

Bob Smith interview on Atiyeh

An interview of Robert Freeman Smith (1931-2020), usually known as Bob Smith, regarding Oregon's Governor Victor Atiyeh. The interview was recorded on Apr. 29, 2015. Smith served as a Republican in the Oregon House of Representatives from 1961-1973, including as Speaker of the House in 1969 and 1971. He then served in the Oregon State Senate from 1973-1983, and then as a Representative in the U.S. Congress from 1983-1995 and 1997-1999. The interviewer, James Moore, was as professor of political science at Pacific University and was Atiyeh's biographer.

The interview includes discussion of: humorous anecdotes regarding the spelling of Atiyeh's name versus the ubiquity of the name Smith; Atiyeh's dual identity as a well-respected businessman and a balanced politician; the legislative dynamics between the Oregon House and Senate, specifically the role of the Senate Republican Caucus in influencing policy; the 1979 legislative session during a period of peak tax revenue and the subsequent negotiations surrounding the creation of the "kicker" as a fiscal alternative to a balanced budget amendment; the economic turmoil of the early 1980s triggered by rising interest rates and the resulting 1982 special sessions; Bob Smith's transition to Congress and his reflections on Atiyeh's reputation as a steady, experienced leader during difficult economic times; the contrast between the bipartisan atmosphere of the Oregon Legislature and the increasing partisanship in later years; the Columbia Gorge scenic area legislation and its perceived negative impact on private enterprise and land management; the decline of the Oregon timber industry and the spotted owl controversy; the state's lack of control over national forest land; Atiyeh's relationship with tribal nations, particularly his deep connection to the Warm Springs tribe; Atiyeh's pride in his Syrian heritage; and his stance on Israel during the National Republican Convention.

Note on the text: This transcript was made through AI in 2025, with some manual corrections. It has been provided in order to facilitate research, but the text does contain errors and inaccuracies. Users should check the transcript against the recording before quoting the speakers.

[Recording begins mid-conversation.]

James Moore 00:00

It's a great honor [to write Atiyeh's biography]. And--

Bob Smith 00:04

Yeah, he's a special man in Oregon history. Dear friend of mine.

James Moore 00:14

So when did you first know him? Did you know him? Just when you got elected into the legislature,

Bob Smith 00:20

That's the first time I met him. When he was elected, he defeated a Republican in the primary, and I met him, and of course, in jest, I said to him, you know, I don't know how the world you could ever be elected. Nobody can spell your name. He says to me, Well, I don't know how you could be elected. There are too many Smiths. So that's the way we started. Anyway,

James Moore 00:52

By the way, I did talk to Norm Smith yesterday. And so he said to say hello to Brother Smith.

Bob Smith 00:58

Oh, thanks, good. So Norm's still working up there, I suppose.

James Moore 01:04

Yeah, he's left the Ford Family Foundation, but yeah, he's doing some of his own things, yeah.

Bob Smith 01:13

Well, anyway, Vic, course, later, I was introduced to his business, and I'll never forget, I walked into his business in Portland, and he was in the back room where they kept the book. So I walked back there, and we were talking, and I looked up, and here was a person out looking through his material in his store. And I said, Vic, you got a customer out there. They said "it's a Democrat." I didn't ask how he knew. But the guy finally left. Nobody there to take care of him. [Laughing.]

James Moore 02:14

So he's in the Senate. You're in the House, become Speaker. Did you deal with him much when he was in the Senate and you were in the House?

Bob Smith 02:30

not long but, uh huh, but of course, I was in the majority and he was in the minority. Yeah,

James Moore 02:40

He still somewhat rues that he ran for the Senate at the same time the Republicans got the majority back, yeah,

Bob Smith 02:49

but he was well respected. Then later as governor, he portrayed himself as a balanced person, not a partisan politician as we know them today, and he reached judgment on the basis of facts. He was fair, he was honest. He made a huge name for himself as a politician, a businessman and an honest man.

James Moore 03:30

Did you see more partisanship when he was younger, or was he reaching across the aisle?

Bob Smith 03:36

Well, I was, yeah, I saw a lot more in the house, but, but we didn't have a lot in the house either, and very little in the Senate. When I got the Senate, I think there were six, six members, Republican members--

James Moore 03:58

Wally Carson gleefully showed me the picture of all of you in the phone booth. Yeah. So how was that caucus to work with? Which caucus, the Senate Republican Caucus, when you got there to sit, did it? Did you actually take caucus votes? Or did you just go your own ways.

Bob Smith 04:20

We basically went our own way. We could, yeah, we couldn't impasse any issue. We We couldn't pass anything, or we couldn't stop anything, yeah, so we kind of blended in, I guess you'd say, How

James Moore 04:38

did you have an impact on what was going on?

Bob Smith 04:41

Well, then we could go to Tia and try to convince him to veto, but you didn't seldom if he ever did much, but at least the threat was there. Yeah, so the Democrats thought maybe they better try to do. In a lot of this, because we might impact their way of thinking.

James Moore 05:04

Yeah. So it becomes a more powerful, more powerful caucus when Atiyeh becomes governor, when you have that extra leverage, no

Bob Smith 05:10

question, yeah. In,

James Moore 05:15

when Vic becomes governor, you become the minority leader in that first 1979 session, when Vic is Governor, it's been described by several people as kind of the peak of Oregon tax revenue. This is when you

decide eventually to give back hundreds of millions of dollars. The kicker comes up. Were you involved in in, you know, the negotiations over the kicker, or any of the tax refunds, ideas, those kinds of things.

Bob Smith 05:49

Well, we were all involved in the kicker, which was a way of saving money for taxpayers, when everybody knew that the government was not going to save money for taxpayers, so we saw it as a as a way to control outlandish spending. Yeah, and I was involved

James Moore 06:15

in that. Do you know who came up with the idea for the kicker? I Yeah,

Bob Smith 06:25

no, I don't know, except that we were, and I was working for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution in those days, we could never get it to a vote. So we saw the kicker as a small alternative to a balanced budget issue. Yeah. Okay,

James Moore 06:51

fascinating, yeah, because later on when Mark Hatfield makes his historic vote against the balanced budget in 1995 I do yeah, but Vic did a he talked to me about it a little bit. He also did an oral history about 25 years ago, and he talks about it as being an example of Hatfield sticking to his principles. But Vic really wanted a balanced budget amendment as well. So, yeah, yeah.

Bob Smith 07:23

Yeah, Mark Hatcher was the lone vote that stopped it.

James Moore 07:26

Yeah, yeah, it's a pretty amazing time. The 1979 session comes to an end, and then Paul Volcker decides to raise interest rates and start whipping inflation and all those things, and the economy starts tumbling in Oregon. When did you when were you elected to Congress? When did you leave the Oregon legislature and

Bob Smith 07:59

think it was 8282 okay,

James Moore 08:05

okay, so there's, there's after the 79 regular session, then there's a series of special sessions to rebalance the budget. And then after you leave, is when things really no actually, because you're running in 82 so that 82 there's the long special session, those kinds of things. In January of 1982, was the long special session that started in January. Then people took a break while committees worked out exactly what you were going to do. Then people came back. And so it ended up being officially 37 days, but it was actually like 4546 days long. Were you involved in the negotiations of that?

Bob Smith 08:51

I don't recall that. I was okay. I think I was running.

James Moore 08:57

So you were already focusing on Congress and getting that going? Yeah? Because the primary would have been coming up and all that kind of stuff. Yeah. The reason I ask is talking to Republicans and Democrats versus Hardy Myers, who was the speaker, Paul Hanneman, who was the House Leader, they don't recall the Atiyeh people coming to them ahead of time and saying, here's what we're going to do, which was Vic's normal pattern, work everything out with the leadership, and then have try to have a focus session.

Bob Smith 09:32

So no, I don't, I don't want to call that either. Don't recall

James Moore 09:35

any of that. Yeah. Okay. Anything else stick out while you were, you were in the Oregon legislature in Vic, was governor.

Bob Smith 09:46

Well, only as a as looking back, you have a more accurate idea what happened. While it's happening you you can't evaluate it. So Well, yeah, but as we look back, it was a very successful time for for the government and for Vic and we we worked out our issues, not based upon more money, but based upon the income that state was receiving at the time, right? So while that there was not a balanced budget, in effect, no one wanted to pass legislation that caused the increase in taxes. Yeah. Yeah.

James Moore 10:43

So you have a wonderful perspective, because you were in the majority in the Congress, working with Clinton in something that eventually led to balanced budgets, and then you were also, you know, doing the same kind of thing you talked about the leverage when Vic got into the governor's office, dealing with the Democratic majorities in the Oregon Legislature. In your thinking about that was the success because the two parties were had to come to some kind of compromise, or was it just the times driving things?

Bob Smith 11:20

You mean in Congress,

James Moore 11:21

well, in both, in both. So you may be that you have different answers for both of them. Well,

Bob Smith 11:26

in the legislature, I think the times just dictated

James Moore 11:33

the action. Okay, it was a recession that was focusing people. Right? Yeah.

Bob Smith 11:41

In Congress, it was terribly partisan. And if you're a Republican and you were in the minority, you were in the minority, you made no decisions. Yeah, that's why I enjoyed my last term is as chairman of the Ag Committee, because we, we gained the majority. Yeah. No, Vic was, you know, I don't think Vic was appreciated as much while, and that's true of anybody while he was governor, until afterwards, when they looked back and saw comparisons and and the State of the Union and the issues that Were involved, because they they realized that he was a steady hand of experience and of bipartisanship. Yeah,

James Moore 12:53

yeah. Looking back, I've actually, I've talked to both Barbara Roberts and Ted Colin goski, who were in the legislature, you know, where Barbara was Secretary of State and general legislature. And they both have exactly the same view, really, you know, Barbara. Barbara feels that her her governorship, got out of control. And she talking to her, I haven't pegged her down on it, but it but it seems that she thinks her staff got out of control, whereas cooling goski, because after the 1982 election, it's not that he and Vic were mad at each other, they just didn't have anything to do with each other. That was a brutal election, but when Ted became governor, he started picking up the phone and calling Vick, and they actually bonded very, very well done last 10 years of Ted's Vic's life, yeah, but it's just, it's just fascinating that everybody's kind of looking back at that. I don't know that I'll be able to talk to John Kitzhaber, but it'd be great to get his perspective this way, while you were in Congress, there were a couple of things that you were were Congress was working on and the state was working on, most notably the Columbia Gorge. You opposed that legislation. It looked like for you thought it was the wrong way to go about doing whatever they were doing

Bob Smith 14:25

now. Which Columbia Gorge?

James Moore 14:26

The scenic area?

Bob Smith 14:30

Yeah, well, I yeah, I didn't, I didn't like the identification of scenic area because it restricted private

enterprise in doing so, and I thought that was a negative, and it was a negative for Oregon, while the rest of the country thought it was wonderful, but it didn't impact them. That's what happens to you when you're in a small state. Yeah. Harvey, yeah, absolutely.

James Moore 15:03

Did you see dynamics like that, dealing with BPA and things like that?

Bob Smith 15:10

Well, all the time, you know, the the whole idea of the management of public lands was very important to Oregon, since a majority of the lands are public, yeah, in our state ownership, but to the rest of the country, it was theirs, yeah, so it was very difficult to protect what was private use of public lands in Oregon against the overall view of the rest of the country that protected set it aside. It doesn't bother us. Yeah? Attitude, yeah. And it was a battle all the way. It still is, by the way. Oh

James Moore 16:04

yeah, just this morning, I was hearing a, I think it's a county commissioner on the Washington side of the Columbia Gorge who was talking about something saying, you know, we got to protect property rights. And it's the same discussion, sure, going on all the time.

Bob Smith 16:20

And, you know, when they finally stopped us from harvesting trees, Mm, hmm, in this state, it has really impacted our state, and we haven't recovered since. Oh

James Moore 16:35

yeah, yeah, yeah. It's fascinating. I mean, I followed it, but before this, I'm following it going deeply into it. It's like, when the timber industry blew up in 1982 we came up with triage, and that's still where we are. Then the spotted owl comes, like, three years later, and just keeps it at that level. And that's, that's it, the marbled murre act, yeah, yeah. When I was talking to Pat Amedeo, she because the state could only really control the state forest, which is small, and the Reagan administration was coming up with ideas on how to manage the national forest land, you know, the BLM, all those kinds of things. Were you involved at all in talking with the Reagan administration people about what they were going to do? Were they just off on their own? No, they were just off doing their thing. Because as I'm tracing it through. It's also it doesn't look like, you know, Hatfield or Packwood was able to have much impact on the either so fascinating that [--?] Californians and Coloradans are running roughshod over another western state. That's right. Yeah. Pat found that that frustrating, because no matter what they did with the state lands, the federal land, in fact, was becoming more and more locked up and sure,

Bob Smith 18:08

yeah, and the state lands were minimal, yeah, yeah, yeah.

James Moore 18:18

So anything else stick out to you about the your relationship with Vic and Oregon while you were in the legislature. I mean, this is just, it's just your first two terms in the house, yeah, well,

Bob Smith 18:32

only that. I didn't realize how important it was to be good friends with the governor until he was gone.

James Moore 18:41

Oh yeah, we

Bob Smith 18:48

we got along very well. I don't remember of any issues between us. And remember that during that time, the Senate was still democratic, right? So you had a Republican House and a Democratic Senate, yeah, and a Republican governor, yeah? Well, you think you should work together? What choice do you have? Yeah, there are, there are no choices, yeah, yeah,

James Moore 19:22

there's one thing in Vic's career, he was never in the majority. 20 years in the legislature, he was always in the minority, and he had Democratic legislature while he was in governorship. So we talk about his bipartisanship. But what other choice did he have

Bob Smith 19:35

That's right, what is what's left? Yeah, absolutely,

James Moore 19:39

absolutely. So talk to me about Vic as an ex governor. Well,

Bob Smith 19:48

we both belong to this old timers organization, and we meet once a year and enjoy each other a short time in Portland. Mm, hmm. And we'd recall issues and reveal a great friendship. So I'd always look forward to seeing Vic, who I considered a special friend, and he me to talk about the history of Oregon and what happened and what's going to happen. So we we always enjoyed each other, although I didn't see more often than that, really. Yeah, yeah, he was in another world and I was in another world in Congress, yeah.

James Moore 20:52

That reminds me of another part of Vic. Did you deal much with the tribes? And you have several large groups that were in your district, congressional district,

Bob Smith 21:06

I did because I felt responsible for a majority of The tribes. Really, yeah, and I lived and was raised just outside at Paiute camp burns. My father took care of the Indians without any costs. He was the only doctor. So I grew up wanting to help and serve people that were poor and destitute. So I looked out for tribes. Fact, there was the tribe in in Southern Oregon, across the mountains over here was trying to get a gambling casino, and I have to do that. So

James Moore 22:13

did you have any interactions with Vic over any of that?

Bob Smith 22:17

I don't recall any. Okay, I don't think so. Yeah, because

James Moore 22:20

he has, he had a close relationship with the tribe. So Warm Springs is the one that really they bonded. Yeah, yeah. One of his prized possessions, which we now have in the archive, is his lifetime fishing license for the Warm Springs reservation.

Bob Smith 22:42

No, I used to kid him a lot. I said, you know, I don't know how you can still be alive in this state with that name and be Syrian on top of that. Kidding, yeah, but he was, yeah.

James Moore 23:04

It's fascinating as I get into this, because when he was in office, nobody really thought of him as it wasn't even an issue. Even with Iran blowing up all they wasn't. Denny miles never even pulled for it, just to make sure. But digging down just a little bit, he was very proud of his Syrian heritage. Yes, one of the things I've used in my classes, he's got, we have all this things from his several times as a delegate to the National Republican Convention. And there's great handwritten notes. He would go to the platform committee every time and argue that Israel shouldn't be the only thing in the Middle East. We need to have more. But, of course, it went nowhere. But it's just, you know, my students eyes get kind of big. There we go. But it was below the surface. You just didn't see that, yeah,

Bob Smith 23:56

well, and we didn't have the public awareness of the Israeli versus Arab issues at that time. Yeah,

James Moore 24:08

yeah, absolutely. So anything else?

Bob Smith 24:14

No, I wish I had more I would share with you. But

James Moore 24:17

did you ever go fishing with them? Do any of those things. No, okay, never did.

Bob Smith 24:25

Everyone had anyone ever fishing with

James Moore 24:35

him. There's an important fishing trip with Lynn Newbury, actually, holiday where Vic drank too much and he never really drank much again, ever.

Bob Smith 24:47

Yeah, I remember that fishing trip. Yeah, I was on it myself. Uh huh, yep, I. Good, well, thank you very much. Well, thank you. Enjoyed visiting with you. Yeah, thanks for doing what you're doing for Victor.

James Moore 25:06

Yeah, no, I hope the book comes out next year. Yeah, the books are books, so, yeah, who

Bob Smith 25:11

knows? Yep, I hope it makes a million dollars for you. Yeah. What do you teach? I teach

James Moore 25:22

politics. Yep, so I but I do equally international relations and American politics. So this is a wonderful project, because, you know, by the time he gets to a second term, he's spending so much time traveling to Asia and, you know, a little bit to the Middle East and those things. Yeah, it's fun. Yeah,

Bob Smith 25:44

well, good, great.

James Moore 25:50

Well, I'm down here...

[Recording ends.]