The central question of this book is: What do states that have just won major wars do with their newly acquired power? My answer is that states in this situation have sought to hold onto that power and make it last, and that this has led these states, paradoxically, to find ways to set limits on their power and make it acceptable to other states. Across the great postwar settlements, leading states have increasingly used institutions after wars to “lock in” a favorable postwar position and to establish sufficient “strategic restraint” on their own power as to gain the acquiescence of weaker and secondary states. Leading postwar states might ideally want to tie other states down to fixed and predictable policy orientations and leave themselves institutionally unencumbered. But in seeking the institutional commitment of less powerful states—locking them into the postwar order—the leading state has to offer them something in return: some measure of credible and institutionalized restraint on its own exercise of power. The type of order that emerges after great wars hinges on the ability of states to restrain power institutionally and bind themselves to long-term commitments.

Viscount Castlereagh in 1815, Woodrow Wilson in 1919, Harry Truman in 1945—each sought to use newly preponderant state power to mold a postwar settlement that bound other states to each other and to them. American officials again found themselves in this position after 1989. But to lock other states into a desired order, these leading states did not simply exercise power—they sought the acquiescence of other states by agreeing to set limits on the use of that power. The order-building power of these leading states was partly rooted in their ability to limit that power institutionally. The changing capacity of states to do so has had a profound impact on the type of international order that has emerged after great wars.

My interest in postwar junctures and peace settlements began in the late 1980s, when the debate about the character and significance of American hegemony was in full swing. My interest was not in the decline of hegemony but in how hegemonic order is created in the first place, and in how political order more generally is created.

The end of the Cold War made my question even more compelling. It also raised the stakes of my initial question about order formation in two ways: first, with the end of the Cold War, scholars and pundits began to argue that the United States was again at a major postwar juncture, a historical watershed not unlike 1919 and 1945. The question immediately became: What can we learn from early postwar settlements about how to
create a stable and desirable postwar order? The other way the stakes were raised was that the end of the Cold War sharpened certain theoretical debates. It was now possible to determine whether external threats were the essential element in cohesion and cooperation among the industrial democracies. During the Cold War, the explanation for stable and cooperative relations among these countries was overdetermined. Both neorealists and liberals had plausible explanations, but it was impossible to determine precisely which variables mattered most. When the Cold War ended, these two theoretical traditions generally expected divergent outcomes and the possibility existed for more careful adjudication of their respective theoretical claims.

In the fall of 1991, I traveled to Washington, D.C., to spend a year working on the Policy Planning staff of the State Department. It turned out to be a very interesting time to be in Washington. Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev went on holiday in August to the south of Russia, and while he was out of Moscow a coup was launched. The drama unfolded before the world on live television. A rising Russian reform politician, Boris Yeltsin, stood on a tank in front of the parliament and shook a defiant fist in the air. The military was rallied, and democratic forces took back the government, but in the meantime the old Soviet empire quickly unraveled. The Cold War was over.

Viewing this drama from the State Department was revealing. American diplomats frantically worried about the viability of the civilian government led by Yeltsin. The winter of 1991–1992 was severe in Russia, and there was worry that food riots and human distress would strangle the struggling democracy at its birth. The largest assemblage of foreign ministers ever brought together at the State Department met in January 1992 to coordinate food, medical, energy, and housing assistance to Russia.

But beyond the immediate crisis, American officials wondered privately about the future. The Cold War was over, so what would come next? Containment and strategic rivalry between the Soviet Union and the West had dominated international relations for a long time. The celebration of “winning” the Cold War was mixed with anxiety about the organizing strategies and purposes of American foreign policy after it was over. One of the great worries at the time was about the future cohesion of the industrial democracies, the so-called “free world” countries that had just won the Cold War. The external threat that had fostered cooperation was suddenly gone. What would keep the advanced industrial powers together now? One of my colleagues at Policy Planning kept asking the question: What is the “glue” that is going to hold the system together? This was the big question at the time, and it remains a critical question in theoretical debates about international order after the Cold War.
Another way to ask this question is: What are the sources of order among industrial democracies? In this book, I argue that the best place to look for an answer is the situation after wars, when states are grappling with fundamental questions of order. This is when order takes shape. My answer draws upon both realist and liberal theoretical traditions. Realism asks many of the right questions about power: Who has it, how is it exercised, how do other states react to huge concentrations of it? Or, as I pose the question in this book: How is power turned into order? But realists, or at least modern neorealists, do not have all or even the most important answers to their own questions. Certain types of states—mature liberal democracies—have capacities to deploy institutions that, together with the openness and accessibility of democracy itself, allow postwar states to overcome the problems of resistance to and suspicion of power that pervade these historical turning points. States have faced similar problems of building postwar order over the centuries, but the “solutions” have changed. Today, at least among the Western democracies, the solutions look a lot like the solutions to the problem of order within their states.

It remains a puzzle to neorealists why powerful states might agree to contain or bind themselves within international institutions. Why would a newly unified Germany, emerging as the most powerful economy in Europe in the 1990s, agree to insert itself within a binding European monetary order? Or, to ask the historical question explored in this book: Why would the United States, emerging from World War II as the most powerful country the world had yet seen, agree to spin a dense web of international institutions and place itself squarely within them? Neorealists have generally not granted much significance to institutions and therefore do not have a good answer to these questions. The answer this book gives is that these states are playing a more sophisticated power game than neorealism appreciates; but it also argues that in order to understand the role of institutions in these situations, it is necessary to move beyond the rationalist and contractarian theory of institutions that liberalism offers. Doing so allows us to appreciate how, even within highly asymmetrical power relations, democratic industrial states can create stable and legitimate order.

There is more “glue” among the advanced industrial countries than many scholars expected. This is a book about how and why this is so.