

# Willy Brandt's Resignation (Retrospective Account, 2004)

## Abstract

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In this retrospective account, Walter Scheel, foreign minister in the first SPD/FDP coalition and later federal president, tells the story of Willy Brandt's resignation as chancellor. Brandt stepped down after it was revealed that one of his advisors, Günter Guillaume, was an East German spy. Guillaume's placement in the inner circles of government was not, according to Scheel, a planned action by the GDR government. In the end, it turned out to be an empty victory for the East German regime.

## Source

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### Walter Scheel in Conversation with Jürgen Engert Memories and Insights

#### Willy Brandt's Resignation

*Jürgen Engert:* It is May 1974, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice-Chancellor of the SPD/FDP coalition government, Walter Scheel, already has one foot in the office of the federal president; Hans-Dietrich Genscher is supposed to become his successor in the Foreign Office and as Vice-Chancellor, but also as chairman of the FDP. There is only one dominant topic in the Federal Republic: the Guillaume Affair, the discovery of a GDR agent in close proximity to the federal chancellor. Willy Brandt is thinking about stepping down. How did you experience those days?

*Walter Scheel:* On May 4, 1974, the top brass of the SPD met in Bad Münstereifel; I was with Willy Brandt for the entire afternoon. Brandt had come home, and we talked about the issue. I wanted to prevent Brandt from resigning, as I was afraid that if he were to step down, the coalition would have to pass through a dangerous stretch at the very least. It functioned well under Brandt, and both sides, SPD as well as FDP, were satisfied. Brandt had earned his authority—unlike Adenauer, who already had his halo when he took office. So all that was perfectly fine. There was a very broad basis of trust with Brandt. We did not have to say a single time, “The chancellor has brought us into a difficult situation here, out of selfishness.” That did not happen. That is also why I tried very hard to dissuade him from stepping down. We also had a high degree of trust in each other. During our conversation, one of Brandt's traits emerged once again: he was at heart discreet. He also did not make any hasty judgments about people. It was not like him to talk about others. What he thought about them is something he kept to himself. We shared this trait. For that reason, too, we felt a mutual affinity. That afternoon I tried again and again to tell him that Guillaume should not be the cause for his resignation, but, as we know, I had no success with my argument.

*Jürgen Engert:* On May 6, Willy Brandt announced his resignation as chancellor. Twelve days later you became federal president. [...]

*Walter Scheel:* Brandt had read his letter of resignation to me, the last sentence of which read: “I request to be released from my office, and with immediate effect.” And that is what Gustav Heinemann did, and he asked me to take over affairs as deputy to the chancellor. That situation gave rise to a rather bizarre discussion about whether one could assume the affairs of a chancellor who was no longer in office.

*Jürgen Engert:* Your friend Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the Minister of the Interior at the time, played an important role in the Guillaume Affair.

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*Walter Scheel:* One has to think back, once again, to how this story came about. For one, there was Günter Guillaume. He came to the West from the GDR, in 1956, I believe. He didn't come with the mission of one day moving into the house of Chancellor Brandt; in 1956, nobody was thinking of Brandt as chancellor. Guillaume went to Hesse, became a member of the SPD in 1957, and then a functionary of the party. Much later, when Brandt was looking for an advisor on party matters, Georg Leber, who had roots in the Hessian SPD, said: I have someone, Guillaume. That was in 1970. Guillaume probably became an aide, and in 1972 he was transferred to the personal office of the chancellor.

*Jürgen Engert:* Guillaume, an accidental spy?

*Walter Scheel:* It was not a politically intended action on the part of the GDR. Guillaume had ended up on Willy Brandt's side rather by chance. Perhaps some in East Berlin were not even happy about it – with a view toward the policy of détente. But removing Guillaume was not something they could do without attracting attention.

*Jürgen Engert:* Genscher had been informed about the suspicions about Guillaume by Günther Nollau, the President of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Previously, only Egon Bahr had expressed certain reservations on account of Guillaume's background, but the Chief of Staff of the Chancellery Horst Ehmke decided in his favor.

*Walter Scheel:* As the Minister of the Interior, Genscher was Nollau's superior and therefore the first go-to. Afterwards, Genscher came to us. The two of us are friends, and he is among the very few with whom I am on informal terms. Genscher was on his way to Brandt to inform him about the conversation with Nollau and the suspicions about Guillaume. He wanted to fill me in before that, and we had a brief exchange of ideas on how the matter should be handled.

*Jürgen Engert:* What was your reaction?

*Walter Scheel:* I was not alarmed. Strangely enough, I did not judge it as a matter of danger for the chancellor and the Federal Republic. And in retrospect: as an agent, Guillaume was probably grossly overrated.

*Jürgen Engert:* Was it different with Genscher?

*Walter Scheel:* I can't say. Genscher is always very cautious. That is his way. In everything that he does, he proceeds with unusual circumspection. We agreed that Brandt had to be informed about the suspicions about Guillaume. We also agreed that Guillaume should travel with the chancellor to his summer holiday in Norway, in 1973. That was the plan, Guillaume knew about it. Had he been excluded, then he probably would have quickly grown suspicious. During the holiday, he then had access to secret NATO papers. Evidently, there was a lack of attention. Genscher and I were now of the opinion that the story had to be brought to an end quickly. We did not think much of the idea of waiting as a way of discovering possible masterminds. I always read about such "overall concepts," which prosecutors' offices develop to fight crimes. I think they sometimes do more harm than good.

Source: Walter Scheel in conversation with Jürgen Engert, *Erinnerungen und Einsichten*, with a contribution from Arnulf Baring and two speeches by Walter Scheel. Hohenheim Verlag: Stuttgart and Leipzig, 2004, pp. 74–78.

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