

**ESSAY** | William Safire

# Waldheim's Secret Life

WASHINGTON  
"What I am accused of are lies," says Kurt Waldheim. He seems to enjoy calling certain people liars. He once charged Yehuda Blum, then Israel's U.N. delegate, with "a palpable falsehood," but never directed a charge so undiplomatic as lying against ambassadors of the Soviet bloc or Arab nations, who were the main sources of his U.N. support.

In truth, Kurt Waldheim's entire postwar life has been a lie. For 40 years, including a decade undermining Israel as the United Nations' top official, he has pretended to be doing something else in another place when Nazis were shipping Jews to Auschwitz for extermination and murdering Yugoslav partisan hostages.

If anything can be labeled a "palpable falsehood," that lifelong Waldheim coverup was it. He now admits being the G-2 officer to a convicted war criminal and has stopped pleading ignorance of the atrocities committed.

How, in the face of his admission of misleading the world about his Nazi military past, can he claim to be the victim of false accusations? Simple: he ignores the central point of coverup he cannot deny, and instead hires an American public relations firm to help him complain about lack of proof of added specific charges not yet proven.

More details of Nazi involvement are sure to come, but diplomats are more interested in this: What nations knew of his past during his rise to power? Was he subject to blackmail?

I remember at a Bermuda conference in the early 70's the American and British foreign secretaries' discussing ways to stop Mr. Waldheim's appointment as Secretary General; to their embarrassment, through some Soviet and third-world complicity, Mr. Waldheim was pushed through before the Western alliance could act. It seemed strange that the Russians went along so easily with someone not identified with their bloc.

Was he then an agent of influence? Certainly the Yugoslavs knew of their own war-crimes reports accusing the German staff officer in the Balkans of complicity in the murder of hostages; Marshal Tito certainly had a handle on Mr. Waldheim. Our C.I.A. evidently failed to compile a dossier for our use, but the K.G.B. might not have been so lax.

Intelligence agencies are now "walking back the cat" — reconstructing events and decisions in light of his Nazi past and who might have known and made use of it. An important West German business leader who has pressed for years for trade with the Soviet Union and is sus-

pected of a Nazi past will find his activities scrutinized more carefully.

A more profound question is being privately debated by Jewish groups: Was it wise for the usually soft-line World Jewish Congress to blow the whistle on this man at this time? After all, Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal has shown unusual lassitude in this case.

Be practical, say some committed Zionists: the revelations only help candidate Waldheim in his quest for power in Austria. The anti-Semites have chosen the slogan "We Austrians will decide," sending the message "Don't let the Jews decide for us." Doesn't the breaking of the story, with an upfront Jewish source, play into anti-Semitic hands — and encourage bigots and longtime Nazi sympathizers to elect the man whom they now see as one of their own?

No; sometimes practicality asks too much. The Waldheim candidacy is an outrage to Western values and a sickening referendum on nostalgia for Nazism. Jews should feel proud

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## A man of honor would step aside

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of, and not sheepish about their role in the exposure of his hidden past, and should resist with passion the bit-by-bit campaign to persuade a new generation that everybody in Europe suffered during the war and nobody was to blame.

Because warnings of world reaction to a Waldheim win might be counterproductive, few outsiders talk of boycotting the Salzburg Festival or denying U.S. entry to the first head of state suspected of passive participation in atrocities. Let it be said, however, that Vienna would cease to be the city of our dreams.

If Kurt Waldheim were a man of honor, he would recognize the shame he is bringing to his country and withdraw; that would be some measure of expiation for hiding his past to Austrians and the rest of us for 40 years. But that is too much to expect; if he had been a man of honor, he would not have lived the life of a lie.

Now it is up to the Austrian voters. They can resist the temptation to bait the Jews and please the Russians and stick it to the West. Or the nation that brought the world Adolf Hitler can, through the election of one of his secret followers, say to the world that it is proud of its most infamous son. □