

Tape 12, Side 2

CH This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The date is January 13, 1993. The interviewer, for the Oregon Historical Society, is Clark Hansen, and this is Tape 12, Side 2.

As we sit here on this morning, the state senate is in a battle over who will become senate president, and we've been most recently talking about the 1971 session where they had such a difficult time - fifty-four ballots, I think, and I don't know how many ballots - I think they said yesterday they had eight ballots or six ballots or something like that. They've been trying to decide between Senator Bradbury and Grattan Kerans and Joyce Cohen and - is it Mi Lin?

VA Mae Yih.

CH Mae Yih has been voting for herself instead of along with the other Democrats. How do you view all this from afar, having gone through it yourself so many times?

VA Well, it's interesting when you make an observation and some people see what's going on, versus having, as they say, walked in those shoes. I walked in those shoes. And I don't recall - we had a lot of ballots; it was more than four. We had a lot of ballots, and we had ballots on the floor, you know, as to who was going to be selected. I have, of course, a personal view of this. I think I had indicated earlier I never was a great lover of a coalition, and mainly because I think somebody ought to be responsible. If you have a coalition, then nobody is responsible. You can't say, Oh, the Republicans are looking at the Democrats, because you've got them all mixed in the same bag. So I like to keep the bag separate, the Democrat bag and the Republican bag. As it turned out, of course, it was the coalition. But as I look at it today, you know, I'd just as soon

let the Democrats fight it out. It's their problem. They wanted a majority, they have a majority - not as big as it was, but that's what election is all about. You know, Elect me, Democrat. We can do things for you. And so they have it. I just wanted them to have all the responsibility.

CH Is there ever any chance that a Republican minority member would be elected as president of the...?

VA No.

CH Has that ever happened, in your knowledge?

VA No, not - no. In all the coalition years, it was a Democrat that was elected president of the senate. The Republicans gave most of the votes to get there, but the fact is, it was a Democrat. It wasn't a question that we will elect a Republican of the senate, and the Republican has a minority membership in the body. It was always the Democrat. So it will be a Democrat. Even if there is a coalition, and it doesn't appear like there will be, they're really jumping on Mae Yih. But it looks like they're very determined that Mae Yih is neither going to be president of the senate nor a co-chair of Ways and Means in the Democratic caucus. Now, how they're going to respond to that is really up to Mae Yih. She's going to have to yield, or they're going to have to go get a Republican vote somewhere. Well, I don't think they'd ever get a Republican vote. I've never seen it work that way, where two or three Republicans will defect and vote on the Democrat side. If they come, they'll all come, all fourteen of them.

CH Who are the Republicans voting for at this stage, do you know?

VA Gene Timms. He's the senate leader of the Republican party.

CH But they realize that there's not much chance that he would be elected.

VA No, there's no chance, it's just a matter of that's pro forma. They're just doing it, and they're saying, We're sticking together, we're going to vote for Gene Timms. Now, you guys work it out. You've got the sixteen votes; you guys work it out. When we were going through the whole thing and John Burns was finally chosen, we never varied from that. We continued - we rotated. It wasn't always - well, I was never nominated, and I was Republican leader. That was very embarrassing. But we'd have Lynn Newbry and Tony Yturri. We kept rotating who we would vote for, but it was always a block of votes no matter what happened and for whomever. In this case, however, there's continuing voting for Gene Timms. It's hard to tell what's going to come out of all this. It's really hard to tell. I went down on Monday to attend the opening session, so I was talking with Gene - Timms, that is - and he was asking me about my strategy about, you know, if there's an offer for a coalition, and I gave him my advice. At that time, Joyce Cohen was one of the contenders, and I think Joyce was willing to come over, or at least - it's hard to tell, but it appeared to be that would be the direction. Certainly not Grattan Kerans. So there was a debate in the Republican caucus about how to respond to it, and I just gave them my own views on that subject. I told them they just ought to hang tough and make no overtures to the Democrat party. Let them come to you if they want to put together a coalition, and if they do, do it. But make sure you get some committee assignments out of this thing. I told them, Don't get greedy about it, like co-chair of Ways and Means or anything like that, but get some important committee assignments. However, it seems that time has passed. They're just - they are - they meaning the Democrats - are deadlocked on this whole thing. They really are. Mae Yih is the logjam all by herself.

CH I can't imagine a strategy like that being either very effective or endearing to the party caucus.

VA Mae doesn't seem to care. She's a pretty determined woman, and she's voted outside the caucus, of her own caucus, whenever she feels like it. She's going to do what she's going to do. She feels secure enough in her own district to just go ahead and do it.

CH Is there any chance that she would vote for a coalition Republican or some other combination of...?

VA Well, that's always a possibility. But, of course, if it's just Mae, that's only fifteen-fifteen. That doesn't get you anywhere. And she'll probably still want to have co-chair of Ways and Means, and I don't think the Republicans would support that. So yeah, everything's possible, but I don't see what's going to happen. They really are at a gridlock. They genuinely are.

CH Who do you think, in your own opinion, would be the best candidate for the Democrats to put up?

VA You know, Bradbury isn't that bad. He's not a bad choice. But they're down to Mae Yih. They've only got fifteen votes. And I don't see at what point they're going to yield, unless - she's going to have to give up. Certainly, I'm sure she doesn't expect ever to be senate president, although she's offered herself for that purpose. What she really wants is co-chair of Ways and Means, and they're determined she's not going to get it, and I must say, although I like Mae Yih, I think she's a delightful woman, this would not be appropriate for her to be co-chair of Ways and Means. We've got some real serious problems, and Mae, as good as she may or may not be - it depends on who you're talking to - is not capable of that job. So it's

appropriate that she not be co-chair of Ways and Means. That's appropriate, but I don't know who they're going to solve it. She's going to have to break. I don't think that under Bradbury or Kerans or all the rest within their caucus that they would be willing to come over to the - say, Okay, all fourteen of you vote for me, which would make it twenty-nine to one. In other words, Mae Yih would still be out there. I don't think that's very likely, because I don't think those kind of folks want a coalition, and they cannot break off two or three Republicans. That isn't going to happen. So, as they say on, what is it, radio or television, tune in next week.

CH Well, another thing that's occurring, people are tuning in to this week, are the appointments that Governor Clinton - or, President-elect Clinton is making for his cabinet and other people, subcabinet people, and there's a lot of discussion as to the philosophy of appointments. You've been on both sides, where you've reviewed appointments and also made appointments. What is the appointment process - I mean, people are talking about how certain people will question a candidate for an office or for a position because they want to get something of their own agenda across or their own interest or - rather than necessarily being critical of the candidate. What is that process like?

VA In terms of the president of the United States, he has what's an identified cabinet: secretary of this, secretary of that, secretary of something else. That's a little bit different. We don't have what you'd call a cabinet as such. Although I could have called it that, it's not officially a cabinet. I would meet with - that would be my department heads, now. It would be the head of the human resource department, head of the department of commerce, head of revenue, head of - you know, these were all department heads, and I would meet with them. I had quite a few, so I would meet, actually, three days a week with different heads. So I want to make that separation.

In my case, I was looking for someone that was able to do the job as I saw the job needed to be done. And having been in the legislature twenty years, two things: first of all, I knew a lot of the actors that were state employees, and, number two, I really knew about agencies and where I saw weaknesses, defects, things that could be improved, things that needed to happen. So what I really - in my own mind, and, again, because I had the twenty-year experience, I said, Okay, now, in human resource - this by way of example. In human resource I want somebody that is a good manager, but also knowledgeable so I can talk about, with some knowledge on their part, children's services, welfare, corrections, employment - these were all in human resources - so I can talk in detail with them about it, and they know about it, but, at the same time, a good manager. Now, those were pretty scarce people. By way of example, I knew that general services really needed some really good manager, and it was not happening. There, they buy everything for state government: lease cars, buy desks, plan buildings, all that sort of thing. But I said, In this case, I want somebody that is a good manager, that can put this all together. The same thing, incidentally, was true in the department of commerce. So anyway, I knew what I wanted. Then I went out and looked for a person.

Now, let's shift gears. We're now in Washington, D.C., and Clinton. There, as you can see, we're not really appointing somebody that really knows about the agencies that they're going to be heading. That's not a criteria. If they happen to know about it, so much the better, but it's not a major criteria. So there I think what a president-elect is looking for is someone that he has confidence in, that he knows, that will make their agenda his agenda, he can trust them to that extent. I think that's what's going on over there.

Now, he's not keeping promise, but, you know, it's interesting. If he says he's doing something, even if he doesn't do it, somehow or other, that becomes the gospel. He says, It's not business as usual, I'm going to get outside the Beltway, all

this kind of stuff, well, you can see that's not happening, but I'll bet you anything, if you ask anybody, or most anybody, they'll tell you that he's doing what he said he was going to do. I remember Neil Goldschmidt saying he wasn't going to do it the way I did it. It was going to be nonpolitical. He was going to go for the best people. He did exactly the opposite. Exactly - 180 degrees opposite. I was doing what he said should be done. I was. But he was indicating that I wasn't doing that, and he was going to be this subjective - he did precisely the opposite, and, yet, I bet you anything people think he did it, what he said he was going to do, and he did 180 degrees the other way. So, there's a lot of politics involved with it. [It's] not necessarily what you do, it appears to me, it's what's you say you're going to do.

CH Isn't that a rather cynical...?

VA Yes, very, and it's true. Actually, if one were to - I mean, I've been so close to it for so long, I've seen so much in twenty-eight - well, now, of course, time past, but while I was in elective office. I've listened to people, I've watched them perform, and I really believe this. I said to myself, I'm not only a participant, but I'm an observer, both of the legislative process as well as of the executive branch of government, and I watch others. You know, this great quote of JFK, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." I almost vomited. Now, this is one of the great lines of all time, which, incidentally, he stole.

CH From who?

VA He didn't invent it. If you go to the thesaurus, you'll find it, and it wasn't JFK. But I'm saying to myself, but that's not who he is, that's not where he comes from, that's not what he's going to be doing. My perception of JFK is entirely

different than the Camelot theory that we hear about and talk about. He was, to me, a classic example - and I think it's because of his charisma - of making promises and not keeping them. And I think it became worse because people really believed it. You know, he got where they really believed him. If you actually go back and look at history, the great demonstrations and the great unrest in the black community came after Kennedy was elected and subsequent to that. Now, I'm not saying that - as a matter of fact, I have some great pain about how America treats the black citizens of our nation. I really mean that sincerely. But he was believable. You know, he really had this great vision for the black community. They believed him, and he didn't do anything. And so where people - and I've used this in my speeches many times about I think one of the great tragedies are what I call unkept promises. You know, if I promise you something, you kind of expect it. You're better off not promising; then, you don't expect it.

CH But, of course, in Kennedy's case, wasn't there the situation that he didn't really have - he didn't have a chance to fulfill some of those things because in the middle of his term he was assassinated? And, then, in the following year, 1964, his successor, Lyndon Johnson, was able to help pass, or was pretty much responsible for passing, the 1964 civil rights act, which did substantially change the direction of the civil rights movement. Maybe I'm...

VA No, that's okay. This conversation is a good example of how people can have legitimate very different views. I just happen to be one who says, Okay, you say it, you do it. What I did - nobody else did this, the media or no one else - I kept track of my own promises, and I made absolutely sure that I was not going to promise anything that I didn't think I could deliver. Now, there were some things I wanted to do I accomplished, but I never promised that I was going to do it. And so, when I see someone

makes the promises, as I see Clinton make, and, then, not delivering, that's where I get upset. It's not really - okay, you say who knows what JFK would have done had he lived. And, yet, you have to at least embark on something to start the process, even if it's going to take a while. He didn't do that.

CH But isn't part of that process, whether you're president of the United States or governor of a state or president of a corporation, in trying to change something or chart a new direction, the process of establishing a vision or goal or raising one's expectations to be able to achieve that particular goal? It may be the goal that one is setting is further than they believe that they can actually achieve, but by trying to set it that far off, people will achieve something more than they would have otherwise?

VA I'll agree, because that's the way I feel about what I wanted to do, and I said to myself, I'm going to have a high standard for my performance. I'm going to do it. Now, I really know - I know, because I've been around long enough to know - that now having done that, you have also committed yourself to frustration. But, just like you said, if I ~~set~~^{AIM} real high, I may not get where I want to go, but I'll be higher than if I didn't aim at all.

CH But isn't that what happened to President Kennedy by setting expectations for black Americans to achieve certain things that not - perhaps in not achieving those goals, they became frustrated and there was more tension, racial tension, across the country?

VA Well, let's make a comparison. He said in a given time we were going to be on the moon, and things got into motion. Now, what did you do for the blacks similar to that? In other words, did he really believe what he was saying? Did he really - in

other words, okay, he put it in motion. They didn't get on the moon while he was still alive, but he put it into motion. I'm not just picking on Kennedy. I think I told you earlier that a lot of my own personal philosophy was a result of LBJ, and I recall we talked about that Great Society. He picked the things that needed to be picked. My frustration is that they've not been solved and we spent a lot of money doing it. I'm not interested in spending money in it. Obviously, we have to. What I'm interested in is doing it. So all of these things you talk about, to me the important thing is not talking about something, it's the doing about something.

CH But isn't the talking part of the process, the initial part of the process?

VA Well, we get down to what leadership really is. Remember we talked about what's leadership, and I asked the kids at Duke University at one time, What's leadership, and they never gave me an answer to it. I'm still puzzled by that - I really am - because my answer to you would be no. And, yet, that's not what they look for, the voters. They want to hear somebody that talks well, that says great things. And somehow, the electorate really is not interested in what eventually happens. There's dichotomies all over the place. Again, I can't recall whether we talked about the - making racial and religious harassment a felony. Well, we have, because that's in my governor's years. And that was an emotional thing. I wanted to get this thing done, I wanted to see it happen, I wanted to see it take place. We'll talk about it when we get to be governor, so I can tell you some things and specific actors that were involved with all of it. But, you know, I went to the black community, and I said to them, in talking with them, "I really want to do something for the black community." And, then, I went on from there. I said, "Now, look. How many times have you heard this before? How do you know that Vic Atiyeh is going to do this? You've heard it

from others before." And I'm telling this all on myself. I said, "I can't prove this to you. All I know is that this is the way I feel. I truly feel this way, and I really want to do something. That's all I can tell you." Now, I didn't promise them that I was going to unshackle them, I didn't promise them anything except that I was really going to - I really had a great emotional feeling for this, and I really wanted to do something about it.

I recall a speech I made, and I started out the speech - I don't recall whether it was in '82 or whenever it was, but it was in our recession. The very beginning of the speech was - this is while I'm governor - "I want to announce to you today that unemployment in Oregon is at 33 percent." Then I paused and I said, "Well, no, it really isn't. But among young blacks it is 33 percent." And what I was really trying to say is, Look, if it were really 33 percent in Oregon, we really would bust our tails doing something about it, but if it's 33 percent of young blacks, well, that's not as important. That was really my message.

The same thing - I'm back into the governor's years again, but I vetoed a divestiture bill. My reason, obviously, was that this was not - this was a divestiture of the Public Employees Retirement System money, and I said to the legislature, This is not your money. This belongs to all of the state employees, and you can't take their bank account and say, We're going to do this with your money. At that time, then, Bill Rutherford, who was state treasurer, had the right idea, and he said, Let people, let the retired employees, say, Divest my money. And I'm sure they would get a whole lot of people doing that, and they would get a large enough chunk of money to divest; but no. So that's why I vetoed it. But that's not the point I'm trying to make. In other words, I had a legitimate reason for doing it. But I went on in my veto message - and I'm going to paraphrase it now - because I cannot understand. I've seen bumper stickers, ban apartheid, I've seen all of the news about apartheid in South Africa, I've seen the national news, and everybody telling us how

apartheid is terrible, and it is, but I'm saying, How come you can't even get excited about what we're doing to blacks in the United States of America? Why can't you get as excited about that here? Why do we have to go to South Africa? Let's do it here, in the United States.

You've got me cranked up, haven't you?

CH I sure did [laughter]. I'm glad.

VA Well, you see, now - now we get back to your question, and the question is, what should we be doing. It is not leadership to talk good, and I'm saying no. To me, leadership is doing good, not talking good. I've talked about Governor Roberts. I'm still remembering her state of the state address last January. Ballot five has created a terrible problem in Oregon. It really has. It is not a good piece of legislation. The Oregon voters made a mistake, and they did. Not that there shouldn't be property tax relief, but that's not the way to do it. So I'm listening to her. She's got better coverage than I ever got, ever, as a governor. All the TV stations are carrying all of her state of the state address. Newspapers are covering it, radio is covering it. What a great opportunity to tell Oregonians, We've got a problem, folks, and here's the problem. No. What does she do - and this is really to your point, because she made - and I've said it repeatedly. She made a great political speech. Political speech. In terms of the kind of speech she made, it was an utter failure, in my mind. She talked about cleaning out the attic, boards and commissions. This is peanuts. I mean, this is really peanuts. And many, many boards and commissions are self-financed. In others words, the people - their licence fee pays for it. And she was going to move General Services over to the executive department. Now, that was the major talk about in the speech. Now, that was a bout a million dollar answer to a billion dollar problem. And I'm saying, Hey, this - it was a great political speech, good words, sounded good, well delivered,

and it missed the mark so badly, it was incredible.

CH And what would you have said in her place?

VA I would have started the process - because as recent as Monday, I went in and talked to the governor. I just said, I'm here. Is she available? She was, and I went in and chatted with her. And I said to her - and this is really in answer to your question - I said, You know, you can't really talk about revenue. People keep talking about the revenue to make up the difference. Oregonians aren't going to vote for it until they're convinced there's a problem. So the first thing you have to do is to convince Oregonians we've got a problem. And Oregonians, they're not convinced there's a problem. They've got property tax relief, and why talk to me about raising more taxes. Don't come to me. What do you want it for? More of the same wasting of government money? So, you asked me the question. I would have started the process of trying to describe to Oregonians what the problem is. She didn't do that. And I'll have to say, she didn't do that Monday, either.

I was talking sort of, I guess you'd call it, background with one of the editorial writers who wanted to have lunch, and we talked about it. I referred to these as missed opportunities, lost opportunities. A lost opportunity again on Monday, a lost opportunity to tell Oregonians we've got a problem. We do have a problem, and it can be simply stated. It's not that complex. Maybe I can do it by narrative. I did it on the napkin to show him, but by narrative I could do it. For all these years - I don't know, I presume since 1929 when we got our income tax...

[End of Tape 12, Side 2]