

VICTOR ATIYEH

June 3, 1993

Tape 31, Side 1

C.H.: This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh in his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer for the Oregon Historical Society is Clark Hansen. The date is June 3rd, 1993, and this is Tape 31, Side 1.

There were some people that felt that there was a contradiction in your reasoning for supporting the 55 mile-an-hour speed limit, but your unwillingness to enforce regulations requiring thermostats in non-residential buildings to be set at 78 degrees in the summer and 65 degrees in the winter as a means of conserving fuel. Was there a contradiction in your reasoning on those issues?

V.A.: No. When I say no, there would appear to be. Again, it gets around to, you know, just telling people exactly what they're supposed to do and when they're supposed to do it. My reason for the 55 was not conservation. My reason for 55 was traffic safety. So when I put it in that context, we're talking about two different things. To someone on the outside, their mind is conservation. How come he wants to conserve here and not there?

On the other hand, to tell people exactly how they're supposed to set their thermostat to me was just an outrageous interference in the lives of people. Some people need more heat than others. At home, my wife needs less heat than I do. She says, "Put on a sweater." Well, that's a fair statement. But you know, I mean, there's needs are so varied and to lay one law on everybody uniformly just doesn't make any sense to me at all. But basically there's no contradiction, at least in my mind, because I was coming from two different places.

C.H.: Something that came up during your term, an international issue which you may have had a close interest in, was the Iran crisis.

V.A.: Yeah, the hostages.

C.H.: [The Iranians] are Persians; they're not of Arab descent.

V.A.: No, they're Farsi.

C.H.: They're Farsis.

V.A.: That's strange, for many years I thought it was all the same. I really did

C.H.: Did you?

V.A.: Many years. As a matter of fact, being in the rug business, and we get rugs with the - what to me appear to be Arabic language. And I'd ask my cousin, who came from Syria, "What does that say?" And he'd study it and he'd look at it and I couldn't figure out what in the world - it's Arabic. Well, it isn't. It's Farsi. Now, I've learned, it's like, as far as I'm concerned, between English and French. When you look at the French language, they use the same characters as we do. An e is an e, and you know. But it's an entirely different language.

But it was during that time the hostages were taken.

C.H.: What were your views on that whole situation?

V.A.: Well, the best said would be the way the media -.

The media asked me, for example, what I thought of the way Carter was handling this hostage situation? My answer to them was at that time was, "I think under the circumstance he's handling it as well as you can handle it. But," I said, "you really should ask the question: Why did the Iranians think they could take the Americans as hostage?" That was the more serious question.

And the thought behind my asking them to ask that question, instead of how are they handling the hostages, was the fact that

Jimmy Carter had been dismantling the military, and the Iranians knew that we couldn't respond, and very clearly we didn't, in a military way. There was that abortive helicopter version over there, but we really didn't.

C.H.: How would we have been able to respond had we had more military?

V.A.: See, there are those that say if you try to build up your military, this is a signal for war. To me, the best way to avoid war is to be militarily prepared. A bully will only take on someone weaker than they. A bully will not take on someone that is as strong or stronger than they are. And so, if I am weak, I'm subject to a bully beating me up. If I am strong, then a bully isn't going to fool around with me.

I'm talking about playground stuff now, but the same thing carries forth. The beginning to back down of Russia was when Reagan began to build up our military - and it wasn't in a nuclear sense. At the same time - and it wouldn't appear anywhere because the SALT talks were going on, and it wouldn't appear in relation to me because I don't deal with it, that's a federal matter.

But I talked to the National Guard, the Adjutant General. "Dick," I said, "I know I don't vote on this but I'd like to understand what this SALT talk thing's all about." So I had a briefing from him. Out of that briefing I discovered that the United States, in terms of matching what we call conventional strength, not nuclear, we exceeded Russia only in one place, and that was we had more helicopters than they did. They had more battleships, they had more naval craft, they had more of everything, they had more troops, they had more tanks, they had more everything in conventional warfare.

And so I noticed all of that, and that Jimmy Carter was dismantling our military, so in effect the Iranians say, "Hey they

can't do anything to us." So they took our hostages and kept them. If we were militarily strong, they would say, "We better not fool around with those folks." So it wasn't a matter of going to war with Iran, it was a matter that Iran wouldn't have taken our hostages. So, to me, military strength is prevention of war. It's not creating war, it prevents a war.

C.H.: Of course, later on you had some difficulties with the way President Reagan was expanding the military, and therefore the budget deficit.

V.A.: It was the deficit. And my proposal was not that they not increase military, but they limit the amount. Now, my problem was that the military was getting too much money. And I said, "Nobody could spend that money wisely. They were getting too much."

And so, to me, a cutback of two or three percent - I've forgotten exactly what it was - was not really a cutback in military strength, it was just - we were less likely to waste money. And obviously we wasted an awful lot of money in military. They were getting too much. So my contention wasn't that we shouldn't build our military, because I even then suggested there be an increase. But it was a limited increase. It wasn't a decrease, it was a limited increase.

C.H.: When you went to Washington during the Iran crisis, there was a briefing of 34 governors in Washington by President Carter and Energy Secretary Charles Duncan and several other people. Do you recall that as a significant event?

V.A.: Well, it was always interesting to meet with the President, obviously.

C.H.: Did you have a chance to talk with him?

V.A.: No, not personally, no.

But still, I'm back onto this whole thing, that he was working against our own interests in that - and unknowingly, he was doing what he thought was right - but unknowingly by dismantling our military, and that then begat the hostage-taking. And we got them back, you know, there was some contention that the campaign and the Iranians were going to hold them until after the election and all the rest of this stuff. But they recognized the difference between Carter and Reagan, they meaning Iran, and that, "We'd better let go of those hostages because this guy's a different cat than Carter is, and he's going to start building up the military, and so we'll find a way to ..."

C.H.: So you feel that was the main reason why they released the hostages?

V.A.: This is my theory. Nobody ever told me any of this. But, you know, I'm back to what I think I know. Common sense, you know, back to common sense. Common sense tells you.

I know because I can remember fighting in the schoolyard at ~~Holly~~<sup>HOLLADAY</sup> School, and there were bullies there, and the bullies were going to pick on somebody weaker. And there's no difference between countries, no difference at all between countries.

One thing I knew, there was not going to be a nuclear war. Not is pretty strong language, but the likelihood of nuclear war very, very remote. Because if you looked at the history up to that point in time, and obviously since then, every war - and there was the Korean War and the Vietnam War and then a bunch of little small wars - but they were all conventional wars. Everybody understood that if you unleashed a nuclear war, I mean, that is a total destruction of maybe your own country, and maybe even the world. So even the wildest, dumbest, Qaddafi-kind of - or Saddam Hussein kind of guy isn't going to be shooting off nuclear weapons. And

it's the strength of conventional weapons. Because that's the way it was going. That was the way I felt about it, believe me.

C.H.: Coming back to the state, there was a new affirmative action plan that had been brought in, and it involved the promotion of the handicapped, the minority and women in training and education to support hiring. What were your views on the affirmative action plan and the efforts to enforce the plan?

V.A.: My theory pretty well goes back to what the question you asked me I think last time about black commission, Hispanic commission, and the point is that you really had to move forward and there had to be some pressure to do it, and I was not unwilling that that kind of thing take place, because I thought that was good.

However, I always strongly opposed quotas. That was the wrong way to accomplish what needed to be done. You see, what you were doing was discriminating under the guise of anti-discrimination. So I didn't believe in discrimination, and that meant discriminating against whites as well as it did blacks. To me that was a uniform application.

However, to promote the - I'm going to say assimilation - of other than whites, that there needed to be a push. The Civil Rights Act on the federal level, that needed a push. But let me give you a story. There was a great big to-do in Mississippi. Gosh, you know, my memory isn't all that good. I do remember the event. But where there was the National Guard was called out to let one black enroll at the college?

C.H.: Was that Meredith?

V.A.: Meredith. And I cheered that. But then about two or three days later, Meredith was complaining that there weren't enough black soldiers out there. And I said to myself, "Now wait a minute, lay off a little. I mean, gosh, you just went through a

big deal, it was an important deal. You're not helping your cause. So lay off."

So it was just a matter of moving it forward and making sure you don't create a big - because a lot of people reacted negatively to that. I'm applauding the fact that they finally got the black into the college. But I'm saying, you know, "Quit complaining about it, I mean, you're in now. Now let's just kind of move, that's one step and it's a giant step, don't fiddle around with little tiny screws." And it's no different. As I say, I created the black and Hispanic commissions because I thought we ought to push it forward.

C.H.: Going on, there was a 1980 special session. It was a five-day session to resolve some of the budget problems. Was this stemming from the inflation rate that was happening?

V.A.: Yeah, that was the beginning of our recession, the income into the state was reduced. There were fewer people paying taxes, and we just had to balance the budget. And that was the first of them.

I do remember this, though, kind of proudly, I would add, that we had set up the budget that really there wasn't an awful lot for the legislature to do. They came and met and reviewed what we did, and took five days and went home. And I just knew, having been a legislator, that we weren't going to have any trouble with that session, I just knew it before it began.

C.H.: Was that a fairly easy exercise at that point?

V.A.: At that point, it was a very easy exercise, yeah. That one went very well; you know, it was just one of those things that everything went well.

C.H.: In the 1980 election, did you have any involvements with any of the legislative campaigns? And how did you feel about that in general?

V.A.: Oh, I was supportive of Republicans. But I can't give you any specifics because I don't have a recollection of any specifics. Looking for, you know, electing a Republican legislature.

C.H.: What about the presidential campaign? With Reagan running against Carter.

V.A.: I didn't really get very much involved. I was an honorary chairman in the general election. I'm trying to recall what one of his opponents - I didn't go to the convention. I had no desire to go to the convention. Not because it was Reagan, I just decided I didn't want to go to any more conventions. But you know, actually Reagan is a lot more conservative in many areas than I am. Although I applaud his eight years, he did slow down that very liberal approach, which was very hard to do. That train had been running for a long time.

C.H.: Where would you say you were - where he was more conservative than you?

V.A.: Oh gosh, in so many areas. You know, we talked about abortion and so many - I'm a little less rigid than he is, but I do agree, you know, with the general direction that he took rather than a specific direction that he took.

C.H.: Did you feel more comfortable with Bush than Reagan?

V.A.: Yes.

C.H.: Ideologically?

V.A.: Yeah. Although I must admit that Bush was, in many areas, again more conservative than I would have been, more than I thought he would be. He's not a liberal, I mean, I never thought of him to be a liberal. But the answer is yes.

Actually, George Bush is a very mellow fellow. He's a very down-to-earth kind of a guy. He's less reserved than Ronald Reagan, much less reserved, and I'm more comfortable around people

like that, just personality-wise, forget philosophy. I'm trying to remember who was -. Well, I had been Ford's chairman in Oregon and was a floorleader for Ford and even gave a seconding speech for Ford at the convention.

C.H.: When Ford was running for president.

V.A.: Yeah. And then that was a big contest between Ford and Reagan and that point. So my litmus test wasn't very good in terms of Reagan. I do remember, though, that I kept telling them that, you know, at the general election, "Let me help, I'll do whatever you want me to do." And I never did get any call until very late in the campaign, very late in the campaign, and they called and wanted to send me to Alaska to do some campaigning for Reagan. There there was an event going on at, not Juneau ...

C.H.: Anchorage?

V.A.: Not Anchorage, not Juneau. Another larger community.

C.H.: Fairbanks?

V.A.: Fairbanks.

C.H.: It's a long ways away.

V.A.: Yeah. So I go up there, and the event that they had in mind was entirely inappropriate to make - I had written a speech, I was all set to go, but it was one of these sort of potluck kind of things and everybody's gathered around and having a good time and dancing, and it was not an atmosphere for a speech.

So I never actually did - well, I did deliver the speech, more or less, the next morning. We flew over to Anchorage, and I spoke to some Republicans, which was a waste of time, they were going to vote for Reagan. But what I found out when I got to Alaska and I said, "Why'd they send me up here? Carter's gonna come in third. He's not even gonna come in first, I mean second, he's coming in third. Why did they waste their money sending me up here?" So I

always felt it was a waste of their time and my time and their money, but that's the way she goes.

C.H.: In the assessments of your first year as governor, the Oregonian talks a little about your state-of-the-state address. Now, again, the state-of-the-state address is given on years when you're not giving an inaugural address, is that right?

V.A.: It's in between sessions is probably the better way, because, let's take the year 1979 was my inaugural address. 1980 was a non-legislative year. 1981 was a legislative year. So the 1980 would be purely state-of-the-state to the public. The 1981 would be a combination of state-of-the-state and "This is what I'm asking of you this session," a combination kind of thing. So the pure state-of-the-state would be in between sessions, although there's a piece of state-of-the-state on the odd-numbered years when the session's there.

C.H.: How do you feel that the news media reacted to your first year in office?

V.A.: Oh, I thought basically fine. And my own personal reaction was that actually, I had gone further, faster than even I thought I would go. I was very pleased with my first year.

C.H.: Some of the things that they stated was that you had to react to a lot of crises, that maybe you actually spent more time doing that than other things, but that you had a calm reaction in the gas shortage, which we had already talked about, and there was a very angry truckers' strike. And then you were involved in mediation efforts to settle the controversy between Willamette Valley grass seed growers and the City of Eugene.

I think we talked about that issue before, but we haven't talked really about your efforts as governor in mediation.

V.A.: That's right. I had gone through all of this, that is, grass seed burning, in the legislative way. Sessions would come up

and they were going to limit how many acres could be burned, and I'm always contending that that was not the way to go about it. But there was a wide division between the grass seed farmers and particularly Eugene.

So after the session, I started talking to Gus Keller, who was the mayor of Eugene, and I talked with him. Then I talked to the grass seed folks. And then I talked to Gus Keller. And then I talked to the grass seed folks. And as I could see things coming closer together, I finally stepped out and Gus Keller began talking with the grass seed people.

Out of it all came what should have been in the first place. Not a matter of acreage, but we treat the field burning like we did any kind of air pollution, and that there be certain guidelines. I mean, you may burn a hundred acres and that's too much smoke, or you could burn a thousand acres and there wouldn't be any smoke, you know, that would be harmful.

So out of all of that came, then, finally, laws which lasted actually through my entire administration into Goldschmidt's. And then we got back into how many acres you could burn again. All that period of time, it was smoke management, is what it was, under the DEQ. And that's the way it should have been from the very beginning.

C.H.: Also mentioned in regards to your first year was your backing of the bill that made the State Accident Insurance Fund save a public corporation. Of course, that later became an issue again.

V.A.: Yes, it did.

C.H.: As we'll talk about. Monty Montgomery, and all that.

V.A.: Well, it's just a matter of they're going compete, let's let them compete. You see, way back then we mentioned what we called the three-way bill, where the State would have a monopoly

and all of sudden they don't. This was just to get more, if they're going compete, let them compete.

C.H.: *The Oregonian* said that the governor sees day-to-day administration as the most basic function of his office. Did you also consider it to be the most important function of your office?

V.A.: Yes. The curious thing to me is what's leadership. Even as we sit here today, you know, what's leadership? I'm puzzled by what -.

To me, I was elected to be the president of the company, to run the company and run it efficiently. And I - remember, I told you before, I have great strong feelings about the fact that people are giving the State tax dollars. They've earned that money. They're giving it to the State to spend, and that I should treat that very carefully. And I have very strong feelings about that.

And the only way you can do it is to manage. To me it's a matter of managing government and have government operate the way government should operate. I don't know how many times I've said government does things the way nobody else would do it. It just doesn't make any sense. Things like, 'Let's see how we can have this happen, rather than how can we prevent it from happening.' Things like - and I think I've gone through this with you, as a matter of fact I know I have - how you approach the public, you know.

I think I told you the story, where's the Department of Motor Vehicles? I don't know. Or, down the hall two doors. That kind of thing. Government is there for people. Well, you can't do this. Now there's those with grand plans. That seems to excite people, that's sort of a leadership thing, that's presumed to be leadership. Goldschmidt, people feel good about themselves.

Well, yeah, that's important, I have no doubt about it. But he had so many grand plans, but not much came out of all of it. As

a matter of fact - well, I won't get into that. I've got my own views on the Goldschmidt administration which are at great odds with a lot of people. But that's because I'm seeing government, and how it should operate, and the way it should operate versus the way he does. Or did.

Tom McCall, you know, he had his years. You remember Tom McCall for air and water quality and environment and all the rest of that sort of thing. And that's fine. Maybe best put - I was a part of, and happily a part of, the environmental movement that we were involved with. I tried to introduce common sense. I know it's important, but what we call livability I like, I want my children to like, I want my grandchildren and their children to have. So I believe in all of that.

And we have done what I thought was a remarkable job in terms of the environment, what I call the natural resource. We had done a very poor job in terms of the human resource. We kept forgetting the human resource. And so if there was any stress in terms of where I was coming from, it's time for us to pay attention to the human resource. My push for diversification of the economy, when we say that sort of grand word, what it really converts to is jobs. A job for somebody. And that's one person. So let's get business in, let's make it possible for business to grow, both existing and new ones. Because it's not a matter that I'm trying to favor business, it's business that creates jobs. If there isn't any business there is no job.

I've said many times, and truly believe, without capital there's no labor. I do go on to say, though, and I believe that too, without labor there's no capital. They work together. So, you see, I'm shifting gears to what I believe to be the human resource, to try to create an atmosphere in which people are happy,

they're satisfied with their government, the government is doing what government ought to be doing - and yet, that's not leadership.

Leadership is dreaming all these great dreams. But I'm not interested in dreaming dreams unless it results into something. Will it happen? We covered LBJ and the Great Society and all the things that he - and I don't disagree with any of them, but my interest is not talking about them. My interest is solving them. And so, that comes about by management. You can't just say, there it is.

What's that Mark Twain story about two fellows in the desert in California, and one fellow said to the other, "Gosh, if we could get water into here, this would be the lushest place in the United States." And the other fellow said, "Well, that's no problem. You dig a canal from the Mississippi River over to here and you've got all the water you want."

And the other fellow says, "Well yeah, but how do I do that?" And the second fellow says, "I don't know. I gave you the idea, you work out the details." And so, you know, the one that works out the details is the one that gets the canal there. The guy that gave him the idea, that didn't do anything.

C.H.: Right.

[End of Tape 31, Side 1]