Episode Book

EPISODE #6489

Why Governments Move Time Zones Off the Grid

PUBLISHED	8 November 2026 at 09:07 UTC
DURATION	24:52
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/politics-of-time-zones-87143/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Desmond, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	z-ai/glm-5.3
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.26
SOURCES	25 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	9 November 2026 at 08:09 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Standardized time looks like pure physics, but every boundary line and offset is an act of statecraft. From El Paso defying federal time statutes for decades to China enforcing a single nationwide hour across five natural zones, borders constantly override geography. A look at how national identity, administrative control, and political independence shape the clocks of the world, including the rare places that deliberately set their schedules to forty-five-minute offsets.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's a thing that feels like it can't be an argument. What time is it? Ask the sun and ask the government, and in a surprising number of places you get two different answers.



Herman

And today's question comes from Hannah, which is a nice change of pace for the household. She grew up in Texas, and she says she only realized as an adult that El Paso keeps a different hour from the rest of the state. That bothered her in the good way — the way a loose thread bothers you — and she pulled on it. If one state can have two clocks, what's China doing with one clock for five zones? Why does Nepal sit fifteen minutes off India? Is North Korea on its own time? And she remembers traveling in Ethiopia and finding out the year itself was different there.



Corn

A different numbered year.



Herman

A different year. So she's asked for a tour, and I've been looking forward to this one all week, because the theme running underneath every example is the same. Time zones look like physics. They're paperwork.



Corn

Paperwork with an army behind it.



Herman

In a lot of cases, yes. Start with the foundation, because everything else follows from it. The prime meridian — the zero line the whole grid hangs on — was set at the eighteen eighty-four conference in Washington, and as Karl Benediktsson of the University of Iceland put it, it could technically have been placed anywhere, but it was centered on London because Great Britain was the leading power at the time. The entire global time system is anchored where it is because of who had the ships in the eighteen eighties.



Corn

The grid has a British accent.



Herman

It does. And once you accept that the zero line is a political fact, nothing downstream is neutral either. Every offset, every wiggly border, every skipped day is a decision somebody made for a reason. The reasons run from convenience to sovereignty to spite, and spite is honestly under-rated as a force in horology.



Corn

You want to start with Texas, since that's Hannah's way in.



Herman

Texas is a perfect miniature. Most of the state is Central Time. El Paso County, Hudspeth County, and a corner of Culberson County — that's the Guadalupe Mountains — are on Mountain Time. And geographically that's fair enough. The one hundred and fifth meridian, which is the basis of Mountain Time, passes through Texas about a hundred and twenty miles east of El Paso. El Paso is functionally a New Mexico city that happens to be in Texas.



Corn

Functionally and emotionally, I'd guess.



Herman

Very much so, and here's the story. The Standard Time Act of nineteen eighteen put El Paso and much of West Texas in Mountain Time. Then in nineteen twenty-one, Congress moved all of Texas to Central Time. And El Paso just... didn't. The city ignored the law and stayed on Mountain Time for decades. Not quietly, either — as a matter of civic identity. It took the Uniform Time Act of nineteen sixty-six to force the issue, El Paso got interim Mountain Daylight Time in April sixty-seven, and a nineteen seventy amendment finally made the law match what El Paso had been doing all along.



Corn

Forty-odd years of a whole city ghosting a federal statute.



Herman

And the law blinked. Congress can declare a clock, but it can't make people read it. There's a detail I love about the nineteen eighteen act, too — it made the Interstate Commerce Commission the regulator of American time zones. Time zones were a railroad logistics problem before they were a government one. The railroads had been patching together their own standards for decades, and the ICC's first official boundaries took effect in January nineteen nineteen. The government inherited the railroads' problem and, eventually, El Paso's stubbornness.



Corn

One state, one city, decades of resistance. Now scale it up by a factor of a thousand.



Herman

China. The largest country on Earth that officially observes a single time zone. Beijing Time, UTC plus eight, for everything — and the country spans five geographical zones. When the People's Republic was formed in nineteen forty-nine, Mao decreed one clock for everybody, and the regional governments switched over as the civil war wound down.



Corn

And the five-zone version — was that ever real, or is it a hypothetical?



Herman

It was real, on paper. The Beiyang government proposed five zones back in nineteen eighteen, with wonderful names — Kunlun, Sinkiang-Tibet, Kansu-Szechwan, Chungyuan, Changpai — ranging from five and a half hours off Greenwich up to eight and a half. But in the nineteen thirties they weren't fully observed, and regions just adopted their own standards, which the histories describe, accurately I think, as chaos. There was a Standard Time Conference in Chongqing in nineteen thirty-nine that adopted the five-zone scheme — and then used one of them, the plus-seven offset, nationwide for the war anyway. So the single zone wasn't inevitable. It was the choice made after decades of trying everything else and finding it messy.



Corn

Messy is what geography is. One clock is what a state is.



Herman

That's the cleanest version of it I've heard. And the lived consequences in the far west are extraordinary. In Ürümqi the sun doesn't rise until ten a.m. or later on some days. People eat lunch after two, or even after four if they're not in a rush — that's a New York Times detail from twenty sixteen — and the school day runs so late that children miss their cartoons. In Kashgar the clock runs about three hours ahead of what the city's longitude dictates. A former resident remembers summer sunsets around midnight.



Corn

Do you have the sunrise numbers? I want the extremes.



Herman

On the first of January, Akto — China's westernmost county — gets daylight from ten sixteen in the morning to seven forty-four in the evening, Beijing Time. Fuyuan, in the far northeast, gets six fifty-four to three eighteen. Mid-afternoon darkness in one place, mid-morning darkness in the other, same country, same official noon.



Corn

And then, as usual, reality negotiates.



Herman

It does, and this is the part I find fascinating. Xinjiang runs two clocks in parallel. Beijing Time, and something called Xinjiang Time, or Ürümqi Time — UTC plus six, two hours behind Beijing, the same as Kyrgyzstan next door. And who uses which splits along ethnic lines. Most Han residents observe Beijing Time. Most Uyghurs follow Xinjiang Time. Xinjiang Television literally schedules its Chinese channel on Beijing Time and its Uyghur and Kazakh channels on Xinjiang Time. One broadcaster, two clocks, chosen by language.



Corn

The schedule is a census.



Herman

It is. And in practice people have built a whole shadow day on top of the official one. Stores and offices commonly open at ten and close at seven, Beijing Time — which is eight to five, Ürümqi Time. Local authorities shift the workday, longer lunch breaks, earlier mornings in some offices, all to avoid the midday heat in summer. So Hannah's question — do people work at bizarre hours, or do unofficial schedules develop? — the answer is both. The official clock says one thing, everyone translates it privately, and the translation you use depends on who you are.



Corn

What happens when a Han and a Uyghur make an appointment?



Herman

You have to state which time you mean. Explicitly, every time, or convert based on the other person's ethnicity. The LA Times reported from Kashgar in two thousand nine that the city — three hundred fifty thousand people — has two time zones two hours apart, and, this is the line, how you set your watch depends not only on the neighborhood, but on your profession and ethnicity, religion and loyalty. And they noted people on both sides said there was little confusion, because they had as little to do with each other as possible.



Corn

The clocks aren't confusing. The society is working as designed.



Herman

There's a political history too. In February nineteen eighty-six the government approved civil use of Xinjiang Time — excluding the areas run by the Production and Construction Corps, while the military, railroads, aviation and telecom stayed on Beijing Time. Local Han residents rejected the decision. And since then the direction has reversed. Payzulla Zaydun, who's from Ürümqi, told Al Jazeera that in the eighties and nineties Uyghur students would deliberately arrive two hours late to classes listed only in Beijing time, and shops ran on the local offset. Not anymore. He says if you openly challenge Beijing time now, you can be prosecuted for subversion. His elderly mother, who never used Beijing



Herman (continued)

time in her life, suddenly started using it on the phone with him. Because she feared the consequences if she didn't.



Corn

A grandmother changing her clock as a safety measure.



Herman

Yao-Yuan Yeh at the University of St Thomas puts it plainly — the single zone is used to reinforce the official narrative of a Chinese nation united under the rule of the Communist Party. The state didn't fully control China before forty-nine. The clock is part of consolidating that control. It's the cheapest flag a government can plant. No territory, no garrison — just a number on a sign.



Corn

And now, as ever, here is Desmond with his money tip.

D

Desmond

This is Desmond's Money Tip. Water down your washing-up liquid by a third, then by a third again. A bottle lasts three times as long, which saves you, over a year, roughly the price of a modest sandwich.

D

Desmond

I keep the diluted stuff in an old milk bottle on the windowsill, and I have not bought washing-up liquid since two thousand and nineteen. The plates squeak. That is the point.

D

Desmond

Over a lifetime it comes to a few hundred pounds, which will not change your life, but neither will anything else. Money is mostly just the slow business of not spending it.



Corn

Three years on one bottle of washing-up liquid. I'm not saying I'm going to try it. I'm saying I've already done the arithmetic.



Herman

Please don't put it next to the leaf medicine.



Corn

The leaves are ancestral. The detergent is economic.



Herman

Moving swiftly on. We've done the places where one clock stretches across a whole continent. The other category is places that deliberately set their clocks off the grid — not a whole number of hours from Greenwich at all. The half-hour and quarter-hour offsets.



Corn

India I knew. Five and a half.



Herman

India and Sri Lanka at five thirty, Iran at three and a half, Afghanistan at four and a half, Myanmar at six and a half, Newfoundland at minus three and a half, chunks of Australia, the Marquesas at minus nine and a half. Quartz did a survey of these and their framing is exactly right — they're administrative choices, not facts of geography. Each government decides which offset its clocks follow, and can change that decision whenever it likes.



Corn

And the forty-five minute club?



Herman

Three members. Nepal at plus five forty-five, the Chatham Islands of New Zealand at plus twelve forty-five, and Eucla in Western Australia at plus eight forty-five. That's it. Three places on Earth.



Corn

I'd argue Nepal is the best of the three.



Herman

Nepal is the best story in the whole offset world, I think. Until nineteen twenty, Kathmandu ran on local solar time, which was five hours forty-one minutes and sixteen seconds off Greenwich — you can set your clock to the sun, it's just awkward. Then it adopted Indian Standard Time, five thirty. And in nineteen eighty-six it moved fifteen minutes forward, to five forty-five, and set the standard meridian through Gaurishankar, a peak sacred in Nepali tradition about a hundred kilometers east of Kathmandu.



Corn

Fifteen minutes as a foreign policy.



Herman

That's how it's widely read — a daily, tiny assertion of sovereignty against the giant neighbor. Not a full hour, which would be inconvenient. Just enough to be a different number. The message is the message; the message is not the schedule.



Corn

You said Quartz lists ten half-hour places. Is ten the real count?



Herman

Honestly, no one knows, and I find that delightful. Quartz itself calls its list a selection rather than a complete roster, and a developer who tallied offsets for practical reasons counted nine half-hour and three quarter-hour against twenty-seven whole-hour ones.



Herman (continued)

Even the meta-level of timekeeping is messy. There is no global registrar of who's how far off Greenwich. There's just a database everybody trusts, which we've talked about before — the time zone database that runs the world exists because an American and a few volunteers decided it should.



Corn

It holds up. The whole system runs on a mailing list and a sense of duty.



Herman

Which is the perfect backdrop for North Korea, because North Korea is what happens when a state plays with the grid deliberately. Right now North Korea uses UTC plus nine, same as South Korea, no daylight saving. But in August twenty fifteen it announced a return to plus eight and a half, effective on the fifteenth of August — the seventieth anniversary of liberation from Japan. They called it Pyongyang Time and framed it as a break from imperialism.



Corn

A return, you said. Not an invention.



Herman

Right — and that's the part that's clever, if that's the word. In nineteen twelve the Japanese Governor-General of Korea changed the peninsula to plus nine to match Japan. Before that, the Korean Empire used plus eight and a half. So Pyongyang Time wasn't a novelty — it was a restoration of the pre-colonial clock, rolled out on the anniversary of the colonial exit. And there's a deeper layer: Korea's first standard timekeeper was the Angbu Ilgu, a sundial developed in fourteen thirty-four, with standard time at Seoul calculated as eight hours, twenty-seven minutes and fifty-two seconds off Greenwich.



Corn

Twenty-eight minutes off the eventual national time. The country has never quite rounded itself.



Herman

And then the reversal. In April twenty eighteen, Kim Jong Un announced the return to plus nine, to realign with the South. The Supreme People's Assembly issued a decree calling it a further step in unifying Korea and eliminating differences between the North and South. The change took effect at twenty-three thirty on the fourth of May. Half an hour, granted and revoked, each time for a political occasion. South Korean officials had been worried about the practical costs too — commuting to the Kaesong Industrial Region, lifestyles drifting apart. Though I'd note the peninsula's lifestyles were not converging because of clocks.



Corn

Three years of being thirty minutes different from South Korea. As a sovereignty claim, it's cheaper than a missile test and gets a similar press release.



Herman

Some other entries in the strange-border category, because they're worth having. Kiribati — a Pacific nation of scattered atolls — became independent in nineteen seventy-nine with its islands straddling the date line, giving it a twenty-three hour internal difference. Twenty-three hours. The same country, where one island's Tuesday was another island's Wednesday-minus-a-day. In December nineteen ninety-four the government announced it was pushing the date line about a thousand kilometers east, effective New Year's Eve, which moved the Line Islands from minus eleven and minus ten to plus thirteen and plus fourteen — and they skipped the first of January nineteen ninety-five entirely. It just never happened there.



Corn

A country deleting a day to fix an administrative problem.



Herman

And a profitable one. Caroline Island, renamed Millennium Island, became the first land on Earth to reach January first, two thousand. Plus fourteen is still the most advanced offset on the planet — the Line Islands are literally the first to every day.



Corn

What's the biggest jump at a land border?



Herman

The Wakhjir Pass, between China and Afghanistan. China is plus eight, Afghanistan is four thirty. Three and a half hours across a single mountain pass. Walk through and you lose more time than a flight from New York to Los Angeles. The records describe it as the most significant official change of clocks for any international land frontier.



Corn

And the Sri Lanka case?



Herman

Sri Lanka is the cleanest example of a clock as a weapon, going the other direction. During the civil war, the government set the country's clock back half an hour — and the Tamil Tigers simply refused to implement the change in the territory they held. So for years, Sri Lanka effectively existed in two time zones at once. By allegiance. A rebel movement can decline a state's clock the way it declines its laws.



Corn

Which is the El Paso story wearing a uniform. Government declares time, population declines.



Herman

Same grammar, yes. Russia did a version recently too — the annexed Ukrainian regions were switched to Moscow time in twenty twenty-three. When a state takes territory, changing the clock is one of the first administrative acts, because it's instant and total. Every clock, every form, every train timetable now reads the new center.



Corn

Which takes us to calendars, the deepest layer. Ethiopia.



Herman

Ethiopia, and this is the part Hannah actually lived, so I want to do it justice. The Ethiopian calendar is the official state civil calendar — not a religious leftover, not a folk custom. Government forms, civic life, the works. It's a solar calendar related to the Coptic one, with a leap day every four years without exception, like the old Julian rule. Twelve months of thirty days each, plus a short thirteenth month of five or six days.



Corn

A thirteenth month. Every year.



Herman

Pagume, the short one. And the new year, the first of Mäskäräm, falls on the eleventh of September in the Gregorian calendar — or the twelfth in a leap year. Christmas, Gena, is the seventh of January, Tahsas twenty-nine on their count.



Corn

But the headline is the year number.



Herman

The Ethiopian epoch equates to twenty-nine August in the year eight AD — their calendar disagrees with the Gregorian one about when the counting starts, and the disagreement has compounded. Ethiopia runs roughly seven to eight years behind the Gregorian year. Officially.



Corn

So when Hannah was there, the date on her boarding pass and the date on the wall in front of her...



Herman

Disagreed about the year. By seven or eight, depending on the season, because the two new years don't line up either, so the gap shifts through the year. You'd book a hotel for one year and check in during another. And it isn't just Ethiopia — Israel runs its own calendar layer for holidays and official documents, plenty of the Islamic world counts from a different epoch, Nepal has its own year, Taiwan counts from nineteen twelve. Ethiopia is just the case where the difference is biggest and most visible in ordinary civic life.



Corn

You said something earlier I want to hold on to. The Gregorian calendar won globally the same way the meridian landed in London — power, not truth.



Herman

I'd stand by that. The Gregorian calendar is a sixteenth-century papal reform that spread with European administration and commerce. It's an excellent calendar, mechanically — the leap-year rules are a genuine improvement on Julian — but so is the Ethiopian one for different purposes, and nobody adopted the French revolutionary calendar or any of the other rationalist schemes because they lost the countries that came with them. What year it is, is a convention. Ethiopia is the standing reminder.



Hilbert

Forty minutes.



Corn

Forty minutes what, Hilbert?



Hilbert

The strangest offset I've dealt with, Herman. Not your half-hours, not your quarter-hours. Forty minutes. My cousin kept his clocks forty minutes off everything and called it family time. Your Nepal is fifteen minutes and a mountain. His was forty minutes and an argument.



Herman

Forty minutes off what — Greenwich, or the local clocks?



Hilbert

Off whatever the rest of us were using, which was the point. The two of us fell out over a wedding anniversary date some years back — which April, which year, I won't relitigate it here — and I kept a wall of clocks in the flat to track it. Four of them, different offsets, so I'd always have the correct hour somewhere on the wall when he rang. He rang at his forty minutes past, regular as anything.



Corn

The wall of clocks is still up?



Hilbert

It's behind me now, above the mixing desk. The plug for the second one from the left reaches only just — I've tripped over it with the claw twice this month, so mind the cable, Corn, if you come round. The dispute is not resolved. He's not wrong, he's just forty minutes wrong. I check them in case the anniversary comes up again, which it does every year, so that answers that.



Herman

Forty minutes is on no map on Earth.



Hilbert

It's on his hall clock, Herman. Runs him to time, by his own reckoning. Courier job I had decades back, you kept a clock in the cab and you kept it right, or you were late by however wrong it was. He never drove anything.



Corn

So the clocks stay.



Hilbert

They keep good time. That's all I ask of a clock.



Corn

A man with a wall of clocks defending a forty-minute grievance against a relative. Somewhere between Nepal and the Tamil Tigers.



Herman

The forty is the part I keep turning over, though. Every official offset we covered was chosen to be legible to someone else — Nepal's fifteen minutes is a message to India, Pyongyang's half hour was a message to Japan. Forty minutes is a message to one cousin.



Corn

Which is the forward-looking question, isn't it. If a clock's power comes from everyone having to read it, what happens as more of life is scheduled in UTC anyway? Every meeting I join, the invite says three o'clock Jerusalem, two o'clock London — nobody's converting to the local sun, they're converting to the server.



Herman

That's Desmond's world, sort of — the slow business of not spending it. The remote-work layer doesn't erase local time, it just makes it optional for the people with the laptops. The clock's political power doesn't weaken so much as move to new battlegrounds. Russia still changes clocks when it takes territory, because the clock still means you.



Corn

And for Hannah's original loose thread — crossing Texas and changing your watch — that turns out to be the whole system in miniature. A line someone drew, and everyone agrees to pretend it's real. Right up until El Paso doesn't.



Herman

Big thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, for keeping us on time, in whatever offset he chooses.



Corn

If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode sixty-three thirty-eight, Why People Reject the Official Clock; episode seven thirty-four, The Illusion of Now; and episode twenty-four fifty, The Time Zone King and the Database That Runs the World. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed this one, tell a friend, or leave us a review — it helps people find the show. You can find everything at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

See you tomorrow.

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