MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #242

Beyond the Bunker: How Governments Plan for the End

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode, Herman and Corn shift the focus from personal bunkers to the "war rooms" of national survival. They dive into how governments use tabletop exercises, red teaming, and strategic decoupling to prepare for geopolitical earthquakes and supply chain collapses. From Finland’s massive stockpiles to Singapore’s "Total Defence," discover how nations are moving away from global efficiency toward a new era of "just-in-case" strategic autonomy.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

How do governments and public bodies handle policy planning for major geopolitical contingencies and supply disruptions? I’m interested in how they plan, drill, and war-game for these scenarios to ensure national self-reliance and continuity at a governmental level.

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. We are sitting here in Jerusalem, the sun is just starting to dip behind the hills, and I am joined as always by my brother.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry at your service. And Corn, I have been looking forward to this one. Our housemate Daniel sent us a voice note that really hits home, especially given where we live and everything we have seen over the last few years.

Corn

Yeah, Daniel was asking about the difference between personal prepping, which we have talked about quite a bit recently, and what happens at the state level. He was specifically curious about how governments handle major geopolitical shifts or massive supply chain breaks. You know, we have covered home energy backups in episode two hundred forty-one and mesh networking in episode two hundred thirty-nine, but this is a different beast entirely. This is about the machinery of the state and how it tries to survive when the world goes sideways.

Herman

It is a fascinating transition. Most people think of prepping as a guy with a basement full of canned beans and a gas mask, but when a government preps, they call it strategic foresight or national resilience planning. It is less about the individual and more about the systems that keep a modern society from collapsing. Daniel mentioned the specific tensions we have felt here in Israel, but the principles apply to any nation trying to navigate an increasingly fractured global landscape.

Corn

Right, and he brought up some heavy scenarios. What if a major ally shifts their policy? What if a trade agreement is torn up? What if the literal flow of goods stops? It feels like we are moving from a world of just-in-time efficiency to a world of just-in-case resilience. So, Herman, where does a government even begin with something this massive?

Herman

It usually starts with something called a National Risk Register. Most developed nations have one. The United Kingdom, for example, last updated theirs significantly in 2023 with potential revisions since, and the United States has the National Security Strategy. It is a document that lists every conceivable disaster, from pandemics and cyber-attacks to the total loss of a strategic partner. But the real meat of the planning happens in the war rooms through something called tabletop exercises, or T T Xs.

Corn

I have heard that term used in cybersecurity a lot. Is it the same thing for geopolitics?

Herman

Very similar, but the scale is enormous. Imagine a room filled not just with generals, but with the head of the central bank, the minister of energy, the heads of the major shipping companies, and even social psychologists. They are presented with a scenario, say, a total blockade of the Strait of Hormuz or a sudden embargo on high-grade silicon from East Asia. Then, they have to play it out in real-time.

Corn

So it is not just a document gathering dust on a shelf. It is a live stress test of the bureaucracy.

Herman

Exactly. There is a famous quote often attributed to Dwight Eisenhower that says, plans are worthless, but planning is everything. The goal isn't necessarily to predict the exact future, because you can't. The goal is to build the mental and institutional muscles so that when the crisis hits, the people in charge already know who to call, what levers to pull, and where the biggest vulnerabilities are hidden. They even use something called Matrix Games now, where players have to argue their positions and a referee decides the outcome based on probability and logic.

Corn

That makes sense. But let's look at the specific example Daniel raised, because it is quite provocative. He asked what happens if a country like Israel suddenly finds its traditional alliances shifting, or if a major trade partner like the European Union decides to significantly alter the terms of engagement. That isn't a natural disaster; it is a political earthquake. How does a government drill for a diplomatic divorce?

Herman

That falls under the umbrella of red teaming. Governments will actually hire or task a specific group of experts to act as an adversary or a hostile entity. Their entire job is to find the most painful way to screw over the country's economy or security. If we take the trade agreement scenario, the red team would look at every single import and export. They would identify the three things the country cannot live without for more than thirty days. Is it grain? Is it specialized medical isotopes? Is it the software updates for the air traffic control system?

Corn

And once they find those dependencies, what is the move? Because you can't just build a factory for everything overnight.

Herman

No, you can't. And that leads us to the concept of strategic decoupling or national self-reliance, which Daniel also mentioned. In the old days, this was called autarky, but that is generally considered impossible in a modern globalized world. Today, it is about strategic autonomy. It means you don't necessarily make everything yourself, but you ensure you have at least three different ways to get it, and at least one of those ways needs to be domestic or from a very close, reliable neighbor. This is why the European Union formally adopted the Critical Raw Materials Act in 2024, specifically to stop being dependent on a single source for things like lithium.

Corn

It sounds like a massive logistical puzzle. I am thinking back to our discussion on the right to breathe and tobacco policy in episode one hundred fifteen. We talked about how hard it is to enforce even simple public health measures. Now we are talking about re-engineering the entire supply chain of a nation. Is it even realistic to think a government can manage that level of complexity?

Herman

It is incredibly difficult, and honestly, most governments are failing at it to some degree. But the ones that are succeeding are the ones moving toward what they call whole-of-society resilience. This is something countries like Finland or Singapore are famous for. In Singapore, they call it Total Defence. It has six pillars: military, civil, economic, social, digital, and psychological. They don't just have a government plan; they have a plan that involves every citizen and every private company.

Corn

Finland is the one that always blows my mind. Don't they have enough underground bunkers for their entire population?

Herman

They maintain one of the world's largest per-capita bunker networks, with capacity for most of their population. And they have the National Emergency Supply Agency, or N E S A. They maintain huge stockpiles of grain, fuel, and medicine, but they also have legal agreements with private companies to pivot their production lines within forty-eight hours of a national emergency. It is a public-private partnership where the government pays the storage costs and the companies manage the inventory so it stays fresh. It is brilliant.

Corn

That is fascinating. So the government acts more like a coordinator than a sole provider. But let's talk about the friction there. Private companies want efficiency. They want the cheapest parts from wherever they can get them. Forcing them to have domestic backups or to hold extra inventory is expensive. It is essentially a tax on the economy in exchange for an insurance policy that might never be used.

Herman

That is exactly the tension. For the last thirty years, the world has been obsessed with efficiency. Just-in-time manufacturing was the gold standard. You don't want a warehouse full of parts; you want the parts arriving at the factory gate exactly when you need them. But as we saw during the supply chain shocks of the early twenty-twenties, and again with the Red Sea disruptions in twenty-twenty-four, just-in-time is incredibly fragile. We are now seeing a shift toward what people are calling just-in-case. Governments are starting to subsidize that inefficiency. They are telling companies, we will pay you to keep this factory in our country, or we will give you tax breaks to source your raw materials from a friendly nation instead of the cheapest one.

Corn

It is like we are watching the end of the era of pure globalization and the start of something much more guarded. Daniel mentioned the Ben-Gurion doctrine here in Israel, which was all about self-reliance because the country felt it had no other choice. It is interesting to see that mindset spreading to much larger, more established powers.

Herman

It really is. Even the United States, with the Chips and Science Act, is essentially doing a version of this. They realized that having ninety percent of advanced semiconductors made in one small area of the world was a catastrophic strategic risk. So they are spending hundreds of billions of dollars to bring that manufacturing back home. That is a form of national prepping. It is the state-level version of you buying a U P S for your server rack.

Corn

So, when these guys are in these war rooms, what does a day actually look like? Are they looking at spreadsheets, or is it more like a high-stakes role-playing game?

Herman

It is a bit of both. Usually, there is a control group, often called white cell, that introduces new complications every few hours. They might start with a cyber-attack on the power grid. Then, while the team is dealing with that, they announce that a major port has been closed due to a strike or a blockade. Then, they throw in a massive disinformation campaign on social media that is causing panic buying in grocery stores. The goal is to overwhelm the decision-makers. They want to see where the communication breaks down. Does the energy minister know who to call at the port? Does the central bank have a plan for a sudden run on the currency?

Corn

I imagine the most interesting part isn't the first-order effects, like the power going out, but the second and third-order effects. Like, if the power is out for three days, the water pumps stop working. If the water stops, people start leaving the cities. If people leave the cities, the roads become blocked for emergency vehicles. It is that cascading failure that really kills you.

Herman

You hit the nail on the head. That is called interdependency modeling. In the past, governments planned in silos. The military planned for war, the health department planned for disease, and the treasury planned for economic shocks. But in a real contingency, all those things happen at once and they feed off each other. The modern approach is to use massive computer simulations to map these connections. They want to find the single points of failure. Sometimes it is something incredibly mundane, like a specific type of chemical used in water purification that only one factory in the world makes.

Corn

That is terrifying, honestly. It makes you realize how thin the ice is that we are all skating on. But to Daniel's point about self-reliance, how far can you actually go? If you are a small country, you can't be self-reliant in everything. You can't make your own fighter jets, your own advanced medical equipment, and grow all your own food. There has to be a limit.

Herman

There is. And that is where the concept of the resilient network comes in. Instead of trying to be a lonely island, you try to build a circle of friends who are all prepping together. They call this friend-shoring. You make sure that your critical dependencies are spread out among countries that share your values and your strategic interests. It is about reducing the leverage that a hostile or unpredictable power has over you. Think of it as a mutual defense pact, but for microchips and wheat.

Corn

So, instead of a global supply chain, we are moving toward a series of regional or ideological supply chains. It feels like the world is becoming more fragmented, which I suppose is a natural reaction to the volatility we have seen. But what does this mean for the average person? Most of our listeners aren't government ministers. How does this state-level prepping affect our daily lives?

Herman

It affects us in two big ways. First, it makes things more expensive. Resilience isn't free. Building redundant factories and keeping massive stockpiles costs money, and that cost eventually shows up in the price of your phone, your car, and your electricity. Second, it changes the role of the citizen. In a truly resilient society, the government expects you to be able to take care of yourself for a few days so they can focus on the big systemic problems. That is why Sweden sends out that brochure called If Crisis or War Comes to every household. It isn't because they are abandoning you; it is because if ten million people can take care of themselves, the government can focus all its resources on fixing the power grid or the water system.

Corn

It is a partnership. We do the micro-prepping so they can do the macro-prepping. That makes a lot of sense. But I want to go back to the war gaming for a second. Have there been any famous examples where these drills actually saved the day when a real crisis hit?

Herman

There are a few, but often the successes are invisible because the crisis just... didn't happen as badly as it could have. One interesting example is the way Taiwan and South Korea handled the initial wave of the pandemic. They had been drilling for something like S A R S for years. They had the laws in place, they had the stockpiles of masks, and they had the digital infrastructure ready to go. When the real thing hit, they didn't have to debate what to do; they just executed the plan. Another is the way the Baltic states prepared for energy disruptions. They spent years building liquefied natural gas terminals specifically because they knew their existing energy relationship with Russia was a strategic vulnerability. When the geopolitical situation shifted in twenty-twenty-two, they were ready.

Corn

Meanwhile, other countries were having meetings to decide who should be in charge of the meetings.

Herman

Exactly. It is essentially buying time. You are buying the time you need to react without the system collapsing under its own weight. I am curious about the role of A I in this. We are sitting here in twenty-twenty-six, and A I has advanced so much since the early days of the decade. Are governments using A I to run these war games now?

Herman

Absolutely. This is where it gets really nerdy and cool. In the old days, a war game might have twenty or thirty human players. Now, they can run millions of simulations using A I agents. They can give an A I agent a personality, like a cynical trade minister or a panicked citizen, and see how millions of these agents interact during a crisis. They call these Digital Twins of the economy. It allows them to find those weird, emergent behaviors that a human planner might never think of.

Corn

Like what?

Herman

Like a specific type of social media rumor causing a bank run in a medium-sized city that somehow triggers a liquidity crisis in a totally unrelated industry. These A I models can spot those weird correlations. They are also using A I to manage real-time supply chains. If a storm hits a port in Asia, the A I can instantly recalculate the best way to reroute critical medical supplies to hospitals in Europe before the humans even realize there is a problem.

Corn

That feels like a double-edged sword, though. If you rely too much on the A I to manage your resilience, what happens if the A I itself is the point of failure? We talked about A I policy wargaming back in episode fifty-one, and that seems more relevant than ever.

Herman

You are totally right. That is the ultimate second-order effect. If your resilience strategy depends on a system that requires constant internet access and massive amounts of electricity, you have just created a new vulnerability. This is why the best state-level planning always includes a low-tech backup. You need the A I, but you also need the guy who knows how to operate the manual valves at the water plant and the paper maps in the basement of the town hall.

Corn

I love that. High-tech for efficiency, low-tech for survival. It is the same principle we talked about with the mesh nets. Use the internet while it is there, but have a radio ready for when it isn't. So, if we look toward the future, what is the next frontier for this kind of planning? What are the big brains in the basements of the National Security Councils worried about now?

Herman

The big one right now is what they call multi-domain attrition. It is the idea that a future conflict or contingency won't just be in one area. It will be a simultaneous hit to your economy, your digital infrastructure, your physical security, and your social cohesion. They are worried about how a society holds together when the shared reality starts to fracture. If you can't agree on what is happening because of deepfakes and disinformation, it is almost impossible to execute a national plan.

Corn

That brings us back to the human element. You can have the best plan in the world, but if the people don't trust the government or each other, the plan is just paper.

Herman

Precisely. That is why some countries are now including social trust as a metric in their resilience planning. They are looking at how to build community-level bonds before a crisis hits. It turns out that the best way to survive a geopolitical disaster is to actually know your neighbors.

Corn

Who would have thought? The ultimate survival tech is a neighborhood barbecue.

Herman

It sounds cheesy, but it is true. When the systems fail, people turn to the people they know. If you have those relationships in place, you can coordinate, you can share resources, and you can keep the panic at bay. This is why countries like Norway and Switzerland have such high resilience scores; it is not just the bunkers, it is the social cohesion.

Corn

That is a great point to pivot to some practical takeaways. We have talked about the high-level statecraft, but for the people listening, how should this information change how they look at the world?

Herman

First, I would say pay attention to your country's National Risk Register if they publish one. It is a great way to see what the experts are actually worried about versus what the media is hyping up. Second, look at your own dependencies through the same lens as a red team. What are the three things you cannot live without? If it is a specific medication, do you have a thirty-day supply? If it is your internet connection for work, do you have a backup like a satellite link or a secondary provider?

Corn

And I would add, don't just look at what you have, but look at where it comes from. We often talk about supporting local businesses, but in this context, it is also a resilience strategy. If you get your food from a farm twenty miles away, you are much more resilient to a global shipping crisis than if everything you eat comes from across an ocean.

Herman

Exactly. And third, engage with your local community. See if there are local emergency response groups or even just a neighborhood chat where people share information. Being part of a network is always better than being a single node.

Corn

That is a perfect way to put it. We are all nodes in a much larger system, and the stronger the connections between us, the harder it is for the whole thing to come down. This has been a really enlightening deep dive, Herman. It is easy to feel small when you think about these massive geopolitical forces, but understanding how the state tries to manage them actually makes me feel a bit more grounded.

Herman

I agree. It is not about living in fear; it is about living with your eyes open. When you understand the mechanisms of resilience, you can start to build it into your own life.

Corn

Well, I think we have covered a lot of ground today. From the war rooms of the National Security Council to the grain silos of Finland and the A I simulations of the future. Daniel, thanks for sending in that prompt. It really pushed us to look at the big picture.

Herman

Yeah, it was a great one. And hey, if you are listening and you have been enjoying our deep dives into the weird and the wonderful, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It genuinely helps other curious minds find the show.

Corn

It really does. You can find us as always on Spotify and at our website, myweirdprompts.com. We have the full archive there, including all those episodes we mentioned today if you want to go back and listen to the building blocks of this conversation.

Herman

Until next time, keep asking the weird questions. They are usually the ones that lead to the most interesting answers.

Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. Thanks for listening, and we will talk to you next week.

Herman

Goodbye everyone!