

VICTOR ATIYEH

June 15, 1993

Tape 35, 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 15th, 1993, and this is Tape 35, Side 1.

We were just beginning, at the end of the last tape, to talk about the 1982 campaign, your re-election campaign, and I was first wondering when you decided that you were going to run. What was the decision, and what was the decision factor?

V.A.: The cycle really for decision would be, oh, late in the year before. I don't recall when I made my formal announcement that I was going to run, but it needs to be somewhere - you know, you have to make a decision around, oh, October or November that you're going to run next year. And it was about that time I made the final conclusion.

C.H.: I had down here in my notes that there was an announcement of the formation of the Re-elect Governor Atiyeh Committee in September of 1981, and on that committee you had Blake Herring and Leonard Forsgren and Roy Livermore?

V.A.: Yes.

C.H.: Who are those individuals, and why did they form the core of that committee?

V.A.: Well, backing up, Roy Livermore had been my treasurer before. He was a very meticulous, strictly honest individual. And the things you shouldn't have to worry about in a campaign, and certainly this matter of finances is one area, you know, because of all the laws that are involved, all of the reporting requirements, the timetable to doing all of those things, the recording of the

contributions and the receipts that go out. You know, it's a pretty technical thing. And Roy was the kind of a person that I could depend on. I knew he'd get the law, he would read it, he'd read the regulations, and he knew exactly what had to happen and when it had to happen. And so I was totally comfortable. I never worried about it. So that's Roy.

Incidentally, I have an interesting story about him, because he was involved in my first election as well. And Punch Green was - I'm talking now about the general election - Punch Green was the co-chair along with Marge Russell. Marge Russell goes way back in my campaigns ~~and is a~~ ^{As a} legislator, she's a good family friend, a wonderful woman. And because Punch felt an obligation to Tom McCall and to me, he stayed out of ^{THE CAMPAIGN} it. But anyway, when I won, he came on the next day. The interesting story was that Punch was gung-ho. And we're going to have to raise I've forgotten how much money, but you know, we had to budget our money. Roy Livermore was very nervous. "Oh, we can't raise this." I mean this is - being a conservative and an account-type fellow.

By the end of the campaign, it was Roy who was saying, "You've got to go get some more money," and it was Punch saying, "We can't get any more." The roles had been totally reversed. At this point now, Punch Green is back in Washington D.C. I really missed him. I missed him, as a matter of fact, during my years as a governor, and we're looking for those that had been involved in campaigns who were familiar in having worked both of my campaigns and with Punch, and you know, had good savvy.

Leonard Forsgren was a dynamite fund-raiser. He had been, and is well known in politics. A very nice man. But you know, he really knows how to go about raising money.

Blake Herring, a really nice guy, I like him, he's a good man. Not the stature of Punch Green, but at least sort of following in

his footsteps. Incidentally, Leonard has just recently passed away unexpectedly, a relatively young man. Blake Herring, who then had his own business, is now working for Norris ^{BELLS} Brakes and Simpson.

C.H.: Real estate?

V.A.: Real estate, ^{BUILDING} billing management, that sort of thing.

C.H.: At that early point, in 1981, you had listed your possible Democratic opponents as Jim Weaver, Neil Goldschmidt, Don Clark, and Ted Kulongoski. Why did you list them? Obviously, Ted became your opponent and Neil was always sort of there in the wings. But especially with Jim Weaver and Don Clark, had they mentioned the possibility of running for governor?

V.A.: No, he just kind of looked over the scenery and picked who are the potentials for such effect. If I had my choice, I'll tell you for the tape and history, I would have wanted Neil Goldschmidt.

C.H.: Really?!

V.A.: Yes. I would have wanted Neil Goldschmidt. I really wanted to campaign against him. Very much I wanted to campaign against him. Obviously, that's not the way it worked out.

C.H.: Why?

V.A.: You have to ask him, I have no idea.

C.H.: No, why did you want to?

V.A.: Why? Oh, I suppose a matter of ego. You know, he's a fair-haired guy and up and coming Democrat, and he stood for a lot of things that I just didn't think were the right things. I'd like to - you know, I debated all of those during the course of the campaign. We already covered the freeway and a few other things. So, you know, it's just one of those things, I think I - But it didn't work out.

C.H.: That's an interesting comment, because I had here somewhere in my notes that actually ^{KULONGOSKI} Kulangowsky - I think it was

one of the papers that mentioned it - said that it was an interesting campaign, running against Kulongoski because it was the first time - oh, here it is. It was *Willamette Week* that said it - something not seen in Oregon for three decades, a classic labor versus business confrontation. Do you see it as that kind of classic polar opposite type of confrontation? Ideological confrontation?

V.A.: No. We did use constantly in our reference to Ted Kulongoski the - we wouldn't say Ted Kulongoski, we would say ^{of} labor lawyer⁹. We used that frequently, that was part of our script. But in terms of labor and business, and that was the clash, I never thought of it that way. He did things obviously that were destructive to business, in my mind, but I didn't sit down and sort of classify the race that way. I had different thoughts in mind, in terms of how I observed the campaign, what I intended to do, that kind of thing.

C.H.: In the early endorsements that came out, one thing that was interesting was that the Columbia Pacific Building and Construction Trades Council ignored the AFL-CIO and backed you. How was it that they were able to do that? It seems like bucking that organization would have been a pretty difficult thing.

V.A.: I had good support from the craft unions, and although collectively AFL-CIO as such didn't endorse me, there were, you know, separate unions that had the courage to go ahead and endorse me. It took a lot of courage for them to do it, a lot of courage.

C.H.: I bet.

V.A.: It's like my good friend, Bill Fast, who has been a labor - let's see - it's a maritime union, I'm trying to think of what it is - and Bill really took an awful lot of flak because he was not only endorsing, he was actively working, you know, in behalf of my candidacy. Took a lot of beating for it. I admire

that kind of thing. That's tough to go against, you know, the tide in your own peer group.

C.H.: Maybe you could describe a little bit your relationship with the Teamsters and how you viewed them in terms of the upcoming campaign.

V.A.: The Teamsters nationally, as we all know, have a very bad reputation. Corruption and all kinds of things of that kind. Even suggestion of crime. I didn't view it that way in terms of Oregon Teamsters. So you can't - it isn't always a good example of not painting everyone with the same brush. L.B. Day represented Teamsters. They were a very responsible group of people.

C.H.: L.B. Day was working for you re-election too, wasn't he?

V.A.: Yes. So I separate it. Just like I would separate the AFL-CIO leadership in convention against versus the members of organized labor. I've been around long enough to know that they don't pull the string for everybody. There are people out there independent and they're going to exercise their own independence. And that became clear, of course, when election day rolled around. But I said so many times, the AFL-CIO did not endorse me, the Oregon Education Association did not endorse me, the Oregon Public Employees Union didn't endorse me, the Women's Political Caucus didn't endorse me, and I won by 62 percent. But you see, it's the same, you know, what I'm saying basically is that the leadership of those organizations is one thing, but I always knew that the people are not that militant, certainly not in Oregon.

C.H.: Were you trying to formulate a way of dividing labor up so that it wouldn't all go towards Kulongoski?

V.A.: No. This was not a target area for me. I've been a great believer in - and I think we mentioned it before - not compartmentalizing people. Putting them in certain bags - these

are labor people, and these are senior people, and these are whatever you want it to count. That goes against my grain. I don't believe that's - again, we keep coming back to my own personal philosophy. My philosophy is we're all Americans and we shouldn't have to make those kind of separations.

Like in my appointment of ^{GERRY} Jerri Thompson. ^{GERRY} Jerri Thompson, a woman. You don't need that "comma, a woman, end comma". ^{GERRY} Jerri Thompson is a person. So anyway, that's where I come from.

So the campaign wasn't geared to putting people in certain pockets and then appealing to them. The campaign was designed to talk to Oregonians, in the sense of what I believed to be their general feeling, whether the young, old, union, non-union, didn't make any difference to me. That was not my target. My target was to talk to Oregonians who wanted - and now you recall, we were at the very depth of our recession, 12.6 percent unemployment - obviously, they want employment. They want hope for the future. They want, you know, a good stable government. They want somebody in government that really has the strength - and the compassion - to do the job they need^{ed} to be done. And so it was up to me to go out and sell that message.

C.H.: You were also endorsed by the Oregon Public Employees Union, weren't you?

V.A.: No.

C.H.: That was Kulongoski?

V.A.: No, that was one of my big disappointments. I really mean that most seriously. As a matter of fact, I will always remember that.

C.H.: I see. They endorsed Kulongoski, didn't they?

V.A.: Yeah. And it was a disappointment to me because I really believed I had done more good for them than anyone that I had every seen, any governor that I'd ever seen. And when I say

that, it wasn't just a matter of pay. It was a matter of creating a career opportunity for them, to make them feel good about their job, to make them happy working here. It was a whole package of things.

Someone said to me one time, "Have you ever been discriminated against?" Meaning of course because of my Arab background. I said, "No." And then I amended it, "Yeah, I have been." And they raised their eyebrows. "I've been discriminated against because I'm a Republican." And then they kind of chuckle at it, you know, others have. The point is, when have you seen the AFL-CIO endorse a Republican? Rarely. When have you seen the Oregon Education Association endorse a Republican? Rarely. And when have you seen the Women's Political Caucus endorse a Republican? Rarely.

You know, here again, here's a man - meaning me - first woman chief of staff in our history. When I started out, seven out of my ten top posts were women. You know, women in department head positions. And incidentally, I guess I didn't get the endorsement because I didn't do it in a token way, I did it in a natural way. My own feelings are I did very well for labor. Certainly in my own views, I did very well for education. But you see, they couldn't get over that hurdle of "This guy's a Republican; how in the world can we endorse a Republican?"

So anyway, the disappointment was the Public Employees Union. I really will always remember that.

C.H.: Who is or was Ted Kulongoski? How would you describe him?

V.A.: I think he was generally described as, first of all, the up and coming Kennedy type, charismatic, you know, Camelot kind of guy. I don't want to get too editorializing. But I think that's the basic, you know, sort of a vigorous young man with new ideas. Again, I described the hurdles I had to face. Here's this

Kennedy type, vigorous kind of young man, you know, tie loose and all of this sort of stuff, nice head of hair, against this rather mundane, quiet, stuffy old Republican businessman, you know, and I had to get over that hurdle.

C.H.: Who was describing you that way?

V.A.: Non-charismatic, have to add that.

C.H.: And non-charismatic.

V.A.: I don't know if I read it anywhere, I'm sure it was at least street talk.

C.H.: Well, there were a lot of debates over debates, weren't there?

V.A.: No.

C.H.: No?

V.A.: Well, there was. But only as to the shape of the table. It was very interesting. I said to my campaign staff, "Tonight" - meaning primary night - "Tonight I'm going to challenge Kulongoski to debate."

"You don't want to do that."

"Tonight I'm going to challenge Kulongoski to debate. I am not going to go through this nonsense of 'Are you going to debate, aren't you going to debate,' Atiyeh will debate Kulongoski. I'm not gonna go through that. That's a lot of baloney, I am not going to do that."

And so on election night, primary election night, I challenged him to debate. Now, the big controversy was from the media. They picked on it. Well, the dog days of August and nobody's going to pay any attention, what's Atiyeh doing. You know, here's a guy who was the incumbent challenging the challenger to the debate. When was that heard of before? And instead of saying, "Hey, this guy's okay." No, he picked the wrong time to debate. You just can't win. You just can't win.

I'll stop and tell you a joke for the tape. Whoever's going to transcribe this might enjoy it. The whole idea is you can't please people, no matter what you do you can't please them. The story is of the grandmother who was walking her grandchild on the beach. This wave comes sweeping in and sweeps the grandchild out to sea. And she was horrified. She dropping to her knees and began to pray to the Lord. "Lord! Lord! Please return my grandchild! He's a young man, he's got a full life ahead of him. I love him so much. Please, Lord, return my grandson to me."

The next wave comes in and deposits her grandchild very safely right at her feet. She looks up towards the sky and says, "He had a hat."

C.H.: And the next wave probably took both of them out to sea.

V.A.: So you see, you can't please everybody, no matter what you do. Anyway, that's -.

C.H.: There were still these reflections about the Morris-Packwood debates in 1968, and the primary debate of 1978 with McCall and Martin fighting while you were just sort of looking on.

V.A.: Yes, that's true, I told you.

C.H.: So, was there agony on your campaign staff because of this? They didn't want you to do it, did they?

V.A.: No. No. It wasn't that they didn't want me to debate. They didn't want me to challenge him on election night. But I'd just had enough of this nonsense for all those years and I wasn't going to be a party to it.

Now, maybe in terms of arguments as to where it was going to be, and what was the format, and who would respond, you know, those kinds of shape of the table kind of things. But there was no question of debate.

Now, you also asked about how we were observed, or how I was or how Kulongoski was. There was one comment in one of the papers, and I don't recall which; it might have been Foster Church. But anyway, somebody said, and it pleased me very much, "Atiyeh looks like the challenger, not the incumbent." That's precisely what I was doing. That's exactly what I was doing. I was not going to be that incumbent -.

I'm going to pause for a moment, because I told my staff time and again, always, that's both '78 and 1982 - being as you know my athletic background - and I had observed contests, particularly football, oftentimes basketball, where the team would be way out in front, and then would all of a sudden convert and they'd begin to protect their lead. And that's when they'd lose.

And I said, "I'm not going to sit here and do that. I'm not going to do that. I'm going out. If you want to say take the risk, I'm going to take the risk, but I am certainly not going to sit back and vote to protect my lead." So it was this aggressive style of mine that I just - I'm talking about my own personal mental attitude - I'm running for re-election, I've got things I want to do as a governor. I'm not going to take any chances at all. I mean, of losing this race. And so I'm just going to put aside all this nonsensical stuff about a debate and just shove that off to the side. I've other things I want to do. I don't want to argue about it, spend my time, energy on arguing about debates.

As a matter of fact, I told the press so many times, I said, "This is a lot of nonsense. I read about how great this is for the constituent, for the voters, and this is a wonderful thing." And I said, "That's all a lot of nonsense." I said, "You guys are here for the same reason that people go to the Indianapolis 500. They want to see a crash into the third turn. That's why they're going."

C.H.: How did they respond to that?

V.A.: Well, they chuckled because, you know, everybody recalls the Packwood-Morris debates, and everybody's looking for that little gap that's all of a sudden - that's what they're there for. That's what they'll sell all about. And to me it was just cosmetic stuff. It's part of the drama. But not part of the real campaign.

C.H.: Your first debate was at the City Club, wasn't it?

V.A.: Yes.

C.H.: What was that like?

V.A.: That's another good example of campaign. I don't know if I've covered that. I think I may have. If I have, we'll just duplicate it.

During the course of my debates, I knew that I was not talking just to the people who were present. You have to keep that in mind, you know. You get absorbed by I'm talking to these people. But when you have gubernatorial candidates, obviously it's carried by a lot of people. Lot of radio, lot of television, lot of newspapers. So it's going to go out. It's not going to stay in that room, whatever you're doing is not staying in that room.

And this is early in the campaign, or contest between each other, and so I'm saying, "Okay, I've got to kind of take care of some things." I'm not sure how it was reported, whether it was reported a tie or ^{Kulongoski} Kulongoski won, I don't remember. But it was no better than a tie, or Kulongoski won. It was never Atiyeh won anything. But Ted Kulongoski had taken a real shot at the farmers, talking in terms of the fact that they had abused their workers and the migrant workers, and it wasn't just a matter of that, but I've forgotten exactly the terminology. But he'd taken a real shot at the farmers.

So now, here we are at the City Club in downtown Portland, we get to ask questions of our opponent. So I'm asking Ted Kulongoski about his thoughts in regard to the farmers. Now, what I had in mind was to have him repeat for this great public audience this shot he'd taken at the farmers. Which he did. So that sort of took care of the farmers, as far as Kulongoski was concerned.

That strategy - and you see, no one would even notice that I'm repeating it, they'll probably never repeat it anywhere in the newspapers, nobody probably even noticed it. Except the farmers. So I felt good about it. I felt comfortable in the process. I knew what I was doing, I knew where I was going, I knew what I wanted to get accomplished.

Incidentally, campaigns are - it's sort of an accumulation. What you say today is not going to do the job, but maybe if you say it 15 to 20 times, then it begins to come across. And so, this is all part of the pattern of trying to develop that message that you want to get across.

But you have to know what your message is, and you have to make sure you repeat it. Maybe in different words. I got tired. I mean, I had - let me see, ^{changed} ~~read~~ speech really wasn't ^{changed} ~~read~~, but there was the text of the speech. But you know, I just couldn't - it's not within me to repeat something exactly the way I said it before. I can't do that.

C.H.: Would you generally make speeches like a formal speech with a completely prepared verbatim text, or would you do it with notes, usually?

V.A.: In the case of the debates, the opening and closing - well, the closing less so, although you have a framework for the closing, but you don't know what's going to happen, you know, during the course of the debate. But the opening, of course, you do have. And so you sit down and figure that very precisely,

because you have a limited amount of time, it's a waste of the certain amount of time you have to do that, and you want to make sure at least you set the stage for what you want to stay. So that's usually scripted in a sense.

There may be a framework for closing. It may be a repeat of something that you said at the very beginning to sort of cap it off. But then you have to also be alert to the fact of what you may want to insert, or finish - sometimes you can't finish the answer to a question or something like that.

I recall very, very well - you know, I wasn't even interested in running for elected politics myself, but when I was quite young and Dewey was running against Stassen, and this was the Oregon primary. And in those days, the Oregon primary was very big because it led into California, a sort of momentum thing out of Oregon. So candidates really wanted very much to get Oregon.

And there was this debate between Stassen and Dewey. It was on radio. No television in those days. I don't recall the debate at all, but I do recall in the closing - and I'm going to paraphrase - Dewey had the last word. And in effect, he said, "You see, everything I said was right and everything he said was wrong." Now obviously, that's a paraphrase. But you know, that's a pretty clever tactic because, you know, he's got the last word and he's leaving the listeners with something.

But debates are way overplayed in terms of the campaign, and how successful the campaign is. We had three debates. Well, that's not very many, in terms of debates, and I can recall Bush had, what, three or four debates? Again, that's not much in terms of - that's one day. And there's a lot of days in between.

C.H.: But isn't the spin from those debates important?

V.A.: No, not really. A debate is just one more element in what you're going to do. It's part of what you're doing. It's

more of a continuum rather than a moment in time in which you're going blip up or blip down. It's just sort of a continuum. Again, it depends on how you look at it.

[End of Tape 35, Side 1]