

"Valley Residents Nurtured Reagan's Political Career," *Fresno Bee*, (June 6, 2004).

The Central Valley left its mark on Ronald Reagan, and Reagan returned the favor -- though not as often as he might have liked.

As governor and then as president, Reagan drew some of his closest allies and staffers from the Valley. They helped him win elections, they helped him govern and they helped shape his legacy.

Reagan, in turn, showed considerable loyalty to key Valley constituencies, even if his achievements didn't always match his rhetoric.

"He always had a lot of supporters there. All those Okies and other redneck Democrats were friends," said political strategist Lyn Nofziger, a Bakersfield native and former Reagan adviser.

Michael Deaver, who served years as chief keeper of Reagan's image, also was born in Bakersfield, while Fresno-area native James Lake played crucial roles in Reagan's election campaigns.

The Valley, then, helped Reagan climb the political ladder. But measuring Reagan's personal impact on the Valley is a trickier matter.

"He was an astute politician," said A. Alan Post, who built the office of state legislative analyst into a powerful entity, "but I can't think of anything that he directly initiated that really had any influence of any kind in the Valley. Certainly nothing on planning or on any of the problems that we now see in places like Fresno, such as growth."

Consider the water issue.

Reagan's predecessor as governor, Democrat Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, brought to the Valley the State Water Project, opening thousands of acres to irrigation.

But Reagan wanted to put the brakes on what he deemed free-spending ways; he started no new projects or any major Valley initiatives, critics and supporters agree.

Gordon Duffy, a Hanford Republican who served in the Legislature from 1964 to 1982, said while Reagan had "a great respect for agriculture," he "didn't have the same drive to continue to develop water. No governor since Pat Brown had."

George Steffes, one of Reagan's former policy directors, said Valley farmers loved the plain-speaking president.

"The rural guys were his friends," said Steffes, who has been part of the Sacramento political scene as a staff member and lobbyist for more than 40 years. "They didn't cause trouble for him."

Reagan made his mark by saying "no" to the Democrat-controlled Legislature: He dug in his heels and banked on his ability to win favorable public opinion.

If anything, Reagan's penchant for cutting aid to local government and vetoing bills to expand farmworker rights set the stage for two of the state's most dramatic reforms in the 1970s: the Agricultural Labor Relations Act and property tax-cutting Proposition 13.

The seeds for the historic ballot measure were planted during Reagan's tenure when he sharply cut money to local governments, forcing them to depend on property taxes. And because local governments legally are obligated to provide certain services, Post said, it's more difficult for them to cut spending.

By 1976, Gov. Jerry Brown, the son of the man Reagan defeated, had won the governor's office but property taxes were soaring. Two years later, political campaigns revolved around Proposition 13.

Opposing the ballot measure brought consequences.

Former state Sen. Ken Maddy of Fresno lost valuable support in his bid for the GOP gubernatorial nomination in 1977 when he opposed Prop. 13 in favor of a less extreme route.

Maddy, a longtime Reagan friend, said in a 1990s interview that the former governor's tenacity sometimes paid off for him but left issues unresolved for people who followed. Maddy died in 2000.

Such was the case with farm labor.

"He was very opposed to the farm labor movement," said Maddy, who first was elected to the Assembly in 1970. "He didn't want to deal with the United Farm Workers. That was an issue where he stood with the farmers."

But, in part because Reagan didn't give an inch and pressure for reform increased, his successor signed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, a law that created the labor relations board in 1975 and gave farmworker organizers the right to legally trespass in search of new members.

Despite the controversies, politicians celebrated Reagan's sojourns to the Valley.

"I loved him coming to town," Maddy recalled. "There was nothing like an event with Ronald Reagan. He brought Jimmy Stewart into town to make the introductions."

Reagan devoted less attention to the Valley during his eight- year presidency. He was, moreover, never an executive known for hands-on management. His former staffers working on Valley issues recalled being given broad marching orders, but being left alone on the day-to-day, if not month-to-month, basics.

"Reagan liked the farmers, but he didn't get too deeply involved in the details," recalled Richard Lyng, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and a longtime Modesto resident, in a 1990s interview. Lyng died in 2003. "We were given quite a lot of [leeway], and there was no tremendous discipline."

Reagan's free-trade emphasis encouraged Valley farmers, who export about half of their crops. And his actions led to lower trade barriers in more than 100 countries.

A president can always extend his influence by appointing ideologically like-minded federal judges. Reagan did so, appointing more than 300 conservative judges; but even these appointees had scant dealings with the president. Fresno attorney Robert Coyle, for instance, talked with Reagan only once before being nominated as a district judge.

"He told me I could tell my wife that she was going to be sleeping with a federal judge," recalled Coyle, who has now taken senior status.

As president, Reagan's "Star Wars" weapons plan pumped federal dollars through Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in Northern California. The combination of tax cuts and spending increases on his watch gave April 15 relief to Valley residents, while also saddling residents with a national debt.

Reagan's impact on the Valley inevitably waned as a result of his collision with a Democrat-controlled Congress. He simply couldn't win support for some of his more dramatic ideas that, if implemented, would have reshaped Valley life.

He talked, for instance, of moving away from the generous price supports given cotton, rice and wheat growers. Congress -- Republicans and Democrats alike -- was not quick to embrace this. He talked of abolishing the \$240 million-a-year [Legal Services Corp.](#), which provides legal aid to thousands of low-income Valley residents, but Congress wouldn't go along.

His first Interior secretary, James Watt, talked of increasing timber production in Western forests and oil production from off the California coast. The real effect was to increase member production for the San Francisco-based Sierra Club, which gathered 1 million signatures on its ultimately successful petition to oust Watt.

At other times, on issues that flew below Reagan's personal radar, his administration's officials had to weigh in on Valley- specific issues. They didn't always win.

In 1984, for instance, his administration endorsed an effort by then-Congressman Tony Coelho that would have eased the way for construction of a big hydroelectric project on the Tuolumne River.

Congress, however, proceeded to block the project by designating an 83-mile stretch of the Tuolumne as a Wild and Scenic River.

Reagan officials, as well, did not always toe the administration's line.

Former National Park Service Director William Penn Mott, for instance, used to publicly testify on behalf of the administration's tight park service budget.

Later, privately, he would tell lawmakers such as former Rep. Richard Lehman, a Sanger Democrat who represented Yosemite National Park, that more money was really needed.

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