

VICTOR ATIYEH

August 16, 1993

Tape 53, Side 1

C.H.: 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 August 16th, 1993, and this is Tape 53, Side 1.

V.A.: You recall we talked about when we were talking about Reagan and my objection about cutting the budget, and I was going to cut back the military? And I told you then that I was proposing to cut back the military, and I am no - you know, I'm one that believes in the military and preparedness. But my position was that nobody could spend that much money well. They couldn't spend it well.

I guess that's what I'm saying about Congress: With all that money, they just don't spend it well. They don't have an understanding of it. They can't say no. They can't say no to anybody.

C.H.: Do you think a constitutional amendment would help at all, like Oregon has regarding their own budget?

V.A.: Yeah. A line-item veto would help, as well. A line-item veto - you know, we talked about the number of vetoes I had. I call myself the modern day record. The threat of veto oftentimes prevented some legislation from coming to me, just the threat of veto.

That would help, but that of course depends upon the guts and courage of the chief executive, which of course is the President in this case. But I'm just not convinced that - we know we're going to get a tax increase. That bird is in the hand. The budget cuts are the two birds that are in the bush. I want - I mean, I want one in my hand, and I'm not satisfied that those two birds in the

bush aren't going to fly away. But the tax increase I've got in my hand. That I've got. We know that. But we hope for a budget cut. I say no, I'm not going to hope that much. I don't have that much trust in those guys.

And you know, at that point, including I would say the legislative process, Oregon, and I became very cynical about the whole thing. And I said, "Well, maybe it's time for a guy like me to be leaving anyway." My cynicism was pretty heavy, still is.

They said, "Do you miss being Governor?" I said, "I don't miss the process at all. I miss people very much. I don't miss the process."

And you know, when you become cynical, it's time to bundle it up. But I am cynical, and I guess I have a reason for being cynical because when I look at the history of things over all the years that I've been intimately involved I've seen things that should not have happened, but they did.

C.H.: Just in general, do you feel that things are getting better or things are getting worse?

V.A.: What do you mean "things"? What kind of things?

C.H.: Well, I mean in general is our standard of living, is life getting better for most people, or is it getting worse? Or is it about the same?

V.A.: Well, I don't think it's getting worse, although I wonder. I'm going to jump into something that sounds a little bit conservative. I think in terms of moral fiber, things are getting worse; the greater desire of, "Well, if I'm a failure, government will take care of me." I wonder about these homeless. You know, why are there so many homeless? Why? I don't think it's because of the general economy of the country because the country's pretty strong, but, you know, if Oregon has high unemployment, then, okay,

we've got some homeless, I can understand that, or those that need food.

C.H.: Why do you think there are so many homeless?

V.A.: Mixed in there, and I can't separate them, are what I call the voluntarily poor. They just decided that's what they wanted to do.

Now, there's no way I can - it becomes a little difficult because I know there are some in there that have chosen that lifestyle. Fate didn't choose it for them; they chose it. And yet I can't base any program that I have on the fact that I know that some people chose it and they're going to take advantage of my tax dollar because there's a lot of people out that didn't make that choice. It was thrust upon them.

But when I start thinking about those people that - well, let me go back. During a recession, we had 12.6 percent unemployment. The state began to pull out of it. Actually, prior to that time I started in my office Oregon Food Share. It was the first, and maybe still is the only, statewide collection, storage and distribution of food for those in need. We started that in my office. That was before the recession - or as we were heading into it, but we didn't know how deep we were going to go.

However, as we began to come out of it - and I asked the question, I remember it, several times during my staff meetings, "Now that we're coming out of the recession, why is it that more people need food? You know, I can understand it when you're in a recession, but we're coming out of the recession, and instead of the number shrinking, it's getting larger. Why? I don't know."

You have to be very careful about this because you're talking about the personal lives of people, we tried - I asked for a survey - you know, it had to be a voluntary survey without names - just to

try to get the profile of who these people are. Never really satisfactorily got one.

But the only thing I can think of, and we're talking about the homeless and those that need food, Americans are very mobile people, and I think very often they move away from their support system. They move away from their brothers or sisters or cousins or mothers or fathers. You know, they've moved. They've gone; they've gone somewhere else. They don't have that person to turn to.

Now, this is a conclusion I came to on my own. It was not something that came as a result of anything that I saw. I still wonder about it. I really do.

C.H.: The breakdown of the family?

V.A.: Yeah, and I think a lot of it is that the moral fiber of people - let me just kind of ramble a little bit.

You know, I'm listening to Quayle, and he's jumping on Murphy Brown because she's going to have a baby without a father. And I'm saying to myself, "What in the world are you doing this for? This is a comedy show. You know, nobody's sitting there promoting morality. You would be much better off if you'd start talking about violence on television."

You know, I don't watch these things, but you see the previews of things to come, and it's always blowing up buildings and smashing cars and machine guns - you know, and all this. And this has been going on for a long period of time. And he picks on Murphy Brown. I have no doubt that the violence that we're facing today is because these kids have grown up with all that stuff.

A good case in point is that the FCC is thinking about forbidding the Camel cigarette camel because it's influencing children to smoke. And I said, "Whoa, wait a minute. If that is indeed the case, and the children are being influenced by Joe the

Camel to smoke, then how about all the machine guns and explosives and bombs and all that? Isn't that doing it? I mean, how come you're getting excited about this, Joe, when all that's been going on?"

I have no doubt in my mind that all this violence out there is because of what these kids have grown up with on television.

C.H.: Then how do you deal with the free speech issues?

V.A.: The freedom of speech - you've heard it - freedom of speech does not cover someone that yells "Fire!" in the middle of a crowded theater.

C.H.: But does this constitute the same thing?

V.A.: Yes. To my way of thinking it does, because what's actually occurring is that they are frightening and leading people to believe things, that this is okay. They never quite figure out at the end - the white hat always wins. You know, even in the shoot-em-up bang things, the white hat always wins; the black hat loses. But they never follow that morality. The macho machine guns, you know, and killing people, and blood splattering all over, and they always have to smash cars and occasionally blow up buildings.

You know, when you asked me are we better off, I would say in a very broad sense that America is. It's a strong country. We are better off in many respects. There are some things there that are wrong, among them the things that I'm telling you, that do need to be corrected.

But I pick on the television, but you read in the newspaper about the - was it Sunday or Saturday? - this young man that admitted he'd sold over a hundred cars?

C.H.: Right.

V.A.: Okay. And what did he say? He said in there the way you try to stop this is that you actually punish the person that

does this. But he knew he could steal a car and he really wouldn't have to serve any time. He knew it.

And the criminals know this, see. The criminals know this. The thing that we - remember we talked about the fact that we need - really need more prisons, and the people say, "Put all those people in jail," but they wouldn't vote the bonds for jails? The certainty of punishment is an important thing. I believe personally, and as a matter of fact, more than halfway - less than halfway kidding, I should say, is that I would take some of the judges to court because our constitution is based upon that talk in terms of criminals' reformation, and there's no way in the world you reform people by saying, "This is a first-time offense; therefore, we're going to let you off." I would hit them hard the first time. That's when I'd hit them hard, the first time. But we don't do that. The first time: "Well, this is your first time so, you know, we'll overlook this one." To me a crime is a crime. And there has to be certainty of punishment.

Well, we are unable to give that certainty of punishment. We don't have enough jails. And even those that go to jail get out early because there's a new batch coming in.

C.H.: But aren't there alternatives to jail in terms of community service and monitoring devices and things of - aren't there other ways that people can serve if there aren't the jails? And maybe there should be the jails, but since there aren't ...

V.A.: Well, this young man, what did he get? Forty hours of public service work, or I forget how many hours. I'll bet you he's not going to do it. Who's going to be watching and looking over his shoulder seeing that he's actually doing this sort of thing? Okay, it would be parole officers, but then what you have, you have all the parole officers are overloaded because obviously you don't have any place to put these people, so they're on parole. And then

you've got a parole officer, and they're all overloaded. If they had just a handful, they could go watch them all, but we don't have enough parole officers.

There's a lot of things wrong. You asked me the question, and I said yes, America is a better country. We're a strong country, economically strong. The opportunities are still there for people that if they want to have the courage to get ahead. I really like the new U.S. Bank ad; I just have seen it recently, but it shows some fellow jumping off of a high cliff with a parachute, but have you got the guts to run your own business? I like that ad.

We can't overlook, and we shouldn't overlook, the family, indeed a family, is the strength of any country. And the family is being demeaned. We're constantly watching television where people are living together, all these big name stars are having babies and they're not getting married, and I don't think that's very funny, and I don't think that's good. And it's not that I'm a namby-pamby by any means. The point is that I know the glue that keeps us together is the family. We can have a court system, we can have police, we can have legislators, we can pass laws, we can do all those sort of things. But the real glue in any country is a family, and it's important that there be that family unit and there be a commitment. That's where marriage comes in. You know, living together is a non-commitment thing. Marriage is not an easy thing, for two different people to get together and live with each other, it's not easy. But the fact is that if there is that there's concern for the children and there's some help and worry about it.

Well, in that arena I think that we're becoming weaker and that we shouldn't really call someone - you know, he's off the wall saying things like I'm saying. You know, "This guy is clearly way over on the right side of the conservatives." That's not true. My

concern is for this country, the democracy of the United States of America. As I see it, that's one of the problems that exists.

Violence on television, the weakening of families, or disrespect for family, the fact that being a mother at home is kind of looked down on as sort of second class, you know, that that's not the right role for women. You know, it's not that I want to place women anywhere; I'm about as liberated as you can get, and I know in my own mind I am, but if some people choose that for their life, what's wrong with it? I don't mean that they all have to be what we used to say "you chain them to the bedpost," I don't mean any of that at all. But if that's what a family chooses, they should be very proud of that fact.

I'm comforted by the fact that everything that I'm talking about involves few people. In terms of homeless, there are fewer homeless than the rest of us that have homes. In terms of those that use drugs or in terms of those that are criminals, in terms of those that are living together, they're all small. They are not the major part. They get a lot of attention, but they're not the major part of the United States, the people in the United States. So that's where my comfort comes from.

There's still a lot of everything that I'm saying that does exist in the United States. I've been working Boy Scouts most of my life. So there are a whole bunch of people like me, working Boy Scouts. There are those that are working Future Farmers and 4-H and Girl Scouts and Campfire and church youth groups. You know, there's a lot of those people out there. They don't get a lot of attention, but there's a lot of them. So you know, that's where my comfort comes. I know this does not constitute a majority of Americans. They get a lot of attention, but they're not a majority of Americans. So I say, "Okay, I see those danger signals. I

don't like them. I think we need to change them. But at least they're not a majority; they're a small minority."

C.H.: So are you hopeful for the future, then?

V.A.: Mm-hmm. I am. Although I must say that I think that Congress really has to get its act together and really quit playing games.

I remember watching on television - this was when George Bush was President, and George Bush had proposed some kind of an economic package which did involve some taxes. That's where of course he got in trouble, "Read my lips," but watching it on television, and this was a hearing, and here was a Democrat saying, "Oh, well, if you fellows want to vote against your President, we're going to give you this chance, we're going to work this bill out."

And I'm saying to myself, "Now, wait a minute. This is not a game. He's playing the political game. This is not a game." I mentioned it to you earlier, you're dealing with the lives of people, and here you are in a very serious situation, playing it like a game.

Well, I think we'd better stop on that subject. Talk about a soapbox!

C.H.: No, it's important, and especially since you said that when you became cynical you felt that you should leave state government, and of course we're approaching the end of your term as Governor, and so it's good to review some of those things.

And you were talking about the homeless, and of course with the lack of certain types of funding on the state level, some of the people that have been in the state institutions have been turned out onto the street, too, so you have a lot of people that are out there for economic reasons, even though it's ...

V.A.  
~~C.H.~~

Yeah, I would say one of the real tragedies was this push by a lot of people to get people out of mental institutions and into their community. And I can recall very vividly there was a bill that was going to move in that direction, and I do not - I am not an opponent of that concept. But there were citizens out there, call them "Friends of the Mentally Ill," I don't know what they're called. But they were really pushing hard to get these people out.

And I was working with them, but I said, "Now, where are the institutions out there that are going to help take care of these people?"

"Well, they're going to be out there."

Finally I got quite upset. I'd been working with them. And I said, "I'm getting off. I'm getting off this boat." I said, "You're saying to me, 'Jump off the diving board; there's no water in the pool, but by the time you get there, there's going to be water.' I want to see water down there before I jump. I want to see those."

So we didn't do that. It makes people feel good, we're going to have them out in the community. But that's probably the worst thing you could do for them, worse than, even if it's not good, in the mental institution. It's worse if you just turn them loose. That's not fair to these people, nor is it fair, incidentally, to the society out there.

But people get on the swing. They get on the - you know, "This sounds good. This looks good." Yeah, it sounds good. I don't disagree it sounds good. But is it going to work? Is it really going to work? And we don't always get that answer.

Way back in our tape we were talking about the trainable mentally retarded.

C.H.: Right.

V.A.: Remember that? And I said, "Is this the best way to do that?" And they didn't give me an answer, which was the answer. They just wanted money. But because we waited and because we studied it, at the next session we came up with a good plan for the trainable mentally retarded, and I was satisfied.

So it isn't a matter of, you know, "Just give us some money and we'll do something with it." Huh-uh. I'm not unwilling to give you money, but I don't want to just "we'll do something about it," I want to know what that something is.

And that's I guess who I - well, I know that's who I am. I don't want to talk about a problem, I want to solve a problem.

*BUT APPARENTLY* That's not visionary. [laughs]

[End of Tape 53, Side 1]