

An Interview with the First Arab-American Governor, Vic Atiyeh

By Jim Pasero



Oregon Gov. Vic Atiyeh's great-uncle Aziz Atiyeh.

“PEOPLE who know me know I’m not a person who rattles easily, but the events of September 11th rattled me. It was a giant tragedy,” said former two-term Oregon Governor Vic Atiyeh.

They were sentiments felt by so many Americans in the weeks following the outbreak of the terrorists’ attacks.

Atiyeh, however, is not a person with a pessimistic

outlook on the future. "It was as saddening an event as any, and I lived through Pearl Harbor, Korea, Vietnam, the Oklahoma City bombing, but our leaders will get to the heart of it. We will prevail. I don't want to be arrogant but these folks have misjudged us terribly."

"You have to remember that bullies only take advantage of people who are weaker than them. If there's anything I hate, it's bullies, and these people are bullies."

Atiyeh should have perspective on the tragedy and ensuing war, an unusual perspective, because not only was he a two-term governor of the state of Oregon, he was also the first Arab-American ever elected Governor in the United States. John Sununu (Lebanese descent) Governor of New Hampshire, later George Bush I's chief of staff, would be the second.

"When I was growing up, I never thought of myself as an Arab. (The Atiyeh family lived in the neighborhood that would become Lloyd Center and the Governor graduated from Washington High.) I went to school and played ball, never talked about it; it was not something I clung to." Even though Arabic was spoken at the Atiyeh home in the Portland eastside neighborhood, the Atiyeh children didn't speak it. As a boy, Atiyeh heard from his mother the words millions of children of immigrants would hear in the 1920s: "You're in America now, go to school and learn English."

The Governor affirms, "I never thought of myself as an Arab, but when I made my first trip over there, I landed in Jidda, Saudi Arabia and transferred to a plane to Riyadh. Getting ready to go down the steps, as I got to the door I got just an emotional feeling. It surprised me, that emotional feeling. But I told the Egyptian president Mubarak...that I am a devout American, proud of it...lucky to be born in the United States."

The early 80s were tense times in the Cold War—Syria and its President Hafez al-Assad were aligned with the Soviet Bloc. And it was in 1983 that Middle Eastern terrorists murdered almost 300 marines in a barracks in next-door Lebanon.

"I met with both Assad and Israeli Prime Minister Shamir in '84," Atiyeh said, who at that time was halfway through his second term. "They both looked at me as an Arab, but I said to both of them, understand, I am an American. Assad and the Syrians were proud that one of their own had come from a tiny Syrian village and made it big in America and his son had become governor. Where else in the world could that happen but in America?"

Frustrated about the region as are most Americans, it was during Atiyeh's last visit to Syria in 1984 that he had an idea about how he, the Oregon governor, could make a contribution to peace in the Middle East. "I talked to both Shamir and Assad at great length. My last visit with Assad went on two-and-a-half hours." It was during that lengthy conversation that Atiyeh outlined his thoughts.

Atiyeh's idea was this: "Diplomatic talking takes a long time to get anywhere. I thought... why not an amateur. Unlike the diplomats, I could say things and not be misinterpreted. We could talk casually. I proposed to Assad that I be that person (a go between). When it got close to something, then I would back out. Assad agreed to that in my presence. I came back and my country did not agree." Word came back to Atiyeh from the State Department via John Sununu, a close Bush family friend and ally: "Got the message, but no thanks."

Atiyeh's thoughts on the matter at the time: "I thought, this is like chicken soup when you're sick. It may not help, but it won't hurt. What we've been doing is not working. Here we have a president of a country with whom we've had difficult relations (Syria), and a chance to talk, him to me, not filtered, the dialogue. And our country says we won't do it. It was disappointing."

Two years ago when Syria's strongman Assad died (known for once literally bulldozing the Syrian town of Hama to put down an uprising of Islamic radicals) Atiyeh once again felt personally frustrated over our government's inability to take advantage of his personal history.

"When Assad died we sent a delegation to his



A favorite old Atiyeh family photo: a carpet deal is concluded; even the camel is pleased.

funeral. I was on the list the State Department put together to go. But the Clinton White House turned it down. They sent Jesse Jackson." Atiyeh admits the personal slight was small, but it was indicative of thinking in American diplomatic circles in the 1990s, which was off the mark.



Oregon Gov. Vic Atiyeh meets with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir.

"Some of our foreign policies are not what they could be, provincial." Atiyeh remembers being told by Middle Eastern leaders in the 1980s that they welcomed America as a peace broker between the Israelis and the Palestinians, but they often felt that America started negotiations on the Israeli's side rather than as a legitimate broker.

"I would hope that what comes out of it (America's War on Terrorism) is that if we want to be an honest broker for peace, we have to deserve that credibility—and we do want to be an honest broker for peace. There is no question about that, but we will have to adjust our thinking."

Adjusted thinking may also be what Tom Friedman, *New York Times* columnist and America's leading Middle Eastern author ("From Beirut to Jerusalem") and journalist may be advising when he rebuked, in a quite stark and unprecedented manner, Israel's Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, on the *Time's* op-ed page last month:

"There's one more thing Mr. Sharon needs to understand. Americans want to destroy this terrorist menace so that we and all other nations, including Israel, can really enjoy our freedom. That's what it's all about. But we are not out to destroy this extremist menace so that Israel will be free to build more settlements or eat up more Palestinian land. Today the Palestinians are literally at war with each other over whether to make peace with Israel. But if and when the Palestinians ever

get their peace act together, Mr. Sharon needs to realize that we are out to make the world safe for Israel to be free, not safe for Israel to occupy the Palestinians according to his biblical map...."

Atiyeh is also concerned about America overreacting to September 11. As an Arab-American he realizes that sensitivities can be acute.

"I remember the Oklahoma City bombing when the FBI first thought that it had been done by a Middle Eastern terrorist. An FBI agent called my cousin Sammy Cahl in Portland and said to him, 'Tell me about terrorists.' He asked me later: 'Why did they do this to me? Why did my country do this to me?' He felt violated. It's a shame because there never was a more devout American than Sammy, and he's never quite gotten over it."

For the Atiyeh family, like so many millions of American immigrant families, their century in America has been the stuff of miracles, the kind of stuff Ken Burns makes films about...and the year 1944 was the year that one Arab-American family in Oregon paid its dues.

For the Atiyeh family of Syrian descent, 1944 was a pivotal year in Oregon—their own part of the American dream. That year on July 5, the youngest, Vic, was married in Portland to his new bride Dolores. Three and a half weeks later on July 31, his father George Atiyeh, who had immigrated to America from Syria, died at the age of 61 from a heart attack. That same year in

December, the governor's twin older brothers, Ed and Richard, were captured in the Battle of the Bulge, the last German offensive of WWII. Ed and Richard were members of Courtney Hodges's First Army, under the command of General Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group.

"The German breakthrough in the Battle of The Bulge (December 16, 1944) came on their division. They were in the same platoon, captured separately and sent to two different prison camps. We (my mother and I) received the phone call about Ed and Richard from their captain." December 1944 was not a good time to be captured by the Germans.

"It was near the end of the war and the Germans were living on Red Cross packages that should have gone to the prisoners. Both my brothers were jaundiced and suffered from malnutrition. Ed said that what kept him alive that winter was trading cigarettes for an overcoat."

In 1944 Vic Atiyeh had been discharged from the army because of an operation he had for a bone infection. "I was in the Ninth Corps in Utah, and the army said wait for your overseas orders. I had the operation on a bone infected when I broke it in grade school, and while recuperating I opened my mail for my orders, and it said I'd been discharged. I tried to re-enlist and they wouldn't take me."

"My father, George, came to America at the turn of the century, as a boy from Syria, from a dinky little village named Amar el Husn in 1898," says Atiyeh. "Our company Atiyeh Brothers is 101 years old, last year we had our 100th anniversary with

a display at the Oregon historical society."

"My dad and his uncle, Aziz Atiyeh, started their business in Allentown, Pennsylvania. They had a little business going there selling rugs and a man came and told them that the Portland area was a good place to sell oriental rugs. So they put up half the money along with another partner." Later Aziz Atiyeh would head back to New York to start an importing and wholesaling business and leave his nephew, George, in charge of the Portland business. Today Aziz' business, Atiyeh International, is run by the Governor's son Tom out of Newberg, Ore. and Atlanta, Georgia.

"In 1920 my dad went back to Syria and married my mother, Linda, who was from Beirut." Both mother and father were from the Christian part of Syria. Forty-eight years later their son Vic would become the first Arab-American elected Governor. Forty-eight years later a direct descendent from the little town of Amar, Syria would "make it big in America."

Today, most of Governor Atiyeh's time is focused on the future, the American future. "We can't go hiding in cellars. There has been a tremendous sense of overreaction in this country. It angered me when I read that they took a meat thermometer away from a grandmother on an airplane. You can't make a prison out of your own country. I don't want to give bin Laden the satisfaction that we're hunkered down. In spite of this huge tragedy, we will hold our heads up and keep going. We always do." ■



A spirited discussion in 1984 included the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (second from left) and Gov. Atiyeh.



Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus

By Rick Perlstein

\$30.00

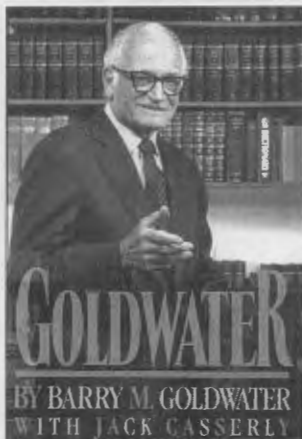
Hill and Wang, 671 pages

Goldwater

By Barry M. Goldwater with Jack Casserly

\$21.95

Doubleday, 1988, 414 pages



REVIEWED BY
MATT BUCKINGHAM

No presidential nominee in American history was so reviled and ridiculed—even by members of his own party—as Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona. With his famous words “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice,” the square-chinned, rock-ribbed Republican from Paradise Valley sealed his reputation in 1964 as a dangerous

kook who, if ever made Commander-in-Chief, would plunge the nation into nuclear armageddon.

Now Rick Perlstein, a regular contributor to such traditionally liberal publications as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Observer* and *The Nation*, sticks a pin in this simplistic characterization and concludes that Goldwater was not so right-wing as his enemies (or, for that matter, his friends) believed. Moreover, Goldwater’s prospects of winning the presidency may not have been as hopeless as even he thought.

But don’t be misled by the book’s title. *Before the Storm* is neither a full-blown biography of Barry Goldwater, nor is it merely a musty postmortem on a failed presidential bid 37 years after the fact. Instead, it’s a fascinating history of a sweeping grass-roots movement that grew out of conservatives’ frustrations with the Republican Party in the 1950s and would culminate in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

It’s interesting to juxtapose Perlstein’s analysis of the candidate’s rise with Goldwater’s own recollections from his self-titled memoir published in 1988. The two accounts essentially agree on most details as well as in their conclusions, particularly about the monumental mistakes Goldwater made in his bid for the presidency.

The political campaign that propelled Goldwater to total victory at the 1964 Republican Convention and then carried him down to ignominious defeat in the general election in November was actually two distinct organizations. The first was a longstanding Draft Goldwater movement that finally picked up steam in 1961 under the politically savvy leadership of a bow-tied former Young Republican organizer named F. Clifton White. About half of Perlstein’s book is devoted to the story of Clif White—and what an incredible story it is. Without the approval of—and often unbeknownst to—the candidate himself, White put together a campaign years ahead of its time, perhaps the first recognizably modern political operation in American history. Fund-raising, voter lists, polling data, telecommunications—everything was state of the art and vertically integrated on a state-by-state, precinct-by-precinct basis.

Instead of naming White chairman of the RNC once he captured the nomination, however, Goldwater essentially relegated his top mastermind to the hinterlands and handed over the campaign to a cabal of his closest friends, known in the press as the “Arizona Mafia.” As Goldwater recounts in his memoir, he simply wanted men around him he could trust. When it came to running a presidential campaign, however, Goldwater and his mafiosi would have been the first to admit they wouldn’t know how to pour piss from a cowboy boot if instructions were printed on the heel. The final chapters of Perlstein’s book, from convention to election day, are a tragicomedy of errors (canceling crucial TV ads in the final days of the campaign, for example, because they would have required borrowing money). Meanwhile, the political orphans on the sidelines—the grass-roots Goldwater supporters collecting crumpled dollar bills in brown paper bags and Clif White, the “forgotten genius” now running Citizens for Goldwater-Miller—struggled valiantly to save the campaign from its own ineptitude, and they might have succeeded.

There were two deeper problems, of course. The