Episode Book

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When Ready to Attack, Seeming Weak

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SYNOPSIS

Military deception usually conjures images of bluffing strength, but the reverse strategy—appearing weak, distracted, or unready while poised to strike—is often far deadlier. This episode examines the operational mechanics behind feigned weakness, analyzing Moshe Dayan's public leave maneuvers before the Six-Day War, Egypt's routine mobilizations and public demobilizations before Operation Badr, and the calculated signals preceding recent strikes in Beirut and southern Israel. The focus centers on how curated, real-world facts induce adversaries to mislead themselves.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Everyone quotes Sun Tzu's first chapter as if it's one trick — when strong, appear weak. The line that actually opens the chapter is about capability: when able to attack, seem unable. And almost every famous example people reach for, D-Day above all, is the other direction — looking strong, or sending the enemy's eye to Pas-de-Calais.



Herman

Right, and Daniel's prompt is about the rarer animal. Not seeming strong when you're weak — that's bluffing. Seeming weak, or distracted, or simply not ready, at the precise moment you are maximally ready to strike.



Corn

That's his framing, yes. He points at September twenty twenty-four: Netanyahu flies to New York, addresses the General Assembly while ceasefire papers for Lebanon are floating around, and within hours Israeli jets kill Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut. An Israeli official later called the trip a diversion — prime minister's abroad, nothing big will happen. Iran's missile salvo came days later. And Daniel wants five more modern cases of the same inversion, with the mechanism of each — not just that they were tricked, but how the trick worked.



Herman

So let's start with the anchor case, because it's the cleanest recent example of the inversion — and also the one where the public story and the intelligence story don't quite line up.



Corn

Which, given the subject, is fitting.



Herman

The date matters. Twenty-seventh of September, twenty twenty-four. Netanyahu stands at the General Assembly podium and says Israel will keep degrading Hezbollah until its objectives are met — in the same hours, Israeli jets are hitting Hezbollah's headquarters in the Dahiyeh, the southern suburbs of Beirut. Nasrallah is killed that day.



Corn

Walk me through the diversion claim itself, because that's where the sourcing gets thin.



Herman

It rests mainly on a senior Israeli official speaking to The Telegraph, who described the UN address as part of a "diversionary plan" — the idea being that Nasrallah would calculate a prime minister abroad, mid-negotiation, would not authorize a decapitation strike. The same official said Netanyahu approved the strike before the speech and that Nasrallah was believed to be watching it live.



Corn

A man watching the speech that kills him.



Herman

It's grim, but that's the claim. The Prime Minister's Office put out a photo of him approving the strike by phone from a desk in New York, and Netanyahu later said his military secretary handed him a note after the speech that read "executed." One word on a piece of paper. Decades from now that note will be in a museum and the speech will be the footnote.



Corn

And the version that doesn't flatter the plan?



Herman

The New York Times linked the timing to intelligence that Nasrallah had called a leadership meeting — meaning the chance to get him gathered with the command structure may have driven the calendar, not the other way around. Some accounts have a decision in principle earlier that week and final approval roughly half an hour before the speech, when the new intelligence landed. It's entirely possible the trip was useful cover for a strike that was mostly opportunity.



Corn

So the two stories aren't exclusive. The performance was real even if the play got rewritten mid-performance.



Herman

That's how I'd put it. And there was a diplomatic cost that's worth naming — the strike landed while the US and France were pushing a ceasefire for Lebanon. The National reported Western mediators felt deceived. Walla News, relayed through other outlets, said the trip and the talks were used to lure Nasrallah out of his bunker — I'd treat that as reported, not established. Iran answered on the first of October with its missile attack, citing the killing.



Corn

October seventh of that year was already hanging over everything, and then the region got a second October.



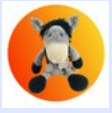
Herman

We did the emergency symposium when that war was at its height, and one thing we kept circling then was how much of the fog was deliberate. This is the same fog, just pointed the other way.



Corn

The thing I want to hold onto from the anchor case is that the deception wasn't a lie Israel told. It was an assumption Nasrallah already held — leaders don't strike while abroad — and Israel supplied evidence for it. Let's get into the other cases, because each one confirms that from a different angle.



Herman

Case one, and it's the oldest: June nineteen sixty-seven. Moshe Dayan becomes defence minister on the first of June. War starts with a surprise air strike on the morning of the fifth. In between, three days, and this is where the performance happens.



Corn

The golf weekend.



Herman

Reported as such, yes — the Jewish Chronicle, citing British assessments, said several thousand soldiers were given weekend leave and told to gather visibly on beaches and in parks, and that Dayan said he'd spend the weekend playing golf. The bluff is sometimes called Operation Fog of War. Fair warning: these details come from secondary accounts. Nobody's produced the press conference transcript. Dayan's line that it was "too late and too early" for war — wrong season, wrong moment — that's secondary too.



Corn

Hedged, then. But structurally it works — the new defence minister publicly gloomy, soldiers on beaches, the whole country doing an impression of a country not about to launch one of the most timed air operations in history.



Herman

Because the aircraft weren't hidden. They were going up, holding, coming back, in a rotation that looked like routine readiness. The deception wasn't absence of activity — it was activity that read as defensive.



Corn

Which is the Sun Tzu line taken literally. When using our forces, seem inactive. The forces were being used and seemed inactive.



Herman

And notice who the audience was. Not only Egypt and Syria — Israeli public opinion, foreign embassies, everyone who might leak a mood. The performance had to be legible in every direction at once. Hold that thought, it comes back later.



Corn

Case two, October nineteen seventy-three. And this time the direction reverses — Egypt fooling Israel.



Herman

Operation Badr, the crossing of the Suez Canal, the sixth of October nineteen seventy-three, opening with a mass air strike around two in the afternoon. The planning explicitly aimed to create the impression that Egypt was unprepared and that its movements were defensive. The machinery of that is beautiful — for years before, Egypt ran large exercises near the canal. Big, visible, repeated. Reservists called up, mobilization, equipment rolling east — and then everyone goes home. Again and again.



Corn

So when the real one came, the Israeli reading was: another exercise.



Herman

That's the concept they exploited — you can't hide a mobilization, so you make mobilization meaningless. Then, two days before the crossing, on the fourth of October, Egypt publicly announced the demobilisation of about twenty thousand troops. Sending soldiers home, in the papers, right before the war.



Corn

That's the part that still astonishes me. Announcing the lie in the newspaper.



Herman

On the morning of the sixth itself, there are accounts — Akhbar El Yom in Arabic describes it — of special squads deployed along the canal bank, showing themselves without gear. Swimming. Fishing. Soldiers sitting on the water's edge doing things that have nothing to do with war.



Corn

Fishing. On the morning of the crossing.



Herman

The Israeli observation posts looking across at the canal see men fishing at the waterline, and the aircraft overhead see the same traffic they've seen a dozen times. Nothing to report. A US Army monograph by a fellow named Edmondson compares the Egyptian plan to Fortitude — the D-Day deception — using a "see, think, do" framework: what the target sees, what he's made to think, what he therefore does. Egypt managed all three.



Corn

One more piece — Sadat sending the Soviet experts home.



Herman

July nineteen seventy-two, Sadat ended the presence of about twenty thousand Soviet military advisers. Ahram Online folds that into the deception story — Israel and Washington reading it as Egypt being neutered, incapable. But the main motives are debated. It was a real strategic decision about Egyptian sovereignty and relations with Moscow. It also happened to feed the assessment that Egypt couldn't fight yet. The best deceptions are the ones where the true facts do the lying for you.



Corn

That's the third case in a row where the trick isn't a fabricated message. It's a curated selection of true facts.



Herman

Dayan's golf, real leave, real soldiers. Real fishing. Real demobilisation orders. The difference between deception and lying is that lies can be checked.



Corn

Herman, before we go on — quick word from Dorothy's Kitchen.



Herman

Mum! Yes, of course.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother. I'm ringing with Dorothy's Kitchen.

D

Dorothy

Today, cold toast. The ingredients are one slice of bread, and butter. That's all. That's the whole recipe, sweetheart, and I'm already worried.

D

Dorothy

First you toast the bread. And you watch it. You watch it the whole time. Bread is patient and bread is cruel. Step away and it goes black before you've blinked.



Corn

Mum, is that a metaphor for surveillance?

D

Dorothy

Then you wait. Let it go entirely cold. This is the hard part. The waiting. It feels wrong. It feels like neglect. It is not neglect.



Herman

She's right about the waiting. Cold toast in an hour beats warm toast in ten minutes, in some applications.

D

Dorothy

Then the butter. Cold butter on cold toast. It will not melt and it will fight you, and you must be gentle with it. Things have gone wrong here before and I would rather not say how.

D

Dorothy

Anyway. Your father's got a bit of a cough, nothing serious. Eat something warm, dear. Bye bye now.



Corn

Tell Dad we hope the cough clears.



Herman

Right — case three. And this one I want to handle carefully, because it's October seventh.



Corn

Yes. We can analyze how the deception worked without admiring it. The mechanics and the atrocity are separate things, and the atrocity doesn't get less monstrous for being well-concealed.



Herman

Reuters, on the ninth of October twenty twenty-three, citing a source close to Hamas, described a sustained campaign to mislead Israel — giving "the impression that it was not ready for a fight." That's the attacker's own side of the story, so treat it accordingly. But the shape of it is clear. After the May twenty twenty-one conflict, Israel's policy was economic — thousands of work permits for Gazans, on the theory that Hamas could be kept quiet by prosperity.



Corn

And Hamas performed the role the theory cast them in.



Herman

They seemed more interested in the permits than anything else. A Jerusalem Post opinion piece on seized Hamas files says a September twenty twenty-two document discussed building a "strategic deception" plan for a surprise attack — reported, not established. And one claim I want to knock down while we're here: the story that the permit holders were spies, gathering intelligence en masse. The Shin Bet reportedly found no broad spying effort by the workers. That claim isn't supported, and it circulates because it makes the story tidier.



Corn

It's also the version that lets everyone off the hook — if you were infiltrated, you were beaten. If you were simply lied to about intent, the failure was in your own assumptions.



Herman

Herman being careful there, but yes. And the mechanism is the purest example of the whole episode. Israel believed Hamas could be bought. That belief was Israel's own policy — the permits existed because of it. Hamas didn't have to plant the belief. It only had to act consistent with it. The target's incentive did the work.



Corn

Which is the opposite of nineteen sixty-seven, where the deception manufactured the belief with beaches and golf. Here the belief was already installed.



Herman

Corn, let me ask you something, because you've read more of the failure literature than I have — do you think that assessment was even a deception failure, or was it a policy failure dressed as one after the fact?



Corn

Both, and the dressing is the tell. A organization that sees the enemy's intentions clearly but misreads its own policy isn't deceived. It's committed. The intelligence wasn't missing; it was inconvenient. Every prior round of fighting had taught Israel that Hamas escalates for leverage, and the assumption was the leverage game would continue — permits for quiet.



Herman

That's fair. The deception worked because the alternative to believing it was expensive. Not believing it meant ending the permit policy, which meant owning the consequences of that, politically and security-wise. Cheaper to keep believing.



Corn

Case four. Ukraine, September twenty twenty-two — and I'll flag now, this is the weakest fit of the six.



Herman

It is, and I'd rather flag it twice than pretend otherwise. Ukrainian officials talked up a Kherson offensive for months — announced it openly on the twenty-ninth of August twenty twenty-two. Kherson, the west bank of the Dnipro, the only regional capital Russia had taken. Then on the sixth of September, Ukrainian forces launch the surprise attack in Kharkiv oblast, fighting at Balakliia on day one. Izium, Kupiansk — the whole northeastern front collapses in days.



Corn

And the Russians had been draining the northeast for the south.



Herman

West Point's Modern War Institute argues exactly that — the Kherson talk drew Russian forces south. One report has the Russian battalions around Izium falling to at least half strength by August. But here's the dispute: the Institute for the Study of War did not think Kherson was merely a feint. It was a real offensive. Ukraine meant it. So the honest telling is that it was a genuine effort that also misled — not a manufactured weakness, but a manufactured focus.



Corn

Feigned direction rather than feigned readiness.



Herman

Which still belongs in the family, because the mechanism rhymes. Russia believed Kherson was the main effort because Ukraine said so, loudly, and then confirmed it by fighting there, expensively. The deception wasn't a costume — it was a real wound displayed in the wrong place.



Corn

Then it's the mirror of the anchor case. Netanyahu performed distraction while the strike was elsewhere. Ukraine performed focus while the strike was elsewhere. Same bone, opposite muscle.



Herman

And it's the only case of the six where the deception cost the deceiver an actual army's worth of effort. That's worth noticing — the others were cheap. Speeches, leave slips, demobilisation orders. This one was bought with real casualties.



Corn

Which may be why it's the least repeatable. Case five — last June, the Iran strikes.



Herman

Thirteenth of June, twenty twenty-five. And the run-up is almost domestic comedy in texture. Netanyahu's aides told reporters he planned a family holiday in the Galilee, and his son's wedding. His office made a point of stressing the northern weekend trip would go ahead — stressing it, mind you. A security cabinet meeting was reportedly labelled, on the agenda, as a hostage negotiation discussion. The Jerusalem Post carried that from an Israeli source. An Israeli official told the Times of Israel that Trump took part in the ruse.



Corn

And the son?



Herman

There's a report, relayed through Mediaite, that Netanyahu's son didn't know the wedding was being used as cover. Unverified, and I'd leave it at that — a family detail nobody's confirmed. What's better documented is the domestic framing: Israel Hayom and others described the political chaos of that period — the coalition noise, the recriminations — as itself masking the strike planning. Tehran could read the Israeli papers too, and the papers said a government busy devouring itself.



Corn

A hostage negotiation label on the meeting where they approved striking Iran. That's the demobilisation announcement again — the lie is a bureaucratic form everyone can see.



Herman

The Times of Israel itself cautioned at the time that it was too early to say the misinformation had worked. I want to keep that hedge on the record. But if it did work, it worked the same way as the others: Tehran believed the moment was wrong. Leader distracted, government in crisis, wedding in the diary. Every true detail pointed away from the strike.



Corn

We should be right back after this word from Dorothy's Kitchen.



Herman

Mum's already been, Corn. You were there.



Corn

I remember it fondly, is all. Back to the synthesis, because we now have six cases and I want to pull the thread through all of them.



Herman

Go on. You've been building to something for the last ten minutes — you do this thing where you go quiet and then deliver a paragraph.



Corn

I nap between points. It's called pacing. Here it is: in every one of these, the deception succeeded not by hiding strength but by supplying the target with a plausible reason to believe weakness, distraction, or unreadiness. And the target's own beliefs did most of the work. Nasrallah believed a prime minister abroad doesn't strike. Israeli intelligence in seventy-three believed Egypt wasn't ready and couldn't be, without the Soviets. Israel in twenty-three believed Hamas was purchasable. Tehran believed a government in chaos was a government not preparing war.



Herman

The deception is a confirmation of what the target already wants to believe.



Corn

Yes — that's why it's harder than the classic move. Classic deception hides a capability. This kind has to be plausible to one specific audience, calibrated to that audience's incentives, and the audience has to want to believe it. If they don't, no performance saves you.



Herman

There's a test hiding in that. If you can't name the belief your target already holds, you don't have a deception yet. You have a hope.



Corn

And the corollary is uncomfortable for intelligence services. If the best deceptions confirm existing beliefs, then the vulnerability isn't in your collection — the satellites will see the fishing squads fine. The vulnerability is in the assumptions you're protecting. Egypt didn't beat Israeli reconnaissance. It beat Israeli confidence that recon traffic meant nothing.



Herman

The "cry wolf" structure, though — that needs the wolf to have actually stayed away several times first. Egypt's exercises only worked because the earlier ones ended. If you fake a mobilisation you never fake-removed, the pattern never forms.



Corn

Right. The pattern has to be real before the lie can borrow it.



Hilbert

— borrowed pattern is the whole game, but you're describing it from the mark's chair. I've sat in the other one.



Herman

Have you, now.



Hilbert

Two seasons as a magician's assistant. Not the box with the swords — the other kind. I was the plant. The volunteer from the audience. A man near the front who raises his hand slightly too early, gets picked, looks mildly confused the whole way through.



Corn

Paid to look confused. Finally, a job market.



Hilbert

It's harder than it sounds, Herman. Bored is easy — bored is what half the audience is doing. Uninterested-but-available, that's the job. You're bored at the magician and curious about everything else. The stage, the lights, the woman with the flowers. Because the trick doesn't need the mark fooled. It needs the room fooled. The rest of the audience has to believe I'm one of them, or the trick's dead before it starts — people can smell a plant, and then they watch the wrong hands on purpose.



Herman

That's the "executed" note, isn't it. The photo of Netanyahu at the desk in New York.



Hilbert

The speech didn't have to fool Nasrallah directly. It had to be plausible to the entire General Assembly — the delegations, the mediators, the press filing stories about the ceasefire push. Nasrallah believed it because everyone else believed it first. The room is the cover. You fool the room, and the mark follows, because the mark trusts the room more than he trusts you.



Corn

And if the room had smelled the plant?



Hilbert

Blew it once myself, that way. Cardiff, a Saturday. Card trick, I was meant to be surprised by the reveal, and I looked too interested about thirty seconds too early — watched the left hand when I should've been looking at the pretty girl with the flowers. The magician had to improvise the ending, dropped half the routine, and the audience thought they'd seen the trick. They hadn't. I knew. He knew. We never spoke of it in the van.



Herman

What went into the improvisation?



Hilbert

He turned the dropped routine into the joke, complained about the cards being Polish, got the laugh, and finished with a simpler trick he kept for children's parties. Slower, worse, unkillable. I learned more from that night than from the ones that worked.



Corn

You mentioned the badge.



Hilbert

The badge — laminated card, it says AUDIENCE VOLUNTEER, font I picked myself because the magician wanted nothing to do with it. Still in my wallet. Behind the fishing licence, which is a different story.



Corn

Naturally.



Hilbert

Anyway. Your six cases all have the plant and the room and the mark in them somewhere. The fishing squads were the badge. The permits were the badge. The Galilee holiday was the badge. Nobody checks the badge, that's the point of the badge. Herman, you said the Egyptian exercises had to be real before the lie could borrow them — the magician rehearsed my confusion with me, on Tuesdays, in a pub function room in Pontypridd. Forty minutes on appearing not to care. We never once rehearsed caring.



Herman

Forty minutes on not caring.



Hilbert

Caring is easy. Everyone's born doing it. The craft is the indifference. Same reason your beach soldiers worked, Corn — those men were on holiday. Egypt's cleverest move of the whole war was a day off.



Corn

The cheapest lie is a true day at the beach.



Herman

I want to pull one thread from what Hilbert said, because it changes the anchor case slightly. If the deception has to work on the whole room, then the ceasefire push wasn't just cover for Nasrallah — it was cover for the mediators too. The National's report that Western mediators felt deceived is the sound of the room discovering there was a plant.



Corn

Which means the diplomatic cost wasn't a side effect. It was the mechanism wearing its own consequences. You can't fool the room for one man and then unfool everyone else.



Herman

The fee gets paid in the currency of the room. In twenty twenty-four the currency was mediator trust. In seventy-three, for Egypt — and this is the striking part — the fee was nearly the war itself. Once Israel realized it had been fooled on the crossing, Dayan reportedly wanted to threaten the dams, and the counterattack across the canal on the eighth of October nearly worked because Egypt had planned the deception around the first day and not the fourth.



Corn

The deception was built for the moment of attack, not the war after it. That's the pattern's limit, isn't it — the lie has excellent timing and no stamina. Once the first strike lands, you're back to being your actual strength.



Herman

Same in the Six-Day War — the golf weekend got you the first morning, and after that the air force did the rest on its own merits. Same in June twenty twenty-five. The inversion buys you the opening. It doesn't buy you the war.



Corn

Six openings, six different performances — a speech, a golf bag, a demobilisation order, a permit, a decoy offensive, a wedding. And the thread through all of them is that not one of them was a lie you could check. They were all true facts, arranged.



Herman

Fishing at the waterline is my favourite image of the year. Men under orders to relax.



Corn

Ordered relaxation. I'm surprised more militaries haven't studied the sloth on this point.



Herman

I'd tread carefully there, brother. Your entire lifestyle is a beach deployment.



Corn

Fifty-eight million years without losing a war, Herman.



Herman

The sloths did lose the giant ground variety, but I'll allow the overall record.



Corn

Casualties of peace. So the open question I'd leave with Daniel is this: if the inversion works because the target wants to believe the weakness, the defense isn't better intelligence about the enemy — it's an audit of your own priors. Nasrallah's mistake wasn't missing the jets. It was being certain about what a prime minister would do abroad. Egypt beat Israel not on the canal but in the Israeli assumption that the canal couldn't be crossed without the Soviets.



Herman

And going forward, the collection problem is only getting worse for the deceiver — persistent satellites, phones, everything watched. Which makes the performance of normalcy the whole game. The fishing squads become the payload, not the garnish. The most effective deceptions of the next decades will be the ones confirming an existing belief rather than contradicting it — because the contradiction is what the sensors catch, and the confirmation is what they bless.



Corn

So the question for anyone reading the news isn't what's hidden. It's what they already believe the other side can't do.



Herman

That's the rabbit hole Daniel opened, anyway. And it goes down a long way.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, as ever, for holding down the desk and the badge.



Hilbert

It's not coming out of the wallet.



Corn

It stays in the wallet. If you enjoyed this one, leave us a review and tell us which classic piece of strategy you'd like to see inverted next — we'll take the weirdest one.



Herman

If you want more of this, try episode eighteen fifty-three, Emergency Symposium on the Iran-Israel-US Crisis; episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide; and episode twelve, The AI Breakthrough. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

See you tomorrow.