

Tape 8, Side 2

CH This is an interview with Governor Atiyeh. This is Tape 8, Side 2.

You were talking about Walter Pearson.

VA Walter was what you'd call a big shot. He had been senate president, and he would say, this is what we're going to do, this is what's going to happen. And I said earlier in the tape that I was a house member, and I got the news finally by saying, well, how can one man tell all of us what we're going to do. Of course, this was a real David and Goliath kind of thing, because Walter was just a big shot and senior, he'd been there a long time, and all the rest of it. We dealt with some pretty interesting people in the senate. The senate kind of held on, and we already talked about Harry Boivin, and you've got Tony Yturri, a leader, and Walter Pearson and Tom Mahoney and, you know, these are all kind of crusty old-timers. Talk about an old-boys' club, they really had this thing pretty well wired.

CH And what impressed you most about them, about their ability to get things done or how they...?

VA No, I wasn't particularly impressed with them. I mean, I was never one that believed in twisting arms, so I didn't care for that kind of thing. I wasn't intimidated by anybody; in other words, I didn't mind debating or arguing with any of them. I guess I'm dealing with personalities. I liked some, I just thought others were adequate, and I didn't really dislike anybody.

CH You were also on the Education Committee.

VA Yeah.

CH Al Flegel was the chair of that and Corbett was vice chair and Don Husband was also on that, Monaghan, and Ben Musa. Leth.

VA Walter Leth.

CH Walter Leth. I don't know anything about him. What can you tell me?

VA Walter? He's from Polk County.

I was mistaken when I mentioned about Eddie Ahrens and agriculture. It was Walter Leth that was the agriculture guy, and he was director of Ag after he left office, Walter Leth, so I was mistaken about Eddie Ahrens.

Walter Leth was - oh, I don't know quite how to put it. He was one of the voices that people heard; he was not one of the leaders. When we talk about Leth and some of the others, we're talking about Republicans, and the Democrats controlled it.

Incidentally, I did something then that came back to haunt me later on, although I don't - if I had a choice to do it over again, I'd do it. I didn't believe in a coalition, and that's what was going on when I got to the senate, coalition meaning that the Republicans and a few Democrats would decide who was going to be the presiding officer. We had enough Republicans, so we only needed just a few Democrats - and the coalition side, I'm sure, was Harry Boivin and Walter Pearson and Mahoney and some of the other folks there, and they were on there. But I didn't agree, I didn't believe in a coalition and voted against it in my own caucus, and a few sessions later they got me for that.

CH Who did?

VA The coalition, meaning some of the - you know, it didn't all add up. It was actually my own caucus. I'm trying to remember when I - I finally ran for and was elected the senate leader, and in those days it was kind of a pro forma thing. By that I mean

the Republicans would put up their nominee, but they already knew it was going to be a Democrat. I was voted in as the Republican leader of the senate, but we took a vote as to what names we were going to put up - this was the John Burns period of time - and my name was never, ever, not once - I'm the senate Republican leader, and not once did they put up my name. Not one time.

CH And that was because of the coalition?

VA And I'm sure that's exactly - nobody ever said anything, but I didn't - you know, we'd go into this joint caucus thing before the session starts, just to kind of get the lay of the land, and it's kind of embarrassing to be the senate Republican leader and your name is not brought up.

CH Why were you against the coalition?

VA I always believe there has to be somebody responsible, and I don't mean some body. In this sense, the Democrats controlled, and I think that they should be responsible for whatever happened, take credit or criticism. But it's the Democrats. When you have a coalition, you can't really do that. There's no way to say, well, the Democrats did such and such, because obviously the Republicans were a party to the organization of the body. That's fundamental. It's a philosophical thing with me. Some are more pragmatic and less philosophical. They say, Look if we don't do this, we're going to have those liberals in the senate, à la Hallock and Willner and those folks, they're going to run the show, and we can't have that. And I suppose they've got a point. But I was sticking to my philosophy.

CH Do you recall specific instances where you actually voted against the coalition?

VA No, other than for the presiding officer.

CH Were there times when you were also voting for the coalition as much?

VA I'm not sure, but at that point it didn't make any difference. This was the organization. Who was going to be senate president; and, then, out of that, who's going to get the chairmanship. And that's where a lot of Republicans got some very important chairmanships: Lynn Newbry chairman of Ways and Means, Tony Yturri chairman of Judiciary; you know, those kinds of things. That's where all that came from.

CH Why didn't the Democrats ever form some kind of a coalition? Or maybe they didn't have to because they were in the majority, but why weren't they as tight as the Republicans were?

VA Well, there was really kind of a split, and I have trouble - I'd have to sit down and figure it out, but there was a body of senators that were liberal, mostly from Multnomah County, and, then, there were the conservatives - I'm talking about Democrats, now - and they didn't want to see the legislature run by these guys. So actually, they - meaning the Democrats, see, because it has to be a Democrat that agrees to take the support of all the Republicans. They have to agree to do that. And they probably didn't have enough votes within the liberal side to get elected as a presiding officer, so they'd come over to the Republicans, and I'm sure it did this formality, but, okay, you guys vote for me, and I'll run.

CH Did you see tradeoffs happening for votes on that?

VA No, I didn't see - I've never seen them, but I know they're there. You know, you can tell by the people vote, and on some things it just didn't make any sense at all. But I've never been a witness. I can't tell you so and so did that on a certain day. I never witnessed it; you just know, you can tell.

CH Why wasn't there ever a situation in which the coalition actually put up somebody from the minority party? In the case, say, where Boivin or Potts would be elected president of the senate, maybe, why wouldn't, say, Newbry or yourself have been elected even though you were technically in the minority with the coalition?

VA Well, you know, the Republicans wanted the liberals even less than the Democrats did, and so the Democrats, obviously, had a hammer: Look, if you guys don't do this, we're just going to go off on our own and have our own caucus and the Democrats will elect liberals. And I think that was kind of a hammer they held over them.

CH Did your office space or secretary change once you went over to the senate? You were still out on the floor, isn't that right?

VA Yeah. We really didn't get any offices until wings were built.

CH And did your secretary come over with you from the house?

VA Yeah.

CH So that stayed the same as well. Did your wife ever work for you?

VA No.

CH She had a family to raise?

VA She had a family to raise.

CH You've mentioned some of the Democratic and Republican

leaders at the time. Boivin and Potts and Republican leaders like Yturri and Newbry. Were there others that actually stood out that we haven't talked about?

VA Well, again, Flegel. You mentioned Flegel. We really didn't talk too much Potts, but Potts obviously was a senate president, and he was quite influential, in a very, very quiet way. Very quiet way. And that's - and I have to, incidentally, say there was always - you know, in spite of that you wouldn't want it, there still was a downstate-upstate contest. And if you look at speakers and presidents over a period of time, you rarely see, as we do with Vera Katz, for example, someone from the metropolitan area as a speaker or president. It has happened, but if you took it in bulk, at least through the period of time that I'm involved, it was always the downstates.

CH And is that because of a group binding together to keep someone from the metropolitan area taking over?

VA I think so. But, see, because I wasn't - well, certainly in the house I was never a part of it because I was never a majority member, and when we get to the senate, I wasn't a coalition supporter, so they never really took me into their confidence as to how they were working all this out.

CH Well, you were on the Education Committee, and one of the things that came up during that session was the increased basic school support, and aid for higher education and community colleges passed. Was there any change in the formula by which the state was figuring these out?

VA No. And I say that from - from only the memory that I can recall going through hours and hours of computer runs trying to change the formula, and I've seen it all laid out. We'd gone about it rather scientifically, you know, how we're going to make

these changes. Then, after all of this very high-level discussion, and then you get a run on it - okay, now, what's that going to look like - the first thing you do is, you turn to your own county, your own district. So you go through all of this philosophical discussion, but when it finally comes down to it, the philosophy is out the window. What's it going to do to Washington County, School District 48, you know, that kind of thing.

CH How would you find that out?

VA You get the printouts. You say, okay, if you make this change, this is what's going to happen. Oh, we had - we wasted a lot of paper on a deal like that. So when you're talking about - I did mention to you earlier, and it was that committee, that session, that they were trying to get basic school support for the trainable mentally retarded, and I'd asked the question, is this the best way to do that, and no answer gave me the answer. And I felt kind of bad about it, because, you know, I can recall a mother talking about sending her children off to school, one of whom is a trainable, and the trainable would stay at home watching their siblings go to school, and it was rather touching. It was to me. And here I was, really, preventing anything from happening. But as a result, as I told you, we had a study on it in the interim, and, then, the next session passed a bill, and I thought it was very good, and it as a good that we waited, but it's kind of tough to go through that knowing - telling the mother to wait two more years. That's not easy to do, not easy to do. But it was that committee that session.

CH There as a failure to merge the state departments of education and higher education. What was the issue there that prevented that?

VA Well, it's just the superboard. That was the term that was

used at that time. It was just going to get too big, that's all. And the interests of higher education and primary and secondary, by and large, were different. The interest in higher education, of course, was to get not only students, but to get students that were prepared to go college, and we really didn't achieve that. We achieved it when I was governor, indirectly, and by that I mean we just raised the standards for entrance to the colleges, and, then, that had to bring up - you know, if somebody's going to go to college, they had to have higher achievement. So that backed it off into their - but really, the superboard was just something getting too big. That was Stafford Hansel. Stafford Hansel was big on that superboard, but he never prevailed.

CH You know, one issue, going through the newspaper clippings, that I saw over and over and over again was this fight to repeal the 1913 law requiring a six-man crew on freight trains. Could you give me a little background on that?

VA I'm laughing because this was a featherbedding deal. This was the second brakeman. I think that's what it was. Anyway, this was the only time in my whole career that somebody said to me, We're going outside and fight. This was a railroad union guy.

CH You mean literally?

VA Literally, yeah. He was going to - he wanted to go fight, he wanted to beat me up. I said, "Whoo, I'm not going to go outside with you" [laughter]. And it got real heated. Again, let's talk about principal - and part of the problems, incidentally, I had when I was on the Labor Committee and all the bills were coming up, and I said to myself, and told my friends in labor, Look, guys, you believe in collective bargaining. Collective bargain this. You don't come to the legislature to collective bargain in the Oregon state legislature, you

collective bargain out there. That was my position, and labor didn't like that. They liked to do their collective bargaining in the legislature. They didn't have to go through all this other mess with the employer. But this was featherbedding on the railroads, and there was featherbedding on the railroad, there was, and there just wasn't any need for the crews that they had.

CH Did this come up in your Labor Committee? Was that where it occurred?

VA I can't recall. I don't recall that. I'm not sure where it came from. It may have come from state and federal - I don't know where the bill came from, to be honest with you, but I do remember vividly, and there was no question as to where I was going to go, but the thing - I can even remember, like almost a photograph, we were standing in the doorway of the senate when this guy challenged me to go outside, and he wanted to beat me up. "Hey, I ain't going out with you." So we never did go out and fight.

CH Didn't the sergeant at arms try to intervene?

VA Well, it didn't get that far. He was just real angry and he wanted to take me out and beat me up, and I said I wasn't going to have any part of it.

CH There was legislation for compulsory breath tests for blood alcohol content of persons arrested for drunken driving. Do you recall the debate on that?

VA I don't recall the debate on it, but I do recall debates on the issue, and - first of all, it begins with my very strong feeling, which persisted all the way through my career, about the drunken driver, and he has no right to be on the highway. I tried in many ways to get laws changed, to stiffen the laws on

drinking drivers, so I can only talk to you about it generically and unspecifically. The lawyers were - you know, they go to court on this breath test thing. It depended on when - was it going up or was it coming down, and whether or not the test was a good test or not. And I was really angry about it because there was no doubt the guy was drunk, but they could use all these fine points to get the guy off the hook. So I can't give you specific answers, I can just tell you - of course, I was kidding, but I can recall early - it was the next session, I think, I was on the Transportation Committee one time, and one of the people from the department of transportation came over and didn't quite know where I stood in terms of traffic safety and the drunken driver, and I said, "Well, I'll you, let me put it this way. I'm for capital punishment in this case, and I'll be glad to negotiate with you anywhere up and down that line." I was just trying to emphasize - obviously, I'm not talking about it, I was just trying to emphasize how strongly I felt about it.

CH Did you ever have any long conversations with Lee Johnson on this?

VA No.

CH He was your assistant and was attorney general, and he was in the senate - was he in the senate at the same time that you were? I guess he was, but maybe later on.

VA I don't think he ever got to the senate. I think he was always in the house.

CH He went straight from the house, then, to attorney general?

VA Yeah. No - you know, there's always these lawyers - first of all, I will say this - I don't know how you want to call them, whether you call them plaintiffs' attorneys or defense attorneys

or whatever - they have actually - what's the word I want to use? They have prevented - they have tied up the Oregon legislature for my entire career and will not permit anything that would really close even a legitimate loophole that they've been using. And I really dislike them. I say dislike. Obviously, I'm not talking about any one person, because I'm [inaudible]. But I think that they've prevented - they've been more - more to be criticized for the thing that people say, and it's true, there's a greater concern for the criminal than there is for the person against whom the crime is committed. I believe that. I believe it. And it's still going on today, and it was going on from Day One in 1959, and it was going on when I left office, and there's just no way to beat those folks. Just nothing good will ever - comes out of the legislature that really is helpful. Well, that's not quite right, because we were able to get some pretty significant, later on, traffic safety legislation passed. There, I credit the MADD mothers, because they finally got the people of Oregon to sit up and take notice that drinking and driving is just not acceptable in the state of Oregon. Until the people made that decision, we really couldn't get any bills through.

CH There was a new set of laws regulating the state's insurance industry. I think this was aside from workmen's compensation, but was that part of the same package?

VA I can't remember that.

CH Redistricting comes up all the time, and in this session the legislature decided to leave it to the courts to decide. Is that a strictly partisan issue, redistricting?

VA Mostly, yeah.

CH It will always fall down partisanwise in the case - the coalition doesn't hold?

VA This whole matter of gerrymandering is - you know, people sit down, and they figure out what the precincts are and how many Republicans and how many Democrats, and you try to squeeze them in there. You look at some of the district lines, and they take some odd twists and turns. Yeah, it's - everybody's jockeying for position. Today, you can't outrageously gerrymander, and I don't know where you draw the line, but they do as subtle gerrymandering as they can.

CH Why wouldn't the people forming the coalition continue in terms of redistricting?

VA Well, their interest was the president of the senate and the key committee. That's where it stopped. Then they'd go back to being Democrats again.

CH I guess that leads me to the other question. I keep wondering, if these people are always siding with Republicans and they're suspicious of the Multnomah County Democrats, why are they Democrats?

VA Because they get elected in their district.

CH But is it really important to the people of Klamath Falls whether Harry Boivin's a Republican or Democrat?

VA No. No, that's not the case at all. Harry Boivin can change and become a Republican and get elected. That, however, doesn't mean that Joe Smith, who wants to start, who happens to be a Republican, he's got a tough chance because there's more Democrats than Republicans down there. So it relates to the person. But you ask why. You know, they fit the district pretty well, Klamath Falls and registered Democrat, but there's a lot - mostly conservative. Now, they'd be registered Democrat, but they would be considered a conservative Democrat, probably more

conservative than Republicans in Multnomah County. [It's] no different than the Democrats down south. They're by far more conservative than any - Democrats down there than any Republican up here. Well, that's not quite any, but most. So, you know, it just varies, and they fit their district.

CH In your long involvement in the political process since the fifties, do you feel that political parties are becoming more or less ideologically defined? I'm thinking not only in terms of the state, but nationally as well.

VA Well, the only real issues that you'd even bring up the subject are abortion and homosexuals, and mostly abortion, and my answer would be generally no. There's still that terrible image that the Republicans are for the wealthy people and the Democrats are for the common folks. I've said many, many times that Republicans have an image we don't deserve, and the Democrats have one they don't deserve, and I believe that. That's from my own personal experience.

CH So you don't really feel that there's a strong ideological pull towards one party or the other that - you know, as is happening, say, like in - say in England with the parliamentary system there where they have - where they don't have Republicans and Democrats, they have a liberal and conservative party, and ideologically you go to whichever party you're most...

VA I don't think it's that well defined, at least in my observation, because there would be a lot of Democrats that should be registered Republicans and a lot of Republicans that should be registered Democrats, and for whatever reason, they're not. That could vary with how many other people are registered that way. The parties really don't really prevail that strongly. The party platforms - gosh, I saw - I'm trying to remember what year, but the Democrat platform was just as outrageous as it

could be. I mean, it was really liberal, I mean really wildly liberal, as some perceive the Republican platform now to be wildly conservative. Candidates just turn their backs on it and go about their way running their own elections. So - and besides, I really don't know who reads platforms anyway.

CH In the same session, there was - pollution of rivers was banned. Was this part of an overall program for...?

VA What's that?

CH Pollution of rivers was banned. Was this part of - like, a preliminary step for the Willamette greenway?

VA Well, that may have been a beginning. When I say beginning, now we're getting into the Interim Committee on Public Health out of the '65 session, and out of that became really the beginning of our environmental program in Oregon. I can't remember that bill you're referring to, but this could be at the very beginning of all this whole process.

CH There was a failure to pass a merger of the Fish and Game commissions. Why was there a reluctance to do that?

VA I think mostly the - the Fish Commission was more the commercial fishing side, and Game really was not really game - well, it was game, meaning animals, but it also was for the recreational fisherman.

CH It was more recreational than commercial.

VA So the fish side was commercial, and they wanted to make sure their interests were maintained, and they didn't want to be charged - which did occur from time to time - added fees to take care of the recreational side of this question. So those were -

beside protecting their own commercial side, they always had a fear that they were going to get extra fees to benefit the recreational side.

CH One issue that is very volatile in the Northwest that came up during this session, the legislature passed a long-range study of Oregon's water resources to head off attempts to divert the water to the Southwest. That's been a long-standing issue, hasn't it?

VA Yeah, but it's never really gotten anywhere. The whole idea of pumping water to California, they keep talking about it, but it's never...

[End of Tape 8, Side 2]