

# The Reagan Years

Justice demands both sides of Reagan be remembered.

**M**uch though it was dreaded by many, the day had to come. Ronald Reagan, 40th president of the U.S., one of two presidents with an Illinois identity, died, June 5. My roots are in Illinois. So the blind adulation of most Illinoisans for Reagan is familiar to me.



The dread diminished as the public realized continued life was a meaningless existence for a man stricken years ago by Alzheimer's disease. Reagan was 93, and his last years brought struggle, no joy. That is the tragic legacy of the illness that has taken captive an aging population.

Eulogies were sure to be many and expansive. On the lighter side, they note his Illinois identity, as he was born in Dixon to the north, and went to college in Eureka in the middle of the state. Sports were big in his public persona. He once broadcast baseball for a radio station in Des Moines. His long acting career included the role of the Gipper, the Notre Dame football player who died during his time playing under Coach Knute Rockne.

There was another side that in justice needs to be described. It is seen in the effusive praise certain to come from a Republican Party Reagan served so well. In recognition of his policies that satisfied the rich, members of his party have proposed various ways to recognize his actions consistently in their behalf. Once it was suggested the actor-president's profile appear on a coin or bill of the treasury. Then there was the proposal, likely given half in jest, his visage be added to that of honored presidents on Mt. Rushmore.

**S**uch praise reflects what has become an all-too-familiar characteristic of recent GOP presidents: service to the party first, the nation second. Have Democratic presidents been free of that partisan shortcoming? Of course not. But never has that out-of-kilter priority been more evident than in the past quarter century among Reagan and two presidents named Bush, all flaunting the GOP tattoo.

Their economic policies in all areas expanded the gap between the wealthy "haves" and poverty-stricken "have nots." Reagan began the pattern of serving the rich at the expense of all others. It has been taken to a blatantly high level by extreme tax policies of the younger Bush that have bloated corporate wealth while teasing the rest of us with meaningless income tax rebates. Along the way, the health of the federal treasury under a Democrat, Bill Clinton, was revived by replacing the danger of a deficit with a giant surplus. Now that has been squandered by a Bush flying the deficit-spending flag that billowed under Reagan.

Even Reagan's ascent to the presidency was achieved – in the views of some who chronicled the 1980 race – by diminishing the interests of the nation for the benefit of the party. The story, still but an allegation, is that the GOP arranged for sabotage in the desert of helicopters President Jimmy Carter planned to use for the rescue of 52 U.S. hostages in Iran.

"An outlandish allegation!" said some. But it took on greater credence when it was later learned the Iranians had been contacted by the GOP to delay release of the hostages until after Reagan was in office. They agreed, not so surprising in light of Iran's place in the foulest U.S. scandal of the late 20th century: the massive illegalities of Reagan's Iran-Contra dealings.

**T**he name Oliver North became a byword for the underhanded exchange of money for weapons to sustain U.S. support for tyrants in Nicaragua and El Salvador. In the second Bush presidency, another Iran-Contra name has been revived, as John Negroponte became U.S. ambassador to the U.N., and now is preparing to become our first ambassador to the possible new government of Iraq. In Oregon, Negroponte's name is rightly vilified. He was Reagan's Iran-Contra point man, operating out of Honduras. His approval made possible the murder of Oregon social worker Ben Linder in Nicaragua, along with many others.

Contrast between Ronald Reagan and the other president from Illinois, Abe Lincoln, should be self-evident. It is understandable and proper the nation honor the death of a former president, as it does this week for Reagan. But when his legacy is measured, it will come up far short because of his Iran-Contra crime.

Flags may fly at half-mast in Dixon and Eureka, Ill. But instead of honoring Reagan, they should commemorate the many who died in Central America because of policies their "favorite son" pursued.

*George Beres is a longtime Eugene resident and writer and former director of UO sports information.*



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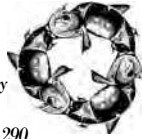
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