

Tape 24, Side 1

CH 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 February 16, 1993, and this is Tape 24, Side 1.

After the election of Walter Huss as head of the party, Secretary of State Norma Paulus and Treasurer Clay Myers and others talked about setting up a new candidate financing organization but the state check-off money would still go to Huss. Wouldn't that, in itself, give Huss a lot of power? Doesn't money equate, or translate into power?

VA Yeah, except he didn't get that much. Incidentally, I've always opposed public money for political parties or candidates. I think that's a terrible way to go, and the same thing with the federal election. But what they were talking about was an offshoot of what we actually had going before Huss took over the party. One of the things I wanted to get done, and worked very hard at it - I'm now trying to make the party stronger - was to get people to give to the party, and the party would give to the candidate. It's very hard to do. You get individuals to do that. To get PACs or lobbies to do that is very difficult because they want to directly give it. They'd say, Vic, I represent XYZ, and I want to give you some money. So to get them to give it to the party is really very difficult. Well, we began to work this candidates assistance committee through the party, and I was on it or chair of it, and Roger Martin was, and we had some others selected, creditable people, and little by little we finally got the lobby to begin to do that, which - I thought this is great, this is the way it ought to be, this is the strength of the party. Actually, just before Huss took over and it looked like the handwriting was all over the wall, we gave all that

money out so Walter didn't get his hands on it. But what they were talking about, Norma and Clay, was an offshoot of that thing which we had going. It was outside of the party now rather than inside, which is where I thought it ought to be. We've never reinvented it ever since. They had a candidates assistance committee, but they could never raise enough money to do any good, and they were always squabbling among themselves as to the litmus test for the candidates, and it just didn't work.

CH Was there any kind of effort at that point, then, to make a change in the party to make sure that Huss didn't get back in later on or that you had somebody or...?

VA No. Again, I've never been a real active participant in party work, even - you know, today I'm a national committeeman; I'm a precinct committeeman, not a very good one, but I'm a precinct committeeman. But I just - you know, it's not a swing of thing I really got involved with as to working that hard within the system. Others, I can hope I could induce them to do that, but it was not something I would do myself. There was some talk after I left as governor to run for chair of the party. Probably I could have won. It's just not something I wanted to do. I did tell my friends, I said, You know, they proved it works, so if you want it to work for yourself, you've got to go out and do what they did. Well, I guess the moderates and the liberals don't work that hard.

CH Well, going on to the general campaign, would you say that the major issues revolved around, or at least in the public eyes, around Measures 6 and 11 that were on the ballot?

VA That was an important issue, whether or not there was confidence in the way government was running. Were we spending

more than we needed to spend budgetary-wise, was there good judgment going on in state government, did the incumbent governor really understand what the problems were. I remember very late in the campaign, with a considerable amount of hoopla the governor decided that he was going to go out and meet the people, which I found interesting. Finally, in August I think it was, he was going to go out, he and Pat, and they got a motor home and they were going to just stop and talk to people, which is something he should have done three or four years before. He had returned back to Salem after taking this one-week visit with Oregonians, and I can recall I was going to a radio station in Roseburg, and the reporter was driving me there, and he was telling me that something just came over the wire service that Straub had come back, and he said he was surprised at how angry people were about property taxes. I said, What? After three and three-quarter years as governor he ^{just} discovered they were unhappy about property taxes? And I remember that. I said, Where has he been? As a matter of fact, he gave me that thing off the wire service, and I have it. I kept it as one of my souvenirs. And, you know, I'm reading back some of the speeches, and it's the matter that he's a nice guy, but he just is not up to being a governor. I didn't quite put in those terms.

CH There was a movement, I think a lot of people would say that it was a conservative movement, across the country. Governor Reagan was becoming more and more popular, and, of course, two years later he would run for and win the presidency, and some of those ideas in that movement seemed to reflect some of the things that you had said. Did you feel like you were a part of that movement or that it did reflect your views or that you were a forerunner of what was later going to become the Reagan era? How do you associate with the trend that was developing at that time?

VA I'll answer one thing that was direct, and the other is more indirect. We were, again, really trying to indicate to people the moderate position that I held. Reagan had a political action committee - I've forgotten what it was - but they were going to give me some money, and we turned it down, and they didn't forget that after Reagan was president. We just didn't - that was a little further right. Actually, Reagan I think did a super job in doing what needed to be done in this nation. I really believe that. But still I would say to you that in classic terms of conservative and moderate-liberal he was much more conservative than I am. I was more willing to deal with some of the things that were called liberal, if you will, progressive. You know, I don't think a Reagan would have gone for a land-use bill or a bottle bill or something like that, or a lot of other issues that I dealt with. So that's where I was.

CH What about his general view on the involvement or the purpose of government to the people?

VA Well, and to that extent, sure. There's a lot of things that are similar. You know, he's a Republican and I'm a Republican, and that means less government interference in the lives of people. Same thing local governments. I as a governor worked with cities and counties. I said, We're in this thing together. I'm not better than you guys are. We're in it together, and we'll work together. But that happens to be what I believe, and why I don't like metro government, which we covered before, and why I'm concerned about school reorganization, which we haven't touched on. In school reorganization bigger was supposed to be better, and I'm saying no, bigger isn't better. And a lot of the problems we had with budgets is because the school districts became anonymous. When my son or daughter went to school, Raleigh was my school. Pretty soon it's part of

Beaverton District 48. You know, it's not mine anymore. I don't have that self-possession about it. But that's how I believe. It has nothing that I was emulating or seeing what his strategy was or - I was just being me, and being me was who I was. And I think most Americans, really, are in the same place. I really believe that. I told you earlier when I lost in '74 that I really believed I was where Oregonians were. They just didn't know it at the time. And where they were was, sure, they wanted progressiveness, but they wanted to make sure that government was running well, that the tax dollar they gave us was being wisely spent. They didn't have that feeling or satisfaction that government really wasn't trying to push them around.

CH What were you doing different this time in your campaign to show Oregonians that you were where they were at?

VA Not much different. They had a chance to see Bob for four years, and here I am and there he is, and he's served as your governor, and I want to be your governor, and he really hasn't done what you want done. Again, I didn't quite put it in those terms, but the contrast was there. He had served as a governor. So we just continued to be who we were, but they were all beliefs of mine. I'll tell you now that, you know, it - I've been very comfortable. The desire for public office has never been so keen that I wanted to try to pretend I'm something that I'm not. And also it's a level of comfort for me personally. I've said many times I was blessed with a lousy memory, because I couldn't tell a lie because if I did, I'd have to remember that so that I could document it later on, but I can't, so I just be who I am. From time to time people would say, Well, you said such and such. No, I couldn't say such and such. But I couldn't point to it; I just know who I am, and I couldn't have said that. I'm just confident that there's no way in the world that I could have said that

because I know who I am. So there's that - it runs, actually - I'm not sure at what point we really want to get into it, but it even runs through my eight years as governor. Everybody was telling me how to do it, particularly the media, and they never really knew it. As a matter of fact, I don't think they know consciously - maybe some do - that if I really jump on this senator or house member, congressman, governor, president or what, they're going to change their ways. They can't stand the pressure. I really didn't pay that much attention. I knew what I wanted to do, and I understood that it was everybody's right to say we don't like it. That's okay too. But I knew what I wanted to do. I had enough self-confidence and experience, business and government, that I said - I'm not sure I ever said it, but - I know a lot more about this than you do, and I'm just going about doing it. I'm very, very conscious about the tax dollar, and I believed - we talked about this, you know, some of the influence was LBJ, and you remember that discussion, but I really believe that we need to help people and we need to do things, but I want to do it, I don't want to talk about it. And there are ways it can be done. And so I really believed it, and it was part of me.

So when you go out and campaign, you know, these are the things you say, you talk about, and they struck a responsive chord with people because I think that's what they want. They don't want an overbearing government, they don't want a government shoving them around. Later on when I was governor and I had my staff meetings and somebody would report to me something, I'd say, That's dumb. You know, that pretty well says it all. It's dumb. It's just not a way to go about doing business. And yet, on the other hand, as we talked earlier, you know, there are people in need and there are things that need to be done, and you've got to do it.

CH How would you characterize the debate between Measure 6 and

Measure 11 in terms of how it reflected your views and Governor Straub's?

VA I would say to you, first of all, I did understand six. I don't think he did. And that's not being unfair, but remember I was on a tax committee for twenty years, so I understood it. I understood where the shortfalls were there. As I told you, if I ever really would be somewhat embarrassed by what I did - no, I'm not really embarrassed, I just said, Well, that wasn't exactly Vic Atiyeh, where I said I was going to vote for six, but if it passed, I was going to clean it up, was the term I used, and I knew what cleaning up meant: what needed to be done to fix it. That was sort of a cop-out, really, when I look back on it. Really, six was not something that should have passed, and I didn't give it enough - except to say there were some defects that needed to be cleaned up. But beyond that there wasn't much leadership in trying to defeat it as I gave subsequent measures, that is, ballot-type sixes, to urge their defeat.

CH You were also opposed to more wilderness, and you've talked a little bit about that. Was Straub on the other side of that issue?

VA Yeah.

CH And, then, there was a controversy over the budget, of course, and you basically blamed Straub for doubling the budget.

VA Yes.

CH And critics said that the legislature actually controls the budget and that you had voted for the budget increases.

VA Well, it's hard to tell, you know, what you voted for. You know, they add up to a total budget. We're not like Washington, where they vote on a whole budget at one time. We vote on pieces at a time, all of which adds up to a final budget. And - well, certainly I voted for budgets. I probably voted against some budgets. In that context, it's probably a good criticism. And yet, at the same time, if I were running the show, it was going to be different. You know, that's what I was saying.

Let's get back to wilderness for a minute, because, again, it represents my personal philosophy. We have in Oregon - or had, I should say, a million acres already in wilderness - already - while this discussion was going on. The question was not should there be wilderness or shouldn't there be wilderness, the question was, how much wilderness. And the thing that always disturbed me was that the wilderness, really, and those that were pushing for it, was designed really for young, healthy bodies so they could go out there and appreciate it, and there was a whole lot of people that would never be able to go out and appreciate the - you know, to see it, to enjoy it, to be a part of it. And I'm saying, that's not fair, that's not right. If you can take something that has a definite environmental reason or ecological reason, I can understand that, but they were sweeping in a whole lot of stuff. Of recent years we've gotten the spotted owl. I say, Hey, wait a minute. Okay, I'll tell you what we'll do. If you want 2,000 acres per pair, that's fine, you can have 2,000 acres per pair. Now, give us 2,000 acres that you've got locked up in wilderness. No, no, no, no, no. We want that and the spotted owl. It's really a matter of a balance between the economic health of the state, and what that means is jobs for people who are raising families and buying a home and want to live a good life, at the same time protecting what we have. I also resented the fact that the West, including Oregon, has an awful lot of public land owned by the federal government. When

you start getting to the Midwest and the East, they have very little of it. So here are all of these congressmen and senators, they want to say, Well, we're going to screw up our own environment, but we want that ^(the west) as a playground. Leave it alone. But I said, There's people out here. We live out here. We want have all the joys of other families. But they don't quite see it that way. So I'm back to balance. When I became governor, and it was up to the governor to make a recommendation for more wilderness, we had a study. We went through the whole thing. I mean, it was a good study. I finally came up and recommended 25,000 acres. Well, that really paled and was ridiculous because Carter was urging 400,000 acres, Hatfield got up to 600,000 acres, and when it all washed down, it turned out to be 1,200,000 acres. So now Oregon has over two million acres in wilderness, plus spotted owl, buffer zones for harvested trees. A whole lot of - if you take all that and put that aside. So to me it was just a matter of balance. That's pure and simple. That's all it was. So when I approach the subject, are you against wilderness or for wilderness, I wasn't against or for, it was how much.

I can recall being down in Grants Pass at the county fair, and they were signing up. They wanted to put some certain area in wilderness, and I was talking to the young ladies and said, Well, what's this? Well, this is a place in - Well, I said, why do you want it? Well, we don't have any wilderness down there. Does everybody have to have a wilderness? You know, we don't have our wilderness. We ought to have ours. What do you mean, ours? It's all in the context of the whole picture. We're the state of Oregon, but Douglas County wanted to have ours, or at least those young people wanted their wilderness. I don't know whatever came of it, but I can recall that discussion.

CH Were there issues of yours that you considered to be more advantageous to your campaign and other issues that you maybe

fervently believed in but were less popular and maybe liabilities to a certain extent?

VA No. I will say that I urged the campaign repeatedly to make sure everybody knew I was a member of the National Rifle Association. A lot of people were nervous about that, but I said, Hey, that's who I am. I don't think we did too much with it, but I kept saying, Hey, tell them. It's part of our material. I don't miss - sort of win that one [?], but, you know, a lot of people think the NRA folks are pretty nutty, but I said, That's who I am. We've got to tell people who I am.

You mean something I felt strongly about I didn't say anything about or make an issue of?

CH Well, no. I mean, I would imagine that, for a lot of candidates at least, that certain issues are very, very popular that they take a stand on that happens to really help their campaign, and maybe other things that, because of their own convictions, they nevertheless - it's harder to get those views across the people, so it drags on the campaign a little bit. Did you experience that in any area?

VA I can't think of really anything that would have been - I mentioned the NRA, but I - you know, I'd go to high schools, and they always ask the question about drinking age at eighteen and abortion, and I was very clear about where I was on the drinking age. You're just going to kill more people. And they say, Well, there are drunken drivers now, legally. Yeah, but I don't want to add to that. You know, you're going to add another group.

CH What about the Mount Hood Freeway controversy?

VA It wasn't a major issue. I was very strongly opposite view

from Goldschmidt and Straub in regard to the Mount Hood Freeway, but it wasn't a major issue out there. I tried to reverse it once I was elected and found out it that it was just near to impossible to get that thing revived. We'll get into that when we get into the governor, because that was early on.

CH Were you opposed to light rail?

VA No, I wasn't opposed to it, but I wasn't any ardent supporter out there that was going to push it through. If it was going to happen, okay, if it wasn't, okay. The one thing, that once it became a reality and that became part of the deal I was working on, that Goldschmidt wanted \$16 million out of our general fund budget, and he wanted it all in one chunk. I said, No, I'm not going to do that while I'm preparing my budget. I will do it if - there was money that was set aside for the Mount Hood Freeway, which was in the Portland metropolitan area, dollars. You give me those dollars so I can use them around the state of Oregon for things that will be needed and to fix up I-84, which was a pretty dangerous freeway. You give me that money and let me do what I want to do and then I'll put the sixteen. We got to bargaining a little, and Goldschmidt said, Well, we'll give you some small part of it. I said, No, no, I want the whole thing. So finally he agreed to the whole thing, and I said, Okay, I'll put the 16 million in. So the point basically was, Okay, there's the money. That gets light rail moving, that's okay with me, but at the same time I know people are still going to get in their cars, and they've got to do it safely, and there's a lot of need around the state of Oregon to fix highways, and so let's get that money and do that with it. So 84 improvement is part of that bargaining process.

CH Were there other major issues during the campaign, aside

from the ones we've already talked about?

VA No. There were sort of general discussions on how one's going to run a government.

CH There was a controversy over the television debates, over two television debates, and how to schedule them, I believe. Do you recall any of that?

VA No. That's all nonsense anyway. There's always that when are we going to have it, where are we going to have it, I don't want it here, you want it there. I considered it nonsense. Debates, to me, are - they're not as important as people make them out to be, but they're not bad.

CH Were there other debates that you had at all? Did you go back to the City Club again, just the two of you?

VA It's fascinating. I can't remember. I think we must have had. I know we had some on radio, I remember that. I'm not opposed to them. I don't like to make big issues out of them. I wasn't fighting them, but both sides sort of, we want this and that, and who's going to ask questions, and can you question - all this other stuff. I'll leave that up to the campaign.

CH So how did the campaign progress, then, up to election day? How did you see it evolve?

VA I worked awful hard. I remember that. Worked very hard. Traveled the state, campaigned really hard, did a lot of traveling and a lot of late nights, early mornings. Some marvelous things occurred out of the whole thing, things you remember. I was down in La Pine - no, it was Chemult. Anyway,

down in that area. It was an early-morning breakfast. So I'm talking to the group there. A photographer was there. On the front page of the paper was this picture of me talking, and he framed it perfectly with antlers - you know those antlers on the wall - coming out of my head [laughter], and so I said, I've got to get a copy of that. So I do, I've got a copy of that.

CH Was that intentional do you think?

VA Yeah, I'm sure it was. But I just really enjoyed that. I think that was just marvelous. After having been all over, we went to a Gunderson shift change, shaking hands. My name is Atiyeh - you know, people coming and going - I'm running for governor. And this was, I don't recall, Friday before the Tuesday election. Right near the end. A young man was - I had been there for quite a while. There couldn't be many more left. I said, My name is Atiyeh. Oh, he said, I know, and you've got my vote, he said, And my family too. A young fellow. So I turned to the staff, and I said, That's it. I'm not going to go anymore, I'm not going to campaign anymore, I'm going to stop right here, and that was it, that's all the campaigning I did. On election day Punch Green said, What do you want to do? I said, Let's go play golf. What? I said, Punch, there's nothing more that I can do. I've done everything that I can do. Let's go play golf.

Let's step back a little to September. At Pendleton, the Pendleton Roundup, the Pendleton Roundup parade. After it was all over, I called my office. I said, I want the election today, and I want it in Pendleton. The sense of what I call penetration. That means that people that don't know you, that you don't know, are very responsive and very supportive. Not your friends. You expect them to be for you.

[End of Tape 24]