

10 Things Conservatives Don't Want You To Know About Ronald Reagan

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February 6th is the anniversary of President Reagan's birth, and conservatives almost always try to outdo each others' remembrances of the great conservative icon. This year, Senate Republicans spent much of Thursday singing Reagan's praise from the Senate floor, while conservative publications have been running non-stop commemorations. Meanwhile, the Republican National Committee and former GOP House Speaker Newt Gingrich are hoping to make a few bucks off the Gipper's centennial.

But Reagan was not the man conservatives claim he was. This image of Reagan as a conservative superhero is myth, created to unite the various factions of the right behind a common leader. In reality, Reagan was no conservative ideologue or flawless commander-in-chief. Reagan regularly strayed from conservative dogma—he raised taxes eleven times as president while tripling the deficit—and he often ended up on the wrong side of history, like when he vetoed an Anti-Apartheid bill.

ThinkProgress has compiled a list of the top 10 things conservatives rarely mention when talking about President Reagan:

1. Reagan was a serial tax raiser. As governor of California, Reagan "signed into law the largest tax increase in the history of any state up till then." Meanwhile, state spending nearly doubled. As president, Reagan "**raised taxes in seven of his eight years in office**," including four times in just two years. As former GOP Senator Alan Simpson, who called Reagan "a dear friend," told NPR, "Ronald Reagan raised taxes 11 times in his administration—I was there." "Reagan was never afraid to raise taxes," said historian Douglas Brinkley, who edited Reagan's memoir. Reagan the anti-tax zealot is "false mythology," Brinkley said.

2. Reagan nearly tripled the federal budget deficit. During the Reagan years, the debt increased to nearly \$3 trillion, "roughly three times as much as the first 80 years of the century had done altogether." Reagan enacted a major tax cut his first year in office and government revenue dropped off precipitously. Despite the conservative myth that tax cuts somehow increase revenue, the government went deeper into debt and Reagan had to raise taxes just a year after he enacted his tax cut. Despite ten more tax hikes on everything from gasoline to corporate income, Reagan was never able to get the deficit under control.

3. Unemployment soared after Reagan's 1981 tax cuts. Unemployment jumped to 10.8 percent after Reagan enacted his much-touted tax cut, and it took years for the rate to get back down to its previous level. Meanwhile, **income inequality exploded**. Despite the myth that Reagan presided over an era of unmatched economic boom for all Americans, Reagan disproportionately taxed the poor and middle class, but the economic growth of the 1980's did little help them. "Since 1980, median household income has risen only 30 percent, adjusted for inflation, while average incomes at the top have tripled or quadrupled," the New York Times' David Leonhardt noted.

4. Reagan grew the size of the federal government tremendously. Reagan promised "to move boldly, decisively, and quickly to control the runaway growth of federal spending," but federal spending "ballooned" under Reagan. He bailed out Social Security in 1983 after attempting to privatize it, and set up a progressive taxation system to keep it funded into the future. He promised to cut government agencies like the Department of Energy and Education but ended up *adding* one of the largest—the Department of Veterans' Affairs, which today has a budget of nearly \$90 billion and close to 300,000 employees. He also hiked defense spending by over \$100 billion a year to a level not seen since the height of the Vietnam war.

5. Reagan did little to fight a woman's right to choose. As governor of California in 1967, Reagan signed a bill to liberalize the state's abortion laws that "resulted in more than a million abortions." When Reagan ran for president, he advocated a constitutional amendment that would have prohibited all abortions except when necessary to save the life of the mother, but once in office, he "never seriously pursued" curbing choice.

6. Reagan was a "bellicose peacenik." He wrote in his memoirs that "[m]y dream...became a world free of nuclear weapons." "This vision stemmed from the president's belief that the biblical account of Armageddon prophesied nuclear war—and that apocalypse could be averted if everyone, especially the Soviets, eliminated nuclear weapons," the Washington Monthly noted. And Reagan's military buildup was meant to crush the Soviet Union, but "also to put the United States in a stronger position from which to establish effective arms control" for the the entire world—a vision acted out by Reagan's vice president, George H.W. Bush, when he became president.

7. Reagan gave amnesty to 3 million undocumented immigrants. Reagan signed into law a bill that made any immigrant who had entered the country before 1982 eligible for amnesty. The bill was sold as a crackdown, but its tough sanctions on employers who hired undocumented immigrants were removed before final passage. The bill helped 3 million people and millions more family members gain American residency. It has since become a source of major embarrassment for conservatives.

8. Reagan illegally funneled weapons to Iran. Reagan and other senior U.S. officials secretly sold arms to officials in Iran, which was subject to an arms embargo at the time, in exchange for American hostages. Some funds from the illegal arms sales also went to fund anti-Communist rebels in Nicaragua—something Congress had already prohibited the administration from doing. When the deals went public, the Iran-Contra Affair, as it came to be known, was an enormous political scandal that forced several senior administration officials to resign.

9. Reagan vetoed a comprehensive anti-Apartheid act. which placed sanctions on South Africa and cut off all American trade with the country. Reagan's veto was overridden by the Republican-controlled Senate. Reagan responded by saying “I deeply regret that Congress has seen fit to override my veto,” saying that the law “will not solve the serious problems that plague that country.”

10. Reagan helped create the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden. Reagan fought a proxy war with the Soviet Union by training, arming, equipping, and funding Islamist mujahidin fighters in Afghanistan. Reagan funneled billions of dollars, along with top-secret intelligence and sophisticated weaponry to these fighters through the Pakistani intelligence service. The Taliban and Osama Bin Laden—a prominent mujahidin commander—emerged from these mujahidin groups Reagan helped create, and U.S. policy towards Pakistan remains strained because of the intelligence services' close relations to these fighters. In fact, Reagan's decision to continue the proxy war after the Soviets were willing to retreat played a direct role in Bin Laden's ascendancy.

Conservatives seem to be in such denial about the less flattering aspects of Reagan; it sometimes appears as if they genuinely don't know the truth of his legacy. Yesterday, when liberal activist Mike Stark challenged hate radio host Rush Limbaugh on why Reagan remains a conservative hero despite raising taxes so many times, Limbaugh flew into a tirade and demanded, “Where did you get this silly notion that Reagan raised taxes?”