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Gorbachev's Complex but Noble Legacy

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On March 2, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev turned 80. If the history books were to judge him strictly for his results while in office, he would be deemed a tragic figure in history. Not only did he fail to resolve the problems facing the country, but the country itself ceased to exist.

But the scale of his personality and his political ability become clear against the backdrop of the insurmountable tasks that Gorbachev placed before himself and his country. Gorbachev had to contend with higher expectations right from the outset. Even now, his legacy is always evaluated on the basis of those elevated expectations. They were the result of years of propaganda and the informational and cultural isolation in which Soviet citizens lived. For example, most people believed that they were not much worse off than people in the United States and Europe when, in fact, their standard of living was significantly lower. Similarly, many believed that Soviet science and education were the best in the world when, in reality, only two or three narrow fields were highly advanced.

Gorbachev was subjected to standards never applied to his predecessors. Intellectuals quickly found fault with his southern accent and mistakes in speech. Who would have given serious thought to evaluating the thoughts or speech of former Soviet leaders Konstantin Chernenko,

Mikhail Suslov, Andrei Gromyko or Yegor Ligachev? In comparison with his predecessors and contemporaries, Gorbachev was both Spinoza and Demosthenes. But, Gorbachev was unfairly compared to U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The Gorbachev period of 1985-91 is one of the most interesting chapters in recent political history. Russia has hundreds of political science departments among its universities, but not a single leading institution held a seminar or round-table discussion to discuss the Gorbachev legacy. Of course, Gorbachev is not to blame for our inability to discuss what is important and even interesting. Happy birthday, Mr. Gorbachev.

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