PROMISE: The Principle Rule Operating Mankind In Securing Expectations

A Unified Framework for Human Commitment

David M. Shelton & Michael C. Shelton Independent Researchers Correspondence:

davidmshelton.email@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper proposes PROMISE -**P**rinciple **R**ule **O**perating **M**ankind **I**n **S**ecuring **E**xpectations — as the foundational operating principle of human commitment at every scale of social organization. Drawing on fifty years of empirical observation in capital allocation and project delivery, and fifteen years of operational experience in industrial production, we argue that promise-making is not merely a social convention but the primary structural mechanism by which humans compete, cooperate, and organize. We introduce a unified framework built on three structural elements: the Three-Party architecture (First Party, Second Party, and Third Party), the Feasibility Gate as the moment of structural determination, and the Admissibility Condition as a formal test of whether any commitment is structurally sound before it is made. The framework carries predictive qualities validated through historical case analysis, including application to the Treaty of Versailles (1919), where it identifies the precise structural failures embedded in the text before ratification. We advance the claim that PROMISE formalizes what every discipline has been studying without naming: the field of human commitment itself.

Keywords: promise theory, commitment architecture, feasibility, accountability, third-party consequences, organizational systems, procurement physics

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I. Introduction

On the morning of February 28, 2026, one of the authors woke with an acronym. Not a theory. Not a conclusion. A word — arriving complete, after fifty years of working toward it without knowing that was what the work was for.

PROMISE.

Principle **R**ule **O**perating **M**ankind **I**n **S**ecuring **E**xpectations.

The elegance is not accidental. The acronym is self-referential: the word is the definition. Everyone already knows what a promise is. Everyone already knows when one is broken. The framework does not ask anyone to learn something new. It asks them to see what they already know — and to recognize that what they already know governs everything.

Every major discipline has been circling this insight without naming it. Economics calls it contract theory but stops at the transaction. Psychology calls it attachment but stops at the individual. Political science calls it legitimacy but stops at the state. Religion calls it covenant but stops at the divine. Law calls it consideration but stops at enforceability. Game theory calls it commitment but stops at the strategic interaction. None of them named the field itself.

PROMISE is the field. It is the mechanism all of them are studying without knowing it — the operating system running beneath every human system that has ever succeeded or failed.

This paper is authored by a father and a son. The elder author spent fifty years building physical structures and discovering that what governed their success or failure was never the materials or the talent — it was the structure of the agreements underneath them. The younger author spent fifteen years on production floors, learning the same truth from the inside of industrial operations where broken promises stop lines and kept promises keep people safe. Different vantage points. Same framework. The paper itself is a demonstration of PROMISE in transmission — from one generation to the next, across shared experience and shared name.

We offer this not as a finished theory but as a falsifiable claim. If we are wrong, the test will show it. If we are right, the word was always there.

II. Theoretical Context and Prior Work

II.A The Gap in Existing Literature

Promise and commitment have attracted sustained scholarly attention across multiple disciplines without convergence on a unified structural framework.

In philosophy, promise-making has been analyzed as a speech act (Searle, 1969), a moral obligation (Scanlon, 1998), and a communicative commitment (Shiffrin, 2008). These accounts illuminate the normative dimensions of promising but do not provide a structural framework capable of predicting whether any given promise will succeed or fail. In economics, contract theory (Hart & Moore, 1988; Tirole, 1999) addresses the incentive structures governing agreements but focuses on the dyadic transaction and does not systematically account for parties who bear consequences without holding negotiating power. In organizational science, commitment theory (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Weick, 1995) addresses individual and institutional commitment but does not integrate the structural

conditions that determine whether commitments are feasible before they are made. In political science, credible commitment theory (North & Weingast, 1989; Fearon, 1995) addresses the problem of enforcement but does not provide a unified framework applicable across scales from the personal to the civilizational.

PROMISE does not replace these frameworks. It proposes the structural field within which all of them operate.

II.B The Empirical Foundation

The framework presented here emerges from two distinct empirical traditions that arrived independently at the same structural conclusions.

The elder author began building barns in Iowa in the mid-1970s. What became apparent almost immediately — before there was language for it — was that customers were reliably disappointed even when builders were competent and owners were reasonable. The question that formed slowly over years: *if everyone involved is* competent and well-intentioned, why does this keep happening? By 1998, the pattern had crystallized into seven expectations that owners consistently bring to capital projects: budget, scope, schedule, professionalism, predictability, accountability, and market alignment. These were not a customer service inventory. They were, as it took decades more to understand, symptoms of something structural — the visible surface of PROMISE operating beneath every transaction.

The younger author confirmed the same structure from the inside of industrial food production. Fifteen years of shift handovers, production targets, and supply chain commitments where broken promises have immediate and visible consequences. There is no mediation on a production floor at 3 a.m. The line runs or it does not. Every shift handover is a feasibility gate. Every production target is a promise with a network attached. What fifteen years of operational experience confirms: PROMISE operates identically at every scale. The structure of accountability on a food production floor is the structure of accountability in a federal building procurement is the structure of accountability in a multilateral treaty. The stakes differ. The mechanism does not.

II.C Legal Proof of Concept: *United States v. Spearin* (1918)

In 1918, the United States Supreme Court decided *United States v. Spearin*, 248 U.S. 132. A contractor built what the government specified. The government's design was defective. The Court held that when an owner provides plans and specifications, there is an implied warranty that those specifications are sufficient for the purpose intended.

The owner warrants the sufficiency of the ask.

This is not merely a construction law principle. It is a structural observation about the nature of promises: the party who defines the expectation makes an implicit commitment about the soundness of that definition. A defines the ask. B can only accept based on what A has defined. If A's definition is unsound, the promise was structurally defective before B said yes. The feasibility gate swings in both directions. *Spearin* recognized this in 1918; the PROMISE framework generalizes it across all domains of human commitment.

II.D Operational Proof of Concept: The National Renewable Energy Laboratory RSF

In 2007, the elder author wrote the Request for Proposals for the National Renewable Energy Laboratory's Research Support Facility - a 222,000 square foot, $64 million federal office building required to achieve net zero energy performance at competitive cost. The procurement architecture honored all three structural laws the framework identifies: singular accountability, feasibility validated before commitment, and enforcement capacity through firm fixed price and measurable performance requirements. The building came in on budget, on schedule, achieved LEED Platinum certification, and upon completion in June 2010 was verified as the largest net zero energy building in the United States (*Architectural Record*, 2010) Largest Net Zero Energy Building In The United States (*Architectural Record*, 2010-10-01).

The RSF did not succeed because the team was extraordinary. It succeeded because the structure of the promises underneath it was sound.

III. The Structure of a Promise

III.A Three Parties — Always

Every promise has three structural roles, whether or not all three are visible at the moment of commitment.

The **First Party** makes the promise. The **Second Party** receives it. The **Third Party** bears the consequences- without having negotiated the terms, without having chosen the structure, often without knowing the promise was made at all.

In a construction contract: the contractor promises, the owner receives, the building's future occupants bear the consequences of whether the promise was kept. In a marriage: two people promise each other, and the children bear the consequences of whether the structure held. In a multilateral treaty: the signatory powers promise, the defeated party receives the terms, and the generation that lives with the outcome bears the consequences of a structure it did not choose.

The Third Party is always present. The Third Party always pays when the structure fails. And the degree to which any promise structure protects those who bear consequences

without negotiating power — what we term the Third Party Quotient — is the ultimate measure of whether a promise was real.

This three-party architecture has not been systematically integrated into existing promise frameworks. Contract theory focuses on the dyadic relationship between promisor and promisee. Game theory models strategic interactions between players at the table. Neither framework accounts for the party that is always affected and never seated. PROMISE places the Third Party at the center of structural analysis because history — across industries, institutions, and civilizations — consistently shows that Third Party consequences are both the most consequential and the most systematically neglected element of any commitment.

III.B The Feasibility Gate

Between the making of a promise and its acceptance lies the most consequential moment in any commitment: the feasibility gate.

The gate has a specific structure. A defines the ask. B can only accept based on A's definition. But B must pass their own capacity through the gate honestly — not optimistically, not strategically, but accurately. And A must have the capacity to hold what they are asking for. A weak or incapable A means the promise fails on the receiving end even if B delivers perfectly. *Spearin* (1918) formalized this bilateral structure in law; the PROMISE framework generalizes it.

The gate is where commitment is either real or fictional. Everything downstream — cost, network impact, Third Party consequences — is determined at the gate And the gate is systematically gamed B winsThird Party consequences is determined at the gate. And the gate is systematically gamed. B wins competitive advantage by optimism. B knows A is motivated to accept. A wants to believe the promise is achievable. The incentive structure at the moment of acceptance pushes systematically toward false gate closure — a promise that feels real but is not. This is the universal failure mode of human commitment. It operates identically whether B is a contractor bidding a federal project or a signatory nation committing to unpayable reparations.

III.C The Admissibility Condition

A promise at boundary k is admissible if and only if:

$$\mathbf{F_k \cdot L_k \geq \|C_k\| / \|K_k\|}$$

Where:

- **$F_k \in [0,1]$** — Validated feasibility: the fraction of material uncertainty resolved prior to commitment
- **$L_k \in [0,1]$** — Authority-consequence alignment: the degree to which the promise-maker bears the consequences of failure
- **$\|C_k\| / \|K_k\|$** — Constraint severity ratio: binding constraints relative to system capacity

When the condition is violated, the deficit $\Delta k = \|C_k\| / \|K_k\| - F_k \cdot L_k$ represents stored structural strain. This strain is conserved. It will be realized — through cost overrun, schedule failure, scope reduction, conflict, or collapse. The form varies. The occurrence does not.

The admissibility condition has been operationalized in a proprietary diagnostic instrument developed by the authors. The instrument was applied to the Treaty of Versailles (1919); the full diagnostic analysis is reported in Shelton and Shelton (2026b). The operationalization is not disclosed here; the theoretical structure of the condition is offered for independent empirical testing.

III.D Completion as the Universal Terminal Event

Every promise ends. Delivered or defaulted. Kept or broken. The race of life has one finish line for every participant.

This is not metaphor. It is the structural reality that gives PROMISE its predictive power. The optimism that wins the bid meets the same terminal accountability as the most carefully gate-tested commitment. Reality does not grade on intention.

Reputation is the accumulated record of how promises finish. The market has memory even when individuals forget. Over time — across careers, across institutions, across civilizations — the record of promise completion is the only scoreboard that matters.

IV. PROMISE as Competitive InstrumentIV.A The Race of Life

Every human being competes with every other human being for the finite goods of existence — resources, relationships, opportunity, meaning. Promises are the primary instrument of that competition. Not force, not speed, not raw capability — promises. The mechanism by which every human being negotiates their position, secures resources, builds alliances, earns trust, and accumulates the reputation that compounds across a lifetime.

Promise-making capacity is human capital in its most fundamental form. The ability to make credible, feasible promises — and deliver on them — is the primary competitive

asset. It scales from a child promising to behave in exchange for something wanted to nations promising security in exchange for allegiance.

IV.B Optimism as Competitive Strategy

The universal vulnerability of the feasibility gate is optimism bias (Kahneman, 2011; Flyvbjerg et al., 2003). B wins by believing - or by performing belief convincingly enough that A accepts. This is not always bad faith. Optimism can be genuine. But belief is not feasibility. The gate is a structural test, not an emotional one. And the incentive structure at the moment of acceptance systematically undermines the gate: competition drives optimism, optimism drives acceptance, acceptance closes a gate that was never truly tested.

Over generational time, reliable promise-keeping may function as a selected trait. Networks have memory. Civilizations that honored their commitments built institutions that lasted. Those that did not left ruins and cautionary tales.

V. The Network Effect of Promise

V.A No Promise Is Contained

No significant promise exists between only two parties. Every promise has a network impact — people, institutions, systems that will be moved by its fulfillment or failure without ever having been party to the agreement. The network impact of a promise scales with its scope.

The moral weight of a promise scales with the size of the network it touches. The handful of men who sat in the Hall of Mirrors in 1919 did not see — or chose not to see — that the Third Party for their promise was the generation that would fight the Second World War. The feasibility gate was never applied to that network. The structural strain was stored. It was realized across sixty million deaths.

V.B The Cost of Structural Failure

In U.S. construction alone — one industry, one country — the annual cost of broken promises runs between $43 and $109 billion in controversy labor: requests for information, change orders, claims, disputes, litigation, and rework (Navigant Construction Forum, 2016). Every dollar of controversy labor is a transfer from the Third Party — the people the promise was supposed to serve — to the machinery that processes its failure.

If one industry generates this cost, the network impact of promise failure across all human activity is incalculable in magnitude but not in mechanism. PROMISE provides the framework for measurement.

VI. PROMISE Across Scale

The framework's claim to universality rests on its performance across domains. We offer five illustrative cases.

The Personal. Sixty-one years of marriage. Asked what made it last, the answer came without hesitation: *Love's got nothing to do with it. That's devotion*. Devotion is the internal enforcement mechanism - the promise kept every day regardless of feeling, through every season that tests it. Love is emotion. Devotion is structure. The promise that endures is the one with internal enforcement when external structures are absent.

The Legal. *United States v. Spearin* (1918). The owner warrants the sufficiency of the ask. The feasibility gate swings both directions. One hundred and eight years of construction law operating on PROMISE without the name.

The Institutional. The Three Laws: singularity of authority, sequence of feasibility before commitment, capacity for enforcement. Any system that honors all three protects its Third Party. Any system that violates one produces predictable failure. The RSF honored all three. The industry that produced it mostly does not.

The Civilizational. The Treaty of Versailles violated all three laws. The Marshall Plan honored all three. Same continent, same countries, same underlying tensions. Different promise structure. Different outcome. The Third Party — the generation that grew up in postwar Europe — was protected rather than sacrificed. The full structural analysis of both cases is reported in Shelton and Shelton (2026b).

The Generational. This paper has two authors because PROMISE demands it. A framework claiming to be the operating principle of human civilization cannot be the possession of one person. It must be transmissible - across generations, across domains, across the distance between a father who built it from construction sites and federal buildings and a son who confirmed it from production floors and shift handovers. The transmission is itself a demonstration.

VII. The Relationship Between Love and Promise

Two words are used constantly and proven rarely.

Love. Promise.

They may be the same word. Both are invisible. Neither can be held or measured directly. Both are known only through their effects - or through the damage left when they were absent. Both are claimed constantly and delivered rarely at full weight. Both are tested not

at the moment of declaration but over time, under pressure, in the seasons when the feeling has faded and only the structure remains. Love without promise is feeling without structure. Promise without love is contract without meaning. When they are the same thing - when devotion is the daily act of keeping the promise made to someone loved - that is what civilization is trying to build and mostly failing to sustain.

The framework does not solve love. But it explains why some love lasts and most does not: the feasibility gate, the bilateral capacity to hold, the internal enforcement when external structures fail. Devotion as the promise that holds when love alone cannot.

VIII. Falsifiability

PROMISE as the operating principle of civilization is a strong claim that requires strong tests.

The framework is falsified if stable, successful, durable human commitments are reliably observed where: the promise was made without feasibility validation, authority over the outcome was not aligned with consequence, and no network damage occurred. A systematic pattern of such observations refutes the claim.

The framework is strengthened if promise failure - at every scale, in every domain - correlates with violations of the feasibility gate and the admissibility condition; and if promises that honor the gate exhibit systematically better outcomes for their Third Parties.

We invite empirical testing across domains. The Treaty of Versailles is one test case, fully analyzed in Shelton and Shelton (2026b). The RSF is a second. Fifty years of construction project data is a third. Marriage outcomes correlated with structural features of commitment represent a fourth. The predictive application to current treaties, contracts, and institutional arrangements is a fifth.

Find the framework. Or break it. Either outcome advances the work.

IX. Conclusion

A just law is one that everyone mostly follows already.

Everyone already keeps promises — imperfectly, inconsistently, but as the default mode of human interaction. Language itself is a promise system. Currency is a promise. Every institution humanity has ever built is an attempt to make promises more reliable, more enforceable, more real.

The word was always there. The framework simply names what everyone already knows.

Newton did not invent motion. He formalized the laws that were always governing it - whether observed or not, whether honored or not. PROMISE does not invent human

commitment. It formalizes the principle that was always operating it - in Iowa barns and federal buildings and production floors and the Hall of Mirrors and sixty-one years of a Midwestern marriage.

The principle rule operating mankind in securing expectations.

It arrived in one author's sleep on the morning of February 28, 2026, after fifty years of working toward it without knowing that was what the work was for.

The other author already knew. He just did not have the word.

Now both do.

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