

The Executive Memorandum

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How America Should Respond to Moscow's August Putsch: Eight Guidelines

Now that Mikhail Gorbachev seems to have survived the *putsch* attempt to topple him, Washington confronts two questions: 1) Did United States policy, in any way, help prompt the *putsch*? and 2) What now should the U.S. do to help democratic reform inside the Soviet Union?

The answers to both questions are linked. Washington, by its near-obsessive support of Gorbachev and its cold-shouldering of Russian President Boris Yeltsin and other democratic leaders, almost surely encouraged the *putsch* plotters to feel that America was not committed to the democratic process in the Soviet Union. What the Bush Administration thus must do now is to avoid its mistakes of the past two years and unequivocally commit itself to Yeltsin and the democratic reformers in all the Soviet republics.

The *putsch* that has threatened Gorbachev hit Washington like a thunderclap. It shook the White House and caught the State Department unprepared. Yet this approaching storm had been on the radar screen for at least two years as many experts warned of Gorbachev's mounting troubles and predicted that his famed balancing act ultimately would fail. These warnings were ignored by Washington as the Bush Administration increasingly placed all its bets on Gorbachev.

Although the situation in the Soviet Union for some time will remain very fluid, if not chaotic, the Bush Administration can begin crafting a thoughtful new American response to the events. Such a response should recognize that:

- 1) **Any *putsch* ultimately will fail.** This is not only because of mounting opposition inside the U.S.S.R. to hardliners but also because no hardliner will have a credible plan to revive the Soviet economy. Communism has collapsed. Only its replacement by a liberal market economy can end the inefficiencies and chronic shortages that make every ruler's hold on Kremlin power tenuous.
- 2) **The only forces that can transform the Soviet Union into a stable democracy are headed by Russian President Yeltsin and similar leaders in the other Soviet republics.**
- 3) **The only forces that can create an entity in the Soviet Union with which America can work and which will not threaten America are headed by Yeltsin and the other democratic leaders.** Yet until this crisis, the Bush Administration by and large shunned Yeltsin and the other democrats, arguing that they were a threat to Gorbachev.
- 4) **America's immediate aim must be to ensure that Yeltsin and the other democratic leaders survive threats of this and future *putsch* attempts.**
- 5) **Bush can help insure the safety of the democratic forces by warning that injury to them individually or that military attacks on their forces will turn *putsch* leaders into world pariahs.** They will be boycotted politically and economically.

- 6) **The White House must stop sending ambivalent messages regarding events in the Soviet Union and other communist states.** The President and his key aides thus must stop giving rambling, confusing statements in interviews and press conferences. Bush Administration statements must be carefully worded and not ad lib responses to reporters' probing questions. There have been enough serious consequences of past widely misunderstood Administration messages, such as Bush's Kiev speech earlier this month and Secretary of State James Baker's encouragement June 21 to Belgrade to use force against Croatian separatists. (Similarly, American Ambassador April C. Glaspie's statements last year to Iraq's Saddam Hussein surely convinced him that America was indifferent to Iraqi actions toward its neighbors.) It is almost certain that this week's hardline *putschists* saw Bush's brush-off of democratic forces in the republics, and his restraint in the face of violent attacks on Lithuania and other republics, as a sign of U.S. ambivalence toward democratic reform in the Soviet Union. This ambivalence may have encouraged the plotters to think that the West would abandon Yeltsin in the face of a coup.
- 7) **Gorbachev is partly responsible for his problems.** He isolated himself politically by shifting allegiances back and forth between communist hardliners and democratic reformers. He should have unambiguously embraced the democratic reformers who, this week, came to his rescue and perhaps even saved his life. He isolated himself from the public by refusing to push the economic reforms that, by now, would have given Soviet consumers hope that their living standards eventually would climb.
- 8) **The U.S. and other Western nations have contributed to Gorbachev's isolation.** His enormous backing from Bush, typified by the hoopla of Bush's visit to Moscow only three weeks ago, surely persuaded Gorbachev that he could survive challenges to his power and that he need not make common cause with Yeltsin and the other democratic reformers. U.S. backing for Gorbachev at the expense of Yeltsin did not strengthen Gorbachev against the hardliners, as Bush hoped and expected. It weakened him.



The *putsch* that has threatened Gorbachev probably ends Act One of the U.S.S.R.'s anti-communist revolution. This act unleashed democratic forces. That hardliners eventually would strike back against these forces was to be expected. In no revolution has the ruling elite easily yielded power and privileges.

Now begins Act Two. It starts with the reformers defeating the *putsch*. It even may see Gorbachev returning as a kind of titular Soviet leader. Real power, however, will rest in the increasingly sovereign and independent republics, headed by Yeltsin and other democrats pushing for the political and market reforms needed to ignite economic growth, raise living standards and establish the political legitimacy that creates internal stability.

The script for Act Two, of course, will be written inside the Soviet Union. Yet there is much that America can do. No longer should Washington embrace a single Soviet leader. No longer should Washington shun the democratic reformers in the U.S.S.R. Instead, the Bush Administration unequivocally should declare its support for the democratic reformers and for the rights of the republics to transform themselves into independent democracies.

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