

VICTOR ATIYEH
June 7, 1993
Tape 32, Side 1

C.H.: This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh in his office in Portland, Oregon. The interviewer for the Oregon Historical Society is Clark Hansen. The date is June 7th, 1993, and this is Tape 32, Side 1.

The next thing I was going to ask you about was something *The Oregonian* commented on. It said, "One of the most controversial aspects of his first year in office was the establishment of a private political fund made up of contributions from Atiyeh's supporters to pay for partisan activities that the Governor's official budget would not cover. Through this governor's committee, Atiyeh raised more than \$25,000, and some question the legality of the fund, and many question its propriety."

V.A.: You know, that's really fascinating to bring this up because I've had an ongoing - when I say that, very sporadic - communication with *The Oregonian* about this. Now, I'll go through it at that time.

I knew there were things that a governor did that were political, and my own personal belief was that the taxpayers shouldn't be paying for anything like that. And so we set up this fund.

Now, one thing I knew is that Mark Hatfield had a fund, Tom McCall had a fund, Bob Straub had a fund. But I said, "This is not right to have a fund and just not say anything." So the thing that I did, which was unlike the rest of them, was made it public. Now, that's where I made my mistake. That's how I got in trouble with *The Oregonian*.

And I was really quite irritated by that. Meaning that, you know, if *The Oregonian* said you shouldn't have it, and this isn't

right, and all that sort of thing, I can understand that. But at least congratulate me for telling the fact, making it public, which they never did. But they made a big deal out of it. I mean, it was a big deal. This was a terrible thing to have happen.

Subsequently, Goldschmidt had a much larger fund than mine. And Governor Roberts has one. And my communication with Landauer, "What's the difference? They have it." Finally I egged The Oregonian along until they finally wrote an editorial on Goldschmidt. But it was sort of an editorial, "Oh come on, Neil, you shouldn't do a thing like that." You know, where they really sat on me real hard, and this was terrible and this was, you know, almost against the Constitution. I mean, it was really pretty bad news.

C.H.: Why do you think they were so severe with you?

V.A.: I've never gotten an answer.

C.H.: Do you have any ideas why?

V.A.: Yeah, I've got some ideas why, but that's because I was a Republican. I don't know why. It's hard for me to fathom because - and Roberts, she says so. She talks about it, and then she's had fifty, sixty, seventy thousand, and so has Neil Goldschmidt. Mine was twenty-five thousand. Five hundred apiece from people.

C.H.: Do you feel that *The Oregonian* has a political orientation? Because my understanding was that they had always supported Republicans for president until this last election.

V.A.: Well, no, they haven't. Of recent years, they haven't. No, I think historically, if you go back to the '30s or maybe early '40s, it maybe was quite Republican. But I think they went from being quite Republican to the middle and maybe they're leaning now the other way. I wouldn't call them highly partisan, but I'm still puzzled. I didn't get an answer.

But when you ask me the question, I don't know the answer. I said to Bob Landauer, "What's the difference? Please tell me." I don't get any response to that. I still don't understand what the difference is.

C.H.: What's wrong with having a fund to help cover politically-oriented expenses?

V.A.: Well, I don't think it's anything wrong. Clearly, they don't think it's wrong to have Goldschmidt have it and Barbara Roberts. I mean, they don't think there's any problem with that. And I'm saying, you know, heck. There are things that the governor does that is partisan. And there is no way that the taxpayers should ever pay for anything like that.

Well, anyway, it got to the point where I said to Lee Johnson, "Oh hell, Lee, it isn't worth it." So we just sent the money back. It just isn't worth it. I still believed in it. I still believe that the concept was correct, but I said it just isn't worth it to go through all this stuff. So, you know, I chuckle because it wasn't something that just happened in 1979, this has a longer life than you thought it did.

C.H.: Later there was some - and we'll talk about it - some controversy about your trip to Hawaii and United Airlines, I think it was, that paid for it, and things like that. Certainly some people would be upset if a politician was having politically-oriented events paid for by the taxpayer, and they don't want businesses to pay for it because of undue influence. How do they expect those activities to be carried on?

V.A.: Well, that's not their role to come up with an answer, or a solution. That's not their role. It's really hard to figure. And my only problem with this whole thing was what I call the double standard. I really dislike double standards.

Well, it might be appropriate when we finally get to my trip to the Middle East, but what's bothering me most is in America the double standard supplied by the United States in regard to human rights. So it's a double standard thing. There's a standard for Governor Atiyeh which is different than the standard for Neil Goldschmidt and Barbara Roberts. That's what really gets to me, the double standard thing.

You know, one can agree or disagree with whether one should have it or not have it, and I can understand that, if somebody say, "You really ought not to have it." That's your opinion, I've got my opinion, and I think I've got solid reasons for what I'm doing. And actually it all came out of the best of intentions. The intention was that the taxpayers shouldn't pay for it. The other governors have had it and didn't say anything about it. I didn't think that was right, so I made a public record of the whole thing, and all I get for that is a bruised nose. It's hard to figure.

C.H.: I guess it would make you want to keep your mouth closed after that.

V.A.: Well, yeah. Yeah, that's true, but that's not the way to conduct business. I believe in doing things publicly, and, you know, you get yourself into trouble, and in this case I did, but it was all from all the best of intentions. And of course nobody ever owns me. They didn't buy me. But there's always that terrible perception out there.

C.H.: Did the attorney general or the Oregon Ethics Commission look into it?

V.A.: No. It was strictly an *Oregonian* thing.

C.H.: And then there was something about your mailing out a letter telling members of the state boards and commissions and heads of state agencies that they really should disregard an

invitation to a testimonial dinner honoring you for \$125 each. Was that sort of along part of the same thing during that same time?

V.A.: Yeah, but I don't even remember that. That is strange, isn't it? I can understand - I don't think anybody should press certainly public employees, and I'm their boss, to sell tickets. That's undue pressure. I don't think you should do things like that. But I don't recall that. That's strange.

C.H.: Some people felt, going on, that you spent too much time away from the capital. This is still during your first year, I guess. But you always had a reputation for traveling around the state and trying to include as much of the state as possible.

V.A.: Yeah. That I would consider a compliment. You know, when somebody picks on that, they of course are coming from a different direction. But to me it's a compliment. We talked about it earlier. There's only one way to communicate with Oregonians, and that's to get out and talk to Oregonians. And if that's a criticism, to me it's a compliment.

C.H.: Some people felt that Denny Miles was too protective of you.

V.A.: Oh, there's always that kind of perception thing. Palace guard. And, oh, Lee Johnson or Pat Amadeo or Denny Miles; that, however, I was aware of. We talked about it. I did everything I could to avoid it from occurring. It does happen. But - And it's a matter of them getting used to me too. After a while, there wasn't that same protectiveness. They said, "Okay, that's the Governor, that's the way he is, that's what he's going to go out to do, he doesn't screw up things too badly when he does it. And just turn him loose."

But I knew it, and it's something that you try very hard to avoid. You have to be conscious of it. And you have to be aware of it, and then you can circumvent most of it. But that doesn't

mean that I wasn't palace-guarded from time to time, and oftentimes unknowingly. But by and large, I've been less protected than certainly I know that my successors have been. They've been very protected by their palace guard. Particularly Governor Roberts. And that's a shame.

Well, let me drop back to Bob Straub. I think we talked about it. Bob's a really neat guy and I said, you know, if his staff would let Bob be Bob, and he is a neat guy, he would have been much more difficult to beat if I could have beat him at all. And so there is that. But you have to know it exists. Very much like I told you earlier. This being trapped by the building, you have to be aware that you're being trapped. If you're not aware of it, then you're going to get trapped. So, you know, that doesn't mean you don't get trapped from time to time, but at least you've got to keep digging yourself out of that hole.

C.H.: You had weekly press conferences too, didn't you?

V.A.: Yeah, I always liked those.

C.H.: Were they pretty much free-ranging and open?

V.A.: Yes. I termed them - the media didn't like it to start with - I termed them "media availability." They didn't like that, the term. But I was trying to make a distinction between a press conference which says, "I've got something I want to tell you" versus "What do you want to talk about?" And so that's what I called media availability.

We had them every week. Every week I was in Salem. I mean, sometimes obviously I'm traveling or one thing or another. But I would say that almost without exception, or rare exception, we had them every week. And I'd just walk out. "Okay, what do you want to talk about?" Actually, I looked forward to it. It was one of the highlights of my week. I really looked forward to it.

C.H.: It seems like that would have made you pretty available right there, just that you had a time, a consistent time every week that somebody could talk to you.

V.A.: Oh, yes. They liked that - the media. But they also knew that I was available if they - You see, we're all meeting together now. Obviously there's some things that everybody wants their own story. They don't want a collective story. So if they wanted to follow up on something, or had their own, they always had access to me. Always.

One of my valued mementos which - and I've got a lot of them - but the one I have hanging on the wall is from the Capital Press Corps. They gave it to me at the last media availability, in the latter part of 1986, and it was - calligraphy is all it was, nothing fancy - "Thank you for your accessibility." Now this is from the media. I mean, they're pretty cynical folks. So I treasure that. I value that.

But it was a highlight, I really looked forward to it. I don't know if I really covered it. Well, it won't hurt to duplicate, we can always scratch it out if I did. But you know, I soon discovered there was three answers. I think I did cover that.

"I know the answer, and I'm going to tell you."

"I don't know the answer, but I'll get the information." Or

"I know the answer, but I'm not going to tell you."

Now. the last one is the one I have fun with, because, you know, they'd come in from 16 different directions, you know. And I'd laugh. I'd say, "Now look, I already told you I'm not going to tell you." You know, and we'd chuckle about it. They knew what they're doing, and I knew what they knew what they were doing. A classic example obviously, but there were many other instances, the Baghwan, you know:

"What are you doing?"

"Well, I know what the answer is, but I'm not going to tell you."

That's a classic one. But there were others.

C.H.: I guess they always tried to get to you on your trips as to who you were talking to that might locate here.

V.A.: Yeah. Those kinds of things. So much fun, because, you know, they'd say, "I know, but I'm not going to tell you." And then somebody'd ask a question from another quarter, getting at the same thing, you know. And then I said, "I already said I'm not going to tell you." Then somebody else would try. I kind of enjoyed that, and I think they knew what was going on.

But I did. I looked forward to it. And the interesting thing was that we - the media's sometimes a little slow. They're kind of accustomed to the legislative timetable where a one o'clock meeting does not mean a one o'clock meeting. And I'd gone through all of that. I'd say ten o'clock, or ten-thirty, or whatever, and I'd stand there at the door with Denny Miles. He always set his watch by Greenwich Mean Time, or whatever. And at the stroke, we'd walk out.

Well, it took them maybe two or three weeks to figure out that ten o'clock meant ten o'clock. It didn't mean ten-oh-one. It didn't mean it's nine fifty-nine. It meant ten o'clock. So they were pretty well set up when we'd go out there. But again, that was sort of a fun part of it. I knew what I was doing. But it was. It was a highlight for me. I looked forward to them.

C.H.: One controversy that came up, and I would imagine this is probably sort of an ongoing thing, is your relationship with the AFL-CIO. In July of 1980, they went on record in support of a move by the employees' union to seek your recall because of your refusal to implement an arbitration award to prison employees.

Maybe you could tell me a little bit more about that?

V.A.: Well, on the recall part of it, I wasn't intimidated by that. As a matter of fact, I knew enough of my security in terms among the electorate in Oregon. I felt, you know, strong enough. I said, "Go ahead. If you want a recall, go ahead and recall." I said, "You're not going to get anywhere. You're going to waste your time and money, but go ahead. It's perfectly legal."

They kept wanting a *quid pro quo* on something, and I just said "I don't do that." You know, "We won't carry out the recall if you do what we want you to do."

As it ended up, we stayed where I was and they decided it wasn't worth the trouble, and they backed off.

C.H.: It had to do with a prison guard strike, didn't it?

V.A.: Yes.

C.H.: There were 200 non-security prison employees who were American Federation members who'd been on strike at the Oregon State Penitentiary and at the Women's Correctional Center since June 16th. And prison guards, I guess, are forbidden to strike by law, and they won a large settlement in binding arbitration that your administration so far had refused to accept, according to *The Oregonian*. Do you recall why the administration was refusing to accept that?

V.A.: No, I think it was just a matter of equity among the state employees, either that or we just couldn't afford it.

Actually, I benefited state employees a great deal, I already knew that. And they were treated better, and they now know it, better than any other governor's treated them previously or since. But, oh, sometimes these people go I guess a little bit sideways. But they'd soon figured out that it was going to be too costly for them and they couldn't really be successful at it. I knew they couldn't be successful.

C.H.: Then we go on to the next session, the 1981 legislative session, and the Republicans gained a little bit in the House. It was 33 Democrats to 27 Republicans, and in the Senate it was still decidedly Democratic at 22 to 8. Hardy Meyers became the Speaker and Vera Katz the Speaker pro tem. Was he the Speaker previous to that as well, or was that -?

V.A.: Hardy, no. It was Phil ...

C.H.: Phil Lang?

V.A.: Yeah. Hardy was really a good guy to work with. Again, he had his own agenda, as Speakers do. But we worked together extremely well. I think actually we respected one another very much. And our conversations on a weekly basis, and we talked about that along with Jason, were always civil. When we had some differences, we wouldn't get in any kind of shouting match or anything like that. Never did.

The only time we ever got in a shouting match was with Jason when the Senate did some things that I didn't agree it ought to do. But that only happened a couple of times. It never really damaged our friendship. We were really good friends til he died. Jason, that is. No, it was a good relationship.

C.H.: What about with Fred Herd as president of the Senate?

V.A.: Fred Herd. Yes. Worked out real well. And we really worked together extremely well.

C.H.: So was this session an easier session then to deal with? In terms of dealing with the people?

V.A.: Over all I'd say about the same. When I say that, I take it in the largest context. Here I am, a brand-new governor, kind of a euphoric thing, I'm exercising my knowledge and what I know and being, you know, having just left that same body. That's '79 now. '81 now, they'd be getting kind of used to me. And still they were was not exercising the - "He's going to run for re-

election, we'd better shoot him down" kind of thing. That didn't happen too often. Certainly not apparently, anyway.

So, you know, it was a good session. All in all, if I were to encapsulate my entire eight years and my relationship with the legislature, it was not any bumpier than one would normally expect. As a matter of fact, if it was a marriage, it was a pretty good marriage. We did not - I'm talking about eight years now - Fadeley was a tough one to deal with. ~~Karns~~^{KERANS} wasn't real pleasant to deal with. But when I wash it all down, I say to myself, "You know, as a governor, I did, for what I wanted to do, I did very well."

C.H.: Maybe since we're kind of talking about generalities at this point, we could talk a little bit about your governing style. Phil Kiesling, who at the time was a reporter at the *Willamette Week*, said, "He is a governor more intent on managing state government than on using it to effect broad policy changes."

V.A.: Well, that's so myopic of the media. We already talked about some broad policy changes. We talked about welfare reform. We talked about alternate energy. We talked about avoiding crises. You know, so that's myopic. That's almost partisan.

Willamette Week was never ever friendly to me. And that kind of an observations says that he's not a very good observer of the process. Back to what's leadership. You know, I think if I'd been beating my chest and talking about all these great things, he would have thought I was just the most marvelous governor in the world without weighing what actually happened, you see. What really did actually occur. Bottom line. What happened? So, you know, I did get to a point, not then, but later on, I said to Denny Miles, "I don't want to talk to these people any more. I don't want to ever talk to *Willamette Week* anymore."

C.H.: Was it something that in particular that ...

V.A.: Well, they just kept - it wasn't a matter of disagreement. I can deal with that. But straining to be disagreeable. And Denny said, "Don't tell them, I'll take care of it. Don't say anything publicly."

"Okay, I won't say anything, but I'm just telling you I'm not going to talk to them anymore." And they're the only ones that I ever dealt with in that fashion. Because I thought they were just generally - that didn't mean they needed to agree with me, they were just disagreeable all the time.

Anyway, when you bring up the *Willamette Week*, I say yeah, he's right in terms of managing the government, but remember, we talked about what's leadership. I'm saying, "Okay, I don't want to talk about anything. I want to do something." And I see it at the national level, they talk, "Look at Bill Clinton, he's going to do all these things." I don't want to talk about it. I want to see it happen.

And I never made any promises, ever - I was very careful about it - that I didn't think that I could fulfill. If I didn't think I could fulfill it, I wasn't going to promise it. That doesn't mean that I wouldn't try. But I think it's just terrible for politicians to promise things and not fulfill them. If I say to you, "Okay, I'll meet you at the corner of Park and Washington Street at three o'clock; I promise to be there." Now you're expecting me to be there, and if I'm not there, you're really ticked off. But if I hadn't said that to you, you wouldn't be ticked off at all.

Well, I'm making this a real life thing so we can understand my feelings about promises. Politicians have been making promises and they have not fulfilled them. And once you make it, people expect it. If you hadn't made it, they don't expect it. And so this whole idea of talking about something and not accomplishing it

is one of the fundamental reasons why a legislative body, and government generally, is in such disrespect. And it's too bad, it really is too bad.

So, okay, we've talked about Kiesling. To me, you know, when I read something like that, which I did, I don't recall it exactly but I must have, I'm saying, "Well, this reporter is lazy. This reporter is not an observer of what's going on."

C.H.: In the same kind of context of other people's ideas of what your style was, Bud Kramer - who was Governor Straub's former executive assistant ...

V.A.: Right. Nice guy.

C.H.: ... said, "Atiyeh's provided a quiet management to state government that has given people the perception of less government, even though it's about the same size."

V.A.: That was not my goal.

C.H.: No, but do you think that was an accurate perception?

V.A.: It's hard to tell what it was they said. Less government, of course, was where I was aiming at. So again, I think that was good. This strangulation versus regulation, which we talked about earlier, I wanted to remove the strangulation. Now, if that's less government, that's okay. That's where I was aiming for.

And you know, someone of that mind bent - and that's the difference between Republicans and Democrats - is that here's a problem and government's going to solve it for you. That's Democrat. Or here's a problem and we'll help you solve the problem - help YOU solve the problem - that's Republican. That's sort of a quickie. And so, his mind set is that if there's anything going on, then government ought to be doing it. And my mind set's entirely different. If there's some problem, let's work this out

together without government interfering any more than is necessary. It never says there's to be no government.

It's just how much government. There's a philosophical difference between Republicans and Democrats in a generic sense. You can prove anything you want by taking one Republican and one Democrat, you can prove anything. Let me tell you on the whole - and incidentally, that is not argumentative in the sense that Democrats agree with it, you know, friendly discussions between my friends. And they would agree with what I just said.

A joke about a fellow drowning 50 feet from shore: The Democrat would throw a hundred feet of rope and leave the end laying on the beach and walk away. The Republican throws him twenty-five feet of rope, and you know, he's going to build up his independence by having him swim the twenty-five feet to get the end of the rope. You see, that was a joke between what's the difference between Republicans and Democrats. So when you ask that, yeah, he's probably right. But that's where I was aiming.

C.H.: *The Oregonian's* view was that, "Caution rules Atiyeh. Even when he recognizes a major problem, he isn't about to attack alone. He wants the political security of numbers. He seems reluctant to lead the attack unless he's certain the cavalry is already organized to follow him."

V.A.: That's an interesting observation.

You know, I fell on a lot of spears when I was in the legislature, and falling on the spears is not one of my favorite subjects. In other words, you know you're going to die. And I learned over 20 years you count.

But that was an interesting observation. I don't recall having heard that, but I would say to you that oftentimes it would not be a matter of counting votes. But when I was leaving office, the media said to me, "Now that you've had eight years, when you

look back, would you do anything differently?" And my answer was
no.

[End of Tape 32, Side 1]