

CHAPTER 4

Focal Symbols

The introduction described how the Soviet army gave up its officers' club and Latvians got back their cultural center after 50 years. The action was symbolic but it could not have been a symbolic message since the Soviet military did not aim to communicate anything. This was an example of a focal symbol, which is, roughly speaking, an event that establishes a focal point in a game through an analogy or a prototype.¹

A focal point is an outcome that develops because players commonly expect it, based on their beliefs about others' beliefs about extra-game factors. (Some examples will be given shortly.) Outcomes become focal in other ways: by their prominence, by agreement among the players, or by precedent. When a focal point is generated by a focal symbol, however, the mechanism in play is a particular one that deserves to be called symbolic. The players' common expectation is produced by their consideration of a certain member/set relationship. The member is the focal symbol and the larger set is a class of events that either show an analogical similarity to it or, in some cases, is the class of events for which the symbol is a prototype. In turn, this set is associated with a particular game outcome and so leads the players to develop self-fulfilling expectations of that outcome.

In the officers' club example, by the end of August 1991 Latvia was assured of its own government and the debate turned to the degree to which other forms of Soviet influence would be acceptable. When the Soviet army left the club, Latvians saw an analogy with the Soviet withdrawal from their country because of the structural similarity. Latvians surmised about each other that they were

1. The concept of focal point is connected to that of a Nash equilibrium. The latter is described in detail in appendix B, but here it can be summarized as a set of moves, one for each player, that no player would want to change if he or she knew the others' moves. If the outcome is a Nash equilibrium, the expectations produced by the focal point are consistent—if a player believes the others will do their part, that player has the incentive to choose consistent with the outcome as well.

thinking on similar lines, and each was more confident to act for independence. A move that might have left someone isolated and vulnerable now had an expectation of support, thanks to the focal point generated by the symbol.

First this chapter will elaborate on the difference between focal symbols and message symbols, then it will distinguish focal symbols and focal points in general. It will give some examples of focal symbolism and finally a definition. Jervis (1989) discussed a series of examples, and the present definition allows an account of two of these—symbolic leadership and prenegotiation symbols—as forms of focal symbolism. Official ceremonies are then interpreted as a *mélange* of focal, message, and value symbolism. The next chapter will present crisis tension as focal symbolism, and symbolic contests will be discussed briefly in chapter 13.

Focal Symbols Compared with Message Symbols

Message and focal symbols share a common consequence—people get mutual understanding of each other's thinking. A message symbol causes a convergence of beliefs between the sender and receiver, but focal symbols do not require a sender. There is convergence of beliefs in the group, but it comes from an external event. The failure of President Carter's mission to free the Iranian hostages was taken to symbolize his foreign policy frustrations, but the failure was not a communication from Carter. It resulted from a dust storm, a mechanical fault in a helicopter, and various human decisions. None of these involved the self-referential intention characteristic of sending a message.

Sometimes the distinction between focal symbols and message symbols is subtle, as when the symbol is an intentional act but the intention does not include the communication of that intention. A major symbol of the Gulf War was the perceived success of the Patriot missiles in downing Iraqi Scuds. Many Americans connected the Patriots with the superiority of U.S. technology over Saddam's raw force. They knew that others saw it this way, and these beliefs mobilized support for the war. George Bush had put the Patriots in place deliberately, and it is likely that he hoped that their success would be taken symbolically, but Americans did not interpret that success as a communication from their president about what he wanted them to believe. The Patriots were a focal symbol, not a message symbol.

It is remarkable that this form of agentless symbolism has been so overlooked. The only exception I know of is Jervis's discussion. The explanation may lie in the emphases of the particular disciplines that study symbols. Semiotics, allied fields of philosophy, linguistics, and anthropological studies of ritual gen-

erally look at repeated behaviors, but focal symbols tend to be specific events. International relations scholars and historians deal with specific events but tend not to be concerned with the theoretical aspects of symbolism. Other studies of symbolism have come from the structural study of myth, the theory of literary criticism, religious studies, and the sociology of symbolic interaction, but these emphasize communication and tend not to look at focal symbolism.

Focal Symbols Compared with Focal Points

“Focal symbolism” alludes to Schelling’s idea of focal points in games (1960). This section discusses how a focal symbol determines a focal point through symbolic processes. In 1957 Schelling put a now-famous question to some colleagues at Yale: you arranged to meet someone in New York City at a certain time but forgot to agree where, and now you must choose a place, hoping that your friend makes the same choice. They were not necessarily to answer the first place that came into their minds. Instead they were to consider how their friend would see the problem, knowing that they both were going through the same mental process. Most of them chose the clock in the middle of Grand Central Station. Perhaps they figured that people generally meet there, or perhaps that the clock is large and impressive. Or perhaps the key was that Grand Central is where one gets off the train from New Haven.² None of these reasons involve the abstract properties of the game; the players are going outside the game to solve it.

Even when there are strong game-theoretical reasons for choosing one outcome, the contextual factors might prevail and lead to another. Suppose that there were exactly one other place to meet, the Cloisters, and both knew it to be a pleasant site that would give each higher utilities (matrix 1). Each friend might still choose the clock. Focality can be more powerful than high payoffs.

Definition of a Focal Point

A focal point will be defined as an outcome that players believe to be more likely based on extra-game-theoretic factors.³ A further condition is that this greater likelihood be based not just on their beliefs about the extra-game factors but on their beliefs about other players’ beliefs about them. Suppose I think my friend

2. Pairs of students from other cities, however, are usually able to select a common meeting place based on their local knowledge.

3. Mehta, Starmer, and Sugden (1994) use the term *Schelling salience* for roughly the present concept. Here the term *salience* is saved for the immediate psychological impact of a stimulus, without any cogitations about what others might be thinking.

	Go to Grand Central	Go to the Cloisters
Go to Grand Central	<i>1, 1</i>	0, 0
Go to the Cloisters	0, 0	<i>2, 2</i>

Matrix 1. Where to meet in New York, a game with a focal point. Nash equilibrium outcomes (see this chap., n. 1) are italicized.

will reflexively stop at the clock since it is the first thing he comes on when he steps off the train. Unknown to me, he reasons the same way, and we meet. Going to the clock is then not a focal point. Simply forming an opinion about each other's action is not enough. There must be higher level thinking about each other's thinking for the outcome to be a focal point.

DEFINITION: A *focal point* is a game outcome that the players perceive as more likely due to their beliefs about each other's beliefs about each others' consideration of extra-game-theoretic factors (or higher-order beliefs about these factors).

Contrast the general focal *point* of the clock at Grand Central with the focal *symbol* of the officers' club in Riga. To represent the Latvian situation as a game, the innocent simplification is made that the country has exactly two citizens who are deciding whether they can rely on each other to join the push for full independence. The game is depicted here as a Stag Hunt,⁴ shown in matrix 2 and discussed in appendix B, and it has two pure strategy equilibria. One equilibrium is the mutually beneficial one of jointly acting for independence, and the other is the inefficient one of both doing nothing. It is assumed that the outcome will be one or the other—that the Latvians understand each other well enough to know their expectations in the game following their observation of the Soviet withdrawal. The Soviet withdrawal from the club symbolically suggests the upper left equilibrium as a focal point because of its analogy to the larger Soviet withdrawal from Latvia. Both events have similar structures involving giving up power and leaving, and the analogical mapping is further supported by the context—the club was already established as a symbol of Latvian

4. The Stag Hunt has been used to represent social movements (e.g., Chong 1993). Brown (1965) used it to model a lynch mob.

	Push for independence	Stay silent
Push for independence	<i>4, 4</i> (Soviet withdrawal)	1, 3 (vulnerability for one)
Stay silent	3, 1 (vulnerability for one)	<i>2, 2</i> (mutual inaction)

Matrix 2. Outcomes and payoffs for a game involving Latvians' decisions on collective action. Nash equilibrium outcomes are italicized.

national culture. This is different from the focal point of the clock in Grand Central. It is not in any larger class of analogous events that selects it as a place to meet. It is focal for other reasons, either precedent or salience or physical centrality.

The officers' club example was a collective action problem that involved a focal symbol. Other collective action examples have involved focal points that were not focal symbols, and the two processes can be compared. Marketplaces, statues, or historic sites provide locations for political demonstrations (Karklins and Petersen 1993), and the likely reason is their prominence, their centrality, or for the statues, their historical associations. Lohmann (1992, forthcoming) discusses the growth of weekly demonstrations in Leipzig for East German independence. Each protest march seemed to grow based on how many people had shown up the previous week. Anything that publicly distinguishes an outcome might make it focal—Tilly (1978) notes that traditional holidays often provide the dates for spontaneous political demonstrations. These examples have the elements of higher-level knowledge playing a role but lack the requirement that the larger set is evoked by an analogy or prototype.

Besides analogy there is another mechanism that produces focal symbols. It involves prototypes, often combined with metonymies. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Ukraine's nuclear warheads came to symbolize its sovereignty. By holding the kind of weapon that many powerful sovereign states possess, the country had one element from the prototype of a powerful state (Sagan 1996). Power could not be symbolized by a large shoe industry, for example. The difference between analogy and prototype as symbolic mechanisms is that the former involves structure and the latter overall similarity of surface features. The former can generate a class of like objects not contemplated before, but prototypes must

be preestablished in the culture. The common element between the mechanisms is the connection of the symbol to the outcome through a larger class of events. A symbol must stand for something broader. If there were no such class in the players' minds, if the connection between the event and the outcome were just a matter of similarity, this might constitute precedent but not symbolism.

Definition of a Focal Symbol

Roughly, a focal symbol is an event, not necessarily brought about by any player, that establishes a focal point in the game by generating the higher order beliefs that the players are following a certain logic that connects the symbol to a larger set and that set, in turn, to the outcome.

DEFINITION: Suppose *S* is an event, *M* is a class of events containing *S*, and *G* is a game. Then *S* is a *focal symbol* with meaning *M* if the following mechanism leads to a focal point in *G* through each player's belief that the mechanism is in operation and belief in other players' beliefs in that: the occurrence of *S* evokes the larger class *M* in players' minds through analogy or prototypicality, and *M* evokes the focal point of *G*.

In the definition, an *event* means an occurrence at a relatively specific time and place. In the officers' club example, *S* is the Soviet Army's withdrawal from the club, and *M* is the set of events, the general Soviet withdrawal from Latvia.

How Focal Symbols Get Noticed

To become a focal symbol, the event must first get noticed, and players must believe that others have noticed it. A focal symbol gets noticed in two ways. Sometimes players are looking for it because they face a coordination problem, and sometimes it forces itself on their consciousness. In the latter case, the event is said to be *salient*, meaning that one pays attention to it without a deliberate decision to do so. Salience has often been used as an explanatory variable in the psychology of perception. For the Gestalt psychologists of the early part of the century it was what differentiated a perceived figure from the background, and social psychologists have used it to explain perceived group differences and identities (Taylor and Fiske 1978). It is different from focality in that it is a one-person concept, so levels of belief are not involved. When Schelling asked his respondents to guess where their friend would go to meet them in New York, he was tapping focality, not salience.

Some focal symbols are innately salient—the Berlin Wall was miles of con-

crete and wire meandering through the city. Others are made salient by the context. A striking symbol of the Gulf War was the photograph of U.S. marines disembarking from helicopters in Kuwait City. Readers recalled the opposite scene at the end of the Vietnam War, when helicopters took soldiers and refugees from the roof of the Saigon embassy. The 1991 helicopters became symbolic of America's liberation from the "Vietnam syndrome."

How Focal Symbols Evoke or Construct Their Meaning

After a focal symbol has been discovered, it must evoke the larger class that is its meaning. The two mechanisms, prototypicality and analogy, will be described in detail.

Prototypical Focal Symbols

Here the class of events to be evoked is a concept already familiar to the audience. A prototypical object or scenario was defined as a specific example used in our thinking for a wider category (chap. 3). This is the mode by which Che Guevara was a symbol of Latin American revolution and Nelson Mandela was a symbol of resistance to apartheid. There are different ways in which items become prototypical. Some are *central* in their category, in the sense that they are fairly similar to the other members. As a bird, a robin is a better example than a penguin, because of its physical features and behavior.⁵ Prototypicality can arise from an object's function: as a prototype for furniture, a chair is better than a telephone or a rug, and a gun is better than a whip as a prototype of a weapon. In other cases a category is brought to mind by an *ideal* member. The story of Tristram and Isolde symbolizes romantic love, although their love was never consummated and so lacked a central feature of such a relationship. It had one core feature to a high and pure degree, selfless devotion. A third way to stand for a category is as a *stereotype*. The item's prominence is socially based, ingrained in the group's thought patterns, and the group is conscious of that fact. Compared to prototypes by centrality or to ideals, a stereotype's status is less due to its innate features. It represents its class somewhat by convention and precedent. Racial, political, and occupational groups usually have stereotypes. Central prototypes, ideal prototypes, and stereotypical prototypes all involve the linking of a specific member to a larger category (Lakoff 1987).

5. The idea of centrality is that if one constructed a psychological space based on placing similar entities close together, the prototypes would lie in the middle. When subjects were given somewhat similar tasks, judging what is a typical tool, fruit, flower, etc. (e.g., McEvoy and Nelson 1984), they gave prototypes that seemed to be based on centrality.

Analogical Focal Symbols

Unlike a prototypical symbol, one based on analogy constructs a new class on the occasion. Borrowing Lakoff and Johnson's phrase from their study of metaphor (1980), an analogical focal symbol can "create similarity." The essence of analogy, as the concept is used here, is a mapping based on similarity of structure meant to resolve some specific question (Gentner 1989; Holyoak and Thagard 1995).

What does it mean to say events have a similar structure? An event can be described in terms of objects, features of these objects, and relationships among these objects. An object might be the Berlin Wall. A feature is a property of a single object, like its size or shape or material. Relations hold between or among objects (the East German government *constructs* the Berlin Wall, a flag *flies over* an embassy).⁶ Two structures are isomorphic if there is a mapping of objects into objects, features into features, and relations into relations such that when features or relations hold among certain objects before the mapping, the mapped versions of those features, relations, and objects also hold. Electrical current is isomorphic to water flow in that one can map electrons into water, voltage into height of the water's source, and electrical current into water flow, so that truths in the first system are also valid in the second.⁷ The greater the height of the water (voltage) the greater the flow (electrical current). (Isomorphism will be clarified in the Berlin Wall example of fig. 5.)

Rules for Analogies: Structural Similarity, Systematicity, and the Persistence of Causation

A strong analogy depends on the successful mapping of the pattern of relations. Features are less important. Gentner labeled this the *principle of structural similarity*, and it is illustrated by an experiment by Goldstone, Medin, and Gentner (1991). Subjects were shown stimuli of columns of geometrical shapes (fig. 4)

6. There are many ways to do this, and formally, one could turn any relationship into a feature by defining $X(y)$ to mean that country y is under attack by x . Features, however, are supposed to refer to general properties, not specific entities, and the representation is supposed to reflect what is psychologically natural.

7. Very often the isomorphism is not exact. Real-life analogies will be imperfect or incomplete—higher voltage does not mean that current moves faster, so speed of movement cannot be mapped. Sometimes elements are not mapped one to one. Holyoak and Spelman's article (1992) asked, "If Saddam is Hitler, who is George Bush?" Bush's role shared features with Roosevelt's and Churchill's. Instead of making a definite choice, subjects seemed to use both to support the analogy with World War II, which was so influential before the Gulf War.

An Analogical Focal Symbol: The Berlin Wall

Through the Cold War, a dominant symbol was the Berlin Wall. Chapter 2 discussed its features as a message symbol. As a focal symbol it represented the division of East and West and the suppression of human rights under communism. One mapping is straightforward (fig. 5).⁸ East Berlin becomes the Eastern bloc, and West Berlin becomes the Western bloc. The wall becomes the division of the world into free and suppressed. As is required, however, causation is mapped into causation.

Focal symbols can draw on several analogies simultaneously. The wall could be thought of as dividing Germany, or Berlin, or one could see a more feature-oriented analogy between the wall and a prison. This analogy shows the unimportance of features relative to structure. Berlin, a city, is mapped into Europe, a region of nations. Bricks and mortar are put into correspondence with Soviet policies. The analogy is strong nevertheless, because the structure of the two diagrams is the same.

Symbolic Leadership

One variety of focal symbolism involves leadership. The country's citizens draw an analogy between the leader's actions and their own and tend to follow the leader's example. There is less problem of getting the event noticed: a leader's deeds are immediately salient. Chapter 12 will examine a positive aspect of this leadership as "moral authority," but sometimes an unwanted analogy is drawn—a leader tries to send a symbolic message or to do something or to believe something but uses a form that has an unwanted focal meaning. In September 1993, Yitzhak Rabin and Yassar Arafat met at the White House to sign a peace declaration and ended the ceremony with the famous handshake. Rabin, who had previously declared that he would never shake Arafat's hand, said he had done it unwillingly but could not refuse in front of the U.S. president and the world (*MacNeil-Lehrer Report*, September 13, 1993). He had not meant the handshake the way the world took it. His words were ineffective, however, and even people who were aware of this disavowal saw the handshake as symbolically important.

Jervis (1989) points to a conflict of symbolism around Ronald Reagan's 1985 visit to Bitburg, Germany. After Reagan announced that he planned to lay

8. Figure 5's way of presenting the structure is essentially a visual version of the predicate calculus (Rumelhart and Levin 1975; Gentner 1989).

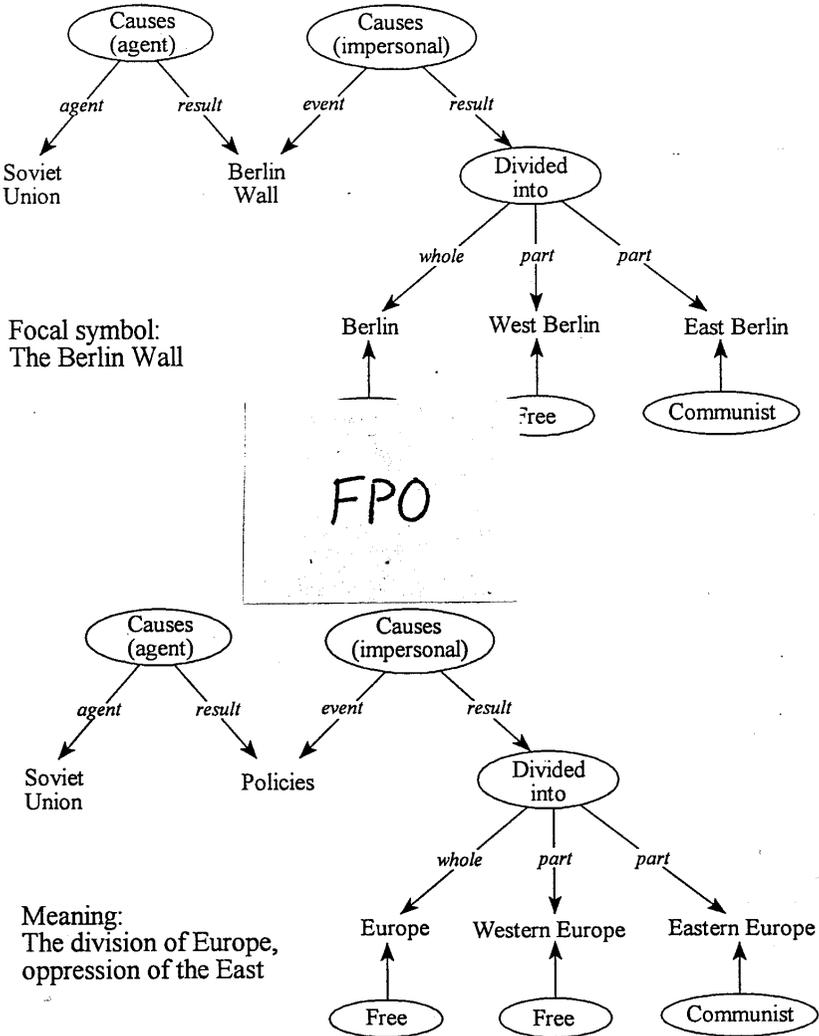


Fig. 5. A symbolic meaning of the Berlin Wall is determined by its analogical similarity to a larger class of Soviet actions.

a wreath at a military cemetery, it was revealed that the cemetery contained the graves of several dozen SS officers. Speaking at a White House ceremony, Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, warned that “for the sake of history, a U.S. president should not bow down before SS graves.” A public debate arose on what a visit would really mean, Reagan maintaining that his message was not toleration for the SS but abhorrence of war. Critics replied that whatever he intended, the action would indeed mean toleration of the SS. To avoid embarrassing the German chancellor, Reagan went to the cemetery but stopped as well at the Bergen-Belsen death camp. The ceremony at Bitburg was altered so that the American and German leaders were not photographed shaking hands; two World War II soldiers stood between them and shook hands in their place (Hilberg 1986; Levkov 1987; Schmitt 1989). Figure 6 shows two examples of symbolic handshakes.

In a parallel controversy that year, on the anniversary of Japan’s surrender Yasuhiro Nakasone became the first postwar Japanese prime minister to visit the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo (Tsumagari 1994). The souls of 2.6 million war dead spiritually reside there, among them Prime Minister Tojo and 13 others who were convicted as war criminals. Some commentators saw Nakasone’s visit as promoting militarization, and some opposition leaders objected that it violated the constitutional prohibition against state support of any religion. Government officials insisted that the visit was not a religious act, only a remembrance of the dead, that it continued a long-standing practice of visits by cabinet members. Like Reagan, Nakasone went ahead with the ceremony but tried to diminish its connection to the unwanted meaning by altering its details. He bowed only once before placing a wreath, where Shinto ritual involves two bows, clapping hands, and bowing again. The principle of structural similarity, however, says that changing surface features like bows and handshakes will be ineffective in determining analogies. It is the structure that is important. Indeed, the changes did not placate Nakasone’s critics, and only one such visit has been made since, in 1996 by Prime Minister Hashimoto, who tried to undo the semblance of an official visit by going there on his birthday.

The crucial issue was not how onlookers saw the leaders’ intentions in making the visits but how onlookers expected each other to act as a consequence of knowing about the visits. When critics charged that the Bitburg visit would “rehabilitate the SS,” they were implying that observers would have lower expectations that others would act forcefully on issues connected to the memory of the Holocaust. Reagan and Nakasone’s “symbolic leadership” spoke louder than their words in citizens’ collective action games and made the undesirable outcomes more focal.



Fig. 6. Symbolism in handshakes. (*Top*): French President François Mitterrand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl meet at the World War I battlefield of Verdun (September 1984). (*Bottom*): Reagan and Kohl at Bitburg observing former soldiers Ridgeway (*left*) and Steinhoff shaking hands (May 1985). (Photos copyright Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, Bonn.)

The Bitburg situation can be represented as involving choices by two citizens—Reagan himself is not a player. They observe the leader's choice, then choose a position themselves on a question evoking the memory of Nazism, such as German military activity outside the NATO area or laws against neo-fascist revival parties. Each citizen takes a lenient or a strict position. The players' preferences are different: the row player prefers a lenient policy and the column player would rather see a strict one, it is assumed, but above all they want to be in step with each other. Also they do not want an open conflict. Also they must commit themselves to actions before knowing the other's move. A game with these abstract features is known as Battle-of-the-Sexes (matrix 3).⁹ If the leader has done something in public that has a structure of toleration or one of militancy, like visiting the cemetery or refusing to visit it, this influences each citizen's expectations of the other's action in that direction. Each chooses that position, expecting the other to do the same. The basis of their reasoning is the analogy between the leader's action and the current issue, through the larger class of events involving toleration. The followers are looking to their leader for coordination, and interpreting the latter's action through an analogy.

Ceremonies

International ceremonies are held for various reasons.¹⁰ They are meant to bring things about, and on this account they can be grouped using the categories of language acts listed in chapter 2. Six categories were given but most ceremonies can be accounted for by three of these.

Commissive ceremonies

make agreements, such as treaties or surrenders;

Effective ceremonies

install officials, like an ambassador;

render honors or give awards;

Expressive ceremonies

welcome, show hospitality to, or bid farewell to someone during state visits;

9. The name comes from Braithwaite (1955), whose couple wish to spend the evening together, but he would rather go to the opera while she prefers the prizefight.

10. This list was generated by searching for international ceremonies reported in the Nexis database.

	Lenient	Strict
Lenient	<i>2, 1</i>	0, 0
Strict	0, 0	<i>1, 2</i>

Matrix 3. Two citizens choose positions on the tolerance of Nazism, a game that might have a focal point established by symbolism. Equilibrium outcomes are italicized.

commemorate events or people; these include ceremonies on the anniversaries of war events or at the funerals of leaders.

These tasks could be done unceremoniously—documents could be signed and mailed, or awards simply handed over, or heads of state picked up at the airport with no pomp or ritual. Do the symbolic elements promote the functions of the ceremony, or are they just entertainment? The answer may lie in the study of religious rituals since international ceremonies seem to be their secular counterparts. Concerning rituals, Whitehead (1927, 61) commented that their symbolic elements “run wild like the vegetation in a tropical forest.” Turner (1967) viewed symbols as the building blocks, the basic meaningful components, of rituals. At secular ceremonies too, one finds symbols upon symbols. At the July 1991 signing of the START Treaty, George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev used pens made from the debris of missiles destroyed under the recent Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The pens were mounted in a holder showing St. George slaying the dragon. In Christian art, this motif corresponds to St. Michael the Archangel battling Satan, and the design seemed to play on the leaders’ first names, as they banished the evil of war with their missile-pen lances.

One way to discern the purpose of symbols at ceremonies is to look at the features they share with rituals, to see whether symbolism’s religious functions have secular counterparts. The following list of general properties of ceremonies includes ideas from Turner (1967), Skorupski (1976), and Moore and Myerhoff (1977), as well as other ideas suggested by the database of message symbols.

1. Religious and secular ceremonies often reaffirm the social order, symbolically recognizing the positions of individuals within the societal hierarchy. Traditional values and historical roots are reemphasized, verbally in speeches and symbolically in actions.

2. Ceremonies often include performative language, such as words that install a leader or make an agreement. In religious rituals, the effectives invoke magic, but those in nation-state rituals are based on the power of participants in their official roles.
3. Ceremonies are often repetitive in their setting, content or form. Many are performed on anniversaries. Any spontaneity, such as exuberance or applause, comes at prescribed times.
4. Ceremonies often involve behavior or objects reserved for the occasion. Certain rooms or desks are regularly used for treaty-signing. They correspond to the sacred objects of a religious ritual.
5. The staging and presentation are dramatic and evocative, perhaps with band music, parades, decorations or elaborate dress.
6. A ceremony has a well-defined beginning and ending.
7. Ceremonies include an audience—private ceremonies are the exception. The audience symbolically represents the broader group, watching and noting what is being committed to or effectuated at the ceremony.

Points 3, 4, and 5, involving the repetitive or special nature of ceremonies and rituals, seem related to making commitments. They make a promise more credible by tying it to other promises made in the same fashion. Breaking the current promise would cause the group to distrust past and future promises. Following point 7, the physical presence of various delegates means not only that they observe the ceremony but, significant for a game-theoretical analysis of commitments, they observe each other observing it. The value symbols of point 1 are included as guarantors of the promise made. Some of the structures at commissive ceremonies also suggest focal symbolism, in that they parallel the structure of the society that is being committed by its leader—representatives of various concerned groups are present to symbolically witness and accept an agreement.

Ceremonies affirm the social order using focal and message symbolism. Rules prescribe who sits where at official dinners (McCaffree and Innis 1985), as well as who sits behind the podium during speeches. Who speaks is important—participating in a treaty ceremony is taken as standing in the group and support for the agreement. Controversy can arise over just what social order is being affirmed—who can attend the ceremony and in what capacity these individuals are to attend. Should Lithuania send a representative to the commemoration of the Warsaw Uprising? Should Germany's premier be invited to D-day remembrance services? Should the Russian delegate to the ratification of the Middle East Peace Accords stand on the platform with the signing party or

down on the White House lawn? A historical example was Emperor Hirohito's attending Japan's surrender on the USS *Missouri* but not having to step up and sign the document. Ceremonies with structures that parallel some important aspect of the society are frequent among indigenous peoples (Turner 1967), and the phenomenon appears, if somewhat less strongly, in official ceremonies.

Focal Symbolism in Prenegotiation

In most examples so far, the players had no influence over the symbolic event. It came about by chance or by the action of nonplayers, like Soviet policymakers for Latvia, the U.S. president, or the Japanese premier. Sometimes, however, the symbolic event is determined by the individuals who will play the significant game, then the symbol can be chosen to influence the game's outcome. One can illustrate this point by positing two games played in sequence. The first is the *symbolic precursor* game, where the players make their moves in the knowledge that the outcome will influence the play of the second more important game, through the mechanism of focal symbolism.

Participants in negotiations often start by bargaining over symbolism, hoping to gain an advantage in the real confrontation. In 1968, as deaths mounted in Vietnam, representatives in Paris argued about whether the negotiating table would be square, oval, diamond shaped, or round. The U.S. and South Vietnamese governments worried that a square table would symbolically imply an equal negotiating status for the Viet Cong and would raise expectations that the Viet Cong's demands would be satisfied (*New York Times*, January 17, 1969, p. 3).

A negotiation often resembles a Chicken game, where one side or the other must compromise to avoid a mutual loss. Chicken has multiple equilibria and so is open to the influence of symbols. An excellent precedent for one Chicken game is a previous one, so yielding in the precursor game establishes a focal point in the later game. Jervis (1989) cites a symbolic example from August 1986, just before the Reagan-Gorbachev summit. The United States arrested a Soviet embassy aide, Gennady Zakharov, for receiving classified material. The Soviet Union reacted by seizing Nicholas Daniloff, a U.S. reporter who had been an intermediary for the CIA (Garthoff 1994). The two governments began bargaining over who would be released first and how many Soviet dissidents would be freed at the same time. Some American commentators worried that the Soviet Union would see the Daniloff negotiations as a measure of U.S. resoluteness at the summit. On the face of it, this seems far fetched. After many years of dealing with the United States, why would Soviet leaders look to this event to judge America's true fiber? A focal symbolism argument, however, suggests that

the Daniloff case's publicity and proximity to the summit made it salient. Its structure made it a member of the larger class of U.S./USSR negotiations, and it became a focal for the summit negotiations. The issue was not one of each side learning about the other's characteristic resolve by looking at accumulated evidence. It was each side forming expectations about the other's current expectation, a phenomenon that is less stable.

Parties sometimes try to counter the focal symbolism of early negotiation moves. In March 1982, the deputy foreign minister of Argentina, Enrique Ros, proposed that negotiations be held over the Falklands, and he included a common phrase, that they be initiated "without prejudice to the rights, claims or position of the parties and without prejudgment of the outcome" (Perez de Cuelar 1997). This did not change the structure of the situation and so might not have worked any better than President Reagan's or Premier Nakasone's alterations in their ceremonies.

The line between simple precedent and symbolic precedent is not always sharp. If one party allows discussion of an item at the early stages of a negotiation, the other side can expect it to be on the table in the main rounds (Stein 1989). This might plausibly be viewed as invoking an analogical larger class involving the party's resoluteness, and so constituting a focal symbol, or it might not. In other cases, the focal symbolism is clear, as when the precursor game is in a domain very dissimilar on the surface to the significant negotiation, and their connection is through their parallel abstract structures. The word *precedent* would not apply between events so different at the level of their features and the explanation must be symbolism. Frequently parties quarrel about where their negotiations will be held. Each is reluctant to travel to the other's homeland, and even a meeting in a nearby capital is resisted, since most of those states have become involved in some way in the dispute. A focal symbolism interpretation would point to the analogy between physically going to the other's geographical location in the prenegotiation and moving toward the other's bargaining position in the real session. The problem is solved if parties choose a site that is neutral and far away, and many negotiators from Middle East and African countries have settled their differences in Geneva or Oslo (Ulriksen 1994).