

Tape 28, Side 1

CH This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer, for the Oregon Historical Society, is Clark Hansen. The date is May 21, 1993, and this is Tape 28, Side 1.

VA Well, I started saying what I enjoyed. I enjoyed going before committees as a governor, and I enjoyed it because - particularly as I'd go before the Revenue Committee, which I did - I knew more than they knew; they knew I knew more than they did, number one. Number two, you know, here's the governor. Yeah, that's Vic Atiyeh, but he's now the governor, and so I really - you know, I knew that I was going to come out unscathed. I knew that to start with. And, of course, they were kind of worried because they knew I already knew more than they did, and so if they tried to attack me, they didn't quite know where to attack me. Where can I get Vic? So I knew all that in advance, and I always enjoyed going down there, which I did from time to time, down to the committees. I had a good time at it.

CH Was it unusual for the governor to go down to the committees?

VA Yeah, very unusual. Usually the governor would send a staff member down, but every once in a while I'd go down if there were some issues that I thought were important.

CH If you were to send someone down from your staff, who would you usually send? I imagine it would depend on the issue.

VA It would depend on the issue. Pat Amadeo did, ^{Bob}Gerry Thompson did, ^{Bob}Oliver. It would really depend on what the issue

was. Sometimes it would be an agency head. So it just varied.

CH Was there anything different about the job than you expected?

VA Yeah, which is an interesting question, because the media came to me and said, What did you find out that you didn't expect? And I said, Well, the number of extraditions I signed. Now, they're very disappointed about that. They were looking for...

CH What?

VA Extraditions. It's amazing the number of extraditions the governor signs. That, I didn't - I knew about almost everything else. You know, if I'd come up with something, I think they might have been surprised, because I'd been around for twenty years. You know, if you hadn't learned something in twenty years, you really haven't kept your eyes open very much. But I was amazed at the number of extraditions that I signed. That was the one thing that surprised me. And, I would tell you the very first official act that I did as a governor - I was sworn in, now I'm governor, I come back to my office - was to sign that extradition. That was the very first thing that I did as a governor. So yeah, that's the one thing that surprised me.

CH How many extraditions did you sign?

VA Oh gosh, I don't know, hundreds of them.

CH Hundreds?

VA Oh yeah, yeah. Not a handful. You know, every once in a

while you read it in a newspaper. It's going on every day. Only in noted cases do you hear, He's fighting extradition, or, He's going to be extradited, or whatever. That would be in major cases. It's going on all the time. I don't know where to insert some of these things. You know, you learn. You get requests for pardons, things of that kind. And it's amazing how these fellows find religion. I was a bad guy once, but I'm not now, and you really ought to turn me loose. And our answer is, "Well, we're glad that you've got religion, and I'm sure your wisdom will tell you that you should serve your time because you did something wrong." Oh I had cases - once in a while I would actually listen to people; not very often. Bob Oliver handled that for me. I can recall this one fellow, he happened to be a black man. He'd lost, I think, both legs while he was - he escaped from prison. He had just gotten married. We were meeting in my conference room, and he had gotten married and had a little baby, so here was the little baby and his new wife and this fellow, and he didn't want to go back to Alabama or Georgia, or somewhere, wherever it was, because if he went back, you know, they were going to kill him, or it was going to be bad news for him. I sent him back. The guy was picked up with a prostitute in a stolen car, so, you know, what does he want from me.

CH I guess if he's found religion, he gets his reward later on.

VA Oh, this guy didn't find religion. He was giving me the, I've changed my ways; I'm going to get killed if I go back home.

CH Well, there was a pardon issue, I believe, that came up later that I wanted to talk to you about.

VA Samples?

CH Samples, yeah, Duane Samples.

Of course, everybody has to comment on the first hundred days. I'm not sure why the first hundred days is such a - is so important, but one comment was that, Much of the Atiyeh effort has focused on the internal administration of state government, as he indicated in his campaign it would be. In what aspect were you working on the internal administration? In making it more efficient?

VA Yes.

CH Is that what they're getting at?

VA Making it work like it ought to work. You remember earlier I had said that - I guess when we were talking about running in 1974, where Tom McCall had really taken state government and dumped it upside down, and now it's in a pile. So I'm saying to myself, I want to sort this pile out. That's sort of a description of what I had in mind. And government was still at loose ends. The government was doing - contradicting themselves. I recall someone inspecting a nursing home, from the health division, so they went there, and they said, Now, you should do this, this, and this. So the nursing home did this, this, and this, whatever that was. A few months later another one, a different person, came and changed things altogether. Now, this is the same agency. I really wasn't blaming them. There was no direction from the top saying let's do things in a coordinated fashion, and so everybody was left to their own devices. I said, Whoa, wait a minute. That's not going to work. We've got to do things in a reasonable and coordinated sense. We're dealing with people out there.

I tried to get - I spoke to state employees, I spoke to state management, and I was trying to describe to them the kind

of government I think we ought to have, and I'm saying to them that, first of all, they've got to realize that they're in business just for the people, and that on a daily basis they are government. If I went to a state agency - you know, it could be Governor Roberts as governor or Larry Campbell or whoever, but no, that person I'm talking to is government. And I used this word - you know, if you walked in the Department of Motor Vehicles - or, you walked in the state office building and say, in an office, where's the Department of Motor Vehicles? And the person could look up and say, I don't know; or, they could look up and say, Well, if you go down the hall three doors and to your right. I said, That took about maybe two seconds longer, that's about all, but it was a world of difference in a response. I also said to them, I'm willing for you to make a mistake. I realize that government is not allowed to make a mistake, and because they're not allowed to make a mistake, government is not innovative, they don't try new things. I am sure that there was just file cabinet, after file cabinet, after file cabinet full of save your ass: No, it wasn't my fault, see? So they were very protective, they wouldn't move forward, they wouldn't try. I said, I don't want you to make a mistake, but if you're trying something and you believe in it and if it doesn't work - what I was saying to them, I'm not going to let you take the heat. I'll take the heat with you, because I wanted them to be innovative, I wanted them to try new ideas, I wanted them to think about how things could be done better. Out of all of that came the Employees Suggestion Awards Board, and we really instituted it, and it worked very well. I don't know if you have that in your papers anywhere, but out of that came that whole thing, and it was marvelous to see it work. We had quality circles in state government. Now, quality circles we know about in manufacturing, but I don't think anybody had ever tried it for government. It was marvelous to see this work.

So when we started talking about the internal workings of state government, it was not just, you know, reorganizing, which, of course, everyone likes to see. It doesn't do any good, but it sounds good. That wasn't it. It was a matter of making what was there work, or, if it wasn't working, then we'll make some changes. But the fact is that there was a reason that it was there, and let's make it work.

Earlier on, remember, we talked about - when we started talking about department heads, and I said I knew what was needed and what I wanted in these departments, and a lot of it was administration, just pulling together and make the darn thing work, so I'd find people that were able to do that. And that gets back to what I said earlier: This, then, makes the tax dollar work a lot better. I said to them, I think that state government can do better for less money. Not the same for less money, better for less money. I believe that. But you have to have somebody working at it to make sure that it functions that way. Just to take dollars away without support, it isn't going to work. But I truly, honestly, sincerely believed, and actually we proved it, that you could do a better job with less dollars.

I challenged my state agencies - actually, we're going into more than my first hundred days, but just to let you know how I was working, I'd get together an agency, and I'd give them time - oh, several hours, not necessarily all in one meeting - and the whole idea is, I said, Okay, tell me what you're doing. Now, I already knew what they were doing. And I would also say, I'm going to ask some questions. They're not hostile questions, they're questions. And so questions would come up, Well, why are you doing that? Why are you doing it that way? But that gave them - I have two purposes, one of which is to get my input, but second, for them to review what they were doing so that they would understand what were they doing and why were they doing it. Sometimes they did it because that's the way Grandpa did it and

Pa did it, therefore I'm going to do it the same way. That's not what I was after. And I'd challenged them. You know, How can we do this better? And they were very, very excited about this, because I'm using their talent. The most disappointing conference I had in that same context was with higher education.

CH Why?

VA They effectively said, Well, we just - we're doing okay. We can't get there from there. They didn't respond. Gosh, here's a challenge. Let's see if we can - they didn't respond at all. It was very discouraging, extremely discouraging to me. And I suppose that's because of the - you know, the bureaucracy of education is worse than any bureaucracy that was ever made. Everyone else responded beautifully. Beautifully. And it wasn't until Bud Davis came in that I got this kind of excitement, innovative thing going. I needed Bud Davis as chancellor to get that work done.

I'm jumping forward, but - and, then, the other thing that I did is that I began to meet with my, let me call it, cabinet. We don't have a cabinet style, but my department heads. I would meet with them on a weekly basis. Two things that kind of kept me up to snuff on what was going on. I told them early on, I don't want to be surprised by anything; if somebody asks me a question and say, I didn't know that was going on. That was number one. But number two, probably more important than anything, I realized that agencies were out doing their own thing without any cognizance or recognition of any other agency of state government. And I had them divided. I had Natural Resources all together at one time, but I had some divisions. I had three meetings a week with a different agency. But the point is that as each agency would make a report, these other fellows, men and women, they were in the room, they were listening to all

of this, and they began to know each other, they began to look forward to, not necessarily meeting with the governor, but to meet their fellow department heads. It finally got to a point where they would call, Hey, Charlie, I'm going to be doing this. They began to recognize.

A good example that I can tell you, during that early period of time in my governorship we went into the recession, and the Veterans Affairs were selling large, huge sums of bonds in order to loan money to veterans to build and remodel. Large amounts. And there was some concern about our being out there with that - meaning the state of Oregon, in the market in New York. The Housing Department wanted to issue some bonds. Now, we're talking peanuts in regard to the Veterans Department. All of a sudden Veterans understood what they were doing to Housing, because here was this big giant out here, gorilla, and this small agency, and they were having trouble selling their bonds because of the heavy load that the Veterans Affairs - they began - that's a good example of what I'm trying to say. You know, DEQ would be talking to LCDC or vice versa, or Forestry or Fish and Wildlife. You know, all of these things, one really would relate to what the others were doing. Back to our initial thing, administration: running this thing, running it so people would understand what they were doing, getting them excited about the idea of doing things better, using the talents, getting to know each other, know how they affect each other. That's part of this sorting out of this problem that Tom McCall had dumped over. I'm proud of that part of it. I say that to you. Actually, I couldn't do this. I said, I've got a lot of things I want to do, and I can't do them. You have to do them for me. I can't do them. I knew that. And, of course, a governor elected, you know you've got four years. You don't know how many - you don't know you have eight. You know you've got four. There was a lot of things I wanted to get done, and I wanted to do it in pretty much

of a hurry so that at least in four years I would have accomplished a lot of what I wanted to accomplish.

CH Bob Smith, who succeeded you as minority leader, had an interesting comment about you. He said about you, He was never seen as a fighter in the senate, but he's a fighter as governor. I think he's grown immensely. Do you feel that that was true, that you had made a shift from being a fighter in the - not a fighter in the legislature to a fighter as governor?

VA Well, that's true, but it was just the nature of what I wanted to do. If I were to be a fighter or a scrapper as a minority member, I couldn't get a lot done. If I start banging the Democrats around - I mean, it's tough enough to get something done. If I start becoming a gadfly, then you lose your opportunity to do the kinds of things you wanted, so that was the role that I played. I was not one that swung wide as a Republican leader, you know, to challenge the Democrats and beat all this. To me, I said, If I do that, and I'm oftentimes tempted to do it, then you lose our opportunity, really, to sneak in an amendment here or get somebody to listen to what you want to say. But as a governor, now, I'm trying to use the weight of the office of governor, and I had that opportunity to get the job done.

CH There was another interesting comment, too, by Robert Knipe, I guess it is, president of the Oregon Trucking Association. The quote was, He must have planned in his mind more than any other recent governor he would be there some day and how he would act.

VA That's a great observation, because that was not the case.

CH I know you've said that.

VA As I got close to it, when I'm running for office, then, of course, I thought about what I would - I knew what I would want to do if I were a governor, particularly during the McCall years, when, as I say, things were turned upside down. That's why I ran for a governor. But this wasn't a longstanding thing, this was not something I had planned, you know, in 1963 or anything like that. Bob was a great lobbyist. He became a personal friend of mine, beside being a lobbyist.

CH There was another comment here. It said, Taking office, he engaged in no wholesale cleaning housecleaning, largely retaining the administrators appointed by his predecessor Bob Straub. Was that true?

VA Um-hmm.

CH Did you feel that you would have their loyalty?

VA Sure. I made some changes. All governors do. That's why I objected to the Goldschmidt style. Goldschmidt - anybody that had anything to do with Atiyeh got dumped. That's the wrong thing to do. It really is wrong. It's wrong in the sense of just institutional memory, if nothing else. If you can the top heads, you just lost an awful lot. You know, there were some that I moved, changed, kept but changed to a different agency, some that I kept, but in terms of loyalty, I had no problem with that. These were professional people. I knew them, and if I had confidence in them, I didn't care whether they worked for Bob Straub or were a registered Democrat. It didn't make any difference to me. If I felt they were competent and capable of doing what I wanted to do, I knew they would do it. Neil Goldschmidt actually canned everybody, so it took him about two and a half years to kind of catch up. If he had taken what we

had left him, made changes, which was expected, over a gradual basis, he could have jumped from the plateau where we were up to a higher point. He didn't. He canned everybody, and so we went into a slump, and he had to finally catch up. Now, he doesn't know all this because he didn't - didn't realize it, but I'm the observer now, and I ^{know} government and what it's all about. He was using the Washington, D.C., style. You know, a new administration, everybody goes, new people come in. No governor, to my knowledge, previous to that had done that. Hatfield hadn't done it, McCall didn't do it, Straub didn't do it, I didn't do it. Now, we all made changes, but not like Goldschmidt. I likened it to the Scarlet Letter, that book, you know, where Hester had this A on her sweater. Well, you know, if an A stood, not for adultery, but stood for Atiyeh, if you had an A on your sweater, out you go [laughter].

CH Well, it was also said that you had daily noontime open houses and frequent press conferences. Was that a regular?

VA Yes.

CH And the open houses, were they real open houses? Anybody could come in?

VA Absolutely. From 12:30 till 1:00 every day I was available in Salem, I would just walk out there in the ceremonial office, and anybody that wanted to come in would come in. It was marvelous to see reactions. Are you the governor? Yeah. Are you really the governor? Yeah. They couldn't believe that here was the governor and you could just walk in and say hello if you wanted to. They couldn't believe it. Oh, it was marvelous. I enjoyed those, I looked forward to it. My successors, either one, they don't - really didn't like to do that.

CH Did you find people that took advantage of that access?

VA You mean repeatedly?

CH Yeah.

VA No.

CH Or that came to you with very particular problems?

VA Oh yeah, they'd come with problems. And obviously, if you've got an open house, you're going to get all kinds of people. Some were mentally disturbed, and I can remember some. Gee whiz, I can remember this poor woman that - she said she had been raped, she'd been raped in her hair. She was mentally disturbed, you know that. And I'd have some staff around. Sometimes they'd come and, like a person like that, talk with her and just kind of ease her out. Security was always nervous, but they were there. If people would have a problem, we'd get one of my - you know, a particular problem, well, let's say something to do with natural resources, we'd get Pat Amadeo and hook them up, or I'd say, Go down to room so and so. So you'd get people going in that direction. It was interesting. You can kind of tell when some people are really uptight. You can tell. There's something about their eyes where you can really tell they're really uptight about something. I never worried about it, never worried about it. As a matter of fact, now that I think back on it, it was a terrible burden, but I had told my security, particularly Lon Holbrook, who was with me most of the time, "I'm not going to worry about this. You worry about it." That's an awful load. It really is an awful load. Of course, they were worried about it. Lon Holbrook, Lieutenant Holbrook, he was my security. If something happened, you know, it was his

responsibility. He used to kid me, "I wouldn't really mind that too much," he'd say, "except it's the darn paperwork." So we used to laugh about that. But I enjoyed it and looked forward to it, and I'd - oh, particularly when schools would come and these little kids would sit on the floor, it was interesting. The early grades, oh, they were great - you know, the first, second, third grades - and they'd ask all kinds of questions, you know. Then you get into middle school or high school, and now they're too embarrassed to ask any questions, so they don't ask questions. But the little kids would ask, you know, Do you have a dog? or Where do you live? or How much does this building weigh, or all kinds of interesting questions, and I would enjoy those.

We'd also use that for swearing in of boards and commissions and people. We'd use that period of time for that. The media - I used the word media availability. That went all the way through once a week. And the media didn't like that to start with, media availability, but I was trying to make a distinction between a press conference when I'm sitting down, I want to talk to you, versus media availability, what do you want to talk about? Anything. And one of the mementos that I treasure very much, and I have it in my office, is a little calligraphy thing, very simply done, Thank you from the Capitol Press Corps. You know, the media doesn't do things like that, but they thanked me for my accessibility, and I treasure that, and it's hanging on the wall.

CH Did you have formal press conferences very often?

VA Once in a while, but not very often. But always media availability.

CH And they got used to it and they liked it?

VA Yep. And then I began to think, gosh, between sessions maybe they won't be particularly interested in it because they'd either have to come down or cover it in their own way, but they came down and they'd cover it, just in case I'd say something that was interesting [laughter].

CH Well, it was probably good publicity for you too, wasn't it?

VA I liked it. Actually, to me, media availability was a highlight of my week. I really looked forward to it, I really looked forward to it.

CH I guess we could go from here into the issues of the '79 legislature.

VA Okay.

CH One of the main issues, of course, was taxes, and legislation was approved for a state payment of 30 percent of a homeowner's property taxes. This is the homeowner and rental relief.

VA That was - remember I told you about the mistake of saving that 600 million? That's what they were going to use for that purpose. The mistake, basically, though, was, this was to go to everybody, and, you know, the obvious people I knew, they didn't need property tax relief. I mean, they were making a lot of money and they really didn't need it. But there were people who did need it, and needed it badly, and that's the distinction I carried through, even when I dealt with welfare. There were some people that really need it desperately and other people that would like to have it. I would use the term repeatedly, not only in that case but others, that there was the essential and the

desirable, and so - but they gave it to the desirable that didn't really need it. So that was the mistake. That's where they made the big mistake. They spent a lot of money unnecessarily when we could have done things like lower our income tax rate, for example, which makes Oregon look better for economic development. Those kinds of things.

CH Another issue, which we'll talk about a little bit later too, was revision of the state welfare system to deny benefits to two-parent families in which both parents are able to work. This came up later, and in terms of the length of how much assistance, whether it should be six months or a year and - but in this case...

VA Well, that was part of reform, and at least for me to tell the story, there's a distinction between a single-parent family and a two-parent family. We proposed, if I'm not mistaken, from May to the end of September that there be no welfare for a two-parent family. We picked that period of time because that was the high employment period in the state. A single parent really has a tough time in terms of...

[End of Tape 28, Side 1]