

RUSH!

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LEBED DISMISSED BUT NOT TAMED

On October 17, President Boris Yeltsin fired National Security Aide and Security Council Secretary Alexander Lebed, denouncing him for “acting without proper authority” and committing “errors intolerable to Russia.” Yeltsin’s allies went even further: Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin charged the controversial general with “Bonapartism,” while Interior Minister Anatoly Kulikov accused him of plotting a coup.

Lebed’s dismissal was the culmination of a long and complicated series of maneuvers initiated by Chernomyrdin and Presidential Chief of Staff Anatoly Chubais. With Yeltsin clearly ill and in his last term, all of the politicians around him, including Lebed, have been engaged in a power struggle that is likely to continue.

Lebed, an outspoken retired paratroop lieutenant general, emerged as a serious contender for the presidency by finishing third in the first round of presidential elections held on June 16, 1996. The 11 million votes cast in his favor earned him much acclaim—and numerous enemies in the Kremlin. In the second round of elections, held on July 3, Lebed grudgingly endorsed Yeltsin (and thereby insured his victory) in exchange for being nominated as National Security Aide to the President and Security Council Secretary.

An extremely ambitious man, Lebed refused to have his authority confined to a merely advisory role on the Security Council. Even before taking office, he succeeded in engineering the dismissal of his rival and former boss, Defense Minister Pavel Grachev. Lebed then proceeded to meddle in economic affairs, an area normally regarded as the Prime Minister’s territory. He also began advocating a new anti-corruption campaign which, had it been implemented, would have been ruinous for the many highly placed Russian officials who often are accused of corruption in the media.

Lebed succeeded in pushing for a swift settlement in Chechnya, which made him the most popular Russian politician. At the same time, however, he challenged the vested interests of extremely influential forces in Russia. Interior Minister Kulikov became his archrival after Lebed demanded his dismissal as the main culprit in the Chechnya fiasco. Virtually the entire upper echelon of power quickly united against Lebed.

In addition to senior government officials, the anti-Lebed coalition came to include communists and nationalists. Lebed contributed to the growing sentiment against him by coming out with a series of wild accusations against his own protégé, the popular Defense Minister General Igor Rodionov. He also made the mistake of allying himself with the extremely unpopular General Alexander Korzhakov, Yeltsin’s former chief bodyguard. This move infuriated both President Yeltsin and the Russian media.

When Lebed finally was ousted, the main charge against him was that he was preparing a coup. This accusation appears to be false. Unlike Chernomyrdin and Chubais, Lebed has neither a nationwide organization nor a strong bureaucratic structure standing behind him. His actions may have been aimed at improving his standing by creating a powerful support structure of his own. He openly proposed creating regional branches for the Security Council, for example, as well as a paramilitary “Russian Legion” to combat organized crime and ethnic violence. According to Kulikov, documents distributed by Lebed indicated that this Legion was supposed to “detain and liquidate leaders of political groups and movements” which threatened national security or the integrity of the Russian state. However, such an apparatus would have taken months to establish.

Had Lebed really planned a mutiny with the aid of his Legion, it is highly unlikely that he would have shared his plans in advance with the Defense and Interior Ministers or sought their consent. However, his proposal was a useful blunder in the hands of his rivals. Kulikov was the one to articulate the charges—with Chernomyrdin's or possibly Yeltsin's approval. Getting Lebed out of the way apparently was a matter of personal survival for Kulikov, since Lebed's people reportedly have accumulated evidence of his involvement in massive fraud and embezzlement in Chechnya.

Lebed still has high hopes for the future. Despite his dismissal, his popularity continues to be high. He is credited with stopping the war in Chechnya, which claimed 100,000 lives. If hostilities resume because of pressure from Kulikov and his allies, Lebed's rating will skyrocket.

The Russian public has always favored the political underdog. This helped Boris Yeltsin in the late 1980s, and it is helping Lebed now. Should Yeltsin retire or pass away in the near future, new presidential elections will be called. If this scenario develops, Lebed will have a good chance of succeeding Yeltsin if he can muster enough financial and media support.

Lebed's chief opponent for the presidency would be Prime Minister Chernomyrdin. Unlike Lebed, Chernomyrdin lacks charisma; but he does command huge organizational and financial resources as well as the loyalty of local political elites. Chernomyrdin could establish a broad anti-Lebed coalition. The Prime Minister also would be in a position to encourage media efforts to discredit Lebed. But it is too early to tell whether these measures would be sufficient to prevent Lebed from ascending to power.

If Yeltsin remains in power for at least two more years, Lebed's chances of winning the presidency will diminish. Much would depend upon his ability to establish a nationwide political movement and secure the support of local elites and business interests.

Despite the turmoil surrounding Lebed's dismissal, Russia does not appear to be heading for civil war. The army is politically passive, and its support for Lebed is neither total nor unconditional. Lebed tried to boost his popularity in the armed forces by supporting the disappointed paratroopers against a Defense Ministry decision to cut airborne forces. However, the top brass moved quickly to instill discipline. General Kazantsev, Deputy Commander of the Airborne Troops, was fired for publicly opposing the force reduction and siding with Lebed. Lebed appears to realize that any appeal to the army to rise in mutiny would only provoke bloodshed and ruin his chances of achieving his ambitious political goals peacefully.

Nevertheless, Lebed's dismissal could have a dramatic impact on Russia's domestic and foreign policies. Most important, the peace he worked to secure in Chechnya could be disavowed, causing disaster for Russians and Chechens alike. Lebed's more reasonable approach to NATO expansion and NATO-Russia cooperation also could be renounced. In the economic arena, Chernomyrdin's government will feel more comfortable and confident without Lebed, whose constant support of a larger military budget and subsidies for the military-industrial complex was a thorn in the Prime Minister's side.

A populist politician, Lebed could initiate a campaign focused on saving the peace in Chechnya and denouncing government corruption. Such an onslaught would mobilize many of his supporters. It is therefore possible that the government might move preemptively against him—for example, by stepping up the orchestrated media campaign against him, or even by bringing criminal charges.

During his short time in office, Lebed made many controversial statements on domestic and foreign policy. He has shown himself to be both unpredictable and anything but a team player. His departure leaves the Yeltsin administration more united and consolidated, and thus more predictable for the U.S.—at least in the short run. To this extent, Lebed's firing could be good news for American policy. However, not everything Lebed stood for was inimical to U.S. interests and values. In dealing with the Kremlin, the Clinton Administration and the West should insist that the best features of Lebed's legacy—cooperation with NATO, the fight against crime and corruption, and the end of hostilities in Chechnya—be continued even after his dismissal.

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