



Cover design by Terrance Turner

Shit You Should Know

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The Rules

/// DAN LEAHY ///

Dan Leahy was born and raised in Seattle. Attended St. Edwards Seminary, Seattle University and went to Turkey in the Peace Corps. Entered NYU Graduate School, refused the draft, and became a community organizer for the Quakers. Ran a field study education center at Cornell University and married Bethany Weidner. They had two sons, JD Ross and Chad. Organized a national political party, the Citizens Party, and a Washington state party called Progress Under Democracy. Taught at Evergreen. Organized the state's first Labor Education and Research Center and ran the New School of Union Organizers. Retired from Evergreen in 2008 after 24 years. Ran around the world. In 2014, organized a region-wide strategy summit to fight oil trains and worked in Greek refugees camps in 2016 and 2017. Lives in Ireland when he can, but mostly lives in Olympia with Bethany and fights City Hall.

Dan Leahy:

Hi everybody, thanks for the invitation. I want to talk about The Rules. I learned them in 1972 from Rick Turner. Rick's street name was Zukor. Zukor spent most of his time in 1972 fighting to defend the Attica brothers from criminal prosecution by the state of New York.

I used to think that The Rules were about dealing with Authority. But then I taught my two teenage sons the rules and they started using the rules against me. So, I decided that the rules are actually about dealing with illegitimate authority. And illegitimacy is a really important thing for community organizers. I learned this early in my organizing work. In 1970 I heard that there were some tenants in rent controlled apartments in Brooklyn that were being evicted. And I went down and talked to them, and I said, can you show me your eviction notice? And they showed me a copy of a letter from a hospital saying the hospital would appreciate it if they moved out of their apartments. I said, you know this isn't a legal eviction notice; you don't have to move. They said well you know we don't want to stand in the way of a hospital. And I said,

you know, they're not expanding the hospital. They're going to tear down your rent-controlled apartment so that doctors can have a parking space when they drive in from Long Island. And all of a sudden that letter from the hospital became illegitimate, and those tenants, all of them in that building, along with community organizations from all over South Brooklyn brought that hospital, which was the oldest Methodist Hospital in the United States, to the verge of bankruptcy. The hospital's request was illegitimate. So, legitimacy is really important, and these are the rules for dealing with illegitimate authority.

The first rule, of course, is don't get caught. Now, I worked for the Quakers for three years. The Quakers can tell you a lot about social movement construction; they're great at it. They can tell you about how to prepare for and deal with civil disobedience. They know that cold. They're good at it. But they're also people that don't mind getting arrested. And why don't they mind getting arrested? Because there are other Quakers who are lawyers that come down to the jail and get them out. But nobody was coming down to get me. So, every time I was involved with the Quakers in a civil disobedience action, when the cops came, I ran. The first rule is don't get caught.

If by some chance the first rule is violated, there's the second rule, which is admit nothing. They'll tell you that they just want to ask you a few questions... to clarify things, understand what happened and this and that and they want to help you. But still, admit nothing.

Once they realize that you're not going to say anything, rule number three comes into play, because they'll start asking you to name other people. So, rule number three is don't name names.

Rule number four is never ever put it in writing. And I'll tell you how I learned that rule. Because in 1969 I refused the military draft at the White Hall Induction Center in New York, I didn't see any particular reason to fight the Vietnamese people. And so I decided to, you know, refuse the draft. And when I did, they sent me up to see the FBI in Manhattan. There was an FBI guy there, and he was real friendly to me. Actually, he was from the University of Washington. He sat back in his big chair and he put his feet up on the table, on the desk, and he slid this piece of paper across to me and said why don't you sign that and we'll get going. So I looked at it and it was a waiver of rights form. And had I signed that everything that I said to that man during that conference could have been used against me in a court of law. And I told him, I know you're trying to be helpful to me, but my lawyer said not to sign anything. And I'm not gonna sign.

All of a sudden that man's whole attitude changed. His feet came off the desk. He threatened me with five years of federal prison, told me that I had to report to the Federal District Attorney and told me to get out of this office. So you know, don't ever put it in writing.

Rule number five, is a corollary to that, which is always get it in writing. And always getting it in writing means basically working off your own paper.

You don't work off your bosses paper; you don't work off your enemies paper; you don't use their paper; you don't use their language. You win with your own paper, your own set of definitions, your own set of languages and you use that in negotiations.

The second thing about getting it in writing is using primary documents. You don't need other people to interpret things for you. You know people often say you need to get a lawyer. No. You can read the ordinances, the law, the statutes, you can do that yourself. And when you read that, you'll find out what the real meaning of those laws are. So, for instance in the late 70s early 80s, the Washington public power system and all the Public Utility Districts (PUDs) in this state wanted to build five 1000 megawatt nuclear power plants. They said their job was to create power for the entire Northwest region. We looked up the actual language used to create public utility districts. It said, "the purpose of the public utility district is to conserve the water and power resources for the benefit of the people there-in". We used that language to stop four of the five nuclear power plants in the state. There eventually was a court hearing, and massive protests, but that language was what defeated that effort to build up nuclear power plants... so always do your best to get it in writing.

Rule number six is always ask the question advantageous to yourself. The authorities will always bring all these people together to tell you what they're going to do to you. So that's good for an organizer because organizers didn't have to expend all their resources to bring people into that room. You should always ask your question in a declarative manner. In other words, you state your position; you don't give them an opportunity to state theirs. You state yours but in the form of a question during the question and answer period.

So one time we were in this debate about nuclear power plants. This young woman stood up during the question and answer period. She did chapter and verse about every reason you do not want to have a nuclear power plant anywhere in your community; then she stopped. The moderator said, well, what's your question? She said "yes or no?"

That's a declarative statement, and that's asking the question advantageous to yourself.

So rule number seven has to do with strategy. And that is, you have to always keep the enemy in front of you. I know most of us don't want to imagine that there's somebody after our ass, but they are. And you have to have a clear understanding of who that enemy is. Because without a clear understanding of opposing forces, you will have no strategy, no effective strategy. Sun Tsu says, you need to understand yourself as well as you understand the enemy, and as long as you do that, you'll be victorious.

Let me give you an example of that. In the early 1980s, most of you know, there was an effort by finance capital to create the North American Free Trade Agreement, called NAFTA. And it was going to be a financial arrangement between Canada, the US and Mexico. And there was a group of people that decided to look into what this was about. They were basically teachers from Canada, US and Mexico. And they saw that this was about the creation of a North American identity and the privatization of all public education systems for the North American continent. So, what they did was they decided to get together, and they had 300 people from those three countries, all of them union members and union activists from teacher unions. They came together and they set up a parallel form of organization, so they could see how NAFTA was affecting all three countries. That was called the Trinational Coalition for the Defense of Public Education. And I just want to tell you that in 2022, after 28 years of organizing, they had 160 people on a zoom call from all three countries and half of the countries from Latin America. They've been confronting and facing NAFTA and its privatization of public education for 28 years and I think they've been successful.

So rule number eight is always keep your passport valid. Why? I think probably one of the most important things for my education was spending 2 years in another country. I lived in a Turkish Muslim village, for two years. That was probably the best education experience I had, mainly in terms of understanding what the US was. The reason you have to keep your passport valid is because you need to go to another country in order to see your own. Second reason is, of course, sometimes you need to get out of the country. I'm reminded that Frederick Douglass had to get out of the country after John Brown took over the armory. He had to go to Ireland because they were gonna come after him because the two knew each other. I had to go to Portugal after the WPPSS debacle where I was blamed for the largest municipal bond default in US history. So, I had to get out of the country with my wife and two small kids for a while, let that cool down. The third reason you want to keep your passport valid is global solidarity makes

domestic movements much stronger. So, keep your passport valid if you can, and then get out of the country every once and while.

Rule number nine. It's an important rule; rule number nine says, "Even though they tell you that all your questions will be answered, all your health care needs will be taken care of and everything will be fine; never ever go to the stadium." If you want me to explain that a little bit, I will. Just leave it with you: don't go to the stadium. Think RFK Stadium, 1971; Chile, 1973; Superdome, 2005.

Rule number 10... Because, you know, coming out of the 60s you'd expect that there'd be 10 rules, just like the 10 point Black Panther Program or the Young Lords Program or the Young Patriots Program. They all had a 10 Point Platform. But Rule number 10 was proposed to be, everything is negotiable, but of course that might affect the rules. So that was denied.

There are the rules: Don't get caught. Admit nothing. Do not squeal. Never ever put it in writing. Always get it in writing. Ask the question advantageous to yourself. Keep the enemy in front of you. Keep your passport valid. Never ever go to the stadium.