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Waldheim



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Part two of three

I long believed Kurt Waldheim's lack of ethics was the quality that made him acceptable to the Soviet Union as United Nations secretary general. This nation may have been afraid to veto the Austrian's high appointment out of fear of offending all small, "neutral" nations.

In its 40-plus year history, the U.N.'s chief administrative seat has rarely been occupied by anybody's best-man. Politics as the art of the possible becomes pragmatic compromise, frequently brazen, in the world body.

However, it strains credulity beyond bounds to accept that Washington and Moscow could have both supported Waldheim for the U.N. post if the Austrian were guilty of Nazi crimes.

With 25 million war dead, the Soviets relentlessly pursued, and executed, everyone they could link with violations against humanity, which they define as Russians or their allies.

Since his Wehrmacht unit occupied Yugoslavia, which fell behind the Iron Curtain at war's end, Moscow had instant access to Waldheim's service records in 1945.

Given any instance of the Austrian's significant participation in reprisals against Slavic partisans, the one-time German army lieutenant would have been lifted from Vienna by Moscow. In fact, when his commanding general was executed for the crimes charged against the Austrian president now, there was no outcry to put Waldheim on trial.

Wholesale sweeps of political "undesirables" rolled through occupied Europe in the years following World War II. The sweeps brought mass suicides among eastern Europeans who preferred death to Soviet justice. Nazis or anti-communists? Who could tell?

In those first postwar years, rarely were the Russian liaison teams questioned on their evidence. No one knows how many innocent people were handed over to be killed, victims of Stalin's paranoia.

One fascinating aspect of the current controversy surrounding the former U.N. executive is why serious allegations concerning his past have surfaced only recently.

This leaves open the suspicion that

Moscow may have decided to "dump" on the Austrian politician, to divert from its abysmal record on human rights, especially its criminal anti-semitism. If that suspicion is true, then the Soviets can count a definite coup.

For all the heat generated by the controversy, few facts have surfaced that would justify according such importance to a man who appears to have so little character as to defy definition on his known principles.

My personal loathing makes me assume that, given the opportunity, the Austrian could have lived up to those worst expectations, but he was no Eichman, Bormann or Mengele. He wasn't even in Klaus Barbie's class.

Irony can be found in the realization that both Barbie and Waldheim never rose above the second-lowest officer's rank; each was a mere first lieutenant. The big difference between their present situations derives from the fact that Barbie was the better Nazi, and so was posted to the Gestapo.

Unlike Barbie, who bucked for a promotion he never received by visiting a range of Nazi horrors on Lyons, France, Waldheim remained stuck in a staff job, limited to shuffling papers and signing his name to orders generated by his superiors.

Furthermore, he was such an expendable soldier that he wangled his way out of uniform. At a time the German army was desperate for manpower, the future president of Austria managed to slip into law school. His student's status at war's end provided the cover for all his later lies.

If readers are shocked to realize that Austrians elected as their president the Kurt Waldheim of my description, then they have paid little attention to American national politics in recent years. In the final analysis, Middle European voters follow the same path as their counterparts in the American Middle West.

Officials are elected all over the world for what they symbolize. And when it comes to Kurt Waldheim, there is no reason to surmise that in his entire life he has ever been more than a hollow man, hiding behind a mask his betters wanted him to wear — a symbol and nothing else.

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