keep the world from falling apart.

Corn

I think that is a really important takeaway. We often think of diplomacy as these big, grand summits, but the most important work is often the quietest. It is the work that happens when nobody is looking.

Herman

And it requires a huge amount of courage, honestly. To be the one to reach out to an enemy, knowing that if you are caught, you might be branded a traitor. It takes a certain kind of person to operate in those shadows.

Corn

It makes me think about the role of technology in this now. With all the surveillance and digital footprints we have in twenty twenty-six, is it even possible to have a truly secret meeting anymore?

Herman

It is much harder, that is for sure. Facial recognition, satellite tracking, signal intelligence—it is a nightmare for a secret envoy. But that just means they have to get more creative. Maybe they meet in a place that is already crowded and noisy. Or they use very low-tech methods. Sometimes the most secure way to send a message today is a handwritten note delivered by a person who is not carrying a smartphone.

Corn

The back-to-basics approach. If you want to beat high-tech surveillance, go low-tech.

Herman

Exactly. There is no digital trail if there is no digital device. I have heard of diplomats meeting in the middle of a park while jogging, or at a crowded public swimming pool where they can talk without being recorded.

Corn

That is amazing. Imagine two of the most powerful people in the world discussing nuclear policy while doing laps in a pool.

Herman

It sounds like a movie, but it is the reality of how these things work. The more sophisticated the surveillance, the more mundane the meeting place.

Corn

So, for everyone listening, next time you see a news story about two countries that are supposedly at each other's throats, just remember that there is likely a whole other world of communication happening beneath the surface. There are people working very hard to make sure that even when the official channels are dead, the conversation continues.

Herman

And that is a good thing. It is the safety valve of the international system. Without back-channels, we would be flying blind into every crisis.

Corn

Well, I think we have given Daniel a pretty deep dive into the world of secret handshakes and public signals. It is a lot to process.

Herman

It really is. And if any of our listeners have their own stories or questions about this kind of thing, we would love to hear from you. We have been doing this for hundreds of episodes now, and the prompts from you guys are what keep us going.

Corn

Absolutely. You can always reach out to us through the contact form at myweirdprompts.com. We read everything that comes in. And if you are enjoying the show, please do us a favor and leave a review on your favorite podcast app or on Spotify. It really helps other curious people find us.

Herman

It truly does. We appreciate all the support.

Corn

Alright, Herman, I think that is a wrap for today. Thanks for bringing all that research to the table. I feel like I need to go check the color of my tie now to see if I am accidentally sending any secret messages.

Herman

You are wearing a blue one today, Corn. I will let you decide what that means for our domestic policy.

Corn

Fair enough. Thanks for listening to My Weird Prompts. We will be back soon with another deep dive.

Herman

Until then, stay curious.

Corn

See you next time.

Herman

Goodbye everyone.

Corn

Wait, before we go, I just realized we didn't talk about the role of the media in this. Because sometimes the media is actually part of the back-channel, right?

Herman

Oh, that is a huge point. Sometimes a government will leak a story to a specific journalist as a way of sending a message to another country. It is called a trial balloon.

Corn

Right, they see how the other side reacts to the news before they actually commit to it. It is like a back-channel that uses the public as a buffer.

Herman

Exactly. If the reaction is negative, they can just say the journalist got it wrong. If it is positive, they can move forward. It is another layer of that deniability we were talking about.

Corn

It really is a hall of mirrors. Everything is a signal, and everything is a test.

Herman

And that is why it is so important to be a critical consumer of news. Especially when it comes to international relations. There is often a message being sent that is not for us, but we are the ones carrying it.

Corn

That is a deep thought to end on. We are the couriers for messages we don't even understand.

Herman

Precisely. Alright, now we really are done.

Corn

Thanks again, everyone. Check out myweirdprompts.com for the archive and more episodes. We will catch you in the next one.

Herman

Take care.