

## MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #338

# Shadow Diplomats: The Truth About Honorary Consuls

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## EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn peel back the curtain on the mysterious world of honorary consuls. From "DIY diplomacy" kits containing cassette tapes of national anthems to high-stakes prison visits, discover why private citizens volunteer for these unpaid roles and what powers they actually hold under international law. We explore the legal nuances of the Vienna Convention, the lure of diplomatic prestige, and the thin line between international service and the "shadow diplomat" scandals.

## DANIEL'S PROMPT

### Daniel

We've talked in the last few episodes about various topics related to the field of diplomacy, and I'd like to discuss the concept of honorary consuls. How are they appointed, and why do people volunteer for these positions? I'm curious about the relationship between professional diplomatic missions and honorary consuls, as well as what the work actually entails. What kind of duties do they perform to represent a country without being a professional diplomat, and do they have powers like issuing passports?

# TRANSCRIPT

## Corn

Hey everyone, and welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am joined as always by my brother, the man who probably has the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations memorized for fun.

## Herman

Herman Poppleberry at your service. And you are not far off, Corn. I actually keep a copy of the nineteen sixty-three convention on my nightstand. You never know when a diplomatic emergency might strike at three in the morning. I find Article five particularly soothing before bed—it lists the thirteen principal functions of a consul. It is like counting sheep, but with more international law.

## Corn

I wish I were joking, but I have seen it there. It is dog-eared and everything. So, our housemate Daniel sent us a really fascinating prompt today. He was asking about something we see quite often here in Jerusalem, but maybe do not think much about: honorary consuls.

## Herman

It is a great topic. Daniel mentioned that story of a guy getting a quick start kit in the mail, with a CD of the national anthem and some maps. It sounds like something out of a quirky indie movie, but it touches on a very real, very ancient part of how countries talk to each other. That story actually sounds like the famous case of the American businessman who basically cold-called a dozen small nations in the nineteen nineties and ended up as the honorary consul for the Republic of the Congo. He reportedly received a box with a flag, some letterhead, and a literal cassette tape of the anthem. It is the ultimate DIY diplomacy.

## Corn

Right, and I think most people have a vague idea of what a diplomat is. You know, the fancy cars, the embassy parties, the immunity. But then you see these plaques on regular houses or office buildings that say honorary consul of, say, Iceland or Togo. And it is clearly not a massive government building. So, today we are going to dive into what these people actually do, why they do it for free, and whether they can actually get you out of a jam if you lose your passport.

## Herman

And it is more common than you might think. There are thousands of them worldwide. For many smaller countries, or even large countries with limited budgets, honorary consuls are the backbone of their international presence. They are the budget-friendly version of diplomacy, but with a lot more local flavor. In fact, some countries like Iceland or the Seychelles have almost no career diplomats abroad; they rely almost entirely on this network of volunteers.

## Corn

So let us start with the basics, Herman. What is the actual definition of an honorary consul versus a career diplomat? Because that distinction seems to be where all the weirdness begins.

## Herman

Exactly. A career diplomat is a professional. They are employees of their country's foreign ministry. They study for years, pass exams, and get posted to different countries every few years. They get a salary, they live in government-provided housing, and they have full diplomatic immunity. An honorary consul, on the other hand, is usually a private citizen who lives in the host country permanently. They are often business people, lawyers, or prominent figures in the local community. They do not get a salary from the country they represent, and they usually keep their day jobs. Under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations—or the V-C-C-R—they are specifically covered under Chapter Three, Articles fifty-eight through sixty-eight. That is where the law carves out a special, much more limited space for them.

## Corn

So they are basically volunteers? That seems like a lot of work for no pay. I mean, if you are a busy lawyer, why on earth would you want to spend your Tuesday afternoons helping a stranded tourist from a country you might have only visited once?

## Herman

That is the big question, right? Why do it? But before we get into the why, we should look at how they even get the job. It is not like they are posting these positions on LinkedIn. Usually, it starts with a connection. Maybe a country wants to increase trade in a specific city, like Philadelphia or Lyon or Jerusalem. They look for someone who is well-connected, has a good reputation, and maybe has some tie to their country. Maybe their grandmother was from there, or they do a lot of business there.

## Corn

So it is more of an appointment of prestige. Like being knighted, but with more paperwork?

## Herman

A bit. Once a country decides they want someone to represent them, they issue a formal document called a Lettre de Provision, or a Commission. They then send a formal request to the host country's government. This is a crucial step. You cannot just declare yourself an honorary consul and start hanging flags. The host country has to approve you. This approval is called an exequatur. It is a Latin term basically meaning let him perform. Once you have that, you are officially recognized by both governments. In the United States, for example, the State Department issues you a specific identification card that looks very similar to a diplomatic ID, but it clearly states your honorary status.

## Corn

I imagine the vetting process is pretty intense. You are essentially giving a private citizen a slice of state authority.

## Herman

Oh, absolutely. The State Department in the United States, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs here in Israel, will do a full background check. They want to make sure you are not a criminal, obviously, but also that you are not going to use the position for anything shady. Even so, because they are not professional diplomats, the level of authority they have is much, much narrower than a regular consul. They are not allowed to engage in political activities, and their immunity only applies to their official work.

## Corn

Let us talk about that authority. Daniel asked if they can issue passports. That feels like a high-stakes power. If I lose my passport in a remote part of the world and find an honorary consul, can they print me a new one right there?

### Herman

Generally speaking, no. And this is a common misconception. Most honorary consuls do not have the equipment or the legal authority to issue a full, biometric passport. Those machines are incredibly expensive and secure. What they can do, however, is help you with the paperwork for an emergency travel document, or an E-T-D. They can verify your identity, witness your signature, and then coordinate with the nearest professional embassy or consulate-general to get you a temporary document that lets you fly home. Some countries, like Germany, actually allow certain honorary consuls to accept full passport applications, but they still have to mail the physical documents to the regional embassy for processing. It is a slower process, but it saves you a flight to the capital.

### Corn

So they are more like a facilitator. A local point of contact who knows the right people to call.

### Herman

Exactly. They are the boots on the ground. Think about a country like Australia. It is huge. If you are a citizen of a small European nation and you get into trouble in Perth, but your embassy is in Canberra, that is a five-hour flight away. But if there is an honorary consul in Perth, you can walk into their office, and they can start the process for you. They can visit you in the hospital, or heaven forbid, in jail.

### Corn

Wait, you mentioned visiting someone in jail. That sounds like a heavy responsibility for a volunteer. Is that a common part of the job?

### Herman

It is one of the most important parts. Under Article thirty-six of the Vienna Convention, if a foreign national is arrested, they have the right to have their consulate notified. If there is no professional mission nearby, the honorary consul is the one who goes to the prison. They make sure the person is being treated fairly, that they have access to a lawyer, and they communicate with the family back home. They are not lawyers themselves—usually—but they are the official witness to ensure the host country is following international standards. It is not all champagne and Ferrero Rocher, as Daniel put it. It can be very gritty, very demanding work. Imagine being a local businessman who suddenly has to spend his Friday night in a local lockup talking to a terrified nineteen-year-old backpacker.

## Corn

That really shifts the perspective. It is not just a title to put on a business card. But that brings us back to the why. If you are taking on the risk of visiting prisons or dealing with bureaucratic nightmares for no salary, what is the trade-off?

## Herman

There are a few layers to it. The first is pure prestige. Having those diplomatic license plates—often with a C-C for Consular Corps—the coat of arms on your door, and being invited to all the official government receptions? That is a huge social boost. In the world of business and law, that kind of status can be very valuable. It opens doors. You are no longer just a lawyer; you are the Honorary Consul of Sweden. People take your calls. You are part of the local Consular Corps, which is a very exclusive club. They have their own galas, their own networking events, and their own hierarchy.

## Corn

I can see that. It is a powerful networking tool. But is there more to it? Does it help their actual business?

## Herman

Often, yes. If you are the honorary consul, you are the first person a company from that country calls when they want to invest in your city. You become the bridge for trade. If you are a trade lawyer, for example, being an honorary consul for a major trading partner is a massive competitive advantage. You are literally the official representative for trade relations. You also get to perform notarial acts. You can certify documents for use in the foreign country, which is a service people are often willing to pay for. While you usually cannot keep those fees for personal profit, they can help cover the costs of running the office.

## Corn

So it is a bit of a symbiotic relationship. The country gets a free office and a well-connected representative, and the individual gets a prestigious title that helps their career. But what about the legal perks? Do they get the same immunity that we hear about in movies, where they can just park their car in the middle of the street and ignore the tickets?

### Herman

This is where it gets really interesting, and where a lot of people get into trouble. There is a massive difference between full diplomatic immunity and consular immunity. And for honorary consuls, it is even more restricted. Under Article forty-three of the V-C-C-R, an honorary consul only has immunity for official acts performed in the exercise of their functions.

### Corn

Okay, so if I am an honorary consul and I am driving to the airport to meet an official delegation and I get a speeding ticket, I might be able to argue immunity. But if I am driving to the grocery store to buy milk?

### Herman

Exactly. No immunity. You are just a regular citizen. And even for official acts, it is not a get-out-of-jail-free card. It is mostly about protecting your files and communications with your government. Article sixty-one says the consular archives and documents are inviolable, but only if they are kept separate from your personal and business papers. If you mix your law firm's files with the consulate's files, you might lose that protection. The police cannot just barge into an honorary consulate and seize the archives, but they can certainly arrest the consul for a serious crime.

### Corn

I remember reading about a few scandals involving honorary consuls who thought they were untouchable. They were using the diplomatic pouches to smuggle things or trying to avoid taxes.

### Herman

It happens more than you would think. Because they are not career professionals, they sometimes do not realize the limits of their position, or worse, they intentionally exploit the gray areas. There was a massive investigation by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists—the I-C-I-J—called the Shadow Diplomats report, published around late twenty-two. They identified at least five hundred current and former honorary consuls who had been accused of crimes or embroiled in controversy. We are talking about everything from drug trafficking and money laundering to supporting authoritarian regimes. Some were even using their status to bypass sanctions or move illicit cash in those inviolable consular bags.

## Corn

Five hundred? That is a staggering number. It sounds like the vetting process we talked about earlier is not as foolproof as it should be.

## Herman

That is exactly what the I-C-I-J report highlighted. Many governments simply do not have the resources to monitor thousands of volunteers scattered across the globe. Some countries do not even make the names of their honorary consuls public. It is a system built on trust and eighteenth-century traditions that is struggling to keep up with twenty-first-century transparency. By outsourcing diplomacy to private citizens, you lose a lot of control. You are basically franchising your national brand to someone you do not fully supervise.

## Corn

That is a perfect way to put it. It is a franchise model of diplomacy. And like any franchise, the quality can vary wildly. Some honorary consuls are incredibly dedicated and do amazing work for decades. Others just want the license plate and the invites to the parties.

## Herman

Exactly. And that brings us to the history of this, because it actually predates modern diplomacy. The word consul comes from ancient Rome, of course, but the concept of an honorary representative really goes back to ancient Greece. They had a system called proxyeny. A proxenos was a citizen of a city—say, Athens—who volunteered to look after the interests of another city, like Sparta. He used his own money and his own house to host Spartan ambassadors and help Spartan merchants. He was not a Spartan; he was an Athenian who just really liked Sparta or had business ties there. It was a position of immense honor, often hereditary.

## Corn

So it was a bottom-up system. The community chose their leader, and the state eventually formalized it. It is fascinating that we are still using a Greek model from two thousand five hundred years ago.

## Herman

It really is. In the Middle Ages, it evolved further with merchant consuls. Italian city-states like Venice and Genoa would have their merchants in foreign ports elect a judge from among themselves to settle disputes. He was the consul. It was only in the nineteenth century that we started seeing the rise of the professional, career diplomat. Before that, almost all consuls were essentially honorary. They were merchants who were given a commission by their king to look after national interests in exchange for some trade privileges or the right to collect fees.

## Corn

Fees! That is something we have not talked about. Does an honorary consul get to keep the money from the services they provide? If I pay for a visa or a document certification at an honorary consulate, where does that money go?

## Herman

That varies by country, but historically, yes, that was how they were paid. They would keep a percentage of the fees to cover their office expenses. Nowadays, most countries require the fees to be sent back to the central treasury, but they might allow the honorary consul to keep a small amount for administrative costs. But remember, they are providing the office space, the electricity, and the staff out of their own pocket. So the fees rarely cover the actual cost of running the operation. It really is a net loss in financial terms for the individual. You have to be fairly wealthy to even consider doing this.

## Corn

I want to go back to the Jerusalem context for a second, because Daniel mentioned the plaques we see here. Jerusalem is such a weird place for diplomacy because of the sovereignty issues. We have these consulates that have been here since the Ottoman times. How do honorary consuls fit into that mess?

## Herman

Oh, Jerusalem is the Olympic Games of diplomatic weirdness. Because of the city's unique status, we have something called the Consular Corps of the Holy Land. This is a group of consulates that often do not report to the embassies in Tel Aviv. They have a historical status that predates the state of Israel. Some of these missions are headed by career diplomats, but many are supported by honorary consuls who have deep roots in the city's various communities—Greek, Armenian, French, and so on. They are often the guardians of the Status Quo, which is the set of ancient rules governing the holy sites. If there is a dispute over who gets to clean a specific window in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, you can bet an honorary consul is involved in the negotiations.

### Corn

It makes me think about the physical presence. The plaques and the flags. Here in Jerusalem, you see them in the most unexpected places. You will be walking down a quiet residential street in Rehavia, and suddenly there is the coat of arms of the Dominican Republic on a garden gate. It feels like a little piece of another country has been transplanted into a suburban backyard.

### Herman

And in a way, it has. While the building itself is not sovereign territory in the way an embassy is, it does have a special status. The archives and documents are sovereign. It creates these tiny islands of international law scattered throughout our cities. I think it adds a layer of cosmopolitanism to a place. It reminds you that even in a quiet neighborhood, you are connected to the whole world. But it also means that if the country you represent does something controversial, your suburban backyard becomes a target for protesters.

### Corn

That is the dark side of the prestige. If the country you represent goes to war or has a revolution, you are the face of that country in your city. Your business might be boycotted, or people might show up at your house with signs. You are taking on a real geopolitical risk for a volunteer position.

### Herman

You are. During the Cold War, honorary consuls were often caught in the crossfire. Even today, if there is a diplomatic spat, the honorary consuls are often the first ones to have their status revoked as a sign of protest. It is a high-stakes hobby. You are tying your personal and professional reputation to a foreign government that you have no control over.

### Corn

So, if someone listening is thinking, hey, I am a well-connected lawyer in a mid-sized city, and I would love to be the Honorary Consul of, I do not know, San Marino. What is the first step?

### Herman

First, you should probably visit San Marino. But seriously, the first step is to identify a country that has a need for representation in your area. Look at trade data. Is there a country that exports a lot to your region but has no consulate? Then, you start building relationships. You attend their national day events, you connect with their embassy, and you demonstrate that you can be a valuable asset to them. It is a long game. It is about building trust. And you should be prepared for more oversight. Since that I-C-I-J report, many countries have tightened their vetting. In twenty-twenty-six, you are likely to face much stricter background checks and more frequent reporting requirements than you would have ten years ago.

### Corn

And maybe brush up on your national anthem. Just in case they send you that CD.

### Herman

And make sure you have a good C-D player! Those are getting harder to find than honorary consuls these days. Most countries are moving to digital kits now, so you might just get a U-S-B drive or a link to a secure portal. Not quite as romantic as a cassette tape, but much more efficient.

### Corn

True. So, to wrap up the practical side of Daniel's question: they are appointed through a formal agreement between two governments—the Lettre de Provision and the Exequatur. They volunteer for prestige, networking, and business advantages. They help with paperwork like emergency travel documents but cannot usually print passports. And they have very limited legal immunity, mostly focused on protecting their official archives. It is a fascinating blend of private life and state authority.

### Herman

It really is. It is one of the last vestiges of a more personal, less bureaucratic form of international relations. It is diplomacy on a human scale. It is the legacy of the ancient Greek proxenos living on in a modern office building.

### **Corn**

I think that is a perfect place to leave it. It is a reminder that the world is often more interconnected and a lot weirder than it looks on the surface. Next time you see one of those plaques, take a moment to think about the person behind it. They might be a lawyer, but they are also a tiny part of the global diplomatic machine.

### **Herman**

And if they are listening, we would love to hear from you. What is the weirdest thing you have had to do as an honorary consul? Did you ever actually have to use that national anthem C-D? You can find us at [myweirdprompts.com](http://myweirdprompts.com) and use the contact form there.

### **Corn**

Or if you have a prompt that is even weirder than this one, send it our way. We live for these rabbit holes. And before we go, if you have been enjoying the show, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on Spotify or whatever podcast app you use. It genuinely helps other curious people find us.

### **Herman**

It really does. It is the best way to support the show.

### **Corn**

Alright, that is it for this episode of My Weird Prompts. Thanks to Daniel for the prompt, and thanks to all of you for listening.

### **Herman**

Until next time, stay curious.

### **Corn**

This has been My Weird Prompts. You can find us on Spotify and at our website, [myweirdprompts.com](http://myweirdprompts.com). See you next week!

