

Devil Trumps Reagan in Duel Over Landmark

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[Richard C. Paddock](#) San Francisco Correspondent

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(Feb. 24) -- Arthur Mijares, a devout Christian, thinks Mount Diablo is no way to identify a San Francisco-area landmark. So he petitioned local officials to support changing it to Mount Reagan in honor of the late president and former California governor.

On Tuesday, he got his answer: The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously against changing the name, which is Spanish for "devil" and dates back some 200 years.

"There is a lot of history behind Mount Diablo, and wanting to keep that name doesn't label someone as a devil worshipper," Supervisor John Gioia told AOL News after the vote. "You don't have to accept the devil to like the name."



Karl Mondon, Contra Costa Times/ZUMA Press

Mount Diablo, about 40 miles outside San Francisco, got its name from a confrontation between Spanish troops and Native Americans.

Mount Diablo, about 40 miles east of San Francisco, is the most prominent geographical landmark in Contra Costa County. On a clear day, the 3,849-foot peak commands sweeping views west across

the Golden Gate Bridge to the Farallon Islands and east to the Sierra Nevada range.

The mountain got its name from a moment in history and an expansive interpretation of the language. According to the commonly accepted account, in 1805 Spanish troops were chasing runaway Native Americans who escaped into a thicket on the mountainside. The Spaniards said the group had vanished with the help of the devil and called the place "monte del diablo," meaning "thicket of the devil."

English speakers, who soon began arriving in ever greater numbers, understood "monte" as mountain -- another meaning of the word -- and the name "Mount Diablo" stuck. Since then, the peak has spawned hundreds of other Diablo place names, including streets, businesses, a school district, schools, parks and a country club.

"I don't think the average person in Contra Costa County thinks of it as the devil's mountain," Gioia said.

But Mijares, a lifelong county resident, has been troubled for years by the name and sought unsuccessfully to change it in 2005. The final decision on the name rests with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, but the county supervisors' recommendation carries considerable weight.

In an address to the board Tuesday, Mijares appealed for the supervisors' support on the grounds that the name "Diablo" is anti-Christian.

"I am a follower of Jesus Christ," he said. "The devil, for whom the mountain is incorrectly named, is the challenger of Jesus Christ and his followers. To me and millions of followers of the Christian faith, the devil is derogatory, pejorative, offensive, obscene, blasphemous and profane."

Mijares' proposal coincides with a nationwide movement to name landmarks after the 40th president, who left office in 1989 and died in 2004. Reagan fans are [attempting to name](#) at least one monument after him in every state. California, where Reagan served two terms as governor, already has a variety of places named for him, including the presidential library in Simi Valley.

But in Contra Costa County, Mijares' proposal to rename Mount Diablo as Mount Reagan prompted an outpouring of opposition. Nearly 81,000 people joined the "People AGAINST Re-naming Mt. Diablo to Mt. Reagan!!" [Facebook group](#), and hundreds e-mailed their supervisors opposing the name change.

In part, that is because Reagan is not an especially well-loved figure in the county, which is predominantly Democratic. Some on the Facebook site suggested that the mountain already was named after Reagan. More than 2,000 people joined [a Facebook group](#) that calls for changing the name of President Reagan to President Diablo.

But even many self-professed Reagan supporters joined in the opposition to the change. And a counterproposal to name the mountain after renowned naturalist John Muir, who lived in the county for many years, attracted little support.

"The name 'Mount Diablo' is well-established and much loved," wrote Seth Adams of the [local environmental group](#) Save Mount Diablo in a January letter to the geographic names board. "Save Mount Diablo opposes any proposal to change Mount Diablo's name."

In the end, Gioia said, the board rejected the proposal for three reasons: the overwhelming opposition, the history of the name and the potential cost of changing hundreds of other Diablo names to match the mountain.

"It's not about rejecting Reagan or Muir. It's about acknowledging history," Gioia said. "This is not meant to say we are honoring the devil. It is meant to tell the story of early California."