

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #282

The Shadow Analysts: How Private Intelligence Shapes the World

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In a world drowning in breaking news, why do global corporations and hedge funds pay millions for private intelligence? In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn Poppleberry peel back the curtain on legendary firms like Janes and Stratfor to reveal how they turn "the mud of information" into actionable strategy. From the 19th-century naval sketches of Fred T. Jane to modern-day geopolitical forecasting, the brothers explore the crucial difference between reporting the weather and modeling the climate of global conflict. They discuss the "revolving door" between agencies like the CIA and the private sector, the forensic detail required to identify drone components from grainy footage, and why the "So What?" factor is the most valuable commodity in the 21st century. Whether you're curious about the "Suits and Spooks" dynamic or how tactical intelligence differs from a BBC headline, this deep dive explains how the pros stay three steps ahead of the news cycle.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

I'd like to chat about the world of private intelligence agencies like Stratfor, Max Security, and Jane's Weekly. What is the added value of the briefings they provide compared to mainstream media like the Telegraph or Reuters? How long have these organizations existed, and are they primarily staffed by former employees of national agencies like the CIA and NSA?

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am joined as always by my brother, the man who probably has a physical filing cabinet for every geopolitical crisis of the last century, and likely a secondary cabinet for the footnotes.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, at your service. And Corn, you are not entirely wrong about the filing cabinets, though most of them have migrated to encrypted drives and decentralized cloud storage these days. Though, I do keep a physical copy of the nineteen fourteen naval registers just for the smell of the ink. It grounds me.

Corn

It is funny you say that because our housemate Daniel sent us a prompt this week that is right up your alley. We were sitting around the kitchen here in Jerusalem the other day—and for those listening, it is a particularly crisp January morning in twenty twenty-six—talking about the recent missile volleys and the sheer amount of information flying around on social media. Daniel was asking about the world of private intelligence agencies. You know, companies like Stratfor, Max Security, and Janes. He wanted to know what the actual added value is when you compare them to mainstream giants like Reuters or the Telegraph. Are they just a retirement home for former C-I-A and N-S-A employees, or is there something deeper going on?

Herman

That is a fantastic set of questions, and honestly, it is one of the most misunderstood sectors of the global economy. It touches on something we actually brushed up against back in episode two hundred sixty-six when we were looking at command centers. The line between a newsroom and an intelligence cell has become incredibly thin, but the differences that remain are actually quite profound. It is the difference between telling you that a building is on fire and telling you who sold the matches, why the fire department is intentionally taking the long route, and how the insurance payout will fund a proxy war in the neighboring country.

Corn

Right, and I think for a lot of people, these names sound like something out of a Tom Clancy novel. You hear Stratfor and you think of the shadow C-I-A. You hear Janes and you think of those massive, expensive books filled with technical specifications of every tank and destroyer on the planet. But before we get into the why of it all, let's look at the how long. How long have these organizations actually been around? Because they feel like modern inventions, but I suspect the roots go deeper.

Herman

It varies wildly, Corn. If you look at Janes, which is now officially Janes Information Group, they are the absolute granddaddy of the industry. They go all the way back to eighteen ninety-eight. It was started by a man named Fred T. Jane, who began with a book called All the World's Fighting Ships. Now, Fred was not a spy. He was a naval enthusiast and an artist. He started by sketching ships. But he realized that naval officers and governments had no centralized way to know exactly what the other side's ships looked like or what their capabilities were. It was essentially a technical catalog for professionals. It was not intelligence in the sense of stealing secrets, but it was the definitive open source record of naval power. By the time World War One rolled around, Janes was the bible of the seas.

Corn

So it started as a hobbyist's guide that became an essential tool for the professionals. That makes sense. It is like the ultimate 'specs' sheet. But what about the more modern, forecasting-heavy firms like Stratfor? They do not just list ships; they try to tell the future.

Herman

Stratfor is much younger, but it changed the game. It was founded in nineteen ninety-six in Austin, Texas, by George Friedman. This was right as the internet was beginning to change how information was disseminated. Friedman's insight was that you could apply a geopolitical methodology—a specific way of looking at geography, history, and economics—to predict how nations would behave. They were not trying to report the news as it happened. They were trying to tell you what the news would be five or ten years from now. They became famous during the Kosovo War in nineteen ninety-nine because they were providing updates that were often faster and more strategically focused than the major networks. They were eventually acquired by a company called R-A-N-E—Risk Assistance Network and Exchange—back in twenty twenty, but the Stratfor brand remains the gold standard for that 'geopolitics as destiny' style of analysis.

Corn

That is the big distinction, isn't it? When Daniel sent that audio clip, he mentioned the added value. If I am reading Reuters, I am getting a report that says a missile was fired from point A to point B at two o'clock in the morning. What does a Stratfor or a Max Security briefing give me that the journalist at the Telegraph missed? Is it just more adjectives, or is it actual data?

Herman

It is the 'So What?' factor. Think of it as the difference between a weather report and a climate model. Reuters is the weather report. It tells you it is raining right now. It is accurate, it is fast, and it is essential. But a private intelligence briefing is the climate model that explains why the rain is happening, how it will affect the crop yields in three months, how those crop yields will lead to a political uprising in six months, and specifically, how that uprising will impact the supply chain of the microchips your company needs.

Corn

So it is about the second and third order effects. It is moving from 'What happened?' to 'What does this mean for my bottom line?'

Herman

Exactly. Mainstream media has a very specific mandate. They have to be objective, they have to be fast, and they have to appeal to a broad audience. Their goal is to inform the public. A private intelligence firm has a client. That client might be a Fortune five hundred company, a hedge fund, or a government agency. Those clients do not just want to know what happened. They want to know what it means for their specific interests. If you are the C-E-O of a global shipping firm, you do not care about the human interest story of a port strike in Greece. You care about the specific political affiliation of the union leader and whether he is likely to take a bribe or hold out for a month.

Corn

Can you give me a concrete example? Let's say there is a coup in a West African nation. How does the coverage differ between the B-B-C and a firm like Max Security?

Herman

Okay, so the B-B-C or the Associated Press will report on the coup. They will talk about the gunfire in the capital, the names of the generals involved, and the international condemnation. It is vital information for a citizen of the world. But if you are an executive at a mining company with a billion dollars invested in a bauxite mine in that country, you need more. You go to a firm like Max Security. They are headquartered right here in the Middle East, and they specialize in tactical, boots-on-the-ground intelligence. Their briefing will focus on things the B-B-C might not even mention. They will analyze the specific tribal affiliations of the new military council. They will look at the proximity of the fighting to the transport rail lines. They will tell you if the new regime is likely to honor existing contracts or if they have ties to rival foreign powers who might want to nationalize your mine. They provide actionable intelligence—information you can actually make a business decision on.

Corn

That is a huge difference in perspective. It is almost like the news is for the citizens, but the intelligence is for the stakeholders. It feels more... mercenary, in a way.

Herman

It is transactional, certainly. And there is a level of technical depth that mainstream media simply cannot afford to maintain. Take Janes for example. If a new drone is spotted in a conflict zone, a journalist might call it a 'high-tech suicide drone.' A Janes analyst will look at the grainy video, identify the specific wing configuration, the engine intake shape, and the likely sensor package. They will tell you who manufactured it, what the export restrictions on its components are, and what that tells us about the supply chain of the group using it. They might even tell you the specific frequency the controller uses. That level of forensic detail is the added value. You are paying for the expertise of people who spend ten hours a day looking at the rivets on a Chinese destroyer.

Corn

I remember Daniel mentioning the thermal signatures of the Iranian missiles during that recent exchange. He found a private analyst who was explaining why they were fired at night based on the cooling requirements of the guidance systems. That is the kind of thing you just do not see on the nightly news because, frankly, most people would change the channel.

Herman

Right, because the nightly news has three minutes to cover the entire conflict. The private analyst has a twenty-page report dedicated to the physics of the launch. And this leads to Daniel's other point about the staffing. Is it just a retirement home for the C-I-A and the N-S-A? Is it just 'Spooks Inc.'?

Corn

Yeah, let's talk about the revolving door. Is it as pervasive as people think? Does every analyst at these firms have a framed commendation from Langley on their wall?

Herman

It is very real, but it is not just about having a fancy resume. There is a specific tradecraft that you learn in the national agencies. You learn how to vet sources, how to spot disinformation, and how to write in a way that is 'actionable.' In the C-I-A, they call it the 'President's Daily Brief' style. It is concise, it is bottom-line up front, and it is brutally honest about what we know and what we don't know. When a company like Stratfor or Black Cube or any of these firms hires a former agency employee, they are buying that methodology. They are buying the ability to look at a mess of data and find the signal in the noise.

Corn

But isn't there a risk there? If you are just hiring people who were trained in the same building, don't you end up with the same blind spots? If everyone is looking through the same 'Western Intelligence' lens, they might miss the cultural nuances that a local journalist would catch.

Herman

That is the big critique, Corn. It is called groupthink. If everyone in your private firm was trained at Langley, they are probably going to see the world through the same lens as the people still at Langley. However, the private sector offers a freedom that the government does not. In the C-I-A, your reports have to go through layers of political vetting before they reach the president. You have to worry about whether your findings contradict the current administration's policy. In a private firm, you can be more provocative. You can take risks with your forecasts because you are not worried about an oversight committee breathing down your neck. Your only 'oversight' is whether your client makes money or stays safe.

Corn

So you might get a more honest, or at least a more unvarnished, take from the private side because they aren't worried about the next election cycle?

Herman

Often, yes. Plus, these firms hire a lot of people who were never in the government. They hire academics, linguists, and data scientists. In twenty twenty-six, the most valuable person in an intelligence firm might not be a former field officer; it might be a twenty-four-year-old who is a wizard at scraping Telegram channels and identifying deepfakes. The real power comes when you combine that academic rigor with the street smarts of a former field officer. It is the 'suits and the spooks' working together.

Corn

I want to go back to something Daniel mentioned in his audio prompt. He talked about the 'mud of information' during the Iran-Israel conflict. He saw a mix of O-S-INT—which is open source intelligence—conspiracy theorists, and psychological operations. How do these private agencies navigate that mud? Because it feels like the internet has made everyone a junior intelligence analyst. I see people on Twitter—or X, or whatever it is called this week—marking up satellite photos with red circles like they are the Director of National Intelligence.

Herman

It has, and that is actually a problem for the traditional firms. We saw this in episode two hundred seventy-seven when we talked about digital obfuscation. The barrier to entry for intelligence analysis has dropped to zero. Anyone with a satellite imagery subscription to a service like Planet Labs or BlackSky can claim to be an expert. The added value of a firm like Janes or Max Security now is their reputation for verification. They have to be the adults in the room. If a 'Twitter expert' says a base has been destroyed, Janes will wait until they have multi-spectral imagery, ground-level confirmation, and perhaps a signal intercept before they put their name on it. Their brand is built on not being wrong.

Corn

So while the internet is screaming about a secret underground base based on a blurry shadow, the professionals are cross-referencing that shadow with historical topography and known construction patterns?

Herman

Exactly. They are applying a structured analytic technique. They use things like the Analysis of Competing Hypotheses, or A-C-H. Instead of just looking for evidence that fits their theory—which is what most social media users do—they actively look for evidence that disproves it. They try to kill their own theories. That is the difference between an 'influencer' and an 'analyst.'

Corn

It feels like there is a spectrum of these companies. You have the ones that are basically high-end news subscriptions, and then you have the ones that feel a bit more shadowy. Where does the line between analysis and actual 'operations' sit? Because Daniel mentioned some firms going through the garbage of beverage companies.

Herman

That is where it gets controversial. Companies like Stratfor or Janes are strictly on the analysis side. They provide information. They are essentially specialized publishers. Then you have firms like Kroll or Control Risks. They do more than just write reports. They provide executive protection, they do forensic accounting, and they help with crisis management. They are on the ground. If your C-E-O gets kidnapped, you don't call Stratfor; you call Control Risks. And then, at the far end of the spectrum, you have the private military contractors and the firms that specialize in corporate espionage.

Corn

Like the ones Daniel mentioned—the ones literally digging through trash to find a secret recipe or a marketing plan.

Herman

Right. That is the world of corporate intelligence, which is often just a polite term for spying. It is the 'Grey Zone.' Most of the firms Daniel was asking about, the ones that provide briefings, stay on the legal side of that line. Their value is in their brains, not their lockpicks. But make no mistake, the information they provide can be used to destroy a competitor just as effectively as a physical break-in. If I know your supply chain is vulnerable to a specific political shift in Indonesia, I can outmaneuver you without ever stepping foot in your office.

Corn

So if I am a regular listener and I want to get a bit of this added value without paying the fifty-thousand-dollar subscription fee that a big corporation pays, is there a middle ground? Or am I stuck with the nightly news?

Herman

Absolutely. Many of these firms have public-facing blogs or podcasts. Stratfor, for example, has a lot of free content under their 'Worldview' banner that explains their geopolitical framework. You can learn a lot just by observing their methodology. How do they look at a map? Why do they care about the depth of a specific port or the gauge of a railway in Central Asia? Once you start seeing the world through those eyes—the eyes of 'Geographic Determinism'—the regular news starts to make a lot more sense. You stop seeing events as random accidents and start seeing them as the logical conclusion of geography and power.

Corn

It is about learning to ask the right questions. Instead of asking 'What happened?' you start asking 'Why does this specific geography make this specific event inevitable?'

Herman

Precisely. It is about moving from the narrative of the news to the logic of the system. It is like moving from watching a magic trick to understanding how the stage is built.

Corn

You know, we have talked about the added value and the history, but I am curious about the future. We are sitting here in twenty twenty-six, and A-I is everywhere. It is in our phones, our cars, and probably our toasters. How is that changing these private intelligence firms? Are the former C-I-A guys being replaced by algorithms?

Herman

It is a massive shift, Corn. Back in episode two hundred seventy-eight, we looked at how A-I is being used to protect whistleblowers, but in the intelligence world, it is being used to sift through mountains of data. A human analyst can read maybe fifty reports a day. An A-I can ingest millions of data points in seconds. It can monitor every ship's transponder, every social media post in twenty languages, and every satellite image update simultaneously. It can spot a pattern—like a slight increase in truck traffic near a chemical plant in Syria—long before a human would ever think to look there.

Corn

So does that make the human analyst obsolete? Are we just waiting for 'S-I-R-I' to tell us when World War Three starts?

Herman

Not at all. It makes the human more important, but their job changes. Instead of being the one who finds the data, they become the one who interprets the A-I's findings. The A-I might spot an anomaly in a supply chain, but it takes a human who understands the nuances of local politics to know if that anomaly is a sign of an impending war or just a strike at a local factory because the cafeteria ran out of coffee. The human provides the context that the machine still struggles with. We call it 'Centaur Intelligence'—the man and the machine working together.

Corn

That makes sense. It is that marriage of big data and human intuition. It is what Daniel was seeing with those thermal signature analyses. An A-I can flag the signature, but a human with twenty years of experience can tell you exactly what that signature means for the operational readiness of a missile battery.

Herman

And that is the 'added value' that will survive the A-I revolution. The ability to say, 'I have seen this before, and here is what happened next.'

Corn

We should probably address the elephant in the room though. These firms are private. They are for-profit. Doesn't that create a massive conflict of interest? If I am paying you for a report on the stability of a region where I have an investment, aren't you incentivized to tell me what I want to hear? Or perhaps the opposite—to scare me so I keep paying for your services?

Herman

That is the big risk, Corn. It is the 'commodification of fear.' If a region is perfectly stable, there is not much for an intelligence firm to sell. There is always a subtle pressure to emphasize the risks. However, if a firm is consistently wrong, they lose their clients. In this world, your reputation is your only real asset. If you tell a C-E-O that a country is safe and their factory gets burned down the next day, you are out of a job. The market, in theory, polices the accuracy. But you always have to ask: 'Who is paying for this report, and what do they stand to gain?'

Corn

In theory. But we have seen plenty of examples where the market fails, or where these firms become part of the very conflicts they are supposed to be analyzing. I am thinking of the Wikileaks dump of Stratfor emails back in twenty twelve—the 'Global Intelligence Files.' It showed a lot of cozy relationships between analysts and the people they were supposed to be watching.

Herman

That was a huge wake-up call for the industry. It showed that even the 'objective' analysts are human. They have biases, they have egos, and they sometimes cross the line into 'influence operations.' That is why it is so important to cross-reference. You don't just read Stratfor. You read Stratfor alongside the Reuters report, alongside the local news from the region, and alongside the academic papers. You have to build your own intelligence picture. You are the final analyst in your own life.

Corn

Which brings us back to Daniel's point. The added value is not that they have the 'secret truth.' The added value is that they have a different perspective and a deeper set of tools. They are another piece of the puzzle.

Herman

Exactly. They provide the connective tissue between the isolated events we see in the headlines. They turn the 'what' into the 'why.'

Corn

So, for our listeners who want to start diving into this, where would you suggest they start? Without breaking the bank or needing a security clearance.

Herman

I would start with the Janes podcast or the Stratfor Worldview site. They have a lot of high-quality free articles. Also, look for the work of Peter Zeihan. He is a former Stratfor analyst who has gone out on his own and has a very engaging, if somewhat controversial, way of explaining geopolitics through geography and demographics. It is a great way to get used to that style of thinking. And for tactical stuff, Max Security often puts out free 'travel alerts' that give you a taste of how they look at immediate risks.

Corn

And what about the staffing? If someone is listening and they are thinking about a career in this, do they have to go through the C-I-A first? Or can they just be a really dedicated nerd?

Herman

Not anymore. While the agencies are still a major pipeline, more and more firms are looking for people with diverse backgrounds. If you are an expert in a specific niche—whether it is cybersecurity, maritime law, or a rare dialect—there is a place for you in private intelligence. The world is getting more complex, not less, and the demand for people who can make sense of that complexity is only going to grow. You just need a thick skin, a lot of patience, and a willingness to look at satellite photos of parking lots for eight hours a day.

Corn

That is a really empowering thought. It is not just a closed club for former spooks. It is a field that rewards deep curiosity and specialized knowledge. It is about being a professional observer.

Herman

It really is. It is the ultimate job for the 'weirdly curious.'

Corn

Well, I think we have covered a lot of ground here. We have looked at the history going back to Fred T. Jane in eighteen ninety-eight, the rise of forecasting with Stratfor in the nineties, the added value of stakeholder perspective versus public information, and the way A-I is changing the game in twenty twenty-six.

Herman

And we managed to do it without getting our trash searched by a rival beverage company. Though, I did see a suspicious-looking van outside earlier.

Corn

That was just the grocery delivery, Herman. Calm down. Daniel, thanks for the prompt. It really forced us to look at how we consume the news we are seeing every day here in Jerusalem. It is easy to get lost in the noise, but having these frameworks helps us stay grounded.

Herman

It really does. And hey, to our regular listeners, if you have been enjoying these deep dives, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It helps more people find the show and join the conversation. It is the only way we can keep the lights on and the filing cabinets organized.

Corn

Yeah, it genuinely makes a difference. We love seeing where you all are listening from and what prompts you are thinking about. You can always get in touch with us through the contact form at myweirdprompts dot com.

Herman

And if you want to see that experimental graph Daniel mentioned in the audio, the one that shows how all our episodes connect—from command centers to digital obfuscation—you can find that on the website too. It is a work in progress, but it is a fun way to navigate the rabbit holes we have been down.

Corn

Like the one we went down today. This has been My Weird Prompts. I am Corn.

Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry.

Corn

We will see you next time. Stay curious, everyone.

Herman

And keep asking those weird questions.

Corn

Actually, before we go, Herman, I have one more thought. We talked about the added value for corporations, but what about for the average person living in a conflict zone? Like us here in Jerusalem. Do these briefings offer us something that can actually keep us safer? Or is it just intellectual exercise?

Herman

That is a heavy question, Corn. And the answer is yes, but with a caveat. Firms like Max Security specialize in tactical alerts. They will tell you about a specific protest or a road closure twenty minutes before it hits the news. For someone living here, that is not just added value, that is practical safety. It helps you decide which road to take to the grocery store. But you have to be careful not to let those alerts turn into a constant state of anxiety. Intelligence is a tool, not a lifestyle. If you spend all day staring at the risk model, you forget to live your life.

Corn

That is a really important distinction. Use the information to make better decisions, but don't let the risk models dictate your life. Be informed, not paralyzed.

Herman

Exactly. You want to be the master of the information, not its slave.

Corn

I think that is the perfect note to end on. Thanks again, Herman.

Herman

Anytime, Corn. Now, let's go check that van one more time, just to be sure.

Corn

It's just milk, Herman! Alright, for real this time, thanks for listening to My Weird Prompts. We will be back next week with another prompt from Daniel. Until then, take care of yourselves.

Herman

Bye everyone!

Corn

Oh, and don't forget to check out episode two hundred seventy-four if you want to hear more about the diplomatic side of things we mentioned earlier. It pairs really well with this one.

Herman

Good call. See you all later!