Trader Vic's visits prove profitable

By RICHARD REEVES

TRADER VIC returned from his latest trip halfway around the world at taxpayers' expense and said that anybody who doesn't like his junketing doesn't understand what government has to do at the end of the 20th century.

"Trader Vic" is a nickname that Gov. Victor Atiyeh of Oregon has picked up in the process of making regular overseas trade missions, most of them to Asia, the last one in November. In 1985, he spent more than a month out of Oregon — in Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Syria. The year before, it was the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel.

Back home, the nickname is not a compliment. Americans — foolishly, I think — have always taken a dim view

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of elected officials who spend hard-earned tax dollars in faraway places. The last trip of Atiyeh's, for instance, cost more than $15,000.

But, in fact, that money seems to be earning more money. In 1984, the people and industries of Oregon imported $2.2 billion in goods and services from Japan and exported $2.5 billion to the Japanese. Those numbers compared with 1983 imports of $1.7 billion against exports of $1.6 billion. Oregon, obviously well-located for Asian trade and rich in such resources as lumber and wheat, went from a negative to a positive trade balance with big, bad Japan.

With Korea, the state's 1984 imports were $179 million, compared with exports of $468.5 million. With Taiwan, it was $172 million in imports and $305.9 million in exports. Both sets of figures represented big business gains over 1983. The same was true of the 1984 China numbers: $16 million of imported footwear, mushrooms, gloves and radios; and $107 million of lumber, paper and aluminum exports.

"It's an important part of my job to put this state in a position to do business internationally," Atiyeh said. "One Oregon manufacturing job in six results from world trade."

The Oregon trader may be getting some flak about that at home, but he gets no argument from Trader Lamar in Tennessee, or Trader Chuck in Virginia, or Trader Dick in Ohio. They are Gov. Lamar Alexander, who has gone from Nashville to Japan eight times in the last seven years; Gov. Chuck Robb, just back from Asia; and Gov. Richard Celeste, who visited China and India last September. In fact, 37 of the United States' 50 governors went abroad on trade missions in 1985.

"It's the cheapest form of economic development there is," said Gov. Jim Thompson of Illinois. Trader Vic agrees; three Japanese companies — NEC, Epson and Fujitsu — have broken ground for new manufacturing plants in Oregon within the last few months. Trader Lamar says foreign companies provide 50,000 jobs in Tennessee. Trader Chuck just announced that a new Canon of Japan photocopier plant in Newport News will provide 1,200 local jobs. Trader Dick had a lot to do with a $12 million deal between Babcock & Wilcox and the Beijing Boiler Works.

Our governors, it seems, have become businessmen, out there beating the bushes for every loose buck, yen and shekel. Foreign businessmen in general, and Asians in particular, prefer to do business with people they feel they know personally. The phrase "business is business" is very American; some foreigners find it too American, too cold.

They've been at this, after all, for a long time. When an Oregon agricultural commissioner traveling with Atiyeh asked a Taiwanese food importer how long his family had been in the business, the man replied: "Two thousand years."

That's the old world — and the new. It's ironic that while presidents and other national political leaders grumble about "government interference in business" and debate nervously whether the United States should have an "industrial policy," each of the states already has one or is rapidly developing one. The world, including the business world, is now interdependent, and what we may need in the White House is someone willing to be mocked as Trader Gary or Trader George.

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