

commentary

from other pens...

Ronald Reagan, a monumental name

The naming of Washington landmarks has been a lively capital diversion ever since the city was given the last name of the first president more than two centuries ago.

In the current round of naming the capital's most prominent sites, the name of the 40th president, Ronald Reagan, is the name of the moment.

A major airport, a mammoth federal building and even the emergency room where Reagan was treated for gunshot wounds in 1981, have been named for the 91-year-old former president.

Other presidents have not been neglected. Recent namings honor former presidents: Truman, Eisenhower, Carter and George H.W. Bush.

In March, after a year of political wrangling, the Metro subway system reluctantly added Reagan's name to station signs on the platform at the capital's bustling airport in suburban Virginia. That reflects the earlier name choice Congress dictated. Now there's no doubt that the aviation artery is the "Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport."

Reagan is seen as an ironic choice. As president he fired thousands of striking air traffic controllers, many of them working at National Airport.

Irony is detected in the 1995 decision to place Reagan's name on the 3.1 million-square-foot government office building that completes the Depression-era Federal Triangle complex in downtown Washington.

Second in size only to the Pentagon, its cost inflated by overruns to more than \$800 million, the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center houses more than 5,000 federal employees. Critics carp the name is an odd tribute to a president who advocated smaller government.

President Clinton presided two years ago as the State Department's block-square headquarters building was named for Democratic President Truman, who governed as the Cold War began.

"That's one for us," then-White House spokesman Joe Lockhart quipped after the Truman dedication ceremony ended a run of naming buildings after prominent Republicans.

The Executive Office Building next to the White House had recently been named for Truman's successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

And the Virginia headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency had been named for another Republican former president. George H.W. Bush was honored as a president who was also a former CIA director.

The spy agency's headquarters is now the George Bush Center for Intelligence, a change made with a cautionary note from former first lady Barbara Bush.

"Remember, they only name things after you when you're dead or really old," she told her 77-year-old husband.

Former President Carter said he got what he wanted when the Navy named a new nuclear-powered submarine the USS Jimmy Carter.

"If I had a choice between a submarine and an airport, I would choose a submarine," the former submarine officer said with his toothy grin.

The modern trend of naming Washington institutions and landmarks for presidents and other statesmen began with the opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in September 1971. One of its theaters was named for Eisenhower, making it a bipartisan venture.

Reagan's admirers are not content with attaching the former president's name to an airport and an office building. Some want his face to replace that of Alexander Hamilton on the \$10 bill.

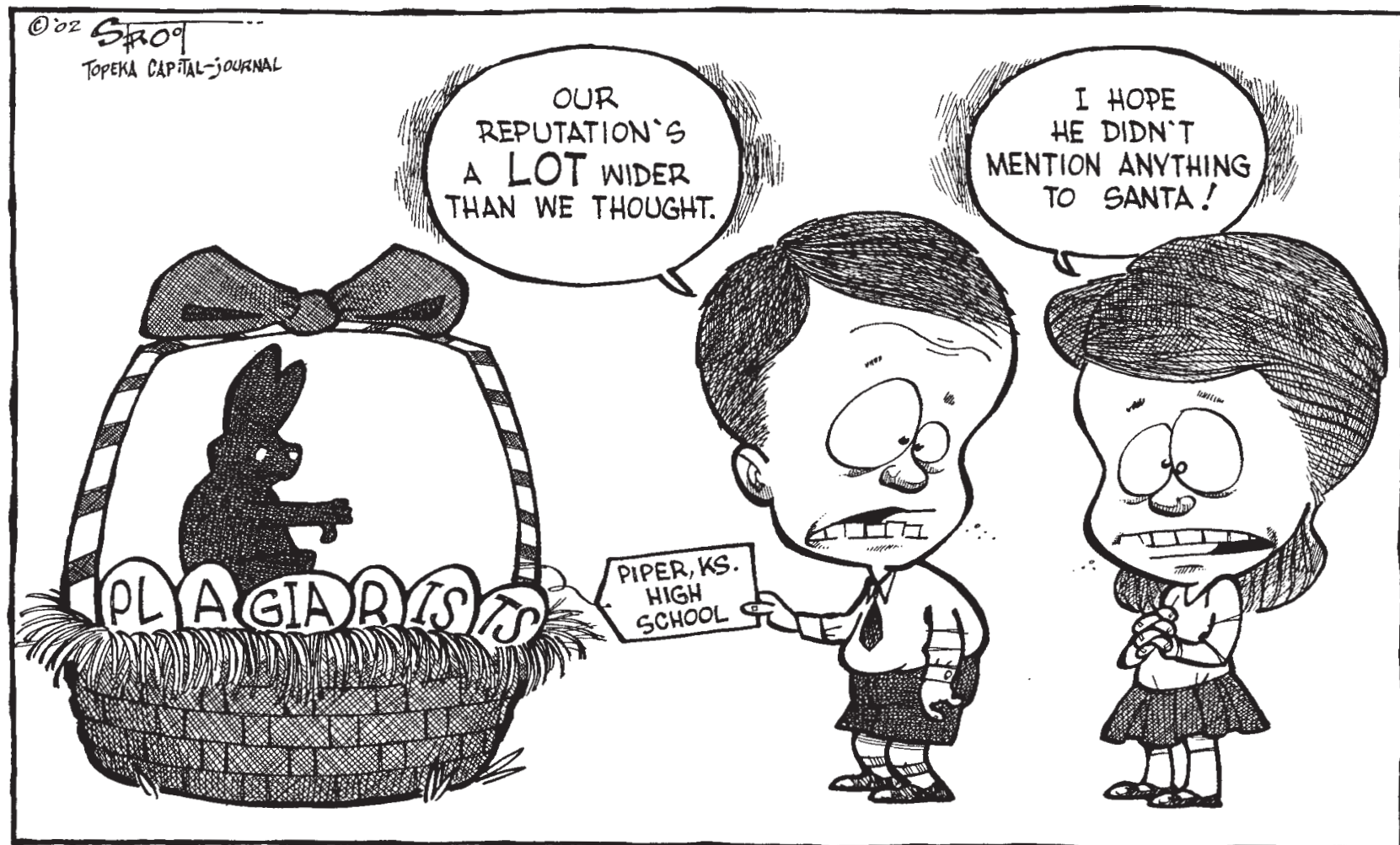
The Bush administration ruled last year proposals to erect a Reagan memorial on the National Mall are premature. Reagan signed legislation in 1986 barring memorials on the Mall until 25 years after a person's death.

Former first lady Nancy Reagan, speaking at the dedication of the Reagan building, said her husband "would never think about whether a monument would be dedicated to him."

He was "sincerely flattered," she said, when a pub in Ballyporeen, Ireland, was given his name.

"He said to me, 'I know presidents get things named after them, but I'll bet I'm the first president who ever had a pub named after him.'"

EDITOR'S NOTE: Lawrence L. Knutson has reported on Congress, the White House and Washington's history for 34 years.



An American night

WASHINGTON — Lenny Bruce said there were no all-out racists in this country because even the truly nastiest would choose Lena Horne over Kate Smith.

The Academy Awards reminded me of Bruce's powerful 40-year-old observation. Call it cosmetic. Call it lust. As a human motivator, sex appeal can be a daunting rival even to racial and ethnic differences.

Halle Berry, who won the Oscar for best actress, is one of the true beauties of the American cinema. Give her five years and she could be the most glamorous, most loved, most classy movie star since Grace Kelly.

Sparkling good looks have also been helpful in driving Denzel Washington's career from the days we first noticed and liked him in "St. Elsewhere" through his great performance in "Glory," a film about black soldiers fighting for the North in the Civil War.

Sidney Poitier, who received a special Academy Award is another figure of undeniable glamour. He made it but not just because he was fabulous in "Raisin in the Sun" a half-century ago, stoic in "Heat of the Night" and noble playing Nelson Mandela. Let's face it, the guy is still good-looking.

So, don't confuse my sentiment about last Sunday's historic twin victory by Berry and Washington in the best acting performances to be dismissed as naive. I know that whenever you're talking about movies and movie stardom, you're talking about the visual. And these two people look great!

But the big two points I want to make about this moment, before it passes into memory, are these: First, I loved the fact that Sidney Poitier started



chris matthews

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off the festivities by thanking a group of aging or deceased white guys who made his career possible.

"Here I am this evening at the end of a journey that, in 1949, would have been considered almost impossible and, in fact, might never have been set in motion were there not an untold number of courageous, unselfish choices made by a handful of visionary American filmmakers, directors, writers and producers, each with a strong sense of citizen responsibility to the times in which they lived.

"Each (was) unafraid to permit their art to reflect their views and values. They knew the odds that stood against them and their efforts were overwhelming and likely could have proven too high to overcome. Still those filmmakers persevered, speaking through their art to the best in all of us.

"And I benefited from their efforts. The industry benefited from their efforts. America benefited from their efforts and, in ways large and small, the world has also benefited from their efforts."

Poitier named Joe Mankiewicz, Darryl Zanuck, Walter Mirisch, Guy Green and Norman Jewison as producers who had the courage to put the name "Sidney Poitier" above the title of some very big motion pictures.

"Without them," the actor noted, "this most memorable moment would not have come to pass." My second point is the observation, which has

come to me late in life, that black Americans have been watching and rooting for characters in movies all their lives.

Almost all those characters, and the actors playing them, have been white.

Yet through all those years, black Americans have rooted for the good guys, rooted against the bad guys, empathized with the guy carrying the torch for the girl he can't have, the girl feeling the hurt of losing the guy she loves. They, too, loved "An Affair to Remember." They, too, were thrilled when Cary Grant realized that Deborah Kerr loved him as much as he did her.

Now, I think, it's the white American's turn to do the same.

We now root, not just for Halle or Denzel to win the Academy Award, we go out to the movies and root for their characters, care when boy meets girl, cry when boy loses girl, cheer when he gets her back.

So I leave you with Denzel Washington's last words in accepting his Oscar. He was talking to his children watching on TV along with that other billion people from around the world.

"I told you, if I lost tonight, I'd come home and we'd celebrate it. If I won tonight, we'd come home and we'd celebrate. Well, we're coming home and we're celebrating. God bless you all."

That party, when this great American daddy comes home, is my idea of the best Oscar party of all.

Chris Matthews, author of "Now, Let Me Tell You What I Really Think" (Free Press, 2001) and "Hardball" (Touchstone Books, 1999), is a nationally syndicated columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle and the host of "Hardball" on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels.

Opportunity calls; conservatives find cuts hard

TOPEKA — The state's budget crisis has represented a huge opportunity for some legislators. For years, conservative Republicans have argued that state government is too big and expensive, that its taxes are high and fetter economic development.

But given a near-historic chance to slash government spending, conservatives are finding it difficult to do.

During House debates last week on the budget, they pushed proposals to protect social programs and provide a small increase in state aid to public schools. Their actions were an acknowledgment that they lack the legislative clout to remake government.

"There's not a conservative majority," said Rep. Tony Powell, R-Wichita, one of the architects of a conservative budget plan. "It was an attempt to reach across the aisle."

Legislators must cover a projected \$700 million gap between expected revenues and required spending. Leaders believe it is the worst financial crisis since at least the Great Depression.

Conservatives helped create a political climate over the past decade in which tax increases are political poison.

Even Gov. Bill Graves — who proposes raising taxes \$364 million — ran for re-election in 1998 as a champion tax-cutter who kept government running "high and tight."

Conservatives also see this year as an especially bad time to raise taxes. With layoffs in the aircraft and telecommunications industries, as well as a soft farm economy, many Kansans can't afford to give more money to the government.

Yet the Legislature seems more likely than not to raise taxes. Rep. Clay Aurand even suggested the conservative vote this year would be for a small tax increase.

"Conservatives would be smarter to vote for a small tax increase instead of letting Democrats team up with a minority of Republicans to pass a large tax increase," said Aurand, R-Courtland.

Certainly, the state is likely to reduce spending: Even Graves' proposed tax increases would finance a budget that is 2.4 percent smaller during the next fiscal year than during the current one.

But the shrinkage of government appears destined to be a temporary aberration, lasting a few years at most.

Conservatives offered a proposal for eliminating the budget shortfall without raising taxes, but



john hanna

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it relied on dipping into treasury reserves for \$104 million and using \$83 million in extra federal funds that aren't guaranteed to arrive.

Conservatives' budget cuts were less aggressive than a no-new-taxes plan offered by the House Appropriations Committee, which wouldn't have lowered cash reserves or used the federal funds.

But the committee's plan would have reduced aid to public schools by \$303 per student, to \$3,567, an amount lower than the level set by the school finance law when legislators enacted it in 1992. For Democrats and moderate Republicans, any cut was unacceptable.

Equally unacceptable were proposals to cut \$11.2 million from programs that provide aides to do chores and nursing services to disabled Kansans and the elderly in their homes.

The prospects of cuts brought 100 disabled Kansans and activists to the Statehouse, where they chanted outside the House chamber and put up a small tent city on the grounds for two days.

The math for conservatives was simple. Of the 79 Republicans in the House, between 50 and 55 are conservatives, not enough to pass a bill.

Powell said of their plan, "We wanted it to be seen as a proposal that could command a majority in the House."

But other legislators — and Graves — suggest that conservatives have missed the mark in recent years when describing government as bloated. They argue that waste exists but hardly permeates agencies so much that the state can cut hundreds of millions of dollars in spending without hurting programs.

"I think most of the members now have discovered that there is just not those kinds of reductions out there," said House Appropriations Committee chairman Kenny Wilk, R-Lansing.

Wilk and others said conservatives have discovered that while Kansans may oppose tax increases and worry about government's size, they also support public schools and expect the state to provide a decent safety net for the needy.

Some GOP legislators have made the same case

over the years — whether they've described themselves as moderates, progressives, traditional Republicans, supporters of President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s, friends of Gov. Alf Landon in the 1930s, or Bull Moosers following Teddy Roosevelt in 1912.

And Aurand said even conservatives want to take a measured approach to cutting government.

"We want to trim the tree," Aurand said. "We don't want to cut it down."

Whatever the reasons, conservatives don't appear likely to fully realize their political vision now, despite having perhaps the best opportunity in 70 years.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Correspondent John Hanna has covered Kansas government and politics since 1987.

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