In memory of my mother and father
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Preface

When Soviet nuclear missiles were discovered in Cuba, Sir Harold MacMillan suggested a plan to ease the crisis. He would immobilize Britain’s 60 Thor missiles on the condition that Premier Khrushchev would withdraw the Soviet deployment. In a letter to President Kennedy, MacMillan stated that his undertaking would be both “symbolic and real,” and “might be helpful to save the Russians’ face.” Kennedy opposed the idea because he saw a different symbolic suggestion in it—that Soviet protection of Cuba could be traded for Western defense of Europe (Press Association Newsfile, Jan. 10, 1993).

In March 1982, during the crisis over the Falklands/Malvinas, an Argentinean scrap-metal dealer landed a party on an outlying island to salvage an old whaling station. He had notified the British Embassy of the trip, but when his workers raised the national flag, shot some of the local deer, and ignored other points of British sovereignty, Britain dispatched marines to remove them. The spiral of reactions ended in war (Freedman and Gamba-Stonehouse 1991; Perez de Cuellar 1997.)

Putting the right symbolic nuances in their words and actions is a regular concern of foreign policy practitioners. They also worry about intangible goals like saving face and preserving national honor and prestige, but these subjects have not been emphasized by international relations theory. This book analyzes symbolism in international relations and examines four status regulators that rely on symbolism: honor, social face, prestige, and moral authority. My aim is to treat the topics more precisely than has been done before.

This book’s thesis is that to understand symbolism one must distinguish three types: value, message, and focal symbols. Value symbols, which are discussed only briefly, involve the association of the party’s identity and values with certain actions or objects. Message symbols are ways of communicating. Communication in a regular language is based on the precedent of the use of its
words and grammar, but the mechanism of symbolic communication is different, involving prototypes, metaphors and metonymies. I show some regularly used symbolic techniques. Focal symbols are events, often not deliberate acts by any agent, that induce observers to adopt a common judgment about what move they will make in an important situation. They establish a focal point through a certain part/whole mechanism that can be called symbolic.

I argue that message and focal symbolism can explain a diverse set of international phenomena, including contests in armaments, actions around leadership, moves in prenegotiations, symbolic arms control agreements, and states' responses to tension during a crisis. Moreover, it can explain these behaviors within a strategic paradigm, without introducing assumptions about emotion or rhetoric or psychological associations. Nonstrategic approaches are also necessary, of course, but it is important to establish that parties would continue to engage in symbolic behavior even if they were fully aware of their situation and were focused on the consequences of their actions.

Concerning the status regulators, my thesis is that their importance has been understated. If rhetorical appeals to national honor are less common nowadays, this is mostly a change in vocabulary. Leaders talk about showing "will," "resolve," "strength," or "credibility," but their patterns of behavior are typical of past disputes over honor. As with symbolism, the status regulators can be analyzed strategically—this approach is just as appropriate for them as for resources, interests or military power. Through definitions and game models I draw distinctions among them and show their relationships. Honor is an internal quality of the individual that can only be estimated by the rest of society. It involves, in part, the individual's desire to be seen as honorable, and this self-referential property is the key to proving one's honor and judging another person's honor. Social face is the group's expectation about how it will treat the individual in direct interactions. Unlike honor, it is not about the individual's internal character; social face is set by precedents of the group's past treatment and sets a precedent for the future. Prestige is the belief among the members that the person is admired — each one's belief that the rest of the group believes that the individual possesses a desirable trait. It is like face in that it involves the group's expectations about its own expectations, but it is based more on deeds done or objects acquired than on precedent. Moral authority is the kind of prestige that one gains by keeping the group's norms. It confers influence over further cases when the norms are unclear, and so is important in an understanding of normative change. The theories developed for these status regulators explain various international phenomena such as the tendency to perceive other states' actions as challenges, international commitments, insults, and the unusual nature of international apologies.
The analysis leads to a series of policy conclusions concerning the prospects of using arms control for symbolic purposes, the danger of using insults as diplomatic tools, and the importance of not identifying a challenge as such on the record. Understanding the most common forms of symbolic messages should help leaders avoid sending messages that are misunderstood. The most significant conclusion in my view involves the issue of proliferation. The focus of the final chapter is the symbolism and status aspects around nuclear weapons, and the danger that these may induce the “have” to hold on to them unnecessarily and other nations to acquire them and engage in arms competitions. I argue that the symbolism of honor and challenges was at the center of one episode in the U.S./Soviet arms race, the 1980s deployment of missiles in Europe.

The three methodologies used here are the theory of games, the philosophy of language, and cognitive linguistics. Past game-theoretical models of communication have tended to ask about the credibility of the messages, but here I look at how we understand their meaning. Past game models looked at the persuasiveness of assertions, for example, that one is resolved to win a conflict. I consider a wider variety of communicative acts than assertions, including challenges, promises, insults and apologies, the kind of speech that goes beyond expressing the speaker’s beliefs and brings things about in the world of social relations.

I hope to make the methodological point that game theory can be applied to broader issues in the social sciences than the literature has seen so far, and that it can be combined with findings in the social and behavioral sciences in significant ways. Game-theoretical methods are not bound to a rational choice account of motivation or perception. Appendix A describes some developments in game theory that allow this extension.

In its concerns if not its style, this work has much in common with post-structuralist approaches. It emphasizes social perceptions, language, and the social rules. Moral authority is tied in with norms and normative regimes, which are clarified here by comparing them with the equilibria of repeated games. What might be called a “social construction,” a “shared understanding,” or “convergent beliefs” can be interpreted nonmetaphorically with a precise model of beliefs about beliefs, using the method of interactive belief systems.

Most of the material presented here is accessible to nonmathematical readers. Some acquaintance with a Nash equilibrium would be helpful, but appendix B explains that concept, as well as the notion of an interactive belief system. The necessary concepts from philosophy, psychology, and linguistics are explained as they appear.

This work is written as a contribution to the theory of international rela-
tions and diplomacy, but it also deals with social interaction in general. I hope that its findings will be useful to other disciplines such as cultural anthropology, sociology, social psychology, and political behavior.

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One consequence of the Cold War ending has been the end of many working relationships. To those just mentioned who come to read this I send warm greetings and my wish to see them again. Many of us have peace as the underlying concern of our professional lives. Working on these subjects requires faith that understanding war will help us avoid it. This is only partly grounded in the evidence, and we are discouraged again and again to see the folly return. However, we must attack the problem as well as we can, following our interests and skills. This book was written in the hope that a better theoretical knowledge of symbols and honor may help.