

How World Politics Is Made: France and the Reunification of Germany

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Of the statesmen involved in the epochal events of 1989, French President François Mitterrand is perhaps the most enigmatic. His distinctive political genius lay in the manipulation of ambiguity: he always kept multiple options open until the last instant, disguising underlying contradictions with presidential pomp and grand ideals. He launched a socialist experiment, nationalizing one-third of France's economy, then embraced free markets and hard money. He ignored Franco-German relations and European integration for years, then championed both. He advocated a European confederation to block U.S. hegemony, then tenaciously defended NATO. Schabert, a German professor with exceptional access to French sources, offers a uniquely well-documented treatment of Mitterrand's German diplomacy. He explodes the myth that Mitterrand opposed German reunification, but his portrayal of the French president as a European idealist is less persuasive. Instead, two other factors best explain Mitterrand's behavior: concern for his own political survival, which always came first, and events on the ground in Germany, which he grasped sooner than most and which meant that reunification was inevitable. Having played a weak hand, Mitterrand had to make the best of it, and, as usual, he did.