

A Speech to the People's Congress
By Andrei Sakharov / 17 August, 1989

In a rush to adjourn on June 9, the Congress of People's Deputies grudgingly voted Andrei Sakharov five minutes to make a closing statement. He had written down his assessment of the Congress's historic first session (May 26–June 9), but the pressure of time forced him to omit or condense several points. Gorbachev warned Sakharov that he was running over his time limit and then cut off the microphone after this memorable exchange:

GORBACHEV: Time's up. Don't you respect the Congress?

SAKHAROV: Yes, but I respect the country and the people more. My mandate extends beyond the bounds of this Congress.

The complete text of Sakharov's statement follows.

I should first explain why I voted against the Congress's concluding document. It contains many theses that are correct and important, many ideas that are original and progressive, but, in my opinion, the Congress failed to address the key political task facing it, the need to give substance to the slogan "All Power to the Soviets." The Congress refused to consider a Decree on Power, although a host of urgent economic, social, ethnic, and ecological problems cannot be successfully solved until the question of power is decided. The Congress elected a chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet [Mikhail Gorbachev] on its very first day, without a broad political discussion and without even a token alternative candidate. In my opinion, the Congress committed a serious blunder that will significantly reduce its ability to influence national policy and that will prove to be a disservice to our chairman-elect as well.

The constitution now in force assigns absolute and virtually unlimited power to the chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet. The concentration of that much power in the hands of one man is extremely dangerous even if he is the author of perestroika. In particular, it opens the gate to behind-the-scenes influence. And what happens when someone else fills this post?

