

The Warrior

Who Would Rule Russia

Benjamin S. Lambeth

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RAND is providing analytical support to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations, Headquarters United States Air Force, on a variety of global security trends and their possible impact on USAF institutional needs over the next two decades.

This report was written in connection with that effort. It offers a detailed portrait of retired Russian army Lieutenant General Aleksandr I. Lebed, who rose to prominence three years ago as the commander of Russia's 14th Army in Moldova and has since been appointed security adviser by the recently reelected President Boris Yeltsin. Lebed, who himself finished a surprisingly strong third in the June 16, 1996 presidential election, promptly joined forces with Yeltsin and helped ensure the latter's winning of a second term in the subsequent July 3 runoff. Because of his current role as the new point man in Russian security affairs and his manifest ambition for higher office, he warrants careful attention by American military leaders and defense planners.

A richer understanding of Lebed's declared outlook on a broad range of issues can offer valuable insight into what kind of Russia the United States will have to deal with in the years ahead, for better or for worse. The analysis presented here—drawing on his many statements and interviews over the past two years—looks beyond the often superficial characterizations of Lebed that have until recently been put forward by the media, to develop a fuller picture of what he actually believes and where he stands on fundamental issues. It portrays him as a respected professional of strong authoritarian bent and unsure devotion to the idea of democracy, yet one who has spo-

ken out strongly against crime and corruption, appears committed to a market economy, and is less aggressively nationalistic than many Western accounts have suggested.

This report was written for the Strategy and Doctrine Program of RAND's Project AIR FORCE. It should be of interest to USAF officers and other members of the U.S. defense establishment concerned with Russian political development, foreign and defense policy, prospects for military reform, and security relations with the United States and its allies.

PROJECT AIR FORCE

Project AIR FORCE, a division of RAND, is the Air Force federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) for studies and analysis. It provides the Air Force with independent analyses of policy alternatives affecting the development, employment, combat readiness, and support of current and future aerospace forces. Research is being performed in three programs: Strategy and Doctrine; Force Modernization and Employment; and Resource Management and System Acquisition.

In 1996, Project AIR FORCE is celebrating 50 years of service to the United States Air Force. Project AIR FORCE began in March 1946 as Project RAND at Douglas Aircraft Company, under contract to the Army Air Forces. Two years later, the project became the foundation of a new, private nonprofit institution to improve public policy through research and analysis for the public welfare and security of the United States—what is known today as RAND.

Aleksandr I. Lebed remains all but unknown to most Americans. Yet in the wake of Russia's presidential election on June 16, 1996, which pitted Boris Yeltsin in a runoff against the communist challenger Gennady Zyuganov, Lebed, a 46-year-old former army two-star general, became overnight one of that country's most powerful men. Despite his expected failure to place as a finalist himself, Lebed nevertheless became Russia's man of the hour with a surprisingly strong finish in third place. That positioned him as a kingmaker to swing the July 3 runoff between the two top contenders and prompted a scramble by both finalists to garner his support.

Once it had become clear that Yeltsin had a straight shot at reelection, he enlisted Lebed as his national security adviser and Security Council secretary in a masterstroke of cooptation. He also went so far as to intimate, at least once, that he might also be grooming Lebed to be his successor as president. However well or poorly Lebed fares in his new assignment, his youth and dynamism, his popularity among Russia's have-nots, and his consuming ambition all suggest that he is likely to remain a prominent player in Russian politics for some time. Accordingly, it is important for Western military and defense leaders to understand who he really is and what he represents.

Until his recent rise to a position of prominence, the dominant tendency of the Western press was to treat Lebed as a curiosity, portraying him in terms that dwelt mainly on his flamboyance and seeming uniqueness. While accurate as far as it went, that image was informed more by anecdotes and sound bites than by deeper inquiry

into what Lebed actually had to say. In the process, it masked a more multifaceted character underneath. Especially since he has assumed his new role as Yeltsin's chief security aide, he has been uninhibited in his public pronouncements and in interviews with reporters. Close examination of these reveals a persona both deeper and more balanced than the prevalent two-dimensional image purveyed by most media accounts. Now that Lebed's power is real, what does his presence on the scene imply for Russia and for broader East-West relations?

Lebed's domestic agenda will focus on four key problem areas: (1) crime and corruption, (2) the war in Chechnya, (3) the composition and role of the Security Council, and (4) military reform. With respect to the first of these, assuming that he does not self-destruct through his own missteps or otherwise become consumed by Kremlin intrigue, Lebed can be expected to try to lend real teeth to the police and to crack down on Soviet captains of industry who have become rich at the expense of the rank and file.

As for the war in Chechnya, Lebed was recently delivered a golden opportunity to make good on his campaign pledge to negotiate a settlement that will stop the killing and allow both sides to emerge with honor. On August 6, rebel forces counterattacked in strength and retook the capital city of Grozny within days. That launched Lebed on a three-week roller coaster ride of shuttle diplomacy with the rebel commander, General Aslan Maskhadov, and high-stakes politics with both his army peers and Yeltsin's chief lieutenants in Moscow. As this report goes to press, Lebed has concluded a framework agreement with the Chechen resistance that, for the first time in 20 months of war, has produced a genuinely promising end to the conflict and has postponed a final ruling on the status of the contested Russian republic until December 31, 2001.

This achievement, however, has elicited at best only lukewarm support from President Yeltsin. It has also occasioned a studied distancing act by Yeltsin's principal deputies, feeding well-founded suspicions in both Moscow and the West that Lebed is being set up by his detractors for a massive fall. Nevertheless, thanks to his prodigious efforts to date, he has made the war in Chechnya Yeltsin's alone to lose. Either way, Lebed stands well-positioned on the high ground, with the equally serviceable options of resigning on

principle should Yeltsin fail to support the peace process, or else charging betrayal by a two-timing and duplicitous Yeltsin administration should he eventually be sent packing for having exceeded his charter. One thing, of course, that could undo all this for Lebed—quickly and perhaps disastrously—would be for rebel forces to renege on their declared commitment to peace with a semblance of honor for Russia and resume fighting for total stakes, thus allowing Yeltsin to make a scapegoat of Lebed and jettison him for cause for having been snookered by the enemy. Even that, however, would probably not signal an end to Lebed's political career for the longer haul given the depth of his commitment and the strength of his electoral constituency.

The Security Council under Lebed's tutelage will almost certainly play a more influential role in Russia's defense and security policy-making, if only because of the power and magnetism of Lebed's personality. He has left no room for doubt that he is seeking a broadened mandate as Russia's chief security planner. The prospect of his Security Council becoming a bureaucratic juggernaut, however, should not be overstated. The Russian security policy apparatus remains poorly institutionalized, and personal rivals of Lebed's have already begun building political alliances and forming counterbalances.

Military reform is Lebed's strongest suit, as well as the policy issue on which his public statements have been most detailed and on which he has the greatest chance of making real progress. Where personnel matters are concerned, he has vowed that important posts will no longer be filled by "good old boys," but rather by professionals who can meet the objective test of competence. Lebed also may seek to depoliticize the armed forces through legislation. He has been adamant in insisting that the military's sole reason for existing is to protect the country against external aggression, not to take sides in domestic disputes. Beyond that, he will strive to end draft evasion by sons of the well-to-do, on the premise that conscription must gather the best of Russia's youth. He maintains that an all-volunteer military entails costs reaching well beyond Russia's grasp, and he has expressed doubts about the feasibility of Yeltsin's campaign promise to end the draft and create a professional army by the year 2000.

Lebed has often stressed that the Russian military needs to get rid of its many separate channels for reporting up the chain of command. He has repeatedly charged that the country's debacle in Chechnya was partly the result of a compartmentalized military organizational structure at all levels, which caused the right hand all too often not to know what the left was doing. He also advocates eliminating skeleton divisions, and he has declared that he will propose to Yeltsin that the latter should announce that the military in 1997-1998 will abandon its current practice of maintaining undermanned units. Those units having only 25-30 percent of the required manning level would be converted into storage bases.

Lebed has promised to reduce the Russian armed forces by a third. He has called for a new three-tiered army structure consisting of airborne forces and specially trained general-purpose forces at level one; fully manned infantry and armored formations with appropriate equipment and munitions at level two; and bases, storage facilities, and logistic structures at level three. He will probably stick with the existing five-service arrangement for the time being. He will also probably pursue reform measures that focus on building a healthy military institution before seeking to acquire new hardware for its own sake. He will press hard at the same time—to the extent possible under Russia's continuing cash shortage—for increased allocations to defense. In addition, he will strive to resurrect the military industry.

Internationally, Lebed can be expected to leave his mark primarily in three areas: (1) Russia's security strategy, (2) the disposition of tensions in the so-called "near abroad" (the other former Soviet republics), and (3) Russia's response to NATO enlargement. On the first count, Lebed has announced that the conceptual framework for a new Russian approach to security already exists and that the challenge is to establish a mechanism for its implementation. However that pans out, the odds are scant that he will seek to pursue an expansionist policy beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. More than any other nationalist contender for president, he understands that Russia lacks the wherewithal to pursue such a strategy, even were it deemed to be attractive in principle. Lebed's main concern is that Russia regain its self-respect and be taken seriously around the world. He has cited Russia's marginalization in the Yu-

goslav crisis as an example of what can happen when a once-great power loses its former clout.

Lebed freely admits that the USSR lost the cold war because of the failed policies of the communists. Accordingly, he will not be inclined to seek a settling of old scores with the United States and NATO. Lebed is not a jingoist, and he has taken a firm stance against organizations supporting fascism. He will take a strong lead, however, in nurturing the development and articulation of a security concept for Russia that reasserts Russia's status as a global power, short of confrontation with the West.

As for the "near abroad," Lebed feels strong compulsions to see to the social and political protection of the 25 million Russians living in the former Soviet republics. It is unlikely, however, that he will advocate outright coercion toward that end or pursue lesser means that blatantly violate the sovereignty of the newly independent states. Lebed has admitted that economic integration out of mutual self-interest and a possible confederation among consenting former republics constitute the outer limits of any acceptable Russian effort to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Lebed can be expected, however, to argue for firm steps against any eastward NATO expansion that does not make a satisfactory offsetting provision for Russia's security concerns and sense of being first among equals in Central Europe. This should come as no surprise to the West. Lebed's earlier declared views on NATO enlargement were more blustery than many. But at bottom his perspective on the issue remains quintessentially mainstream. Since his appointment as Yeltsin's security adviser, he has shown indications of being less adamant over this divisive issue than most policy elites in Moscow, an encouraging sign that he may be acquiring a more pragmatic policy outlook. In pursuing this new line, Lebed has adopted a clever stance. Rather than being frontally critical of NATO enlargement, he has asked the United States and its allies, in effect: "Have you really thought this through?" That does not mean that he has become indifferent to NATO expansion. It merely testifies to his status as the first senior establishment figure in Moscow to acknowledge Russia's limited ability, at least today, to do much about it—beyond complaining.

Lebed has voiced skepticism over Partnership for Peace, NATO's arrangement for engaging the military establishments of the former Warsaw Pact states, including Russia. This may merely reflect his lack of much first-hand exposure to the West. Insofar as that may be the case, it points up a problem that should be remediable through astute NATO initiatives aimed at engaging him constructively. One concern that might incline Lebed to think hard about the merits of a security relationship with the West is his evident unease over China's ambitions and long-term strategic prospects.

It will be interesting to see whether Lebed will succeed in enduring for long the petty humiliations and daily hassles that are the inevitable lot of a civilian bureaucratic politician. As an army general, Lebed had grown accustomed to having things his way. He will need to develop new expectations and habit patterns if he is to survive in his new incarnation. If Lebed can control his ambitions, remain directed and focused, and play to his greatest professional strengths, he has every chance of gaining credibility as a politician and building a foundation for bigger things to come. This will necessarily mean concentrating on those issues where he can make a real difference and avoiding the squandering of his energy on needless turf wars. On the positive side, to cite just one example, Lebed could serve as a counterweight to the tendency of Yevgeny Primakov's foreign ministry to cozy up to troublesome countries like China and Iran.

As for relations with the United States, there is no reason for Washington to assume the worst from Lebed's recent rise to a position of policymaking influence. Despite some early sharp flashes over the NATO expansion issue and his disdain for what he regards as debased American values, Lebed has shown little sign of an ingrained animus toward the West that would predispose him to confrontational conduct. Depending on how we in the West approach him, we may find in him either an antagonist or a businesslike, if sometimes difficult, workmate in security affairs.

Of course, Lebed, having often stressed the importance of Russia's nuclear posture as the nation's last line of defense, could prove nettlesome with respect to the stalled ratification of the START II Treaty. Other areas where he may prove prickly could include the question

of arms sales to pariah states and the possibility that he might support a turn to reactionary policies at home.

That said, Lebed has admitted that Russia has little choice but to engage the West. He has also granted that the West has much to offer toward helping integrate Russia into the world as an accepted power. There is no *prima facie* reason to believe that he will oppose continued, and even expanded, military contacts with the United States. American defense leaders should test him on this as soon as possible.

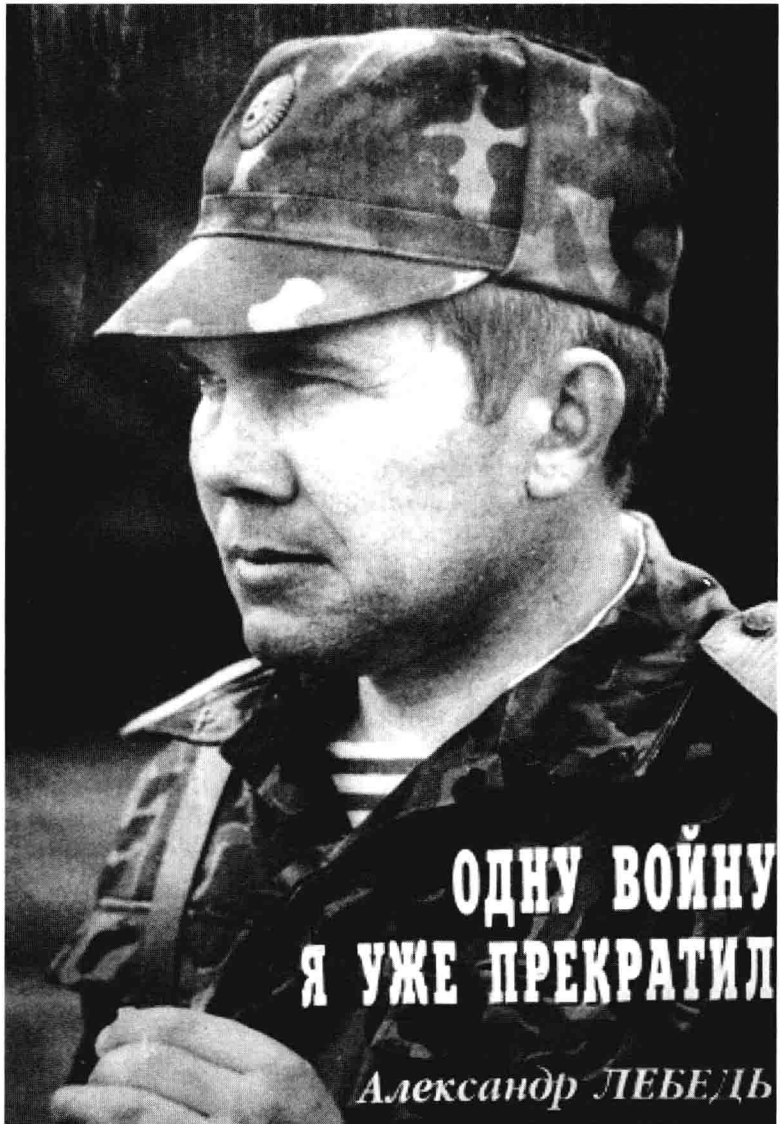
All in all, the United States has nothing to lose and perhaps much to gain by reaching out to involve Lebed in an effort to build a mature Russian-American relationship shorn of romantic expectations. For better or for worse, his success story to date reflects the voice of the Russian people. It also reflects Russia's ongoing struggle to transform itself into a rule-of-law state. If the United States is properly solicitous and inclined to engage the shaky new Yeltsin government without the patronizing overlay that has hitherto often triggered bad feelings among Russians of all persuasions, Lebed may well be disposed to respond in kind. If we in the West write him off too soon as a man on horseback who threatens all we have hoped for in Russian reform, however, we could contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy and live to regret it.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CNN	Cable News Network
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
FSB	Russian Federal Security Service
KGB	Soviet Committee for State Security
KRO	Congress of Russian Communities
MPA	Main Political Administration
MVD	Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NTV	Russian Independent Television Network
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
USAF	United States Air Force
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VTsIOM	All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion



"I have already stopped one war."

Aleksandr I. Lebed's Presidential Election Campaign Poster

CONTENTS

Preface	iii
Summary	vii
Acknowledgments	xv
Abbreviations	xvii
Chapter One	
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter Two	
THE POPULAR IMAGE OF LEBED	7
A Modern Bonaparte?	11
Chapter Three	
LEBED'S RISE TO PUBLIC PROMINENCE	15
From Professional Soldier to Populist Politician	17
On the Campaign Trail	20
As Yeltsin Appointee and Would-Be Heir Apparent	29
Chapter Four	
ON RUSSIA AND ITS PLACE IN THE WORLD	39
Lebed's Vision of Russia	40
On Reconstituting the Soviet Union	41
On Russia and the West	43
Chapter Five	
THE EXTERNAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT	47
On NATO Expansion	47
On Other Potential Threats	51

Chapter Six	
THE MILITARY AND SOCIETY	53
On the Health of the Military	53
On the War in Chechnya	55
On the Political Role of the Military	59
On Grachev and the Military Leadership	61
Military Reform Needs	64
Chapter Seven	
DOMESTIC POLITICS AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS	67
On the Need for a Strong Leader	68
On Crime and Corruption	70
On President Yeltsin	72
On Zhirinovsky and the Communists	74
On the Prospects for Democracy	75
Chapter Eight	
LEBED'S LIKELY POLICY AGENDA	79
Issues on the Home Front	79
External Concerns	88
Chapter Nine	
LEBED'S NEAR-TERM POLITICAL PROSPECTS	91
A Persona in Flux?	92
Invitations to Trouble	94
The Resurgence in Chechnya and Its Portents	98
Surviving in Kremlin Politics	107
Chapter Ten	
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST	119
A SAMPLER OF LEBEDISMS	123