MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #333

Before the CIA: The Secret History of Spying

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Long before the existence of the CIA or Mossad, the world of espionage was a decentralized web of personal favors, diplomatic gossip, and "Black Chambers." In this episode, Herman and Corn trace the evolution of intelligence from Renaissance ambassadors to the birth of modern signals intelligence. They explore how the need for institutional memory transformed spying from a temporary wartime necessity into the permanent global infrastructure we see today.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

I'd like to discuss the evolution of the intelligence community. While professional, standalone intelligence agencies are a relatively modern phenomenon—largely dating back to the World War II era—countries have always sought information to inform policy and military activity. How was intelligence gathered before the establishment of dedicated agencies? Was there always an overlap between diplomacy and intelligence, and what techniques were used to gain a strategic advantage before modern developments like signals intelligence?

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. We are sitting here in our house in Jerusalem, the sun is just starting to hit the balcony, and we have got a fascinating topic to dive into today. I am Corn, and I am here with my brother.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, ready and reporting for duty. Our housemate Daniel sent us a really thoughtful prompt this morning. He was looking at how we talk about these massive intelligence agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency or Mossad as if they have always existed, but he pointed out that they are actually quite a modern invention.

Corn

Right, and it got him wondering about how it worked before the nineteen forties. If you did not have a building full of analysts and satellites, how did a king or a general actually know what the other side was doing? It is that classic question of how we moved from spies being individuals to intelligence being an institution.

Herman

It is such a great angle because we often suffer from a bit of historical amnesia. We assume that because the need for information is ancient, the way we gather it must have always looked somewhat like it does now. But the professional, permanent intelligence agency is a very recent development in human history. Most of what we think of as the intelligence community only really solidified after the National Security Act of nineteen forty seven.

Corn

I remember we touched on some of the modern tech side of this back in episode two hundred when we looked at the evolution of the modern artificial intelligence tech stack, but today we are going way back. We are talking about the era of the human element and the physical letter.

Herman

Exactly. And I think to really understand this, we have to start with the fact that for most of history, intelligence was not a department. It was a person. It was an ad hoc, temporary arrangement. If a king wanted to know if the neighboring kingdom was preparing for war, he did not call his Director of National Intelligence. He probably called his most trusted cousin or a merchant who traveled that route often.

Corn

So it was more about personal networks than institutional knowledge. But Daniel's prompt asks about the techniques used before things like signals intelligence. If I am a ruler in the year fifteen hundred, what is my version of a satellite photo?

Herman

Your version of a satellite photo is a guy on a very fast horse with a good memory. Or, more accurately, it is the diplomatic pouch. One of the biggest points Daniel raised was the overlap between diplomacy and intelligence, and historically, they were almost the same thing. In the Renaissance period, particularly in places like Venice, the ambassador was expected to be a spy. That was his primary job. He was there to represent his sovereign, sure, but his main value was the reports he sent back about the health of the foreign king, the state of the treasury, and the gossip in the court.

Corn

That is interesting because today we have very clear lines, at least on paper, between a diplomat and an intelligence officer. If a diplomat gets caught spying now, it is a huge international incident. But back then, it was just the job description?

Herman

Pretty much. The Venetians were the masters of this. They developed this incredibly sophisticated system of diplomatic reporting called the relazioni. When an ambassador finished his term, he had to give a full, detailed report to the Senate. They were so good at it that other countries started copying their methods. But even then, it was not a standalone agency. It was part of the diplomatic service.

Corn

So if diplomacy was the legal side of it, what about the illegal side? The classic cloak and dagger stuff. We always hear about the second oldest profession. How did they manage those networks without a central headquarters?

Herman

That is where it gets really interesting and a bit messy. You had people like Sir Francis Walsingham in the sixteenth century. He was Queen Elizabeth the First's spymaster. He is often cited as one of the fathers of modern intelligence, but he did not have an agency. He had a private network. He often paid his spies out of his own pocket. He was obsessed with protecting the Queen from Catholic plots, and he used every trick in the book. He used codebreakers, he used double agents, and he was a master of what we now call postal interception.

Corn

Wait, postal interception? You mean they were just opening everyone's mail?

Herman

Oh, absolutely. This led to what were known as the Black Chambers, or the Cabinet Noir in France. This is one of those specific techniques Daniel was asking about. From about the seventeenth century until the mid nineteenth century, almost every major European power had a secret office within their post office. Their job was to carefully open the mail of foreign diplomats and even their own citizens, read it, copy it, and then reseal it so perfectly that no one would notice.

Corn

That sounds incredibly tedious. How did they reseal it without leaving a mark? We are talking about wax seals and specialized paper.

Herman

They had artisans who were experts in forged seals. They would take a bread crumb impression of the wax seal, create a quick mold, and then recast the seal once they were done reading the letter. They had chemists who worked on secret inks and developed ways to steam open envelopes without wrinkling the paper. In the Austrian Empire, the Geheime Kabinettskanzlei was so efficient they could intercept, copy, and return a letter to the mail stream in less than two hours. It was a highly technical, specialized field, but it was hidden inside the postal service. It was not its own agency.

Corn

So the Postmaster General was essentially a high ranking intelligence official. That is a career path you do not see much of anymore. But it makes sense. If all communication is physical, the person who controls the physical transport of that communication has all the power.

Herman

Exactly. And that is a form of signals intelligence, really, just for a world without electronic signals. You are intercepting the medium of communication. But the jump to a permanent agency only happened when the volume and complexity of that information became too much for a few guys in a post office basement to handle.

Corn

I want to dig into that transition point. Daniel mentioned that these agencies mostly date back to the World War Two era. But what was the catalyst in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century that made countries say, okay, we need a standing, professional group for this?

Herman

It was really the professionalization of the military and the rise of the nation state. In the nineteenth century, you started seeing the creation of military intelligence departments. In Britain, for example, they had the Topographical and Statistical Department. Notice the name. It sounds very boring and academic. They were making maps. But mapping a foreign country is the ultimate intelligence act. You are learning the terrain, the bridges, the supply routes.

Corn

Right, if you are drawing a map of your neighbor's backyard, you are not just being a good cartographer. You are planning a visit. We saw a version of this in episode three hundred twenty four when we talked about global flight tracking. The data is public, but the way you use it is what makes it intelligence.

Herman

Exactly. And in the nineteenth century, this was called the Great Game. This was the cold war between the British Empire and the Russian Empire over Central Asia. They sent out these young officers disguised as explorers or botanists or merchants. They were literally mapping the gaps in the map. They even used local agents called Pundits, who were trained to walk in exactly equal paces and use prayer beads to measure distances for secret surveys. But even then, they reported back to their military units. There was no MI six yet.

Corn

So when does MI six actually enter the chat? Because that feels like the archetype of the professional agency.

Herman

Nineteen zero nine. That is the big year. The British government realized they were terrified of German spies. There was this huge public mania in the United Kingdom at the time, people were seeing German spies behind every bush. So they created the Secret Service Bureau. It was tiny. It was basically two guys. One was Commander Mansfield Cumming, who became the first C. You know how in James Bond the head of MI six is called M? In real life, he is called C, because Cumming used to sign his notes with a C in green ink.

Corn

And they still do that, right? The head of the Secret Intelligence Service still signs in green ink?

Herman

They do. It is one of those great historical carryovers. But the point is, before nineteen zero nine, the British did not have a permanent, peacetime foreign intelligence service. They would spin things up during a war and then shut them down when the peace treaty was signed. The big shift was the realization that in the modern world, you cannot afford to start from scratch every time a war breaks out. You need a permanent memory. You need a standing library of secrets.

Corn

That is a crucial point. The permanency is what defines the agency. But I am curious about the techniques during that transition. If we are moving away from just opening mail and toward more complex stuff, how did they handle things like cryptanalysis before computers?

Herman

It was all linguistics and mathematics. During World War One, the British had a group called Room forty. It was part of the Admiralty, the navy. They were scholars, people who studied ancient languages or complex math. When the British cut the German undersea telegraph cables at the start of the war, the Germans had to rely on radio. And once it is in the air, anyone can grab it. That was the birth of true signals intelligence, or SIGINT. Their biggest win was the Zimmermann Telegram, which they intercepted and decoded, eventually helping pull the United States into the war.

Corn

So the technology forced the institutionalization. You could not just have a merchant telling you what he saw in the harbor anymore. You needed a room full of linguists and mathematicians working twenty four seven to decode radio bursts.

Herman

Exactly. And that required a budget, a building, and a hierarchy. It required a professional class of people who were not soldiers or diplomats, but analysts. And that is really where the modern intelligence community begins to take shape. But even after World War One, a lot of countries tried to go back to the old way. The United States is the famous example here. They had a codebreaking office called the Black Chamber after World War One, run by a guy named Herbert Yardley. But in nineteen twenty nine, the Secretary of State, Henry Stimson, shut it down.

Corn

Why? Was it a budget thing?

Herman

No, it was a moral thing. He famously said, gentlemen do not read each other's mail. He thought it was unseemly for a great power to be spying on its allies during peacetime. It was a very old school, nineteenth century view of diplomacy.

Corn

That feels so quaint now. It is hard to imagine a world where a Secretary of State would say that with a straight face.

Herman

It really does. But it shows that the idea of a permanent intelligence agency was still being resisted. It took the absolute shock of Pearl Harbor and the Second World War for the United States to realize that Stimson’s view was a luxury they could no longer afford. They needed the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services, which eventually became the CIA in nineteen forty seven.

Corn

So the CIA is really a product of the early Cold War. It is about that transition from the hot war of the forties to the permanent state of readiness.

Herman

Right. And that is when you get the intelligence community as we know it. It is not just one agency. It is a massive web. In the United States, you have eighteen different organizations now, from the big ones like the CIA and the NSA to the smaller ones like the Coast Guard Intelligence or the Department of Energy’s intelligence wing. It is a whole ecosystem.

Corn

I want to go back to something Daniel asked about, which was the techniques used before modern developments. We have talked about mail and radio, but what about the human side? Did the way we recruit spies change when it became professionalized?

Herman

That is a great question. In the old days, spying was often about money or coercion. You found a disgruntled clerk and you paid him. Or you found someone with a secret and you blackmailed them. When it became professionalized, it became more about ideology and what we call tradecraft. You started seeing the development of formal schools for spying. During World War Two, the British had a place called Camp X in Canada where they trained agents in everything from silent killing to how to blend into a French village.

Corn

So it went from an amateur pursuit to a science. You are not just a guy who knows things; you are an asset who has been trained in specific protocols.

Herman

Exactly. And the terminology changed too. You started hearing about the intelligence cycle: requirements, collection, processing, analysis, and dissemination. It became a factory process. Before the nineteen hundreds, it was more like a boutique service for the King.

Corn

It is interesting to think about how that change in structure changed the actual information. If you have a professional agency, they have to justify their existence, right? They have to produce reports. Does that create a situation where we are gathering more information than we actually need?

Herman

That is one of the biggest critiques of the modern intelligence community. It is called the noise problem. In the era of Sir Francis Walsingham, you might get one letter every three months, but that letter was gold. Today, the NSA is collecting petabytes of data every day. The challenge is no longer getting the information; it is finding the signal in the noise. It is a completely different kind of intelligence work.

Corn

It almost feels like we have come full circle. In the beginning, it was hard to get information because of physical distance and secrecy. Now, it is hard to get information because there is too much of it.

Herman

That is a brilliant way to put it. And it is why the role of the analyst has become so much more important than the role of the spy on the ground in many ways. You need people who can connect the dots between a satellite photo of a grain silo, an intercepted phone call in a different country, and a change in the price of copper on the London Metal Exchange.

Corn

That is the second order effect Daniel was hinting at. When intelligence becomes an institution, it changes how the government actually thinks. It is not just about reacting to events; it is about trying to predict them using data.

Herman

And it changes diplomacy too. Remember how we said diplomats and spies used to be the same thing? Now they are often in tension. A diplomat wants to build a relationship and trust. A spy wants to exploit that relationship for information. When they both work for the same government but in different agencies, you get these internal battles that would have been unthinkable in the sixteenth century.

Corn

I wonder if we could talk about some specific examples of pre modern intelligence that really gave a strategic advantage. You mentioned the Venetians, but what about non Western examples? I am thinking of something like the Mongol Empire. They were famous for their communication networks.

Herman

Oh, the Mongols were the masters of what we call tactical intelligence. They had a system called the Yam. It was a series of relay stations across their entire empire. A messenger could travel up to two hundred miles a day by switching horses at these stations. This meant that Genghis Khan knew what was happening on the borders of his empire weeks before his enemies even knew a Mongol army was coming.

Corn

So their advantage was speed. It was not necessarily that they had better spies, but that their information moved faster than anyone else's.

Herman

Exactly. It was a network advantage. And they used their merchants. The Mongols were very pro trade, and they encouraged merchants to travel. In return, the merchants acted as the eyes and ears of the Khan. If a city was poorly defended or if the local ruler was unpopular, the Mongols knew about it before they even arrived. It was a very efficient, very low tech version of a global intelligence network.

Corn

It is amazing how much of this comes down to infrastructure. Whether it is a Mongol horse relay or a modern fiber optic cable, the person who controls the path of the information wins.

Herman

Every time. And if you look at the history of the British Empire, their intelligence advantage in the nineteenth century was the telegraph. They owned almost all the undersea cables in the world. If you wanted to send a message from South America to Europe, it probably went through a British owned station. They did not even need to be in the country to listen in.

Corn

That is such a huge point. It is the same thing we see today with the internet and where the servers are located. If the data passes through your territory, you have the right of way to look at it.

Herman

It is the ultimate home field advantage. But to Daniel's point about the evolution of the community, the biggest change was the move from intelligence being a tool for war to intelligence being a tool for policy. Today, intelligence agencies weigh in on climate change, on global health, on economic trends. They have become a sort of shadow academic department for the government.

Corn

Which brings up the question of transparency. In the old days, if a King had a spy, nobody cared because the King was the law. But in a modern democracy, having a massive, secret agency is a bit of a paradox, right?

Herman

It is a massive tension. We saw this in the nineteen seventies with the Church Committee in the United States, which was the first time the public really got a look under the hood of the CIA and the FBI. People were shocked by what they found, things like MK Ultra or the attempts to assassinate foreign leaders. That led to the creation of oversight committees. So the evolution of the community is not just about getting better at spying; it is about the struggle to make spying compatible with democracy.

Corn

That is a really deep point. The institutionalization brought with it the need for oversight, which is something a Renaissance spymaster would have found hilarious. Imagine telling Walsingham he had to report to a subcommittee on civil liberties.

Herman

He would have had you thrown in the Tower of London before you finished the sentence. But that is the price of professionalization. When you become part of the state, you have to follow the rules of the state, at least in theory.

Corn

I want to pivot back to the techniques for a second. We talked about mail and radio, but what about things like steganography? The art of hiding a message in plain sight. That feels like a very pre modern technique that is still around today.

Herman

It is one of the oldest tricks in the book. There is a story from Herodotus about a man who wanted to send a secret message. He shaved the head of his most trusted slave, tattooed the message on his scalp, waited for the hair to grow back, and then sent him on his way. When the slave arrived, the recipient just shaved his head again.

Corn

That is the ultimate low bandwidth, high security communication. It takes months to send a tweet.

Herman

Exactly. But it worked. And you see more sophisticated versions of that throughout history. Microdots in World War Two, or today, hiding data inside the pixels of a digital image. The core concept is exactly the same: if the enemy does not even know there is a message, they cannot try to decode it.

Corn

This really reinforces the idea that while the agencies are new, the human ingenuity behind them is as old as we are. We have always been trying to find ways to know what the other person is thinking while keeping our own thoughts secret.

Herman

It is the fundamental game of human interaction. But I think Daniel's prompt really highlights that we are living in a very specific, and perhaps temporary, era of the large, centralized agency. With the rise of open source intelligence, or OSINT, that central monopoly is starting to crack. We are seeing this right now in twenty twenty six, where commercial satellite imagery and social media analysis are often faster than the official channels.

Corn

Right, when a teenager with a laptop and a satellite subscription can track a tank column as well as a CIA analyst can, the value of the agency changes.

Herman

Precisely. The agency's value now is not just in having the data, but in having the context and the history to interpret it. But the collection part is being democratized. We might be moving into a future where the intelligence community looks more like a decentralized network again, much like it did in the days of the merchant spies, just with better tools.

Corn

That is a fascinating prediction. It is like we are returning to the ad hoc nature of the past, but on a global, digital scale.

Herman

It is the cycle of history. We went from individuals to institutions, and now we might be moving to a hybrid of both. But the one thing that will never change is the need for a good story. At the end of the day, an intelligence report is just a story about what might happen next.

Corn

And that is why we need people like you, Herman, to help us read between the lines. I think we have covered a lot of ground here, from the Black Chambers to the Yam of the Mongols. What are the big takeaways for our listeners who are trying to make sense of the headlines today?

Herman

I think the first takeaway is that the intelligence community is much younger than you think. If you feel like these agencies are these ancient, immutable monoliths, remember that they are mostly younger than your grandparents. They are still evolving, and they are still trying to figure out their place in the world.

Corn

And the second would be that the overlap between diplomacy and spying is not a bug; it is a feature. It has been there since the beginning. When you see a news story about a diplomat being expelled, you are seeing a very old dance that has been going on since the days of the Venetian Republic.

Herman

Absolutely. And the third is that technology always dictates the form. Radio gave us the NSA. The telegraph gave us Room forty. The internet is giving us something entirely new that we probably do not even have a name for yet.

Corn

That is a great place to wrap it up. Daniel, thank you for sending in such a deep prompt. It really pushed us to look at the long arc of history.

Herman

Yeah, it was a blast. And hey, if you are listening and you have a weird question that pops into your head at an inconvenient moment, send it our way! We love diving into these rabbit holes.

Corn

And if you have been enjoying the show, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a quick review on your podcast app or Spotify. It genuinely helps other curious people find us.

Herman

It really does. You can find us at our website, myweirdprompts.com, where we have the full RSS feed and a contact form if you want to get in touch.

Corn

Alright, that is it for this episode. I am Corn.

Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry.

Corn

Thanks for listening to My Weird Prompts. We will see you next time.

Herman

Until then, keep asking the weird questions!

Corn

So, Herman, be honest. If you were a spy in the sixteenth century, what would your cover be?

Herman

Oh, that is easy. I would be a traveling clockmaker. No one suspects the guy who is obsessed with gears and springs, but I would be listening to every tick of the court's gossip.

Corn

I can see that. You would probably build a tiny microphone into a grandfather clock.

Herman

Exactly! The original bug. Anyway, let's go get some lunch.

Corn

Sounds good. Catch you later, everyone.