

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #423

The Theatre of Diplomacy: How Nations Fight Without War

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn Poppleberry explore the intricate and often performative world of international diplomacy. Prompted by a question about the strained relations between Ireland and Israel, the hosts dismantle the misconception that hostile relations automatically lead to embassy closures. Instead, they reveal a complex "ladder of escalation" where nations use symbolic snubs, such as recalling ambassadors or seating rivals on lower chairs, to communicate displeasure. By examining the physical rituals of the *démarche* and the legal weight of the *persona non grata* status, the discussion highlights how diplomacy functions as a vital, physical safeguard in an increasingly digital world. Listeners will gain a new perspective on why countries choose to "stay in the house" even when they've stopped talking to each other.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

"I'd like to talk about the world of diplomacy and the ways countries express displeasure with one another. I'm particularly interested in the bilateral relationship between Ireland and Israel; Israel closed its embassy in Dublin in December 2024, yet Ireland maintains its mission in Israel. How does that work on the ground when one side pulls the plug but the other keeps going, especially in a hostile environment? I'd also like to explore other diplomatic mechanisms, such as downgrading to a non-resident ambassador, recalling an ambassador for 'consultations,' and 'summoning' an ambassador. What do these practices actually look like in the modern era, and what is the significance of a 'démarche' or formal letter of protest? How do these different ways of signaling disagreement function in the world of diplomacy?"

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

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

Herman

Herman Poppleberry at your service. It is a beautiful afternoon here, and we have a really dense, fascinating topic to dig into today. Our housemate Daniel sent us a voice note earlier that really got us thinking about the theatre of international relations.

Corn

Yeah, Daniel was asking about the world of diplomacy and how countries basically tell each other they are angry without actually picking up a weapon. It is this incredibly complex system of signaling. He specifically brought up the relationship between Ireland and Israel, which was extremely tense in 2024.

Herman

It is such a timely question. There is this misconception, which Daniel touched on, about embassies closing down. In the world of high-stakes diplomacy, the rhetoric often sounds like a total break is imminent. For instance, back in late twenty twenty-four, there were rumors that Israel might shut its doors in Dublin because the environment was so hostile. But if you look at where we are now, in early twenty twenty-six, those embassies are still open and operating, even if relations remain strained—the lights are dimmed, so to speak.

Corn

That is the perfect place to start, Herman. Why do they stay open? If two countries are at each other's throats, why keep a building and a staff in the other person's capital? It seems almost masochistic to stay in an environment where you are clearly not wanted.

Herman

That is exactly what most people find confusing. We see the headlines about ambassadors being recalled or summoned, and it feels like a breakup. But in diplomacy, you almost never want to go for a full divorce. You want to stay in the house but stop talking to each other. Keeping an embassy open even in a hostile environment is about maintaining a baseline of functionality. You still have citizens in that country who need passports or help. You still need a physical place for your intelligence officers to work out of under diplomatic cover. And most importantly, you need a direct, secure line of communication for when things get really dangerous.

Corn

So it is about keeping the hardware there even if the software is crashing. But Daniel mentioned this dynamic where one side might pull back more than the other. Like, Ireland keeping their mission here in Israel while Israel might reduce their presence in Dublin without fully closing. What does that look like on the ground?

Herman

It creates this asymmetrical relationship. Think of it like a ladder of escalation. Most people think it is either you have an ambassador or you do not. But there are so many rungs in between. The first big move is often recalling an ambassador for consultations. We saw this with Israel and Ireland amid 2024 tensions. Israel brought their ambassador, Dana Erlich, back to Jerusalem for consultations. Now, the common misconception is that this means she is fired or the embassy is closed. But in reality, it is a formal snub. You are saying, our relationship is so bad right now that I need my top person here with me to figure out what to do with you.

Corn

And meanwhile, the embassy in Dublin is still there, but it is being run by a lower-ranking person, right? The charge d'affaires?

Herman

Exactly. The charge d'affaires ad interim. That is the technical title. It essentially means the deputy is in charge. This is a massive signal in the diplomatic world. It says, you are not worth the presence of our full-ranking representative. It is a way of downgrading the relationship without formally severing it. When you have a charge d'affaires running things for months or years, it is a persistent, low-level signal of displeasure. It makes every interaction more difficult because that person doesn't have the same direct access to the foreign minister or the head of state that an ambassador would.

Corn

It sounds like a lot of posturing. Does it actually change anything, or is it just for the news cameras?

Herman

Oh, it definitely changes things. Diplomacy is built on access. If I am an ambassador, I can usually get a meeting with a high-level official relatively quickly. If I am a charge d'affaires in a hostile capital, I might get stuck talking to a junior desk officer. It slows everything down. It makes the host country's life harder, too. If Ireland wants to complain to Israel about something, and there is no Israeli ambassador in Dublin, they have to go through the deputy, who then has to check with Jerusalem, and the whole process becomes a bureaucratic nightmare. It is a way of throwing sand in the gears of the relationship.

Corn

You mentioned the summons, too. Daniel was curious about what that actually looks like. We have all seen the headlines saying a country summoned an ambassador for a reprimand. Is it really just a meeting where someone gets yelled at?

Herman

It can be! There is a legendary story from about fifteen years ago involving the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister at the time and the Turkish ambassador. They summoned the ambassador to the Knesset, and they intentionally sat him on a lower stool than the Israeli officials. They even made sure there was only one flag on the table. They wanted the cameras to capture this image of the ambassador looking physically smaller and less important.

Corn

That is incredibly petty.

Herman

It is high-school level pettiness, but it is deeply symbolic. Usually, though, a summons is more formal. You get a call or a note saying you are required at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at a specific time. You walk in, you are taken to a room, and a senior official reads you the riot act. They might hand you a formal letter of protest, which is what Daniel mentioned—the *démarche*.

Corn

Let's talk about that word. Démarche. It sounds very fancy and very French. What is the actual anatomy of a démarche?

Herman

It is French for a step or a proceeding. In diplomacy, it is a formal move where one government officially expresses its position or its displeasure to another. It is not just a letter. It is a recorded event. When a diplomat delivers a démarche, it goes into the permanent record of both countries. It is like a legal filing in a court case. You are put on notice.

Corn

So if I am the Irish ambassador and I receive a démarche from the Israeli government, I have to report that back to Dublin word-for-word?

Herman

Every single syllable. And the language is very coded. If the démarche says the government is concerned, that is actually pretty mild. If it says they are gravely concerned, that is a step up. If they use words like unacceptable or consequences, you know the situation is hitting a boiling point. The beauty of the démarche is that it avoids the ambiguity of a press release. It is a government-to-government document that says, this is exactly where we stand.

Corn

It is fascinating because it feels like this ancient ritual that has survived into the era of instant messaging. I mean, the Israeli foreign minister could just tweet at the Irish foreign minister, right? Why go through the theater of a summons and a physical piece of paper?

Herman

Because a tweet isn't sovereign. A tweet can be deleted or dismissed as a personal opinion. A physical démarche delivered by a diplomat is an act of state. It carries the weight of the entire nation's legal and political apparatus. Also, the physical act of making an ambassador drive across town, walk past reporters, and sit in a waiting room is part of the message. It is about power and protocol.

Corn

We are talking about all these ways to show displeasure, but there's an even more extreme one Daniel mentioned. The persona non grata. That sounds like the nuclear option short of war.

Herman

It really is. Persona non grata literally means person not welcome. Under the nineteen sixty-one Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations—which is basically the rulebook for all of this—a host country can declare any member of a diplomatic staff persona non grata at any time, without even giving a reason. Once that happens, the person's home country has to recall them. If they don't, the host country can simply stop recognizing them as a diplomat. They lose their immunity. They can be arrested.

Corn

Does that happen often between countries that aren't at war?

Herman

It happens more than you would think. Usually, it is a tit-for-tat move. If country A expels a diplomat from country B for spying, country B will almost immediately expel a diplomat from country A just to even the score. But when it's done for political reasons, it's a huge deal. It is basically saying, we find your presence here offensive.

Corn

I want to go back to the ground reality in a place like Dublin or Jerusalem when things are this bad. Daniel asked how it works when one side pulls back but the other keeps going. If Ireland feels the environment is hostile, but they stay here, what are those diplomats actually doing all day? Are they just sitting in an office waiting for the phone to ring?

Herman

It is a very lonely existence. Imagine being a diplomat in a country where the local population is protesting outside your gate every day, and the government won't even return your calls. You are basically an observer. You spend your time reading the local newspapers, talking to other foreign diplomats to see what they know, and writing reports back home. You are the eyes and ears of your country, even if you are being ignored.

Corn

It sounds like a psychological grind.

Herman

Oh, absolutely. But there is a strategic reason for Ireland to stay in Israel even if they are being criticized. If you leave, you lose your seat at the table. You lose your ability to see what is happening on the ground with your own eyes. You become dependent on the news or on other countries for information. By staying, even in a hostile environment, you maintain a foothold. You are saying, we are a stakeholder here, whether you like it or not.

Corn

There is also the concept of the non-resident ambassador. Daniel asked about that, too. How does that work? Is it really just a guy on a plane?

Herman

Sometimes, yeah! A non-resident ambassador is when a country appoints an ambassador to a nation, but that ambassador doesn't actually live there. They might be based in a neighboring country or even back in their home capital. For example, a lot of smaller countries might have one ambassador based in London who is also accredited to Ireland, Iceland, and Norway.

Corn

So they just fly in for the big meetings?

Herman

Exactly. They fly in, present their credentials to the head of state—which is a whole ceremony involving fancy cars and letters from their president—and then they go back to their main base. It is a way of having a formal relationship without the cost or the security headache of a full embassy. If a country downgrades from a resident ambassador to a non-resident one, that is a massive signal. It says, you are no longer important enough for us to pay rent in your city.

Corn

That feels like a very modern way to snub someone. It is the diplomatic equivalent of saying, this could have been an email.

Herman

Ha! Exactly. But the reverse is also true. When a country opens a full, resident embassy, it is a huge compliment. It is a commitment of resources and people. That is why the location of embassies is such a flashpoint. Like when the United States moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The physical location of the building became a global political event because it signaled a change in policy.

Corn

It is amazing how much of this comes down to buildings and pieces of paper. We think of the world as being run by digital signals and economic flows, but diplomacy is still very much a physical, human endeavor.

Herman

It has to be. You can't look someone in the eye over a *démarche* if you aren't in the same room. There's a nuance to a face-to-face meeting that you just can't get on a Zoom call. When an ambassador is summoned, the person doing the summoning is looking for body language. Are they nervous? Are they defiant? Does their government seem like they are looking for an exit or a fight? That is the real work of diplomacy—the stuff that happens in the margins of the formal meetings.

Corn

You mentioned the Vienna Convention of nineteen sixty-one earlier. I think that is a piece of history most people overlook. Why was that so important?

Herman

Before that, diplomatic rules were kind of a mess of tradition and bilateral agreements. The Vienna Convention codified everything. It established the concept of diplomatic immunity, which is what allows this whole theater to happen. If you didn't have immunity, no one would ever be an ambassador in a hostile country because they'd just be thrown in jail the moment a disagreement started.

Corn

So the immunity is what creates the safe space for the theater of displeasure?

Herman

Precisely. It allows you to have a person in your capital who represents a government you despise. You can't touch them, you can't search their mail, and you can't bug their embassy—at least, not legally. This safety net is what keeps the lines of communication open when everything else is failing. It is the most successful piece of international law in history because almost every country on earth follows it, even when they are at war.

Corn

That is a fascinating point. Even at the height of the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviets kept their embassies open. It is the one thing everyone agrees on—we need a way to talk, even if we are only using that channel to complain.

Herman

Right. And that brings us back to Ireland and Israel. Even with the extreme tension in 2024 and harsh rhetoric since, neither side has fully pulled the plug as of early twenty twenty-six. They are using all these tools—the recalls, the summons, the public statements—to signal their anger to their own voters and to the international community. But they haven't taken the final step of breaking relations.

Corn

Because once you break relations, you are blind.

Herman

You are blind and you are mute. You have to use a third party, like Switzerland or Norway, to pass messages for you. It is a massive admission of failure. So, countries will endure a lot of hostility and a lot of awkward summons before they actually close the doors.

Corn

So, for our listeners who see a headline tomorrow saying an ambassador has been summoned, what should their takeaway be? Is it a sign of imminent war, or just a Tuesday in the world of diplomacy?

Herman

Most of the time, it is just a Tuesday. Here is the thing most people don't realize: diplomatic theater is often performed for a domestic audience. When the Irish government summons an Israeli ambassador, they are doing it partly to show the Irish public that they are taking a stand. When Israel recalls an ambassador for consultations, they are signaling to their own people that they won't be pushed around.

Corn

So it's as much about the people back home as it is about the other country.

Herman

Absolutely. You have to look at who the audience is. If it's a public summons with cameras, it's for the people. If it's a quiet *démarche* delivered in private, that's the real government-to-government business. The trick is to distinguish between the noise and the signal. A recall for consultations is serious noise. A *persona non grata* is a signal that the relationship is on life support.

Corn

This really reframes the news for me. It makes me think about the diplomats themselves, though. The actual people living in these embassies. It must be a very strange career choice to move your family to a city where the government might summon you just to sit you on a low stool.

Herman

It takes a very specific personality. You have to be thick-skinned, patient, and deeply committed to the idea that talking is always better than the alternative. You are a professional lightning rod. You take the hits so your country doesn't have to.

Corn

I think that is a great place to pivot to some practical takeaways. If you are interested in this world, how do you start reading between the lines of these diplomatic moves?

Herman

The first thing I would say is to look at the rank of the people involved. If a foreign minister meets an ambassador, that is normal. If a head of state meets an ambassador, that is a high honor. If a junior desk officer meets an ambassador, that is a snub. The level of the meeting tells you everything you need to know about the current temperature of the relationship.

Corn

And what about the language? We talked about gravely concerned versus unacceptable.

Herman

Right. Pay attention to the adjectives. In diplomacy, adjectives are the currency. If a statement uses the word regret, it is a soft protest. If it uses the word condemn, it is getting serious. If it says there will be consequences, you should start looking for economic sanctions or travel bans to follow.

Corn

Another takeaway for me is the importance of the physical mission. Even in the age of the internet, the fact that we still care about where a building is located and who is walking through the front door says a lot about human nature. We need that physical presence to feel like a relationship is real.

Herman

We really do. It is about skin in the game. If you have fifty people living in a capital, you are invested in what happens there. You can't just walk away with the click of a button. That physical presence creates a friction that actually prevents countries from making impulsive decisions. It forces a certain level of deliberation.

Corn

It is a stabilizer. Like a flywheel in a big machine. It takes a lot of energy to get it moving, but once it is spinning, it keeps things steady even when the power fluctuates.

Herman

That is a perfect analogy, Corn. Diplomacy is the flywheel of the international system. It is slow, it is heavy, and it is often invisible, but it is what keeps the whole thing from shaking apart when tensions rise.

Corn

Well, I feel like I have a much better handle on why Daniel was so curious about this. It is a world of shadows and signals, but it has very real consequences for how we all live.

Herman

It really does. And looking at the Ireland-Israel dynamic, it is a case study in how two democracies can have a fundamentally different view of the world but still stay within the framework of the Vienna Convention. They tested the limits of the system in 2024, but the system held and embassies remain open.

Corn

It is a resilient system, even if it feels archaic. I mean, we are still using French words from the eighteenth century to describe how we talk to each other in twenty twenty-six.

Herman

If it isn't broken, don't fix it. The French were the masters of this for a reason. They understood that ceremony and protocol aren't just for show—they are the guardrails of civilization.

Corn

I love that. The guardrails of civilization. Herman, thanks for diving deep into this with me. I think we covered a lot of ground, from the low stools of the Knesset to the formal letters of protest in Dublin.

Herman

It was a blast. I could talk about the Vienna Convention for hours, but I think our listeners probably have a limit.

Corn

Probably! But before we wrap up, I want to say a huge thank you to Daniel for sending in this prompt. It gave us a great excuse to look at the world a bit differently today.

Herman

Yeah, thanks Daniel. And if you are listening and enjoying these deep dives into the weird and the technical, we would really appreciate it if you could leave us a review on your favorite podcast app. Whether you are on Spotify or Apple Podcasts, those ratings really help new people find the show.

Corn

It really does make a difference. We are a small operation here in Jerusalem, and your support keeps us going. You can find all of our past episodes—and we have over four hundred of them now—at our website, myweirdprompts.com. There is a searchable archive there if you want to dig into other topics we have covered over the years.

Herman

And there is a contact form there, too, if you want to be like Daniel and send us a prompt of your own. We love hearing what you guys are curious about.

Corn

Absolutely. Well, that is it for this episode of My Weird Prompts. I am Corn.

Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry.

Corn

We will see you next time.

Herman

Until then, keep asking the weird questions.

Corn

Thanks for listening. This has been My Weird Prompts, a human-AI collaboration. We will be back soon with another exploration of the ideas that shape our world.

Herman

See you then!

Corn

Goodbye everyone.

Herman

Bye!