

Diplomatic Signaling in the Amarna Letters

CHRISTER JÖNSSON

Communication is the essence of diplomacy. The contemporary diplomatic system may be described as a universal communications network in which the exchange of signals is a professional preoccupation.

All acts, verbal or nonverbal, intentional or unintentional, are potential signals that feed into the network and are liable to reach all listeners and be read by them for the messages that they convey. Moreover, any message may be read together with and understood in the light of the collective body of evidence already communicated or later to be communicated.¹

Diplomatic signaling typically aims at persuasion; that is, communication is designed to influence others by modifying their behavior or beliefs and attitudes.² Attempts at mutual persuasion are of the essence. In other words, bargaining and negotiation processes are at the heart of diplomacy.³ In effect, diplomacy can be defined as “the conduct of international relations by negotiation rather than by force, propaganda, or recourse to law, and by other peaceful means (such as gathering information or engendering goodwill) which are either directly or indirectly designed to promote negotiation.”⁴

Diplomatic negotiations are generally seen as the only alternative to warfare in resolving conflicts among autonomous states.⁵ Other forms of collective decision making, such as voting or adjudication, violate the principle of sovereignty. Only through bargaining processes, whereby sovereign states are left to themselves to sort out their differences, can the states come to a common decision.

In these bargaining processes, signaling may be either verbal or non-verbal. For states, as well as individuals, “body language” complements and

adds to verbal communication. In fact, both behavior and nonbehavior may constitute messages. "Activity or inactivity, words or silence, all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot *not* respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating."⁶ This, in a nutshell, is a common way of looking at signaling and bargaining in contemporary diplomacy.

To what extent is the contemporary perspective on diplomatic communication applicable to the Amarna Letters? In other words, what are the timeless, and what are the transient aspects of diplomatic signaling? In addressing these questions, I first consider the diplomatic codes and conventions that render meaning to the exchange of signals and then identify similarities and differences in communication techniques.

Diplomatic Codes and Conventions

The very word "communication" stems from the Latin verb *communicare*, "to make common or shared." It reminds us that what is made known in any social communication is contingent on some kind of "architecture of intersubjectivity."⁷ The meaning of a signal, in short, is not fixed and objectively given but rests on social convention. Semioticians argue that successful communication presupposes a common *code*, which is part of the (often unconscious) preknowledge necessary for understanding a message. A common code establishes what German hermeneutic philosophers call *Interpretationsgemeinschaft*, or initial commonality with respect to interpretation.⁸

Modern diplomacy rests on a code and conventions shared by members of the profession. Diplomacy can thus be seen as "the construction of an intersubjective reality."⁹ While facilitating communication across cultures, diplomatic codes and conventions render communication between professionals and nonprofessionals more difficult. In addition, codes and conventions differ over time. All this calls for humility in any effort at uncovering the codes and conventions of Amarna diplomacy. Yet some elements of the intersubjective architecture of the Amarna Letters seem fairly obvious even to modern-day readers. As in today's diplomatic world, the Amarna exchanges appear to have been governed by protocol and diplomatic etiquette. I shall limit myself to a discussion of three components of the underlying code—the use of ritualized language and symbols, the quest for recognition, and concern with reciprocity—and how these could be used to convey signals that are not immediately and superficially evident.

Ritualized Language and Symbols

The backbone of modern diplomacy is a carefully deliberated diplomatic language with courteous, nondramatic, and sometimes ritualistic phrases. The American writer Caskie Stinnett has characterized a diplomat as “a person who can tell you to go to hell in such a way that you actually look forward to the trip.” And when a diplomatic communiqué speaks of “frank” exchanges, we know that a row has taken place. Circumlocution, such as understatements and code phrases, permits controversial things to be said in a way understood in the diplomatic community but without needless provocation.¹⁰

Similarly, the language of the Amarna Letters is ritualized, replete with courtesies and other set phrases, suggesting a honed and well-established diplomatic code. The greeting phrases are highly standardized, and deviations from the established practice are noted. When a new monarch succeeds to the throne there are pledges of, or demands for, “ten times more love” than for the predecessor (e.g., EA 19, 26, 27, 29). For a *demandeur*, who wants to deflate the size of requested concessions from the more powerful Egypt, it is commonplace to use the phrase “gold is as plentiful as dirt” in Egypt (e.g., EA 20, 26, 29).

In the same vein, one might infer that the recurrent references to brotherhood and family are part of a ritualized diplomatic language rather than a constitutive paradigm, in the same way as today’s diplomats may allude to “the family of nations” on ceremonial occasions.¹¹ As is argued by Avruch in this volume, the family metaphor derives its strength from its ontological and existential basis in human experience. And as is pointed out by students of contemporary Arab culture, references to brotherhood remain common in modern political language.

However refined, verbal language cannot convey all the nuances of diplomatic signaling. There are several aspects of international relations that require symbolic representation. Therefore, symbols have always played a prominent role in diplomatic exchanges. Expressions of *status* and *power* have traditionally been symbolic. Thus, the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 was delayed for half a year because of a dispute concerning the order in which delegates were to enter and be seated at the table; similar problems of relative status at the Potsdam meeting in 1945 were solved by having Churchill, Stalin, and Truman enter the signing ceremony simultaneously through three different doors; and the Paris talks seeking an end to the Vietnam War in 1968 were long stalled because of an argument about the shape of the negotiat-

ing table that revolved around the status of the South Vietnamese Liberation Front (Vietcong).

In this respect, little has changed since the days of the Amarna Letters. As discussed above, greeting phrases and gifts are generally understood as symbols of status and power. To be addressed as “brother” is a symbol of being accepted into the club of Great Powers.

Expressions of friendly or hostile *relations* between states are equally symbolic. In the current diplomatic system, for example, a handshake is an accepted visual sign of friendly relations. The Rabin-Arafat handshake is but one of the latest in a long history of graphic conciliatory symbols. The exchange of gifts appears to have been the Amarna counterpart of today’s handshake as a symbol of good relations. And in the same way as a refusal to shake hands is today taken as an indication of hostility, the absence of gifts or the delivery of inferior gifts were seen as signs of deteriorating relations in the ancient Near East. Amenhotep III’s dispatch of gold (objects) that turned out not to be of the expected quality was seen by Tushratta to signify souring relations; no longer was he able to tell others that “my brother, the king of Egypt, loves me very, very much” (EA 20:46–59). And Akhenaten’s refusal to honor his father’s promise to deliver statues of solid gold symbolized a further deterioration: “Is this love? I had said, ‘Naphurreya, my brother, is going to treat me 10 times better than his father did.’ But now he has not given me even what his father was accustomed to give” (EA 26:30–48).

In sum, the diplomatic dialogues described in the Amarna Letters obviously rested on ritualized language and symbolic expressions that were well understood by all the participants and thus formed part of a shared diplomatic code.

Recognition and Status

The desire for recognition by others is a basic human need, central to our sense of who and what we are. Social and organizational selection occurs largely by mutual empowerment. Actors create their own environment by preferring and tolerating only certain types of actors and organizations. Today, recognition is an essential aspect of sovereign statehood. The state needs external authorization to be the ultimate claimant within its territory; this is not an attribute of the state but is attributed to the state by other state rulers. To be granted or denied statehood is central to participation in contemporary international relations.

Beyond acknowledged statehood, international recognition concerns status. The conception a state has of its own role in the world accounts for

little, unless it is matched by similar role expectations by other states. For instance, a central theme in Soviet foreign policy from the late 1950s was the quest for recognition of Soviet superpower status, especially by the rival superpower, the United States.¹² In the same vein, Russia today covets a seat on the G-7 as a recognition of its continuing Great Power status. In neither case are the desires for recognition necessarily granted by the relevant others.

Similarly, the diplomatic correspondence in the Amarna Letters reflects a keen and jealous preoccupation with recognition and status. In Cohen's words, "The most crucial game of all concerned acceptance and recognition as a Great King, as this was the condition of diplomatic and strategic activity."¹³ As already alluded to, recognition and nonrecognition usually found symbolic expression.

Thus, the king of Assyria, reminding the king of Egypt how much gold his predecessor had sent to the Egyptian king's father, points out that "now I am the equal of the king of Hanigalbat." By linking this with a complaint about the amount of gold the king of Egypt has sent him — "not enough for the pay of my messengers on the journey to and back" — he implies that his proper status has not been recognized (EA 16). Similarly, when Amenhotep III's gifts to Tushratta proved not to be solid gold, this was a blow to the latter's status and prestige, aggravated by the fact that the gifts were delivered in the presence of foreign guests who realized that no one would give such humiliating gifts to someone he "loves," that is, recognizes as equal (EA 20:46–59).

The address of the Amarna letters constituted another symbolic expression of status: only if the sender was superior or the equal of the addressee did he name himself first.¹⁴ Deviations were noted and given sinister interpretations:

And now, as to the tablet that you sent me, why did you put your name over my name? And who now is the one who upsets the good relations between us, and is such conduct the accepted practice? My brother, did you write to me with peace in mind? And if you are my brother, why have you exalted your name. . . ? (EA 42:15–26)

The language and symbols of the Amarna Letters may seem alien, but the diplomatic quest for recognition and status appears to be strikingly familiar. Decisive influence rests with a "club" of Great Powers with certain values in common but also mutual conflicts (a bargaining relationship, in short). The Great Powers guard against usurpers of power and are wary of admitting new members into the inner circle. Perhaps the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe or today's G-7 can be seen as distant parallels.

Reciprocity

Norms of reciprocity are today codified in current international law and are often invoked in international negotiations. Concessions are to be returned, and retractions to be retaliated. The distinction between *specific* and *diffuse* reciprocity is pertinent in this connection.¹⁵ Specific reciprocity refers to “situations in which specified partners exchange items of equivalent value in a strictly delimited sequence,” whereas in situations of diffuse reciprocity, “the definition of equivalence is less precise, one’s partner may be viewed as a group rather than as particular actors, and the sequence of events is less narrowly bounded.”¹⁶

Buyers and sellers of houses or cars practice specific reciprocity; families or groups of close friends rely on diffuse reciprocity.¹⁷ The ideal of international cooperation ought to be diffuse reciprocity, where the participants do not insist on immediate and exactly equivalent reciprocation of each and every concession, on an appropriate “quid” for every “quo.” However, in contemporary international relations “stable patterns of specific reciprocity are often the most one can expect,” whereas “genuinely diffuse reciprocity is rare.”¹⁸ The kind of trust that binds families together is simply lacking in the relations between sovereign, egoistical states. What about diplomatic relations in the Amarna period? Does the frequent use of the family metaphor imply greater reliance on diffuse reciprocity and more widespread expressions of trust than is the case today?

The first observation one can make is that reciprocity definitely appears to have been a prominent norm in the Amarna diplomatic exchanges. There are many expressions of expected equivalence of behavior in bilateral relations, variations on the theme “do to me what I have done to you.” For the most part, however, these expressions seem to reflect expectations of specific rather than diffuse reciprocity. This applies across a whole spectrum of issues, ranging from security matters to the exchange of gifts and other symbolic measures.

Thus, the mutual defense pact, referred to by the Mittanian king Tushratta in his letter to the Egyptian pharaoh Nimmureya, was obviously based on specific reciprocity:

If only an enemy of my brother did not exist! But should in the future an enemy invade my brother’s land, then my brother writes to me, and the Hurrian land, armor, arms, . . . and everything concerning the enemy of my brother will be at his disposition. But should, on the other hand, there be for me an enemy — if only he did not exist! — I will

write to my brother, and my brother will dispatch to the land of Egypt, armor, arms, . . . and everything concerning my enemy. (EA 24:III 110–18 = sec. 26)

Specific reciprocity also seems to have governed the exchanges of gifts. “My gift does not amount to what I have given you every year,” complains the Babylonian king to the Egyptian Pharaoh (EA 3:13–22). Tushratta voices similar complaints about his gifts: “In comparison with mine they are not equivalent”; moreover, “my brother has not given to me the equivalent of what he dispatched to my father” (EA 24:III 68–70 = sec. 25). The treatment of messengers is another aspect of relations in which specific reciprocity was expected. Tushratta repeatedly tells the Egyptian Pharaoh that he will detain Pharaoh’s messenger, “until my brother lets my messengers go and they come to me” (EA 28). “As soon as he lets my messengers go, . . . and present their report to me, I will let Mane go and I will send Keliya back to my brother as before” (EA 29:148–54). In short, behind the professed brotherly love, one can discern a preference for hard-nosed tit-for-tat strategies.

Only when one party makes a bid for friendly relations do vague offers of diffuse reciprocity appear: “Write me for what you want from my country so that it may be taken to you, and I will write you for what I want from your country so that it may be taken to me,” the king of Babylonia proposes to Pharaoh (EA 6:13–17). And when Tushratta wants to forge friendly relations with Akhenaten, the son and successor of the recently deceased Amenhotep III, he points out that his relations with Akhenaten’s father had rested on diffuse reciprocity. Whereas in earlier generations, daughters had not been given in marriage until after prolonged haggling, Tushratta had given his daughter to Amenhotep III immediately without asking anything in return, and the bride price paid by Amenhotep III had been “beyond measure” (EA 29:16–27). Once friendly relations were established, however, specific reciprocity seems to have reigned. Thus, contrary to the idealized picture given to Akhenaten, Tushratta in his correspondence with Amenhotep III had in fact complained about the lack of specific reciprocity (EA 24).

Conventions and Signaling

Only if the underlying conventions of recognition and reciprocity are taken into account can otherwise puzzling dispatches be understood.¹⁹ For instance, in EA 4, the Babylonian king recounts an incident that would seem to put him in an unfavorable light. His initial bid for Pharaoh’s daughter had been refused with reference to a marriage taboo—“From time immemorial no

daughter of the king of Egypt is given to anyone.” The Babylonian king had then requested the daughter of a commoner instead: “Someone’s grown daughters, beautiful women, must be available. Send me a beautiful woman as if she were your daughter.” Pharaoh again refused. Why should the Babylonian king recall a seemingly humiliating episode like this in his dispatch?

The key to a possible answer can be found in the latter part of the letter, where the Babylonian king offers his daughter to Pharaoh in marriage: “Should I, perhaps, since you did not send me a woman, refuse you a woman, just as you did to me, and not send her? But my daughters being available, I will not refuse one to you.” He goes on to demand a heavy bride price in gold and set a deadline for payment. If the main purpose of the Babylonian king’s letter was to bargain for the highest possible bride price in return for his daughter, the references to Pharaoh’s dual snubs make sense. The king probably knew that his request for Pharaoh’s daughter would be refused. And the following offer of a ruse might have been a tactic to expose Pharaoh’s hypocrisy—the second refusal to provide a bride could not be accounted for by religious or traditional taboos—and gain the moral upper hand. The Babylonian king, in short, made cunning use of the convention of strict reciprocity between Great Kings. By reminding Pharaoh of his failure to maintain the customary reciprocity, he hoped to increase the compensation for offering his daughter in marriage.

In EA 7, the Babylonian king also makes tactical use of prevailing conventions. He starts by recording his anger at receiving no “get well” message from Pharaoh when he was ill, as the convention of recognition required. An Egyptian messenger ostensibly managed to appease him by referring to the great distance between the countries. Why did the king bother to relate this non-incident to Pharaoh in terms that made the king look foolish and ignorant? The king was hardly unaware of the distance between Egypt and Babylonia, for envoys had been exchanged between the two courts for many years.

If the king’s proclaimed ignorance is merely a sham, and he knows that Pharaoh knows it is a sham, the account has a tactical purpose that becomes clear in the latter part of the letter. The king takes the distance and the difficulty of the journey as a pretext for sending smaller gifts: “Furthermore, as I am also told, the journey is difficult, water cut off, and the weather hot. I am not sending many beautiful greeting-gifts.” The excuse is again a sham that ought to be obvious to Pharaoh. The hidden message seems to be that the Babylonian king was discontented with the Egyptian Pharaoh and wished to express this symbolically by sending a smaller gift than usual. At the same time, he wished to avoid impressions of stinginess or poverty. The fiction of difficult conditions then came in handy. The Great King, however, wanted to

avoid loss of face from showing weakness in the face of natural difficulties. The phrase “as I am also told” then becomes of key importance. The informant must be the Egyptian messenger, which means that the Egyptian side had already admitted to such weakness. The Babylonian king, in sum, made good use of the earlier incident in building up an argument in his own favor. By alluding to the conventions of symbolic expressions, recognition and reciprocity, he turned his seeming foibles into sources of strength, in a veritable diplomatic jujitsu.

Communication Techniques Then and Now: Similarities

As we have seen, there are parallels between ancient Near Eastern and modern diplomatic signaling in terms of its foundation in shared codes and conventions that lend nonobvious meanings to messages. In addition, several features of the Amarna Letters are reminiscent of modern diplomatic communication techniques. I dwell on four of these: the practice of incurring commitments, the use of precedents, the concern with credibility, and the role of messengers/diplomats.

Commitments

To persuade an opponent, spoken or written proposals and arguments may not be sufficient; accompanying measures that demonstrate seriousness and resolve may be needed. This is what Thomas Schelling, in his seminal analysis, calls “the art of commitment.”²⁰ By means of commitments, actors underscore their current position by making it more difficult for them to yield. Thus, the art of commitment rests on “the power to bind oneself.”²¹

Commitments may be either unconditional or conditional. Troops who “burn their bridges” behind them as they advance, display their determination to fight by physically excluding a retreat. Negotiators frequently try to convince their opponent that a binding public opinion at home renders a change in position impossible. In both instances, unconditional commitments are incurred. Conditional commitments, on the other hand, make one’s course of action contingent on what the opponent does. Threats and promises are examples of such conditional commitment techniques that are considered useful in bargaining situations. Threats are dissuasion attempts, promises persuasion attempts. Whenever the alternatives are more than two, threats and promises are often used in combination.

The Amarna Letters indicate that the art of commitment is a timeless feature of international bargaining. The statesmen of the ancient Near East

knew well that the spoken word had to be backed up by other gestures that made their bargaining position credible to the other side. The quality of gifts and the selection and treatment of messengers were used as commitment instruments. Also, the usefulness of combining threats and promises was well understood. In a difficult marriage negotiation, the Babylonian king used this technique in an exemplary way:

If during this summer, in the months of Tammuz or Ab, you send the gold I wrote you about, I will give you my daughter. . . . But if in the months of Tammuz or Ab you do not send me the gold and with it I do not finish the work I am engaged on, what would be the point of your being pleased to send me gold? Once I have finished the work I am engaged on, what need will I have of gold? Then you could send me 3,000 talents of gold, and I would not accept it. I would send it back to you, and I would not give my daughter in marriage. (EA 4:49–50)

Tushratta employed a similar tactic when he tried to persuade Akhenaten to release detained messengers. Threatening to keep the Egyptian messengers as long as Akhenaten detained the Mittanian messengers, Tushratta added the promise that if Akhenaten released the messengers, he would not only reciprocate but also send a large mission to Egypt (EA 29:166–72).

Precedents

Related to the art of commitment is the practice of referring to precedents in diplomatic communication. “Precedent seems to exercise an influence that greatly exceeds its logical importance or legal force,” Schelling notes.²² Earlier behavior and relations are considered to commit the actors to similar behavior and relations in the future. There are two sides to this in international relations. On the one hand, states have to assess what kind of precedent a certain course of action may create. Thus, the domino theory, which guided U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, precluded the abandonment or loss of any of its allies or clients for fear of the precedent and chain reaction it might create. On the other hand, states frequently try to convince their opponents in negotiations that they are bound by previous behavior, that they have committed themselves to a certain course of action.

There are several manifestations of the latter technique in the Amarna Letters, especially in connection with regime changes, when there is a felt need to remind the new king of the commitments his predecessor has ostensibly made. Thus, Tushratta, as we have seen, tried hard to convince Akhenaten

that his father had made a commitment to deliver golden statues and that he was bound by the precedent of good Mittanian-Egyptian relations (esp. EA 29:50–54, 61–64). Similarly, the king of Hatti reproached the new Pharaoh: “Why, my brother, have you held back the presents that your father made to me when he was alive?” (EA 41:14–15). These and other statements invoke a tacit norm that commitments should be honored, *pacta sunt servanda*, which remains one of the foundations of modern diplomacy.

Credibility

To be persuasive, diplomatic signals need to be not only communicated but also deemed credible. The problem of credibility has received considerable attention in the bargaining literature. The manifest possibility of deception creates an intrinsically insoluble credibility dilemma.

Because signals derive their meanings from tacit or explicit agreements among the actors, an actor can lie as easily as he can tell the truth. A signal used to convey an accurate message can also convey a misleading one. It is logically impossible to design a signaling system that does not have this attribute.²³

There are several indications that credibility was indeed a concern for ancient Near Eastern statesmen as well. In response to actual or imagined doubts about the credibility of his messages, Tushratta implores Amenhotep III not to trust other sources than the tablets and the messengers: “And an evil word that anyone may say about me or about my land, may my brother not hear those words if Mane and Keliya do not say them. But the words that Mane and Keliya say about me and my land, they are true and right, and may my brother hear them” (EA 24:IV 16–23). However, the word of a messenger might not always be enough; it had to be backed up by some sort of commitment:

Behold, concerning the fact that Kalbaya has spoken this word to me, “Let us establish a blood-relationship,” in this matter I do not trust Kalbaya. He has indeed spoken it as a word, but it was not confirmed on the tablet. (EA 32:4–6)

Credibility problems became acute for Tushratta, when Amenhotep III died before having delivered on his promise to send gold statues. He wrote to Tiye, Amenhotep III’s widow, who was “the one . . . who knows much better than all others the things that we said to one another,” and asked her to remind the new king Akhenaten of the commitment (EA 26). In addition,

Tushratta wrote to Akhenaten himself on several occasions and pleaded with him to listen to Tiye, his own mother (EA 27, 28, 29). At the same time, he referred to his own messengers as witnesses; they “saw with their own eyes” how “your father himself recast the statues in the presence of my messengers, and he made them entirely of pure gold” (EA 27:19–27). Yet, in the end, Tushratta’s efforts to boost the credibility of his demand for the golden statues seem to have been in vain. At any rate, credibility appears to have been as much of a problem in the diplomatic signaling of the ancient Near East as it is today.

Messengers/Diplomats

Most international negotiations take place through representatives, agents who are authorized to represent their principals. As noted above, these agents — messengers in the ancient Near East, diplomats in the modern world — assume symbolic significance. The way the agents are treated reflects state relations. In his eagerness to forge friendly relations with Egypt, Tushratta points out that he has treated the Egyptian messengers “with great distinction,” showing them “very great honors” and exalting them “like gods” (EA 20, 21). He also goes out of his way to praise the Egyptian messengers — “I have never seen men with such an appearance” (EA 21:24–32). He especially praises Mane: “There does not exist a man like him in all the world” (EA 24:II 95–96 = sec. 17).

In addition, principals can use agents either to facilitate or interrupt communication. The Amarna Letters repeatedly refer to the detainment of messengers for long periods. Today, ambassadors are called home for consultations. Both practices indicate an unwillingness to communicate with the other party.

The selection of messenger/diplomat can also have symbolic significance. For example, the selection of Averell Harriman to lead the U.S. negotiating team in the test-ban talks in Moscow in the summer of 1963 was one in a series of conciliatory signals on both sides. Harriman was well known to the Soviets and had become well acquainted with Khrushchev during the Soviet leader’s visit to the United States in 1959. In the words of an official from the Soviet embassy in Washington, “As soon as I heard that Harriman was going, I knew that you were serious.”²⁴ Similarly, Tushratta made it abundantly clear in his correspondence with Amenhotep III that the selection of messenger was of importance. In his opening bid for a renewed alliance, he sent no less a person than his chief minister, Keliya, as messenger (EA 17). Later, he made it clear that the Egyptian selection of messenger mattered to him as well:

And may my brother send Mane along, so he can leave together with my envoy! Any other envoy may my brother not send. May he send only Mane. If my brother does not send Mane and sends someone else, I do not want him, and my brother should know it. No! May my brother send Mane! (EA 24:IV 52–57 = sec. 31)

In another letter, the Egyptian Pharaoh complains to the Babylonian king who, instead of sending “dignitaries,” had dispatched a delegation of “nobodies,” one of whom was an “assherder” (EA 1). Again, it is obvious that the selection of envoys was a serious matter, as it remains today.

Negotiation Techniques Now and Then: Differences

It is not difficult for students of modern diplomatic signaling to identify “surprisingly familiar stuff” in the Amarna Letters.²⁵ But one should not underestimate the dissimilarities. Changes in communication technology have brought about significant changes in diplomatic signaling and negotiation. I will point to just two aspects of these changes.²⁶

First, the speed of diplomatic communication has increased dramatically. In our century, first nuclear weapons and then the advent of electronic media have contributed to the accelerating speed of communication. Nuclear weapons added urgency to crisis management efforts; television introduced “real-time” coverage and a demand for immediate diplomatic reactions to unfolding events.

In the Amarna Letters, there is reference to a messenger being detained, and thus communication being interrupted, for six years (EA 3). Before the advent of telecommunications, the exchange of diplomatic messages could take weeks or months. Still, in 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis, it took four hours, with luck, for a formal message to pass between Washington and Moscow.²⁷ And whereas in 1961, President Kennedy could wait eight days before making a public policy statement on the erection of the Berlin Wall, President Bush was compelled to make a statement within hours of the dismantling of the wall in October 1989.²⁸

The accelerating speed is not necessarily beneficial from the viewpoint of diplomatic signaling. As Hans Morgenthau noted before the communication revolution, “Diplomacy owes its rise in part to the absence of speedy communications in a period when the governments of the new territorial states maintained continuous political relations with each other. Diplomacy owes its decline in part to the development of speedy and regular communications.”²⁹ Another student of the evolution of diplomacy argues that “as time

replaces space as the significant mediation of diplomacy, crisis-management takes the place of reflective decision-making.”³⁰

Another important dimension of change in diplomatic communication concerns the ever-widening audience. The diplomatic tablets contained in the Amarna Letters were read by no one other than the intended addressees. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, diplomats were still, by and large, members of an “aristocratic international” with a sophisticated communication system between themselves but little contact with other sections of society. The advent of electronic media in combination with the elevation of public opinion as a significant factor in foreign policy have made the differentiation among audiences more difficult. Diplomatic signals are intercepted and interpreted by a variety of audiences across and within states. The expansion of multilateral at the expense of bilateral diplomacy adds to this tendency.

This represents a problem for the finely calibrated signaling of classic diplomacy, which was characterized by constructive ambiguity to allow varying interpretations among strictly delimited audiences. There were obvious drawbacks to the exclusively bilateral communication system of the Amarna Letters, however. For one thing, the lack of a wider audience made it more difficult to incur commitments. For instance, Tushratta’s problems in convincing Akhenaten that his father had indeed made a vow to send gold and establish good relations stemmed in part from the fact that “no one else” beside the Queen Mother, Tiye, knew about the commitment (EA 26, 27, 28). While making communication simpler in many respects, a strictly delimited audience at the same time narrows the register one can play upon in employing various commitment tactics.

In summary, modern-day diplomats would have recognized many of the basic communication and negotiation techniques had they been transferred in time to the era of the Amarna Letters. No doubt they would have missed many of the things that they have become used to in the wake of technological changes, such as speedy and reliable communication links, diplomatic immunity, and permanent embassies. But they would certainly find things to envy their ancient counterparts, such as the absence of obtrusive TV cameras and constant time pressures.