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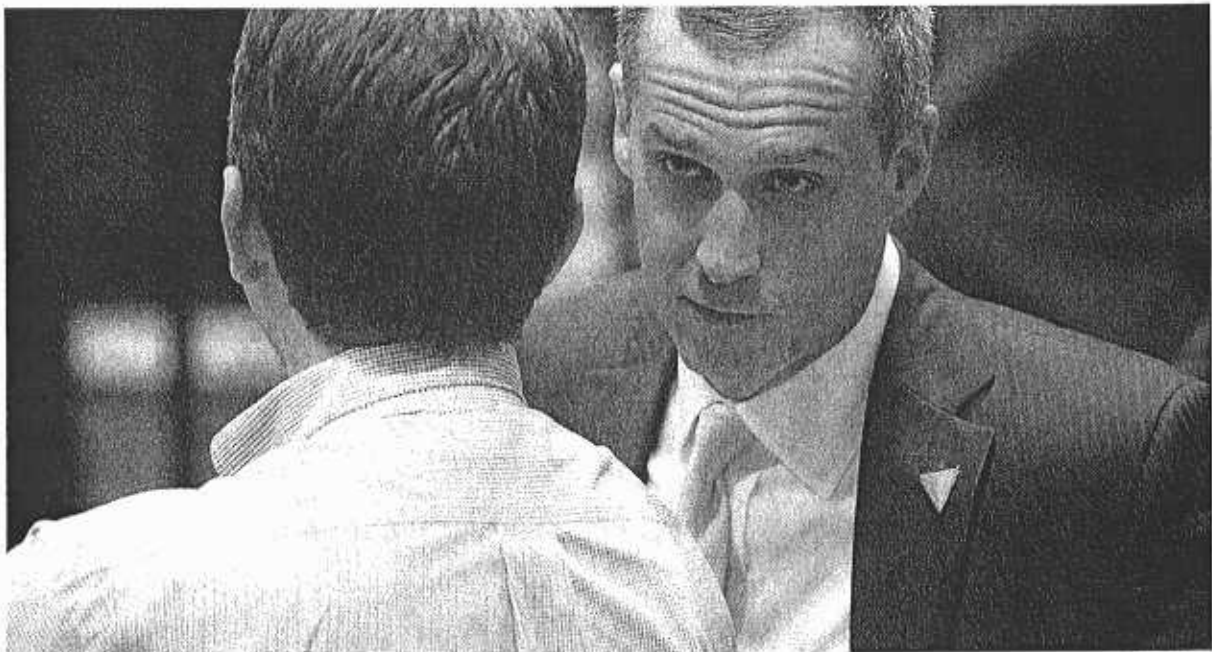
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Trump campaign rift gets personal

The fight for control among the candidate's top aides turns bitter, draws in others.

By **KENNETH P. VOGEL** and **BEN SCHRECKINGER** | 05/25/16 05:17 AM EDT



Sources inside the Donald Trump campaign say top aides Corey Lewandowski (pictured above) and Paul Manafort are at each others' throats. | AP Photo

The internal struggle for control of Donald Trump's presidential campaign is getting personal, with allies of feuding campaign manager Corey Lewandowski and chairman Paul Manafort increasingly turning to shadowy tactics to try to sully their rivals.

The battle, which was already toxic even by the standards of notoriously vicious internecine presidential campaign spats, escalated last week, even as Trump moved to clarify the official hierarchy atop his campaign by creating a new position — campaign chairman and chief strategist — for Manafort.

Lewandowski's enemies around the campaign, after months of circulating rumors about his personal life, had a hand in planting a suggestive item about his emotional argument with a campaign staffer in a New York tabloid, according to a person with direct knowledge of how the item came to be. And Lewandowski's rivals also circulated a news report about him shopping a book, in an effort to raise questions about his commitment to Trump's campaign, according to people familiar with the incident. (Lewandowski denied the report.)

Lewandowski's supporters, in turn, have urged Trump and his representatives to examine Manafort's personal life, as well as the lobbying done by Manafort and his associates, according to people on both sides of the Lewandowski-Manafort rift.

Perhaps fittingly, much of the feud has played out on the same social media battleground and using the same conspiratorial tone that Trump himself has exploited to great effect to belittle his rivals.



CONGRESS

Corker skips Obama trip for Trump date

By BURGESS EVERETT

But the tug-of-war also has potentially serious implications for the presumptive GOP nominee's general election matchup with likely Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. Many individuals familiar with the Trump campaign — including campaign staffers and people who work with them on the outside — say the infighting has infected the campaign's day-to-day operations, with little communication and mounting distrust among Manafort, Lewandowski, and their allies.

“It’s a total cage fight in there now,” said an operative close to the campaign. “Manafort tried to take out Corey, but he didn’t succeed. And now, everywhere Corey looks, he sees a threat, so he’s trying to neutralize those threats.”

Supporters and opponents of Lewandowski say he and his allies have called Trump’s attention to articles chronicling lobbying work done by Manafort or his campaign associates for a gambling company, as well as politically problematic foreign clients, including Saudi Arabia, multiple pro-Russian figures and a group accused of being a front for Pakistani intelligence.

An ally of Manafort’s said Lewandowski “takes all the bad news up to Trump — ‘Paul represented this person, Paul represented that person.’ ”

Lewandowski and Manafort declined to comment, as did the Trump campaign’s press office.

But even as a Tuesday news report revealed that Trump was separating the rival factions into distant office spaces in his New York headquarters, a campaign official disputed the characterization of an increasingly bitter and damaging divide, asserting that the once-skeletal campaign of the billionaire real estate developer had moved past the well-documented acrimony in its upper ranks.

“Corey and Paul are actually working very well together right now. There is a very clear delineation of roles and responsibilities right now, and things are better than they have ever been,” the official said, suggesting that any efforts to undermine Manafort or Lewandowski reflected only the actions of lower-level individuals acting on their own.

Indeed, most of the dirty work on both sides of the tug-of-war has been conducted not by the principals, but by their supporters in and around the campaign.

For instance, a California Republican close to the campaign said Lewandowski has repeatedly tried to enlist allies on the campaign in his efforts to marginalize Manafort. “He’s going to people and saying, ‘I need your help. We need to get rid of Paul,’” said the Republican.

Lewandowski’s supporters inside the campaign have highlighted accounts of Manafort privately assuring leery Republican officials that Trump will moderate his tone in the general election and act more presidential, according to people close to the campaign. Those reports have bothered the first-time candidate, who has bristled at efforts to

restrain the bombastic rhetoric that helped fuel his rise.

Manafort seems acutely aware of the sensitivity of the terrain, and he pushed back after POLITICO on Friday reported that he told top GOP congressional officials that his boss' "behavior can be changed." Manafort argued later that he was not referring to Trump's behavior, but his poll numbers, explaining his "negatives are going to be changing over the course of the next couple of weeks, as Republicans come home."

Meanwhile, Lewandowski for months has been the target of whisper campaigns from a pair of erstwhile Trump campaign advisers with whom he had clashed well before Manafort came on board in March — veteran GOP operative Roger Stone and former Stone protégé Sam Nunberg.



Trump dredges up sordid Clinton accusations

By **NICK GASS**

Last week, Nunberg helped facilitate a New York Post Page Six item about an argument between Lewandowski and campaign spokeswoman Hope Hicks on a Manhattan sidewalk outside the Trump campaign headquarters, according to a person with direct knowledge of how the item made its way onto the Post's website. The person said that Nunberg asked an associate to relay information about the exchange to the Post, which relied on a witness who quoted Hicks screaming at Lewandowski, "I am done with you!"

Hicks declined to comment for this story, as did Trump campaign adviser Michael Caputo, another former Stone protégé who witnessed the incident, according to two sources.

Stone said he had "nothing to do with" the planting of the item and is "not responsible about anything Sam says or does." He acknowledged emailing the Page Six item to some of his associates after it posted, but suggested that was in service of Trump. "It didn't reflect well on the candidate," Stone said. "I don't like anything that's harmful to Donald's candidacy."

Nunberg would not comment on whether he had a role in the Page Six item, but he suggested Trump would be well-served by firing Lewandowski.

"Donald loves to fire people. Why can't he just say it to Corey?" said Nunberg, who blamed Lewandowski for his own firing from the campaign last summer over a years-old racist Facebook post.

The Trump campaign official sought to distance Manafort and the campaign as a whole from Stone and Nunberg, declaring “there’s no association with Roger or Sam and anyone on the campaign.”

After Nunberg was fired from Trump’s campaign, he endorsed Trump’s now-vanquished GOP rival Ted Cruz, and doesn’t speak to the billionaire anymore.

That’s not the case for Stone. The self-styled dirty trickster — who also has advocated conspiracy theories including that Lyndon Johnson was a leader in the plot to murder John F. Kennedy — worked with Manafort for years as partners in a lobbying firm and also advised Trump for years before the campaign.

Stone emphasizes that he has no formal role with the campaign. But he has fashioned a role for himself as an informal adviser and high-profile surrogate. He has waged a months-long campaign to boost Trump and Manafort, while eviscerating perceived enemies, including Lewandowski, using social media, television and radio appearances and his own writing on conservative websites.

On his expletive-filled Twitter feed, Stone has publicly branded Trump’s campaign manager “Loserdowski.” He’s urged Trump to question Lewandowski’s loyalty, calling him a “snake” and comparing him to the serpentine villain in a song Trump recites on the stump about a woman who is killed by a snake she had rescued.

Stone also has used Twitter to lash out at Barry Bennett, a Lewandowski ally on the campaign, as “brainless,” and “ignorant, unpresentable and inarticulate,” while urging him to “stay out of the media. You hurt Trump every time you open your mouth.”

Bennett, a senior adviser to the Trump campaign, wouldn’t respond to Stone’s jabs, but suggested his public vitriol is not helping Trump.

“I have nothing bad to say about anyone who is working to elect Donald Trump,” Bennett said. “I don’t understand why anyone would think attacking a member of the team moves the ball forward.”

When news broke last week that Trump had promoted Manafort to campaign chairman and chief strategist, Stone took to Twitter to gloat, calling it a “good decision” and mocking Lewandowski, urging him to “call your office.”

Club for Growth backs off Trump threat

By BURGESS EVERETT

But a source with knowledge of the situation said that Manafort's allies had leaked the report of Manafort's promotion to counteract a recent New York Times Magazine article that focused much more attention on Lewandowski's role on the Trump campaign. Stone tweeted that Manafort's promotion made the nearly 7,000-word story "hopelessly dated."

The target list in Stone's crusade against Lewandowski also has come to include journalists he views as insufficiently skeptical of the campaign manager's importance or performance, or overly skeptical of Manafort's — a group that includes reporters at POLITICO and The Washington Post.

When the Post reported that Lewandowski had been tapped to head Trump's vice presidential selection process, Stone accused Bennett of being an anonymous source for the story and assailed it as "100 % inaccurate." (Bennett declined to comment on whether he played any role in the story.) Stone repeatedly demanded a retraction and launched into a weeks-long crusade against the reporter who wrote it, accusing him of being "conned" and worse. "Neither [the reporter] or Corey Lewandowski knows his ass from his elbow," Stone tweeted, demanding that the reporter "resign or be fired for his false reporting," and suggesting that Stone intended to "chat with his editor this week."

The Post declined to comment.

In an interview this month with popular libertarian talk-show host Alex Jones, Stone argued that Lewandowski "has aggrandized his role" partly by leaking the vice presidential selection story, before pivoting to an ironic plea for unity on the Trump campaign.

"Campaigns that are divided will lose," Stone said. "Now Donald Trump is smart enough to know that open discord in his campaign is not helpful. But it is very clear that some in the entourage are more interested in feathering their own nest . . . while others, who are consummate political professionals like Paul Manafort are keeping their head down, not playing the press game to try to burnish their own standing and their own image, but focusing on getting Donald J. Trump elected president."

Hadas Gold contributed to this report.

