HE UNCONDITIONAL surrender of Nazi Germany to Allied forces on 7 May 1945 inaugurated a decade-long occupation by Germany’s conquerors. All four victor powers—the United States, France, Britain, and the Soviet Union—resolved “to destroy the National Socialist Party” and to bar “more-than-nominal” Nazi Party members from public life. The United States Office of Military Government (OMGUS) proved the most ambitious of all four occupation regimes in cleansing totalitarian remnants from postwar Germany. U.S. forces assiduously examined and punished thousands of ex-Nazis and collaborators, most notably in the high-profile Nuremberg trials of 1945–49. Such endeavors reflected an idealistic and sincere desire on the part of American leaders to cultivate democracy on the ashes of a brutal dictatorship.

Before long, however, the United States, in competition with the other three occupiers for control of German military and espionage secrets, quietly began sheltering scientists, industrialists, and military figures who had formerly worked for the Third Reich and now faced trial for complicity in Nazi atrocities. The U.S. Army employed Klaus Barbie, Wernher von Braun, and Walter Dornberger, all wanted for war crimes, while U.S. High Commissioner John J. McCloy pardoned wartime industrialist Alfried Krupp, among others. Occupiers also acquiesced in the appointment to leading positions in the new West German government of such former aides to Adolf Hitler as Hans Globke, who had co-authored the antisemitic Nuremberg Laws of the 1930s and then went on to become one of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s closest advisors.

What explained this apparent contradiction between the spirit and practice of American denazification? Why did the United States reempower some servants of Hitler’s regime at the same time that it officially punished and discredited others? The following study explores these and related questions. It places American interactions with former Nazis into a
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broad context, evaluating U.S. responses to a spectrum of rightist thought and action in postwar Germany and Europe. Based on extensive research in U.S., German, British, French, Italian, and Canadian primary and secondary sources, the work engages scholarly debates about the nature of postwar U.S. foreign policy and of American international power in general.

The study shows that U.S. responses to the German and international Right were more complex than has commonly been acknowledged. Many scholars have accepted the premise that the United States has traditionally favored right-wing forces of “order” abroad against left-wing revolutionary challenges. The recruitment of former Axis enemies into a Cold War defense apparatus appeared consistent with an ongoing U.S. practice of using antidemocratic forces to promote “stability, anti-Bolshevism, and trade with the United States.” President Ronald Reagan’s ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, implicitly validated the premise that the United States favored autocratic forces against destabilizing movements for social change when she defended authoritarian dictatorships that preserved “existing allocations of wealth, power, status, and other resources.”

Yet the “search for order” thesis leaves unanswered the question of why the United States, as often as not, provoked political chaos in pursuing American interests abroad. Particularly in the non-Western world, but also in visible ways in Western Europe, U.S. forces opposed even “right-wing” figures who shared the American antipathy for communism and endorsed existing distributions of wealth and power but in one way or another affronted the United States. U.S. leaders likewise displayed some flexibility toward left-wing forces. Even as the Cold War ossified East-West divisions and launched the United States on a global quest to contain communism, American administrators worked with an array of individuals who had Marxist inclinations but who welcomed U.S. help in preventing Soviet advances.

This study proposes that a search for opportunity, not order, guided American policy toward Germany and other states during the postwar era. Democratic ideals informed decision making, and U.S. officials preferred to work with political moderates where available. But American leaders aimed foremost to secure U.S. interests against threats from any quarter. The ideological rightness or leftness of prospective allies ultimately mattered less than did their political pliancy.

An analysis of American responses to the West German Right during the U.S. occupation (1945–55) illuminates these themes. American offi-
cials cooperated with moderate conservatives—namely Christian Democrats—who largely shared the United States’ liberal capitalist vision for postwar Western Europe. They also co-opted nationalistic figures who appeared willing to accept an expanded American presence in exchange for financial or other rewards. But U.S. policymakers simultaneously worked to contain right-wing neutralist-nationalists who promoted German non-alignment in the Cold War and, like communists, corroded Western unity. These patterns recurred in France and Italy, where the United States fought hostile forces at both ends of the political spectrum while bolstering rightists and leftists thought useful to the United States.

The notion that opportunism, not order, impelled American foreign policy has implications for how scholars think about the nature of U.S. overseas power and about the links between American domestic and international history in general. The very means by which the United States sought to manage its West European alliance—its tactic of alternately containing, co-opting, and cooperating with perceived allies and adversaries—had origins in American political culture. These methods reflected and extended techniques of hegemonic social control employed by governing forces and their allies throughout the nation’s history.

Chapter 1 explores the intersections between American domestic and international systems of hegemonic power. The chapter also defines key terms and provides a detailed overview of the book. Chapter 2 analyzes U.S. cooperation with the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, and especially with West Germany’s Christian Democratic chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who abetted U.S. power in Europe but also exploited cooperation toward West Germany’s own ends. Chapter 3 shows that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the U.S. Army Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) during the early 1950s secretly co-opted German far rightists in an ill-fated plan to contest a Soviet attack. Chapter 4 discusses joint Allied efforts to prevent the ex-Nazi Otto Strasser from returning home following wartime exile in Canada, lest he rouse nationalist and neutralist sentiment that undermined Atlantic unity. Chapter 5 describes parallel U.S. containment, co-optation, and cooperation efforts in France and Italy and elucidates further the significance of the study.

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