

Tape 60, Side 1
September 10, 1993

CH This is an interview with Governor Victor G. Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer for the Oregon Historical Society is Clark Hansen, the date is September 10, 1993, and this is Tape 60, Side 1.

We're wrapping up here, and I wanted to ask you some things about activities since your governorship. I noticed in one news article that after you were out of office you went to - I believe it was on the first Portland-Tokyo flight on Delta Airlines with then-governor Goldschmidt. What prompted you to take that trip?

VA It was pretty much like a desire that I had that there be no interruption. That we have a change of administration, change of governor, but I wanted to make sure that in terms of our relations - in this case we went to Japan - our relations with Japan would continue uninterrupted. And because I really had made a lot of friends, and I think gained a considerable amount of credibility, I thought I'd kind of pass that on to Governor Goldschmidt so there wouldn't be a bump in there, any gap of time. I just wanted to kind of keep the momentum going.

It was interesting, their reaction, that is, in Japan. You know, here I am, a Republican, I'm introducing the new governor. I told Governor Goldschmidt - you know, you take these things in order, but I said, "Let me go first." That would not be typical. The governor would go first. I said, "Let me go first, and then I will introduce you." That would be my way of passing it on. And that was my motivation, just to continue it. But the Japanese were

really surprised. They said, How come you're doing this? I said, well - actually, that helped me reinforce it a little bit more, that my interest was in continuing the relationship, and that's why I'm doing it. So they understood that part of it. Maybe it reinforced it a little.

CH Did you do anything else with Governor Goldschmidt during his administration?

VA No. I was perfectly willing to have done so, but he wasn't inclined to ask me.

CH You had mentioned a little bit about some of your activities with the Republican National Committee, and I believe that you were involved with them in 1993, just this year. You went out to a - we talked a little bit about this on Tape 18. You went out to a - was it Illinois or St. Louis?

VA St. Louis.

CH Because Craig Berkman was running?

VA No. I went as a national committeeman, and delegates to the national convention, national Republican party meeting - the delegates are the national committeeman, committeewoman, and the state chairmen - the same time Craig was running for national chairman, but I didn't go because of that, I went because I was a national committeeman, a new one.

CH Were you supporting him?

VA Well, I had a lot of conversations with him. I didn't come right out. I told him it was going to be uphill. I didn't tell him I thought he had no chance at all, I didn't put it quite that cruelly.

But he ran a good campaign. It was an interesting national meeting, interesting in the sense - all I know is what I've heard from others, but I can imagine it, that for a long period, now at least twelve years - that would mean through Reagan and through Bush - that the national party really didn't make a choice. The president said, This is who I want. And so here was an opportunity to really elect a chairman. And it was interesting. There was a lot of people campaigning for it. Bo Callaway was, Haley Barbour, of course, who was elected, Spencer Abraham, Craig Berkman.

CH How do you campaign for something like that?

VA Oh, they had a hospitality place. Each had their own way of doing it. Send messages and want to meet you. It's all within the hotel. And Craig, he was - put your right foot forward, I think that was his - so he had a whole bunch of Nikes. He sent every delegate one Nike, and you had to go get the right shoe, to his hospitality room. I don't know how many shoes he ended up with. I got a pair. I finally found a pair of shoes that fit [laughs]. That was his way of doing it. There were balloons and - but it was all inside the hotel, trying to line up votes and nominations and the whole thing. It was kind of interesting in that context.

I became a national chairman really - not because I

really yearned to do that. As a matter of fact, I keep thinking, gosh, this is not really my thing, and it really isn't my thing. It's not something I need to do. But we had quite a conservative national committeeman. A nice fellow. I wouldn't say OCA, but he was very conservative. I had told him earlier that I was interested, but I wouldn't run against him, and he decided he wasn't going to run again. Well, we had another conservative who was wanting to run, and I thought, well, we've got to really kind of balance this thing out a little. And the only one I think could have won in those circumstances would be me, so I ran. I'm not sure how long I want to stay at that job. I'm not a particularly good national committeeman.

CH What do you have to do?

VA Oh, you're supposed to communicate with the state party, with the people within the party, pay attention to what goes on in the national scene and, of course, go to meetings. But it's not something I really - you know, at this stage of my life I'm not - that's not something I'm really looking forward to. But, anyway, I did it for that reason, and then I went to the convention because I was a national committeeman.

Craig asked me to nominate him, which I did, and everybody - you know, I actually was supporting another person. Not overtly. I was telling everybody - they didn't know how I was going to vote, but that's normal. And sure, I said - and everybody understood he was from my state and I'm a national committeeman, and that was no real problem. If a candidate withdraws, our rules called for the person that nominates to do the withdrawing. And I had told Craig

earlier, that is, before we went to the national meeting, that - I said, you know, it's going to be an uphill fight, and what I would suggest to you is you have Plan B in mind. And Plan B would be, figure out who you think is going to win, and then you jump aboard that vote. Then I read his statement, he's withdrawing, thanks the people, and then he says, If I could vote, I would have voted for Haley Barbour. So that was his way of jumping on the right - and he did jump on the right boat. But by that time it was pretty clear - you know, Haley always had a larger number of the votes. We went through three ballots, and it was pretty clear by then the way things were moving. It was interesting. I enjoyed it. It was just a different experience. But it's not something really I yearn to do.

CH What is the state of the Republican party now, and how has it evolved over the recent years?

VA Nationally?

CH Well, I'm thinking - well, nationally to some extent, but I'm actually thinking more in terms of state. The two may be intertwined, but you probably are more familiar with what's going on in the state.

VA Well, it's much different than when I first started in that you had bickering within and people had different ideas, but there was no real intimidation. In other words - I say that in the sense of OCA, right-wing. If you don't do this, we're going to do this. Constant intimidation. We didn't have any of that, so it's different in that respect.

CH But didn't you have the - you had some problems - not you personally, maybe, but the more moderate Republicans had some problems back even in the seventies with very right-wing conservative chairs of the Republican party, and I'm trying to think of the person in particular that caused so much problem. I remember you had a conference over in Bend that was very tumultuous and...

VA Well, there was a fellow that owned a hospital in Gresham, named Dirksen[?], and he was conservative, and there was a conservative group in there, but there wasn't that kind of organization that we're facing today, and have been for quite a long period of time. It all kind of really broke apart when Huss...

CH Huss, that's who I'm thinking of.

VA ...won the election.

CH Right, Walter Huss.

VA Walter Huss, 1974. And it really hasn't fully come together since then in the sense that we're all in this. We may complain, but it's not a matter of we're going take our ball and go home, or if you don't do this, we're going to do that. I mean that kind of intimidation. I saw a lot of signs of that kind of organization.

When I ran the first time - I say the first time. The first time that it was not a winner-take-all in terms of going to a national convention. You know if one candidate got 51 percent and the other got 49, the one that got 51 percent, according to Oregon law, got all the delegates.

Well, we changed the law. And in the example I just gave, if it was 51-49, one candidate would get 51 percent of the delegates and the other one would get 49. So now we are in that mode. And that, in this case, happened to be Ford-Reagan.

I ran in our congressional district as a delegate, and you designate, obviously, that you're running on the Ford side, because you have to have a certain number of Ford people and a certain number of Reagan people. But Bob Voy[?] came up to me, and he said, "What's your slate?" I said, "What?" "What's your slate?" I said, "We don't have a slate." He couldn't believe it. They had a slate, they knew exactly who they were going to vote for, regardless of who ran. They'd gotten together and said, This is who we're going to vote for. Well, that's the kind of thing - here I am, I'm in the mode of how things ought to be; a person runs, and if you do the right things, you get elected. And, all of a sudden, we find this group over here has a slate. He couldn't believe we didn't have one. He thought I was keeping it a secret. "No, Bob," I said, "we don't have a slate. We're just running."

Well - so I guess a lot depends on how you really look at it. My vision of what the party should be is back to, you know, fighting whatever fights we have, whatever philosophy we have, but when it's all done, you come back to what you're supposed to be doing. And a party's sole purpose for life is to elect the members of their party. Those that are working in the organized Democrat party, that's their job, that's Numero Uno, elect Democrats. And those of us who work on the Republican side, that's our job, elect Republicans. That's what we ought to be doing, not being out there with, as we've heard, on gays and lesbians

and out there on abortion and all the rest. That's platform stuff, okay, but that's not our job. Our job is to elect Republicans.

CH As being a party person and not necessarily an elected official but a committeeman, maybe, or somebody representing the party, how do you feel about the party measures that have been adopted, the platform? Do you feel obligated, not as an elected official, because you're separate, but as a person representing the party? I know we've talked a little bit about it before.

VA Well, I had quite a long discussion - I'm trying to heal this thing and I'm trying to pull people together, and so I met with the conservatives. I told Bill Witt, I said, "You gather all these people together..."

CH This is when?

VA Oh, gosh, now - I don't know.

CH A long time ago?

VA No, no, not that long. Eight, nine months ago, something like that.

"...Let's sit and talk about this whole thing."

One of them is a very well-intentioned person. I've known him for a long time. We got on the subject of abortion and whether or not there's a place for it, in terms of the party, and my first reaction was - and I had said before, Look, when you have issues like that, I can't say don't do it, but don't do it using the party vehicle to do

that. Go do it. I mean, God bless you, go do whatever you want to do. That's your business. But don't use the party vehicle. So I'm trying to get the party out of it.

And the one fellow who I mentioned was a nice fellow, well intentioned, not an OCA, but a conservative, religious conservative guy, he said, "But the party should stand for something. We should stand for something." And I said, "I don't disagree with that, but if people look at the Republican party and say, They are against abortion and they are against gays and lesbians, then that hurts us. Now, if they say it's among the things that we stand for, fiscal conservatism, public safety - you know, you go down through the whole list of things - and this is among them, then I don't have any problem with that. But that's not the way it comes down, that's not the way the media treats it, that's not the way we're looked at. And so if was just a part of the compendium of things that Republicans represent, okay, I can deal with that. But if it's the only thing the Republicans are, then I have a problem with it.

CH Well, then - I don't know if we've talked about this before or if I've asked you, but what is a Republican, and how is a Republican different than an Independent or a Democratic...?

VA Okay, I'll give you my answer. I've got an answer.

CH [laughing] I would assume so.

VA It isn't a pat answer, it's something that I've chewed on for a long period of time.

Basically, a Republican - well a Republican believes in

the government closest to the people is best. A Republican believes that the minimum amount of government is best. Republicans believe that, left to their devices, that the people are very smart and they actually can handle a lot of problems that government ought not to be dealing with.

I should get - as a matter of fact, in a moment I'll - I have something that Abraham Lincoln said much more eloquently than I did. That, to me, is what a Republican is, and I'll get it and quote it and put it on the tape.

Independent, in my view, that's a copout. As a matter of fact, today people think that they are superior if they are an independent. You know, "I'm not partisan like those Democrats or Republicans, I'm independent." That's a lot of baloney, in my view. That's a total copout. You can be a Democrat and you can be a Republican and be independent in terms of your views, your thinking.

I believe, incidentally, that a two-party system, whatever names that are being used, a two-party system is one of the things that really has kept this country alive and healthy and good and moving in the right direction. When the Democrats are in, the Republicans say, Hey, we can do this better, and you kind of keep the heat on the Democrats and control them. When the Republicans are in command, in the majority, the same thing happens with the Democrats; we can do that better, and you kind of keep a control on the Republicans. So you don't get the wild swings. You'll get swings, but you won't get wild swings, just because everybody's looking over their shoulder. But it's a two-party system.

When you get three or four or five parties, you just look over - you can look in Europe. Most governments are coalition governments. Okay, now, who's in charge?

Nobody's in charge. You can't say, kick out the...

CH Well, you can say, Kick out the coalition, can't you? I mean, isn't the coalition - isn't our country run by sort of a coalition in the same respect that - I mean, it may not be - and when you're trying to get a bill passed and you're trying to form your program as president, whether you're Republican or Democrat, you're trying to get a certain number of Republicans and a certain number of Democrats. George Bush or Ronald Reagan, neither of them could have gotten anything through if they hadn't put some kind of a coalition of Democrats and Republicans together.

VA Well, that's true, and, yet, it's still a Republican president or a Democrat president who is doing whatever it is. So it's initiative by the Republican or initiative by the Democrat. People don't really sort it out how many Republicans and Democrats voted on a bill.

The point really, Clark, is, I can prove anything I want to prove if I take an individual. I can tell you about moderate to conservative, basically where Republicans are, and you'd say, well, how about Bob Packwood? He's a Republican. You know what I'm trying to say. I'm giving you the generic.

CH Yes, I understand.

VA You asked me also on Democrats. Democrats truly believe that government should solve most problems and that they're less inclined to have small government, they're more inclined to have big government. They have the general concept of what they call distribution of wealth. We're

going to take your money and give it to somebody else, and we're smart enough to know how to do that. You don't, but we do.

I may have covered it in a tape, but I consider those kinds of people what I consider elitists. They say, We're smarter than you are. And they are pre-1787, prior to our constitution and our government. They go back to when the king was ruling, because it says, Don't worry about it, I'm going to take care of you. So, folks out there, don't worry about what's going on, I'm going to take care of it. What I say is what's going to happen.

And I do remember telling you that way back Jefferson - I was paraphrasing what I thought our system was all about. Hey, I wonder if people can run government. That's my paraphrase of what our system is. And the Democrats go in the opposite direction of that. We don't want people fiddling around with this government; we're smarter. I get very upset about it.

Now, having told you what I have, mainly the idea of the Republicans want the people to solve more of the problems and the Democrats want the government to solve most of the problems, that is not a disputed - I've had that in good, friendly discussion with Democrats, and they would agree with what I just said to you. In other words, I'm not making up my own. But when I look at it, the fiscal conservatism does work into the Republican side, fiscal conservatism does not on the Democrat side. We'll go get it somewhere. Deficits are not bad, according to most Democrats, deficits are real bad according to most Republicans.

But at any rate, you push that button, I'll go get Lincoln's quote, and I'll be right back.

CH Okay [tape stopped].

VA Okay. I was talking about this quote of Lincoln. He really could say it: You cannot bring about prosperity by discouraging thrift. You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong. You cannot help the wage earner by pulling down the wage payer. You cannot further the brotherhood of man by encouraging class hatred. You cannot help the poor by discouraging the rich. You cannot establish security on borrowed money. You cannot keep out of trouble by spending more than you earn. You cannot build character and courage by taking away man's initiative and independence. You cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves.

Now, that sort of encapsulizes, you know. I would say that would be the tune for most Republicans. That would not be the tune for most Democrats. They may say that it is, but I look at actions, what have they done, not what you're telling me. "Oh, I believe in that." No, no, no. If you do, then how come you're doing all of these things that you are?

Anyway, when you ask that question, basically I - I've said many times in my speeches, I'm a Republican not because my dad was a Republican, which he was, and I didn't shoehorn myself into - in other words, I'm comfortable in the Republican party and the general attitude of Republicans. I would be uncomfortable - my philosophy does not permit me to be a Democrat. So it's not a matter of I inherited it, it's just something that I believe in. And this Republican party, although they do a lot of things I don't like, but this thing called a Republican party, I'm closer to this. I could not fit in the Democrat side.

This is your copy, for whatever it's worth.

CH Oh, thank you. I'll keep that up on my desk.

Well, has the Republican party - in Oregon, at least, is it cornered by or controlled by what you would consider to be the right wing?

VA Not controlled, no, but intimidated by. Maybe not doing all the things they would normally do, not being the umbrella that they should be.

CH What does right wing mean to you?

VA To me?

CH Yes.

VA Right wing I would put with far-right conservatives. All of that means way over on the right side of society. That's not where Americans are, that's not where Oregonians are. The same thing as the left wing, far out left, and that's not where Oregonians are, either.

You want maybe more definition than that. Usually those people - I'm talking about on both ends, now - think they're smarter than anybody else, think that they have a corner on conscience, think the rest of us in the middle are compromising, giving up on principle, all kinds of things. And what I'm saying fits on both ends.

CH What role should religion play in politics?

VA What?

CH Religion or religious values, mores.

VA Well, values are what you kind of bring with you. But whether it's gospel or Episcopalian or Catholic or whatever, it should have nothing to do with the party. It was very carefully chosen, the separation of church and state, and I believe that's the correct thing to do. But it was more of a protection for the church than it was for the state. This separation wasn't a matter of saving the state, it was saving the church, is what it was for.

CH I think people probably view it the other way around.

VA Yes, but basically that's what it was for. And I believe that, I believe it should stay out of there. But, you know, I don't walk into a room and then turn of something. I'm who I am and they are who they are, and they believe it. But, you know, I feel sorry for them. Now, again, I'm on both sides, liberal, way-out liberal and way-out conservative. I really feel sorry for them. They must lead the most unhappy life. You know, their teeth are gritting all the time, they're so intense all the time. I think, God, what a terrible way to live. They're so certain that they're absolutely correct and everybody else is wrong, and they're very, very intense, angry people all the time. I feel sorry for them.

CH The Oregon Citizens Alliance has talked about maturing into a - either a political party with its own candidates or to have a broad-based political profile throughout the state.

VA They'll never become anything but intimidators. That's all. If they ever plan that they're going to elect - they might elect a legislator or two or three out of ninety. They'll never elect a statewide official.

CH But they can keep certain statewide officials from being elected, like you've talked about with Dave Frohnmayer.

VA That's right, they could do that.

CH So their power is real.

[End of Tape 60, Side 1]