Episode Book

EPISODE #5577

When the UN Goes Viral: Pitchers, Shoes, and 6-Second Clips

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SYNOPSIS

A man reaches for water at the UN General Assembly and lifts the entire pitcher instead of a glass. The clip is everywhere — but it's from 2024, not this year, and it stars Haiti's Transitional Presidential Council chairman Edgard Leblanc Fils, not a sitting president. That misattribution opens onto a bigger question: why does the world's most solemn room keep producing comedy? From Khrushchev's shoe to Castro's four-and-a-half-hour marathon, Gaddafi's tent to Netanyahu's cartoon bomb, the moments that travel are almost never the ones that mattered. This episode unpacks the mechanics of diplomatic absurdity — and why the format guarantees it.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

The whole thing lasts about six seconds. A man in a suit, mid-sentence, reaches for the water, and instead of a glass he lifts the entire pitcher.



Herman

And the internet declared it the moment of the session.



Corn

Right, so, Daniel saw this clip. He loved it. And he's written in with a whole set of questions about it. He wants to know what actually happened, why we never associate the UN with comedy, what the oddest moments in UN history are, and what the strangest speeches ever delivered at that Assembly were. There's a tension he's poking at, which is that this is supposed to be the most solemn room on earth, and yet it keeps producing material that plays like a sitcom.



Herman

He's not wrong about the pattern.



Corn

Before we get to the shoe and the tent, we need to deal with the pitcher. Because the clip Daniel saw is not from this year.



Herman

It isn't. And this is the part I want to get out of the way early, because the correction is actually more interesting than the clip.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

That video is from September 2024. The seventy-ninth General Assembly. The man is Edgard Leblanc Fils, who at that point was chairman of Haiti's Transitional Presidential Council. He is not a sitting president, and he was not at this year's Assembly at all.



Corn

So the whole framing is off by two years.



Herman

By two years and one job title. He spoke for roughly twenty-eight minutes, and then he drank straight from the pitcher. Lips on the rim, water down the front of the suit. And then he left the interim role the following month, replaced by Leslie Voltaire.



Corn

Which means when the clip resurfaced during this year's general debate, it was being shared as if it were current. Two separate fact-checking outfits rated it misleading. Not false, exactly. Misleading. The act happened. It just didn't happen now.



Herman

That distinction matters. The fact-checks don't establish that he mistook the pitcher for a glass. There's no evidence of intent one way or the other. It's a gaffe, full stop.



Corn

And meanwhile Haiti actually was at this year's Assembly. Prime Minister Alix Didier Fils-Aimé spoke on the twenty-fifth, urging dignity for migrants, calling it a watershed moment for the security force.



Herman

Which is the thing the meme buries. The domestic reaction to the pitcher clip in Haiti was angry. People condemned him for having misplaced his priorities while the country was in crisis. And then the meme version flattens all of that into a six-second loop with a laugh track.



Corn

So the misattribution is the story. The question is why an annual news cycle keeps recycling old clips, and why the UN keeps producing moments worth recycling in the first place.



Herman

Those are two different questions and the second one is the good one.



Corn

Start with the room. Why doesn't the UN read as funny?



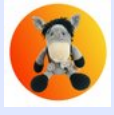
Herman

Because it's engineered not to be. Think about the physical setup. One speaker, one podium, fixed fifteen-minute slots, simultaneous interpretation into six languages, a chamber built for gravity. Everything about the format is designed to strip out personality.



Corn

And that's exactly the problem. Solemnity is a high-contrast backdrop. You put a man in a grey room with a grey suit and a grey speech, and the moment he does anything human, it detonates.



Herman

The comedy is a function of the formality. That's the whole mechanism. If this were a comedy club, nobody would have clipped the pitcher. It's funny because it happened in the one room on earth where it isn't supposed to.



Corn

Give me the canon, then. The moments everybody knows.



Herman

Khrushchev, 1960. He's in the chamber, he's angry about a Filipino delegate's remarks on Soviet policy in Eastern Europe, and he starts banging his fists on the table. Then he takes off a shoe and bangs the shoe.



Corn

There are competing explanations for the shoe, aren't there?



Herman

At least two. One is that it was too tight and he'd already removed it. The other is that a journalist stepped on his heel and it came off. Either way, he reportedly was delighted by how angry everyone got. He wanted the reaction.



Corn

Which makes it a hybrid. Half accident, half performance.



Herman

And then Castro, also 1960. Two hundred and sixty-nine minutes. Four hours and twenty-nine minutes. Still the longest General Assembly speech ever delivered. He attacked American imperialism, he insulted Kennedy and Nixon by name, and he kept live chickens in his hotel room that year.



Corn

The chickens are the detail that gets me. You prepare a four-and-a-half-hour address to the nations of the world and you also bring poultry.



Herman

Priorities.



Corn

What about Menon?



Herman

Krishna Menon, 1957. Indian envoy, Security Council, Kashmir. He spoke for over eight hours. Collapsed from exhaustion, was hospitalized, came back, and continued for another hour while a doctor stood there monitoring his blood pressure.



Corn

That's not a speech, that's a medical event with a microphone.



Herman

It's also a reminder that the filibuster isn't an American invention. The format invites it. If the only tool you have is duration, you use duration.



Corn

So that's three different species of moment. The pitcher is pure accident. The shoe is accident plus intent. Menon is sheer endurance.



Herman

And Castro is deliberate. He knew exactly what he was doing for four and a half hours.



Corn

Which is a good bridge, actually. Because the really strange ones aren't accidents at all.



Herman

No. The strangest speeches in that building were almost all calculated. They only became comic in retrospect.



Corn

Gaddafi.



Herman

Gaddafi, 2009. His UN debut. He had a fifteen-minute slot and he ran nearly a hundred minutes. He called the Security Council a terror council. He accused the United States of developing swine flu. He questioned the official record on the Kennedy assassination. And at one point he read aloud from the UN Charter, on the floor, to the people who wrote it.



Corn

The tent.



Herman

He wanted to pitch his Bedouin tent. First he tried Central Park. Then New Jersey. Then he landed on Donald Trump's Bedford estate.



Corn

He was working his way up the property ladder in real time.



Herman

The tent never went up. But the point is that none of it was confusion. It was a man using the world's biggest stage to say the things he wanted said, at whatever length he wanted to say them.



Corn

Chávez, 2006.



Herman

The devil speech. He called George W. Bush the devil, said it smells of sulphur still today, and crossed himself while he did it. He later insisted the line was unscripted and that he had smelled sulphur. He also plugged a Noam Chomsky book from the podium.



Corn

A book recommendation in the middle of an exorcism.



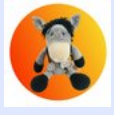
Herman

And then Netanyahu, 2012. The cartoon bomb. He holds up a diagram of a round bomb with a fizzing fuse and draws a literal red line at the ninety percent mark.



Corn

That one gets filed under comedy, and it shouldn't. The intent was deadly serious. It was a warning about enrichment thresholds.



Herman

The prop invited derision. The argument underneath it was as grave as anything said in that chamber that decade. That's the trap with all of these. We remember the visual and forget the content.



Corn

Johnson, 2019.



Herman

Boris Johnson warning that artificial intelligence would bring terrifying limbless chickens to our tables, and an Alexa that will be watching you, clucking her tongue and stamping her foot.



Corn

I want to defend that one slightly. It's a silly image doing real work. He's describing automation risk in a way people will actually remember.



Herman

Which is the same trick Gaddafi was using, minus the tent. The absurd image travels further than the policy paper.



Corn

Trump, 2018. He's mid-boast, saying he's accomplished more than almost any administration, and the chamber laughs at him.



Herman

He pauses, smiles, and says, wasn't expecting that reaction, but that's OK. Nikki Haley's read was that the delegates were amused by his honesty.



Corn

That's a strange kind of laugh, though. It's not a heckle. It's the room deciding, collectively, that it isn't going to play along.



Herman

And Lodge, 1960. This is my favorite one, because it's the opposite of a gaffe. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge uses tweezers to pull a tiny microphone out of the beak of a wooden eagle that had been gifted to the American embassy in Moscow. He does it during a U-2 debate. He's presenting Soviet espionage as a show-and-tell.



Corn

That's a man who understood the room. He knew a prop beats a paragraph.



Herman

Arafat, 1974, addresses the General Assembly in military fatigues. A year later, the Zionism equals racism resolution passes. Then in 1988 the US refuses him a visa, citing associations with terrorism, and the Assembly votes to relocate to Switzerland just to hear him.



Corn

The building moved countries to work around one visa denial.



Herman

Ortega, 1987. He tells Reagan that Rambo only exists in the movies. The US delegation walks out. Ambassador Vernon Walters says the people of Nicaragua may have to sit and listen to him, but I don't.



Corn

That's a good line.



Herman

And Waldheim, 1995. Boutros-Ghali simply doesn't invite his own predecessor, Kurt Waldheim, to the UN's fiftieth anniversary, over alleged Nazi-era war-crime complicity. No announcement. No explanation. Just an absence.



Corn

That's the most diplomatic insult I've ever heard. You don't get disinvited. You just don't get mentioned.



Herman

Which brings us to this year, and the reason the old clips are circulating at all.



Corn

The 2026 color.



Herman

Trump's keynote. Cuba and Iran delegations walk out. He calls Cuba an absolutely failed state and says it will fall. He threatens to annihilate Iran. He announces two American military bases in Greenland. And he rebrands AI as Super Intelligence, on the grounds that the word artificial makes it sound fake.



Corn

That's a communications decision I'd like to see the memo on.



Herman

And separately, the Syrian president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, appears to be scrolling Instagram Reels during Erdoğan's speech.



Corn

On camera.



Herman

In the chamber.



Corn

So the room is still doing exactly what it's always done. Which is to say, producing six-second clips that outlive the speeches they came from.



Herman

The format guarantees it. One speaker, one podium, one camera, a hundred and ninety-three delegations. Any deviation, intentional or not, gets isolated and amplified.



Corn

And the deviation is only legible because everything around it is so stiff. You can't have the pitcher without the fifteen-minute slot.



Herman

You can't have the shoe without the protocol.



Hilbert

Quick question.



Corn

Go ahead.



Hilbert

When you pour water at a diplomatic table, you never lift the pitcher by the handle with your palm facing down. You hold it at the base. You never let the spout touch the rim of the glass. And you never fill past two-thirds.



Herman

That's a very specific set of rules.



Hilbert

I did a stretch as a banquet server. New York. UNGA week. The pitchers get polished before service and they get polished after. There's a cloth for it.



Corn

So you watched the clip.



Hilbert

I watched the clip. And my first thought wasn't gaffe. My first thought was, that man has never been trained on a pitcher.



Herman

That's a different diagnosis than ours.



Hilbert

You're saying the UN is a comedy engine because it's formal. Fine. I'd say the comedy is the gap between people who've been trained on the small rituals and people who haven't. There were forty of us in that room and every one of us knew not to do what he did.



Corn

So the scaffolding usually holds.



Hilbert

The scaffolding usually holds. One reception, a delegate from a small country drank from a finger bowl. Lemon water. He drank it.



Herman

And?



Hilbert

And nobody looked. A hundred people in the room and every single one of us decided not to see it. That's the actual skill. That's most of what the UN does, if you want my honest read. The polite refusal to notice.



Corn

That's a better frame than anything we've said this hour.



Hilbert

The pitcher clip only exists because nobody was close enough to stop him and the camera was pointed at his face. Different failure. Same room.



Herman

So the invisible scaffolding is the thing that normally prevents these moments, and when it's absent, the whole world sees the gap.



Hilbert

That's it. I had four of those pitchers at one point, from a hotel that was closing. Gave three away. Kept one for years. It went in a move.



Corn

Noted.



Herman

Which is worth sitting with, actually. Because it reframes the whole episode. We've been treating these moments as the UN failing at solemnity. Hilbert's version is that they're the UN failing at invisibility.



Corn

The machinery of protocol is supposed to be undetectable. The moment you can see it, or see its absence, you get comedy.



Herman

And it explains why the deliberate spectacles work too. Gaddafi's tent, Netanyahu's bomb, Lodge's tweezers. Those aren't gaps in the scaffolding. Those are people tearing the scaffolding down on purpose, because they know the camera is on.



Corn

So there are two ways to make the room funny. You can fail to be trained, or you can choose to be theatrical.



Herman

The second one is usually the more serious of the two.



Corn

Which is the thing I keep coming back to with the pitcher. The man wasn't making a point. He was thirsty after twenty-eight minutes of talking. That's it. And it's now the most recognizable image of Haitian diplomacy in the last two years.



Herman

While the actual Haitian message at this year's Assembly was a plea for security support and dignity for migrants. Which nobody clipped.



Corn

The building did its job this year. It just didn't get shared.



Herman

If you take one thing from this, it's that the UN's solemnity isn't the opposite of its comedy. It's the raw material. The stiffer the room, the louder the deviation.



Corn

The deviation only survives because the rest of the room agrees to pretend it didn't happen. Until the clip goes viral, at which point nobody pretends anything.



Herman

The most-shared UN moment of 2026 was a clip from 2024. That tells you the annual cycle doesn't need new material. It just needs the stage to be lit again.



Corn

The stage gets lit every September, whether or not anything new happens on it.



Herman

Which means the archives are effectively infinite. There's a pitcher, a shoe, a tent, and a cartoon bomb in there for every year the Assembly convenes.



Corn

The UN will keep producing moments worth recycling. And the internet will keep recycling them. Both of those things are now permanent.



Herman

That's the show. Our thanks to producer Hilbert Flumingtop, who has strong opinions about pitchers.



Corn

If you enjoyed this one, a review helps more than you'd think. Everything lives at my weird prompts dot com, and you can email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.