

The Executive Memorandum

The Heritage Foundation

214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E. • Washington, D.C. 20002-4999 • (202) 546-4400 • <http://www.heritage.org>

8/13/96

Number 457

RUSH!

THE SUCCESSION STRUGGLE BEGINS IN RUSSIA

Lieutenant General (Ret.) Alexander Lebed, Russia's new National Security Council Secretary and President Boris Yeltsin's defense aide, already is locked in a succession struggle with Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin. The outcome of this battle is particularly important in view of reports of President Yeltsin's poor health. The nomination of Lebed protégé Colonel-General Igor Rodionov as Russia's Defense Minister on July 17 has strengthened Lebed's hand. The nomination of reformist Anatoly Chubais as Yeltsin's Chief of Staff strengthens the democratic faction and the Chernomyrdin camp. A situation of such uncertainty requires that U.S. policymakers maintain dialogue with all factions in Moscow, including General Lebed's.

Lebed joined the Yeltsin administration after the first round of presidential elections, and the next act of the Russian political drama began immediately, leaving little time for the thorough discussion of policy direction that Russia so badly needs. In exchange for supporting Yeltsin, Lebed demanded that Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, his former commander and boss, be fired. He also asked for and received a broad mandate to lead and reform both the military and the security forces.

No sooner had he joined Yeltsin's administration than Lebed offended his new boss by saying that he, Lebed, might become president before the year 2000, when Yeltsin's term expires. Lebed is lobbying aggressively to be appointed to the currently nonexistent position of vice president, which would give him supreme power if Yeltsin was incapacitated. This was met with a sharp rebuke from Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, who said that Russia is still recovering from its experience with the previous Vice President, the flamboyant Alexander Rutskoy, who politically self-destructed in 1993. Lebed also may have annoyed Yeltsin by lobbying publicly to expand his authority as the de facto head of the Russian National Security Council.

The ambitious general has embarked on a power-grabbing expedition. No one knows where Lebed's anti-corruption drive may end, and who may become its next victim. In Russia's current legal limbo, almost anyone can be charged with corruption.

Western Russia-watchers initially looked upon Lebed as a born-again liberal. However, conversations by the author with his staff in Moscow indicate that the general, as they call him, is no follower of Jefferson. He hired, then dropped, a Moscow economist by the name of Vitaly Naishul, who is an admirer of Chilean General Augusto Pinochet's economic policies. Naishul is credited with writing a large part of "Truth and Order," Lebed's no-nonsense, market oriented election platform. But he also believes that Lebed, if he becomes president, needs to "nominate a professional parliament which will consist of experts"—a chilling thought for those in Russia who believe in universal suffrage.

Lebed's sophisticated image-makers are deeply disenchanted with Russia's experiment with democracy and far too ready to drop it for imperial grandeur and "real power." Moreover, the key roles in Lebed's inner circle increasingly are being played by hard-line military veterans who would like to re-orient Russia away from the West and toward cooperation with Iran and Iraq. One such insider—Heydar Jemal, Chairman of the Islamic Committee of Russia, which claims to represent Russia's 20-million-strong Muslim community—allegedly has close links to the Islamic regime in Tehran, according to the newspaper *Izvestiya*.

There are no guarantees that Lebed will remain a democrat. He sees his Security Council position as a stepping-stone to the presidency. Moreover, certain sectors of Russian society like the military-industrial complex, the security forces, and the armed forces remain inherently hard-line and can be counted on to seek senior political figures to represent them at the pinnacle of power. General Lebed seems almost tailor-made for the job.

However, it is not clear whether Lebed will survive the infighting within the Kremlin. Yeltsin is a master of balance-of-power intrigue, and Lebed's utility dropped greatly after the second round of elections. In the words of one senior Russian diplomat, speaking recently off the record at The Heritage Foundation, "the Kremlin ice is so slippery—you either learn how to skate, or you fall and break your bones."

Prime Minister Chernomyrdin is aware of Lebed's ambitious plans and already is taking steps to preempt the general in the forthcoming battle for succession. A veteran of Soviet and Russian power struggles, Chernomyrdin projects the image of a no-nonsense manager. He will retain the reins of the economy and close ties within the energy sector (he was Minister of the Gas Industry during the Gorbachev administration). Chernomyrdin enjoys the trust of the Soviet-era industrial managers: He is "one of them." But he also will be supported by the new Russian business elite. If Chubais works in tandem with Chernomyrdin against Lebed, the backing of wealthy Russian bankers will be guaranteed as well.

Western multilateral financial organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have invested heavily in a relationship with the Russian Prime Minister, and so has Clinton's White House through the high-powered Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, which supervises everything from space cooperation to defense conversion. The West would prefer to see the stolid and predictable Chernomyrdin at Russia's helm rather than the mercurial nationalist Lebed.

America and the West need to understand that the Lebed-Chernomyrdin power struggle has begun. In this struggle, the powerful Russian oil and gas industry will deploy its financial might against the muscle of the armed forces and security services. Lebed may rally to his side the nationalists and the inherently hard-line national security establishment. But Kremlin insiders view Lebed (whose name means "swan" in Russian) not as a regal bird, but as a raging bull on the Kremlin's slippery ice. The prognosis for his long-term success, while guarded, has improved with the nomination of Rodionov as head of the "Moscow Pentagon." The outcome of this struggle will depend also on President Yeltsin's health, vigor, and longevity in office.

The U.S. and the West should establish an intensive dialog with Lebed and his staff. The general has shown that he is a quick study and that he possesses a good measure of common sense. But he is inexperienced about the West and its ways and values; he comes from the Soviet armed forces and therefore has received his share of indoctrination in anti-Western xenophobia and Russian nationalism.

Lebed should be invited both to Washington and to NATO headquarters in Brussels. He has yet to make up his mind about solutions to many of the burning issues facing Russia, such as economic and military reform and the fight against crime and corruption, and may be receptive to Western views, policy inputs, and assistance. While National Security Advisor Anthony Lake is Lebed's official counterpart, Secretary of Defense William Perry, who coordinates military and security aspects of the Administration's Russia policy, would be the best candidate to invite Lebed to Washington. Perry has the knowledge and interest in Russian affairs to educate Lebed about the U.S. and the West. In any event, a long-term dialogue between Lebed and American security officials should begin now.

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