

# Atiyeh-Johnson team marriage of 'iron fist' and 'Boy Scout'

By DOUGLAS YOCOM  
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SALEM — Twice in the last week Vic Atiyeh has waxed ecstatic in public about how happy he is to be governor of Oregon.

"I'm delighted with the office of governor. Whoever invented the job has my utmost thanks," he told Republicans attending last weekend's Dorchester Conference.

This week Atiyeh has been governor for 60 days, and his performance so far provides some interesting hints about the type of governor he will be during the next four years.

Of the state's recent governors, Atiyeh may be the most technically qualified. He spent 20 years in the state Senate and is accustomed to working not only with the larger legislative picture but with the details as well. He shouldn't be a governor who will be embarrassed about his lack of preparedness when hit with a new issue.

But Atiyeh may be politicizing the governor's office to an extent not seen in years. The new governor appears as innocent as a Boy Scout, and that analogy isn't far off since he has served as president of the Columbia Pacific Council of the Boy Scouts. However, he and Lee Johnson, his executive assistant, play a tough political game. A Salem newspaper columnist recently called Johnson "the iron fist in the velvet glove." The Boy Scout image of Atiyeh shields a political cunning in the governor and his new administration that many Oregonians should see more of in the future.

Another observation is that Atiyeh is immensely popular within his own party. The governor appeared in a skit at last weekend's Dorchester Conference, and the Republican delegates appear to love Atiyeh more than any Republican in the state. Yet many Democrats distrust the new governor, partially because they disagree with his political philosophy.

One Democratic legislator, who asked not to be named, said he believes Atiyeh has a "hidden agenda" that hasn't been revealed. It consists of paying off campaign debts, particularly to private utilities. "He actually will move the state backward," said the legislator, "in a direction the people of Oregon wouldn't support if they knew what he was doing."

That distrust of Atiyeh and his still to be revealed energy policy was part of the reason the state Senate rejected W. Kelly Woods as acting director of the Department of Energy.

Both Senate President Jason Boe, D-Reedsport, and Sen. Ted Hallock, D-Portland, — neither the legislator quoted above, incidentally — said Atiyeh probably would have succeeded in winning Senate confirmation of Woods if the governor had presented his energy program, or at least an outline of it, earlier. As it was, some senators say they wonder if it won't be tilted toward nuclear energy more than they want.

Atiyeh said during the campaign that the Pebble Springs nuclear plant in Eastern Oregon "is necessary to meet the immediate growing energy needs of Oregon." And at least one representative from a private utility sat on his campaign steering committee last fall.

Hallock: "The appointment of Woods was far more important than any of us understood. It involved the role of the private utilities in his campaign . . . and if there is an untoward ability by them to influence the governor. His true colors are being revealed and he is a very conservative Republican."

Boe: "If the outline of his energy program had been there, three or four swing votes might have been changed and Woods would have been confirmed. Maybe before the session is over, energy may have become the key issue in this session."

So far in the first 60 days, it is Somebody 2, Atiyeh 0. He lost Woods' appointment, but he still may win a bigger fight if it turns out the Senate will be reluctant to reject any more of his appointments.

Senate Republican Leader Robert Smith, R-Burns, doesn't consider Woods' appointment a mistake.

"It may mean the Senate was experimenting with its new power. It may mean the Senate has had its pound of flesh. It experimented and won. I think the Senate will have a hard time rejecting his next DOE appointment," said Smith.

The second loss on that "Somebody 2, Atiyeh 0" scorecard involves the defeat of the governor's tax relief package, although whether he has lost that fight remains to be seen until the Legislature decides what it will do in the tax relief area. Atiyeh says he has hopes that the Legislature may turn back to his tax relief plan if the House and Senate can't agree on its own package.

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CLAUDIA J. HOWELL/Oregon Journal

**HAPPY CHIEF** — Republican Gov. Vic Atiyeh is happy with his first two months in office, but Democrats, such as Senate President Jason Boe (seen in the background here), contend Atiyeh has gotten off to a rough start.