

# Why Kohl Will Win

By JOSEF JOFFE

BONN—Summertime is slumber time in Bonn. The university town that doubles as the capital empties out, and newspapers around the country begin to hold the first page for ferryboat disasters in the Straits of Malacca and quintuplets born to Turkish guest workers in Stuttgart. Late summer is a sellers' market for news—and the season of the back-bencher. As the heavyweights wander off to the Alps or the beaches, junior ministers, political groupies and other hopefuls prepare for Bonn's major summertime festival: the August headline-hogging contest.

Take the case of Johannes Rau, the man the Social Democrats have chosen as their chancellor candidate in January's national election. While he was off on vacation, resting for the uphill battle against Chancellor Kohl, the populace at large was treated to a bizarre spectacle of attempted politicide. The target was Mr. Rau, but the arrows came from totally unexpected quarters, namely his own Socialist brethren.

One fine August morning Mr. Rau woke up to headlines that proclaimed him unfit for the chancellorship. "Is Johannes Rau the appropriate chancellor candidate?" a semi-prominent comrade wanted to know. Not really, was the solicitous answer. "I can't quite imagine him as a political leader in Bonn. He would only agonize and feel lonely."

## The Peter Principle

It did not matter that Mr. Rau had carried North Rhine-Westphalia, the Federal Republic's most populous state, in a landslide last year. Scoring big in the provinces marked Mr. Rau not as a heavy but as likely victim of the Peter Principle (everybody gets promoted to the level of his own incompetence). Mr. Rau was a local hero "whose talents thrive in a lesser arena." A caring family man and devout Christian, the would-be SPD chancellor lacked the toughness and fighter's instincts for the top job in Bonn. And thus, come next January, he would "fall with almost inexorable necessity."

The author of those killing-with-kindness lines is Klaus Boelling, a self-proclaimed confidante of Helmut Schmidt who had served the former Social Democratic chancellor as permanent representative in East Berlin and then as government spokesman. Today Mr. Boelling dabbles as a writer and gadfly; in fact, his unsolicited advice was lifted from a book that will come out in September.

Normally, such a sneak preview would have been seen for what it is: a skillful sales pitch, carefully timed for the summer doldrums when even a whiff of scandal is bound to make the headlines—and a little extra cash, to boot. But there is more to the story than an uncomradely publicity plug.

To begin with, there are the telling

sounds of silence. One might have thought that an attack on the candidate would have been treated like an attack on the party. Unlike Mr. Kohl's conservatives, who look back at a long history of intramural leader-bashing, the Social Democrats have traditionally put solidarity *uber alles*.

Yet today nobody has proposed to read Mr. Boelling out of the party. Damnation came faintly, almost in a perfunctory manner. Perhaps that was nothing but good campaign strategy—as if the order had come down from headquarters: Let's not give comfort to our enemies by fighting in public.

On the other hand, Mr. Boelling has merely splashed across the front pages

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what many of his comrades—and especially the left wing of the SPD—harbor in private: the gravest doubts about the man they have chosen to lead them against Chancellor Kohl. Mr. Rau may appeal to the center, but precisely for that reason he is the wrong standard-bearer for an SPD that has been drifting leftward for much of the past decade.

Mr. Rau is the "old" SPD: a bit statist, but mindful of the market; fitfully critical of the U.S., but not anti-American; eager for detente, but with a keen appreciation of the military balance. He does not see the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as an American conspiracy. Nor does he believe in exorcism when it comes to nuclear power and nuclear missiles. Mr. Rau, in short, is a Schmidt-like Social Democrat—but without the former chancellor's hard edges. In fact, his friends describe him as a kind of Rhenish Ronald Reagan, a personable and optimistic fellow with a genuine sense of humor.

Yet this "old" SPD is either dead or in hibernation. The "new" SPD is led by septuagenarian Willy Brandt who, in his dotage, has developed strong sympathies for the red-and-green visions of his youngsters. In the middle ranks there is the successor generation of the 40 year olds who came out of the student revolts of the 1960s, who won the battle for intraparty power with radical slogans, and who today are straddling the line between reality and ideology as they face the rigors of running

for regional office. Finally, there is the youngest generation, ensconced on the precinct and local level, where radicalization, both reddish and greenish, is still running its course.

It is here where people like Mr. Rau are almost persona non grata, where anti-Americanism is rampant and where NATO is a prime candidate for the dung heap of history. In addition to his middle-of-the-road "deviationism," Mr. Rau has committed the unpardonable sin of categorically excluding any alliance with the Greens—and everything they stand for, i.e., neither nuclear power nor nuclear weapons, an end to NATO membership and a no-growth economy.

And then there is Mr. Rau's Great Dilemma. In the last national election in 1983, the SPD pulled only 38.2%, its worst showing since 1961. Current polls concede only 41% to the Social Democrats. Yet the Liberals are committed to Mr. Kohl, and the Greens are anathema according to Mr. Rau. Hence, Mr. Brandt and his friends don't need a computer to tell them that victory will elude the SPD.

## Literary Potshots

At this point Mr. Boelling's literary potshots become part of a more significant pattern of attack. While Mr. Rau's abilities were pooh-poohed in public, the party's chairman, Mr. Brandt, was heard to muse that a majority in the January election was but a dream; it would be a "nice success" if Mr. Rau pulled 43%. Why would Mr. Brandt (along with his secretary general) denigrate the chances of his own party's candidate? To do so makes sense only as a velvet-gloved warning to Mr. Rau: stop flirting with the center and go left, young man. You are bound for defeat unless you lift your anathema against the Greens. A more radical stance will sop up Green votes and still leave you the option of a quasi-alliance with the Greens when Parliament reassembles to elect a new chancellor.

Will "Brother John" (as the pious Mr. Rau is called) find happiness in the embrace of the Greens? Even if he forsook his principles, he will only warm the hearts of Mr. Brandt and his friends. Elections in West Germany have always been won in the center, and an SPD that would move even further left might not even gain on the fringes what it had sacrificed among the vast and sluggish majority. It did not work during the height of the recession in 1983, and it will not work in 1987—after several years of sustained economic growth.

And if Mr. Rau does not heed the warnings of the left? In that case, the guns of August will hardly be retired in the months to come. But in either case, it is a safe bet that the next German chancellor will be Mr. Kohl.

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