



Kelli Ward claims President Ronald Reagan regretted the 1986 'amnesty' law. Did he?

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Republican U.S. Senate candidate Kelli Ward has made the point several times: President Ronald Reagan's "biggest regret" was granting amnesty as part of 1986 immigration-reform legislation and then counting on Congress to secure the border, which never happened.

Ward, a former state senator from Lake Havasu City, and her campaign attribute the claim to Ed Rollins, who served in the White House as an aide to Reagan and who was national director of Reagan's 1984 re-election campaign.

Rollins also now is serving as Ward's campaign chairman as she pursues Arizona's GOP Senate nomination in a three-way race against former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio and U.S. Rep. Martha McSally, a Tucson-area congresswoman.

Ward's argument: President Donald Trump and Congress should learn from the failure of the 1986 law as they move forward with the debate on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program and additional border-security upgrades and immigration system changes.

The DACA program — created in 2012 by then-President Barack Obama to protect from deportation undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children — is set to expire March 5.

In [an interview on Breitbart News' satellite radio show](#), Ward said: "In 1986, Ronald Reagan — great president, amazing conservative, lover of liberty and of America — granted amnesty; and Ed Rollins, who is helping me with my campaign, told me that President Reagan's biggest regret as president was granting amnesty and then trusting Congress to deliver on border security. It didn't happen then, and it's not going to happen now if we do this in the wrong order."

Did Reagan regret amnesty?

The suggestion that Reagan regretted the amnesty law is not new. But previous versions of this story usually attribute the claim to his longtime friend Ed Meese, who served as Reagan's attorney general.

David Bier, now an immigration policy analyst with the libertarian Cato Institute, researched the matter in 2013 and concluded the former president's so-called regret was an "internet myth."

Bier quoted Reagan as suggesting in a 1980 candidates forum that it would be better to allow immigrants to come in and out of the country legally with work permits instead of "talking about putting up a fence."

"... It seems that Reagan would understand that his law failed to stop illegal immigration, not because we allowed people to stay, but because we refused to allow more to come — in his farewell address, he said he wanted an America 'open to anyone with the will and heart to get here,' " Bier wrote for the Daily Caller website. "That doesn't sound like regret to me."

In an email exchange with *The Arizona Republic*, Michael Reagan, the former president's son, said that his father never regretted the amnesty part of the 1986 compromise, but did regret that there was no follow-through on the enforcement measures or border security.

"He would hold the Dems' (Democrats') feet to the fire this time because he would have learned," Michael Reagan wrote in one message.

The Cato Institute's Bier remains skeptical.

"I checked it as much as I could, and I tried to trace the development of it, and it looks like one of these things that is just an internet myth," Bier told *The Republic*. "It certainly did not originate with anyone who was close to Reagan. If you follow the Google development of this thing, somehow it ended up in Ed Meese's mouth, but he told us back in 2013 that that didn't come from him, that he never heard that from Reagan."

'To humanely regain control of our borders'

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, signed into law by Reagan on Nov. 6 of that year, provided amnesty to nearly 3 million undocumented immigrants who proved that they had been in the United States prior to Jan. 1, 1982.

The law's sanctions against employers who hired undocumented immigrants were never vigorously enforced and, when they were, received a strong backlash from business interests.

The law also didn't include a mechanism to allow for the legal entry of low-skilled foreign workers. So when the U.S. economy boomed in the 1990s and early 2000s, the labor demands were met by new undocumented immigrants.

"Our objective is only to establish a reasonable, fair, orderly, and secure system of immigration into this country and not to discriminate in any way against particular nations or people," Reagan said upon signing the legislation. "... Future generations of Americans will be thankful for our efforts to humanely regain control of our borders and thereby preserve the value of one of the most sacred possessions of our people: American citizenship."

Reagan, who died in 2004, indicated that he considered the 1986 law's employer-sanctions program to be crucial in preventing future illegal immigration.

"It will remove the incentive for illegal immigration by eliminating the job opportunities which draw illegal aliens here," he said.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., is the only member of Arizona's current Capitol Hill delegation who was in Congress in 1986. Though he later became a champion of comprehensive immigration reform, McCain voted against the 1986 immigration law as a then-member of the U.S. House of Representatives.