

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Reagan doesn't earn Galesburg recognition

Spare me the hysterics of those who want to name a local landmark for former President Ronald Reagan. He lived in Galesburg for one year, for heaven's sake, as an elementary student. There is a plaque at Silas Willard school commemorating that. That was hard enough for my mother to swallow, who was there at the same time but didn't remember him.

Come on, he wasn't even a good president. He won't be remembered as a good president. We all feel sorry for him and his family because he has Alzheimer's disease but that's no reason to make him some kind of god.

He was once a Democrat and union leader who turned Republican just because it was convenient and easier to win, so from my point of view, there's the worst kind.

We don't need to get complicated here. A recent column in that "other" newspaper by Lionel Van Deerlin cites the following info. When Reagan took over the White House, the national debt stood at just under a trillion dollars. After 12 years of Reagan and Bush the elder, our debt topped four trillion dollars. Annual deficits reached an all-time peak of \$155 billion in 1988.

When President Clinton arrived, he presented a deficit reduction package that passed Congress without a single Republican vote, amid Republican cries that the tax increases would invite a recession. President Clinton then presided over one of the most remarkable periods of prosperity in the nation's history.

During the Reagan years the rich got richer and the poor got poorer, and we've never recovered from it. By 1989, income distribution between the richest 5 percent of American families and the bottom 80 percent was back to the level it was in 1947. By 1987, male high school students with one to five years of work experience were earning 18 percent less than their counterparts did in 1979. Their pay, adjusted for inflation, was the same as their counterparts earned in 1963.

Oh yeah, as a Galesburger for over 25 years, I sure want big a reminder of those wonder years, when we also watched local businesses go down the tubes. I think the plaque at Silas Willard is enough reminder of trickle up Reaganomics.

We all know we are working longer hours for less pay and we are waking up from the

American Dream. American parents spent 40 percent less time with their children in 1985 than they did in 1965. Employed Americans spent 142 hours more per year on the job in 1994 than they did in 1973.

The deficit was a trillion dollars when Republicans went after Jimmy Carter tooth and nail 22 years ago and now that number is "the holy grail in the new order," according to Van Deerlin. Why an incoming president would change a single economic plan from the previous administration's success, it's hard to imagine. The tax money returned to us supposedly "belonged to the taxpayers," but then the \$4 trillion dollar debt belongs to us too.

Former President Reagan lied to Congress about his involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal, when his administration broke the law by selling arms to a terrorist state. Reagan either should have been put in jail or is really stupid; take your pick.

Unions were busted and demoralized during his reign and lost power they have never regained. Reagan constantly belittled those who chose the career of public service. He always talked about his small-town, church-centered upbringing and stability of the family, but paid little attention to his first wife and divorced her. He was a cold and inattentive father who created bitterness and division in his family. He rarely attended church. He claimed he was overseas during World War II and he was not. He constantly ridiculed programs of federal grants and assistance, which enabled his father to survive the depression through a New Deal WPA job and his hometown to grow and prosper.*

For more than 40 years in Hollywood Reagan played the boy next door, wise-cracking nice guy, fun-loving and handsome. He continued his role as president. Was it real? Even those who were close to him don't know. They couldn't get close enough to know him very well.

No, this is not my idea of a hometown hero. Let Eureka College and Dixon have him. One year of elementary school does not merit a special stop on the Reagan Trail. In fact, it would be embarrassing.

* *Sleepwalking through History, America in the Reagan Years* by Haynes Johnson

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer from Galesburg who can be reached at (309) 342-1337 or cporter@galesburg.net.

Aug. 23, 2001