

Tape 62, side 1

11 June 1998

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 Hanson. The date is 6/11/98, and this is sort of a catch-up from where we were several years ago when we finished the interview so this is tape 60 A, side 1. I thought I would like to begin by just having you give a summation of how you felt your political career went and what you basically accomplished.

VA That's not going to be a short answer I think, I tell you. I know we well covered my introduction into government and the thoughts that went through my mind at the time and why I got started, and people would ask me that question, and I know that we have covered that pretty well. I served as a minority member in my entire career in the Oregon legislature so the things that occurred during my tenure all would be things that probably I would be the only one to remember and I don't remember all that much and when I say that to you, so much it was involved in making what I would consider bad legislation there, proposing amendments I was – I [would be ?] respected as time moved on and I was able to get amendments and change things and move them in the direction where, if they were going to pass, this is the way they ought to be.

I remember spending hours of time when I was not in favor of a sales tax, developing a sales tax bill, and my thought was that it – [if] there becomes a law in Oregon, it [had] better be a good one, and so I was going to give it my shot although I wasn't in favor of it. That kind of thing was where I was involved. Land use, sometimes it is misunderstood; land use planning, for example, I keep hearing that I was opposed to it, and I just makes me angry as hell because I wasn't opposed to it. I was opposed to some of the language in the bill. I was opposed to some of the ways it was going, but I wasn't opposed to my planning, and I always use as an example one of the elements in the original bill was it allowed the state of Oregon to have a regional land use body plan for Oregon and - Hell, I'm a person that [believes] government closest to the people is the

best and, meaning, hell, city, county, at the most, and here, he is talking about having somebody land use plan somewhere up in region ten in Seattle. Well, it's kind of a thing got out of the bill.

So, those are the kinds of things that occurred, but I feel good about my tenure in the legislature. I feel that I did have a positive influence on this, some good legislation passed, and some of it, of course, if I sponsored and [mechanical background noise interrupts] \_\_\_\_\_ review went through all of that. Now we get to my time, in the time as governor. Here is where I am going to take a little more detailed time. I do remember this, and I first ran in 1950, it was extremely difficult for me to tell people why they' ought to vote for me. I guess that is the modesty factor, well, but you know, you finally get over it; you say, well, these are one of the things I have done, and I feel good about it, and so it isn't just bragging, oh see, you are telling how you feel. The thought that I have \_\_\_\_\_, you know, I said, you know it didn't look like I we could put you to finish what we had in mind [a sharp high pitch hiss] I wanted to recap my governor years.

CH Yes.

VA And, when I was leaving, people said, 'Well, what do you think people will say about your tenure as a governor?' and I said, "Well, you know, it's not up to me; it is up to whoever is going to write Oregon history." But, as time has moved along, I am not so really sure that I had ought at least get my shot in, and so I am really anxious to say why I think my tenure as governor was good, because so much of it, I notice it now that years have moved by, people take some things that are here as if they have always been here, but they *haven't* always been here. They weren't here when I started as a governor.

CH: What kinds of things are you referring to here?

VA: Well, of course, I will be more definitive about it, but the diversification of the economy of the state of Oregon, that wasn't always here, the internationalization of the

state of Oregon, that wasn't always here, those things, why, even the Columbia River Gorge legislation wasn't here, the regional power authority wasn't here, the unification of the courts weren't here.

VA: I will get a little more detailed into that in a second. Anyway, I have decided now that I am not going to be all that modest, and I am really going to try and say as I see it. Now again, understanding that historians and writers are willing to make their own decisions, because they say, well, Vic Atiyeh, well it will just be Vic Atiyeh. [If] anybody is going to talk about his own history, obviously it is biased in their favor. So they have to be unbiased and I don't want to - OK? One of the things that I really am proud of - and this is interesting: so many people remember, for example, Tom McCall and we had the gasoline shortage and the odd-even, and so what, incidentally there was long lines and there was a lot of attention, and all the rest. They remember that. They don't remember when we had the same gas shortage when I was governor. And the reason they don't remember it is because we avoided the crisis, and it seems to be so fascinating, in political life that there is the hero that comes after a crisis occurs, but nobody really pays any attention to someone that avoided a crisis.

Let me shift over. All these grand new remarks of Iacocca saving Chrysler. But nobody thinks about the chairman or the president of the Ford Motor Company where there was no crisis, or the chairman or the pres of General Motors, where there was no crisis, but they get no credit for not having gone, gotten to a crisis mode. When the gasoline shortage came up, I said, I am remembering where it had taken place. I got a hold of the gasoline dealers and I got a hold of some of the others, sat down. "Now, look, guys. We've got a problem we've got to deal with." and instead of everybody going up and making press for races. "Let's work this thing out," which we did. And, there never was a crisis. Avoiding crisis to me was important, so people don't remember because of it, the crisis didn't occur. We didn't have the problems we have today, i.e. without Measure 5, the limitation of property, the problems with the school funding, and all the rest. Could have, because there were, repeatedly there were, very bad property tax limitation bills, and this as governor, I among others of course, were out there campaigning against

it, and so they never passed. I as a governor was out there on bills of the one to repeal Senate Bill 100 that land use laws, and they never passed, and people stopped doing that now. Maybe even more difficult was when the Baghwan and Rajneesh was here trying to keep the level down, and that was very difficult for me politically. People said the governor is not doing anything, well, there was, but the governor wasn't telling the world what the governor was doing. And, other politicians were – it was 'good' to say, "Get the S.O.B.s out!" and you know that was good politically... [phone interrupts].

Well, let me give you some examples. I'm going to relate something, but I'll come back to what I meant when I – met with the media many times, and I conclude there is one of three ways you could answer any question.

[One:] I know the answer and I am going to tell you.

[Two:] I don't know and I'll find out, or

[Three"] I know, but I am not going to tell you. The Rajneesh was in that category.

CH Of "I know but I'm not going to tell you"?

VA I know, I am not going [to] tell you. And, they would say, well, now we are ready for the Baghwan no matter what they do, the Rajneesh. Well, what is that? I am not going to tell you. If I tell you, obviously, I'm telling them, and I don't want to tell them. Well, that was the mode that we were in. My chief of staff Jerry Thompson and Bob Oliver my legal assistant, they met with them. I never met with them, constantly to assure them [that] the governor does not bargain, which they wanted to do. I had the National Guard at the height of it, when it got really intense. I had then on training at Redmond. Well, we had the helicopters, we had a personal carrier, all that kind of stuff in training, "in training." So they were standing by. Obviously I'm not going to tell them and owe the public as a matter of fact. Those were the kinds of things that we were doing quietly. They brought all these street people in. I kept telling, "You brought them in, these poor souls, you've got to pay to get them back home." And I kept pressure on them but I did never tell them. I made a deal with the Salvation Army quietly without money to them, but get the people, put them on a bus, and send them back home." Never told

the Rajneesh that, nor the public. All of these things are the matter of avoiding crisis, avoiding the fate that could worse than what was happening. I feel good about that. We did it! That's my mode, that's my philosophy. Many will say, and they have repeatedly [said, that] the management of state government during the recession and Oregon got to 12.6% unemployment, which was - I don't remember now - the third or fourth highest in the nation.

Lynn Newbry, who was a state senator at one time as was my [[- listen -]] transition, said to me - and I don't remember when it was - anyway, [at] the depth of the recession at the end of the year he said, "Vic, you must be doing something right." And I said, "Well, what do you mean, Lynn?" He said, "I haven't seen any article in the front page of the paper about some family living in the back of an automobile, or somebody getting kicked out or out of the house. I haven't seen any of that stuff."

Well that is kind of symptomatic of the way we were handling the whole situation. Not just well, but it was a matter of being able to do it well, and do it precisely. So it just didn't happen, and good people working for me, we had the right philosophy in terms of how we were going to try and deal with government. Everybody got cut, I mean, all of the budgets were cut. I kept saying I want to do as well or better, work [with] less money, and I would say most often we did. We had no welfare reform, and it wasn't a matter of philosophy [of] let's kick the rascals out. It's a fact that most people didn't want to be on welfare, and we had to do everything we could to keep them off or help take them off, so that was our philosophy, so you know, you can casually say that got you through the recession, we got to stay through the recession without any problem, but it was a very difficult, very - [sighs] we made some very hard choices .

I think I've told you on the tape, I would go home and I - like my body would beat, was it wasn't. It was just sitting there and making these decisions and wanted to make sure he made them right. Even to the extent like for example, people they get, reach a certain economic level, they go on welfare. But, If you say we're going to cut all budgets 10%, these people are just barely into welfare, maybe they could survive. [However], the

people on the bottom of welfare, a 10% cut is *devastating*. So we are talking about the same body of people all on welfare, but some are more desperate than others. But you have to understand and know that.

CH When people refer to your tenure as being a “caretaker governor,” I guess you could see that, either as complimentary derogatory depending on, because of the situation you were having to deal with, with the recession, [and] everything like that. How do you respond to that?

VA Well, you know, you can't really maybe, hopefully, by this conversation, somebody will look at the tapes someday and say, ‘By God, that's not sure,’ because we were more than just caretaker. There were a lot of things going on besides just running the state government the way the state government ought to run. Many, many things are happening. So people will mention that, meaning a recession, and how we managed to get through it; and as I tell you, I had very good people. When we talk about how did I deal with some of the things, I was *very* resentful, very resentful of Neil Goldschmidt during his campaign talking about the deadwood in our government. That was a cruel thing and unfair thing to say about the people I had worked so hard for the people state of Oregon. But, you know, that's the politics of it. That is why *I* want to talk and get *my* view across. People will say that, but let me tell you the Atiyeh version. I was very proud, in fact; I traveled Oregon extensively. You know, I'm always suspicious of round figures, but certainly at least a quarter million miles of travel inside the state of Oregon. That is because I believe it was necessary to get out and talk to people, and the thing they call the “Other Oregon” really, it never appeared during my administration.

CH The “Other Oregon” being a reference to...

VA Downstate, upstate, Eastern Oregon, Western Oregon, whatever it might be, because I was out there talking to Oregonians, sharing with them, being with them, I mean, I was there working real hard to make sure everybody got [the] same kind of attention as the major urban areas would get. Matter of fact, one of the things I got a lot of static on was

I wanted to have the state own an airplane. [laughs] Somebody gave me one of the little wooden toy airplanes and said this is the only airplane you were going to get.

CH [Laughs.]

VA But my whole idea was that my state agencies had heads, you know, you think one from Eastern Oregon, it would take a day to go there, a day while they're there, and a day to come back. If you had an airplane, they could go there, they could go to two or three towns one day and come back. You know, the legislature didn't have the guts to do that. I asked for one; I had the guts to ask for it, and all I get is a lot of criticism and static. It was just a matter of getting out and letting people know. That is part of what I consider one of the assets of my administration. I like people, I like Oregon, I like to travel Oregon, and I think that my, at least [my] successors, weren't that – didn't have that same attitude. I operated with a limit on the growth of state government, and a limit on the growth of state employees. The first thing my successor did was to immediately ask for where the elimination of the limit of growth on state government, and incidentally got it. That is something that shouldn't have happened, but it did.

Now, I've got a list here; let me go through my list. Out of my office I can have – I have a very clear recollection of this, it's just like a photograph. Congress had passed a law changing the opportunity for people to get food stamps, and it was very difficult, and a matter of fact, my affirmative action officer Jackie Moyers came in and says they were getting a lot of complaints that people were purely run [out] of food stamps, and I said to Jackie, we can't wait for Congress, they made a mistake, we can't wait for them, sure we've got to do something about this. Out of that conversation came Oregon Food Share. It was the first, and probably - I don't know what it is now - the only, but certainly for a long time the only nation agency for collecting, storing, and distributing food to the hungry. Now it is called the Oregon Food Bank. This is one of those things people think always was there, but wasn't there until we started. We started, and I am very proud of, I call, it was called then Oregon Food Share.

Oregonians, and certainly I was among them, had a kind of restless feeling. Mine was more than restless, about getting some kind of legislation to keep the Columbia River Gorge as beautiful as I saw it for my children and grandchildren. I had a very special feeling about that, but Washingtonians really weren't that excited about it. They looked at Oregon, we looked at Washington. Certainly, by the time they got up to Olympia, they were long removed from the Columbia River Gorge. I had to somehow get the governor Spellman's attention, because I said to myself if the two or less governors can say that something ought to be done about this, maybe we can get this whole thing cranked up and going through Congress.

CH Was he receptive to that?

VA Well, it took awhile. A lot of negotiation, you know, he wasn't thinking about the Gorge. I was, and so that's not a matter of picking on him, it just wasn't in any part of his agenda. We had to make it part of his agenda. We finally did it, and made an agreement. We agreed on principles, we agreed and signed a bill, with the signature of mine, and that is the beginning of what really put a lot of heat and moving. At that point, there were a lot of actors in it, and some that really deserve a lot of credit, and Mark Hatfield was one of them. He is one of them that got the bill passed, and it is his influence that made that finally happen. I can claim a good part of it, because the President, Reagan, was going to veto the bill, and I called Jim Baker, and said to him – it was his chief of staff, Jim, I have never asked anything of the President, and he said, I yeah, Vic, I know you haven't.' I said, "I want this." so the President didn't veto it.

Well, nobody questions the - unless I told you, and I just now told you. I got too worried about, early on, about the power. We have dams in different areas, we have some coal fire plants around, not just in the state of Oregon. I kept saying that the power was like a large pool. You don't have different levels in a large lake, meaning Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, you know its one large lake. And so I sent then Lee Johnson who was my chief of staff, I sent him on what I call a Kissinger route, I said now, don't back any of these guys into a corner, but let's start doing it. So he traveled in Washington, Idaho,

Montana, back and it finally worked out and out of that came the Northwest Power Planning Council, and I will tell you also that it was our idea to include in there a fishery. Again, this is something people think was always there, but it wasn't until we created – had a hand in making the creation of it.

This probably is less fascinating to people than the ones I just mentioned, but as a legislator all of these years, we would have – a fellow would give us a forecast for income in the state of Oregon and we would use that then to create our budgets and balance our budgets. Well, during those years, he really couldn't go wrong, you know, in \_\_\_\_\_, no matter what he would predict, it was going to be more. I keep reading in the newspaper that the state "found" money. Well, we didn't find it, you know, the economy is good. So matter what this economist said, you couldn't go wrong. [clears throat]. But we didn't know what he was making his decision on, because he was, in fact, he was selling to us. If he told us, then, we didn't need him. I said, well now, we can't have one person doing this, so we created the economic product, kind of metric modeling, of the economy, and I created the Economic Council, advisory council, and that turned out to be one of the really, very good things that happened, because we had the downturn, we had the recession, we had it well enough that we could know what the econometric model in our economic council, we could get a head start and do something about rebalancing our budgets when we had a chance to do it, and time to do it. Had we not done that, I do not know what would have happened. I really don't know what would have happened. Well, as I say, that was not quite as successful, you could say sexy, but that was very important. [?] Again, people think that was always there; it wasn't always there. I really do love that \_\_\_\_\_ [?] purchase, that was just a really, a happening almost. The opportunity came to acquire it and people need to understand that in private ownership, first of all, you can't fish in the Deschutes from a boat; you have to go ashore. Well, obviously, you can't go ashore on private property, and this was private property, but it was being sold and it would have gone to private hands and fishermen couldn't fish from the banks. Oh, what a wonderful thing it was. We had all these different agencies get together, the Oregon Heritage Foundation spear-headed the thing, we raised money and bought it.

CH You were in an – actually in a club that is over there on the Deschutes River.

VA The Deschutes Fly Fishing Club, that is part of the folks that helped us, but there were a lot of others. The various Trouts Unlimited and Steelheadders and oh, it was wonderful. It was a wonderful thing, and great to be a part of it. I created the Black Commission and the Hispanic Commissions, and that was interesting. I happened to be, incidentally, of a mind that it is my hope the day would come where you don't need those, but I also knew that you needed to highlight it, you needed someone to spearhead it and you need some way to keep it constantly in front of the people and the legislature. These are things you have to have trouble understanding. Yeah the Democrats were in control. They are for the people, you understand. They are for the little people. They are for the common people [CH laughs]. They gave these commissions one dollar [?]. Now, what it did was it legitimized the commission, but it also said now you've got a fishing license, go raise your own money. I am saying to myself, now wait a minute, these folks are supposed to be for all of these people, you know, that is the reputation they had, and I don't. I'm a Republican; I am not supposed to be for these things. Anyway, I did create, and we finally got budgets for them.

CH What was their resistance to it, why?

VA I have no idea.

CH Really?

VA I have no idea. I don't know why, I can't answer the question. It would seem to me that no matter what it was it was important to have these things, but they didn't do it. I created this Senior Services Commission. These were to make sure that the senior services, seniors had all the services that were available to them, and actually that led to a division for seniors which I'm not quite sure if that fair, but it was interesting, because a lot of seniors were a little suspect of it. Reverend \_\_\_\_\_ [McGennagin??] who was really

my point person, he was a respected senior, and it worked out very well, and it helped the seniors in the state of Oregon.

Part of the 1985 session, I \_\_\_\_\_ [?] any bit, part of the session, there was a burning of the cross on the lawn of the \_\_\_\_\_ [?] in Milwaukie, and I was really, really, very angry about that. I hate bullies, and I have since I was a kid. I don't know why, I just hate them, and these are bullies.

Anyway, we finally worked out a bill that made racial and religious harassment a felony in the state of Oregon, and incidentally, I don't really want to put this to the tape, I will tell you that I thought again, I'm working with the Democrat legislature that that was just be a slam dunk; it was at 1:00 in the morning on the last day of the session. It probably next to the last or very close to next to the last bill that was passed, and I argued with two leaders, Democrat leaders, early in the morning to get that bill passed, and it finally passed. I thought it would go winging through because I was angry about the cross burning, these people who were supposed to be both for the little man, I don't know. It was in my message when I addressed the legislature at the start of the session. Anyway, I feel good about that. Court reform, yes...

End of tape 62, side 1.

Tape 62, Side 2

CH An interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office, this is tape 61 – 60A side 2.  
Go ahead.

VA Okay. Another one of those things that people think has always been there, that is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court is the, well, I quite mess up [?] what to say that he is in charge of the entire court system of the state of Oregon. What we call court reform,