



A Mountain for the Gipper?

As we were reminded over the past weekend, there are already an impressive number of schools and government buildings, as well as streets, avenues, highways, parkways, turnpikes, and boulevards named after Ronald Reagan. They may be found in 11 states and in the District of Columbia, where Washington National Airport was renamed Reagan National Airport in 1998.



But some folks in New Hampshire are still trying to name a mountain after our 40th President. They face, if you will pardon the pun, an uphill struggle, despite the fact that the state Legislature passed a law changing the name of Mount Clay to Mount Reagan back in 2003. But the mountain is part of the White Mountain National Forest, which is, as the name indicates, federal land. And wouldn't you know, the name change met with resistance in the federal bureaucracy.

The U.S. Board of Geographic Names (Yes, Virginia, there really is such a board) began to consider New Hampshire's application in 2009, in keeping with the requirement that anyone so honored must be dead for at least five years. Makes sense. Why bestow an honor on someone while he's still alive to appreciate it. Finally, in May of 2010, the board rejected the proposal. Opposition was based in part on a reluctance to slight Henry Clay, a Kentucky Senator and U.S. Secretary of State, for whom the mountain was named within several years of his death in 1852. Reagan probably would have appreciated that. He might even have joked about it. ("I knew Hank Clay. Hank Clay was a friend of mine...") There was also concern about the cost of updating maps to reflect the name change (Imagine that — a government board interested in saving money!) and a fear that hikers with outdated maps would get confused and lost in the woods. Sort of like the "Reagan Revolution" that lost its way to the summit of smaller government balanced budgets.

Some devout Reaganites are determined to try again, after last year's elections put Republicans into three of the four seats held by the state's congressional delegation and left the entire House of Representatives under Republican control. "Come November, there's going to be a friendlier group down there," state Sen. Jack Barnes, Republican of Raymond, predicted to the [The New Hampshire Union Leader](#) after the board rejected the name change last spring. But perhaps honors for President Reagan "maxed out" last Sunday, on the 100th anniversary of his birth. Henry Clay, after all, was never paid tribute on the JumboTron at the Super Bowl and probably never will be. Surely, Reagan by now has reached the peak of fame and adulation.

Funny think about Reagan, though. The further in time we get from the eight years of his presidency, the more fondly we seem to remember them. We remember the "Reagan tax cuts" but forget all the times taxes were raised, either with his approval or at his insistence. We remember the rhetorical attacks on "big government," but we can easily forget how much bigger and more expensive government grew on Reagan's watch. The federal budget doubled and the deficits more than tripled — \$200 billion deficits in the "out years," for "as far as the eye can see." His boldness was impressive, especially in calling for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution at a time when no previous



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 9, 2011

budgets — surely no previous peacetime budgets — had ever been as wildly out of balance as the ones Reagan submitted to Congress. The promised assaults on the departments of Education and Energy either never came or were soft and subtle enough to blend in with the upholstery in either department. The departments that the Republicans were going to eliminate outlived Reagan, outlived the "Reagan Revolution" and, barring a collapse of the entire government, will still be in business when Reagan's grandchildren have had grandchildren, whose children have died of old age. They bear witness to Reagan's oft-repeated observation that the closest thing to eternal life in this world is a government agency.

Still, his apologists never tire of saying, "Reagan won the Cold War." That overlooks the contributions of previous Presidents, not to mention the men who fought the hot battles of the Cold War in places like Korea and Vietnam. And it underestimates the self-inflicted failures of the Soviet economic system. Reagan, to be sure, did his part to stand against and ultimately defeat the "evil empire." But it is remarkable to hear his admirers boast that he did it with an arms race that forced the Soviets into bankruptcy. Talk about self-inflicted wounds! Have they looked lately at our arsenal and national debt?

The veneration of Ronald Reagan has become a political cult among Republicans, an exercise in what might be called Reaganolatry. "Most conservatives still believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, but Reagan runs a close fourth," the late columnist Joseph Sobran observed in 1999, as Republican candidates for the 2000 presidential nomination were eager to align themselves with the wisdom, the courage, the vision, the optimism, the faith in America, etc. etc. of the great Ronald Reagan, the very embodiment of our noblest ideals. "Like God," Sobran wrote, "Reagan comprehends every perfection, and the flesh is flawed to the degree that it doesn't resemble Reagan."

A saint, Ambrose Bierce wrote in *The Devil's Dictionary*, is "a dead sinner, revised and edited." We are all sinners in need of revision and editing, but we should draw the line at mythmaking. Reagan is not the first President whose admirers have all but deified him. It happened with Lincoln, both Roosevelts and, to a slightly lesser extent, Kennedy. But if there is to be a mountain named in honor of the Reagan myth, we might also name one for the reality of Reagan's big-government budgets and all their red ink. Except we don't have a mountain high enough. If we did, it would take one hell of an expedition to reach the summit of Mount Deficits.



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