

Tape 25, Side 1

CH This is an interview with Governor Vic Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer, for the Oregon Historical Society, is Clark Hansen. The date is May 12, 1993, and this is Tape 25, Side 1.

In our last session we got up to election night when you were first elected as governor in 1978, and I was wondering what had happened on election night, where you were and how you watched the results come in.

VA I felt pretty - well, I felt very confident, not pretty confident. That was versus 1974. You know, I'd been around long enough to get a sense, what I call my gut reaction. Incidentally, that's a very unscientific, but for me quite accurate, reaction, gut reaction. And so we drove down - I remember this very vividly - drove down to the victory party, as we call it, at the Benson Hotel just before eight o'clock. I stayed in the car because I wanted to get the first result, the first announcement, so it came across on the radio. We're getting the first returns - this is right after eight o'clock - on the governor's race. And whoever the announcer was, I don't remember that, said, Straub 55 percent, Atiyeh forty-five, and then ^{he} said, No, no, wait a minute. That's wrong. It's Atiyeh fifty-five, Straub forty-five. And it was really strange; I wasn't alarmed. I knew that was not right. You know, my gut reaction again, I said, That's not right, and so I didn't go into shock the moment I heard him say that. I just knew that wasn't right. At that point I knew I won. And as I said before, in all my previous races, and most often in most races regardless of even if it's a small return, the first report will be what the result will be, regardless of two precincts or - it's strange. I don't know why. And you might want to watch it yourself just to

see how it goes. But that's not 100 percent perfect, but I would say to you that it's 80 percent or 85 percent perfect.

CH I would think there would be some distortion because of the urban-rural vote counts.

VA For whatever reason, and I don't know the answer, and I understand what you're saying. It just seems to sort of hold up. The only time, and I think we did cover that, it was in 1964 when I ran for the senate, and I'd heard on the radio that I was behind John Hare. So I'm driving to Hillsboro to thank everybody, and by the time I got there it had changed. That's the only time the first report didn't carry through. The only time. So anyway, obviously, I'm elated. It's really strange. You campaign hard, you don't know what the future holds. I can remember, I guess flying into Salem. Anyway, we're in the air, and I'm looking down, and I see the state capitol building, and you think, well, you know, maybe I will be elected governor. I'm not really superstitious, but I saw a double rainbow, which I thought was propitious. But, you know, these things go through your mind. You're working hard, you're campaigning hard, and you kind of get a sense of what's happening. I don't know if I've told you, but I do remember in September I was up at the Pendleton Roundup, and I'm in the parade, and when the parade was over, I went and called my office and said, "I want the election today, and I want it in Pendleton, Oregon." I mean, it was really great. So you know there's this penetration thing that's going on, you know that - you feel good about what's happening, and I can't really tell you much more. It was kind of one of these - oh, what do I want to say. There's just a lot of - you know, everybody's happy, your team, everybody that worked for you is happy; obviously, we're happy. And then finally get a recognition from Governor Straub.

CH What was that communication like? It had been just the other way around, hadn't it, the previous - four years previous?

VA Yeah - well, except for Roger. That was the primary. Of course, obviously I had to congratulate Straub in 1974, which I did. I like Bob Straub. I like him as a person. I like him very much. He's a fine human being, both he and Pat. Well, it's - you know, you've won, you know you've won. You get a congratulations from your opponent, which is nice, and the proper thing to do, but you already know you won. You don't need him to tell you that you won. He waited for quite a while, and finally I said, I can't wait for him to - I declare victory, and - because you usually wait. You know you've won, but you usually wait, again, in protocol, I suppose, wait for your opponent to congratulate you for having won. He waited a long time. As a matter of fact, I don't think his communication came in until the next morning or something. But I guess he was waiting for the upstate votes to come in. I don't know. But I finally said, I declare victory.

CH And that was about what time?

VA I don't know. I suppose I may have waited till ten, ten o'clock. But it was all - nothing was changing, you know. Actually, it was holding all the way.

CH And at that point you came down, then, and - down into the - you were at the Benson. You came down to address a large group of people that were...?

VA Oh, I was there all the time. No, I wasn't like some of the candidates I see today. They sit up in a room. No, I went right in there. We had a room, but - you know, it was just sharing in

the joy of the whole thing. It's a wonderful thing. And I can recall being up there, and, God, all these people out there, you know, there was just a lot of people up there, and it's an exhilarating moment to live through. A very exhilarating moment to live through. And my family, my children, and, of course, Dolores and all these other people that had worked so hard for so long.

CH Did you ever feel fated that you would be governor?

VA No.

CH I know that's an odd term to put it, but some people feel that - you know, that's it's their...

VA You mean my destiny?

CH Yeah.

VA No. And I guess because I never really thought of it - how am I going to try to explain it. It never - to me, it was never a matter of salivating over the title. As a matter of fact, it took me quite a long time to - and I'm even not really sure I really, fully got over it - to think of I'm something special, to refer to myself as the governor. It really took a long time for me to refer to myself as a governor. A long time. You know, I'd call up and, Who's calling? Vic Atiyeh is calling. It was hard for me to say Governor Atiyeh is calling. So I suppose if you were thinking - I'm thinking of Clinton. Clinton wanted to be president. I think he's enamored with the title. You know, it's - he's got an image in his mind, which, of course, is true, but this is a really, really big shot. You can't get any bigger shot than this. So I presume he might respond positively to your

question. But I sort of took it in the sense that I'm running for the job of president of a company, and I got the job as president of the company, but, to me, the president of the company is somebody that's supposed to do something; you know, not just wear a robe and a crown, do something. And I had some plans of what I wanted to do. But that doesn't take away from the thrill, the exultation, the euphoria that goes on. It's really something very, very special. And it's special in the sense just not for myself, but you've got all these people, you know, that are just thrilled with what's happening, so obviously they feed you in that process. It's quite a night.

CH Were you concerned at that point, or shortly thereafter, about the possibility that their expectations would be too high for you to be able to fulfill this euphoria?

VA No, I never felt that load. I never thought about it. I had the opportunity - you know, if you think through things, you begin to think about it, you know, afterward. I had problems with business because they thought, well, we elected one of our guys. Now he's going to do what we want. I never - I always did what I wanted. I mean, I knew; I knew government, I knew business. I didn't spend time like, well, Governor Roberts did, Clinton is doing, Goldschmidt did. You know, task force study groups. I didn't - with some notable exceptions, I didn't do that. I knew it had to be done; I just went about going and doing it. I didn't have to go study the thing, I already knew what it was.

CH You had been in the legislature so long...

VA Legislature and in business. And so I just went about getting the job done. I suppose that's why, when people talk

about big donors, pressure groups, lobby groups, I never felt the weight of those people. Now, I know I got a lot of money from business, but I got a lot of money from a lot of people. But I never - you know, pressure is something you put on yourself.

CH But after you were elected, did you feel the burden of the responsibility falling upon your shoulders?

VA Oh, I couldn't wait to get to it. I didn't feel like this was a heavy load that I was taking on. I told my staff - I may have said it in our previous meetings - that I - I'd tell people we don't have any problems, we have opportunities. To me it was kind of an exciting thing, really very exciting. As a matter of fact, I felt that through all of my eight years in spite of the very heavy burdens we had in the recession. It was exciting, it was a challenge, it was an opportunity. And I never before or since - you know, you use your whole mind, not just the pieces of it, like most of us do all the time. Using the whole mind all the time. That is exciting. And getting others to respond and work in the same way. It really was. It was a - it was very exciting. I'd use the word I enjoyed it, which - I suppose enjoy here is not the same as you would say you went to see a good movie, because we had tough times, and it was difficult, and I felt - I felt, there, a real responsibility. I was going to say burden, maybe burden, what you're asking. I'm talking about, oh, mostly welfare and education and things like that. But here was something that I had seen going on in government, I saw it, at least what I thought was in disarray. I described it during the McCall years: he just took government and dumped it upside down, and that it's - a lot of it was good, of course, but it had to be pulled together so it would work. I mean, it was just kind of dumped upside down in a pile. You had to separate the pile out a little bit, and Straub wasn't able to do that, and so I saw all

of that, and I said, God, this is great. I can get my hands on this now. I can do this.

CH Did you have any trouble going to sleep at night?

VA Never. Never in my whole career. I went to sleep - of course, it was late when we finally went to sleep. Then the realization begins to start hitting. I mean, the realization in the sense that I think - yeah, it was that night we had the state police parked out in front of my house. And during the entire period from the election, well, actually until I think it was sometime in late February when we finally moved to Salem, we had security in the house, in my house here in Raleigh Hills.

CH In the house?

VA In the house. Well, we don't - you know, down there, there was a security shack. I say shack. There was a house outside the house. That's where the security people would stay. But we don't have one in my home in Raleigh Hills. And we still have the signs of it. There's a chair that the fabric's worn out because the guys would sit there all night long, you know, all day and all night, but they'd have the pistol, you know. They finally wore out the fabric on the chair from their guns. Then - now we're moving some days, and I don't recall exactly, but it was before I was inaugurated. We had some kind of an event at the Nendels, which is, as of very recently, Shiloh, and we were having some kind of a to-do. I don't recall. Anyway, they'd come up to me and say, I think we'd better leave. The state police, you know. Oh, well, okay. So we get in the car. They're parked on the side; we didn't get out in front. They'd seen somebody with a rifle across from then-Nendels going up this hill. They were out looking for him and had better get the

governor out of here. So now I begin to think, okay, now, when do we tell Dolores about these things? She's got to realize that now, that we're a target. It's not that somebody dislikes Vic Atiyeh, you know, it's the head guy, whoever the head guy happens to be. And so we told her. She dealt with that very well. So these are the things that begin to - we get a state police car, not the governor's car yet because the governor has it, and going back and forth to Salem. We find a place to live, which we rented this house from the state, and they had to fix it up, you know, paint it, because it had been pretty bad run down. [It was] the same house that McCall had used, and [they were] getting ready for us to move in, and then we moved.

All this time we're commuting, all - and incidentally, I - of course, obviously I'm jumping ahead and we have to go back. I'm going back and forth now because we're now in transition. We have to do the transition thing; that is, begin to pick your directors of departments, your chief of staff, your transition team, which, incidentally, I had Lynn Newbry part of my transition team. Lynn had been co-chair of Ways and Means, had been on Ways and Means, and he was my budget guy. He was going to put my budget together. And I had Travis Cross, who had worked for Mark Hatfield and was development man over at St. Vincent's Hospital. They both got leaves, and he was on the administrative side for me as we put the team together of people and set up our deal. And they're neat guys, both of them. Wonderful people, did a good job. So that's going on.

CH Well, as you had mentioned, the final result was 45 percent to 55 percent, and that was a fairly substantial margin, so there wasn't any question in terms of there being a close race. And in other statewide races, Vern Duncan was returned as superintendent of public instruction, and Mary Roberts - I presume that's Mary Wendy Roberts - was elected as the labor commissioner. And in

the legislature there were gains in the house and senate for Republicans, which must have been very heartening for you as well.

VA I thought so, although when the session was over - I'm quite sure I mentioned this to you, but - or a few months after, I don't recall, but some members on the Republican side said that they weren't going to run for reelection, which leaves an open office, and some members of the media said, Now, isn't that going to be difficult for the next session for the Republicans to gain control? And my answer was, Well, the Republicans didn't treat me all that well. But, you know, you always hope for the best. But, yeah, those are all good signs, but I'm paying attention, now, to what government is and what I want to do.

CH One interesting statistic in the election was that - I notice the paper said, Atiyeh becomes the only man in Oregon history to beat two governors at the ballot box in the same year, McCall and Straub. So that must have been a bit of an ego boost.

VA Well, that's nice to hear. Actually, in a very cynical way, I said that I had to beat three governors. I had to beat McCall, I had to beat Straub, and I had to beat Goldschmidt, because Goldschmidt had a lock on Straub's office, and so that was sort of a cynical comment.

CH What do you mean by that, he had a lock on his office?

VA Oh, hell, you know, what Goldschmidt really wanted Goldschmidt could get from Straub any time he wanted, so - but that was my cynical comment.

CH He was transportation secretary at that point, wasn't - no,

he wasn't. Well, maybe it was just after that.

VA No, it was after that, after I was in office.

CH He was still mayor at that point?

VA Yeah.

Yeah, that's interesting, to me it was interesting. Again, I didn't think of these as Goliaths, either one of them, that I had to slay.

CH Not even McCall?

VA No, not even McCall.

CH And most of the papers said that by running as a Republican McCall chose the most conservative route possible, facing the Republican party, which is clearly to the right of McCall's political philosophy. If McCall had not run in the primary, if he had run as an independent in the general election, would that have - do you think things might have been different?

VA Well, who knows. I would tell you, from what I'm thinking, that I could have beat him. There were people that didn't like McCall, there were people that like Straub, and if I had been, let's say, the third candidate, I think that they would have beat each other up and I would have still won. Who knows? I don't know. The fact that I beat McCall as badly as I beat him might be a clue, because, really, he lost rather significantly. I've forgotten what his last count was, but I came very close to getting 50 percent of the whole vote. I've forgotten, 47 percent or 48 or something like that, of the whole vote. And there was, as I recall, seven of us, but three major candidates, Roger

Martin, Tom McCall, and myself, and, then, four others. But still I got almost 50 percent of the vote. Whether McCall dipped below thirty, he may have. I don't remember.

CH And even if McCall had run as an independent, then, he would be splitting the liberal vote with Straub, and that probably still would have left you as a frontrunner.

VA But anyway, you know, you talk about having beat two governors, to me the more significant thing was beating an incumbent governor. That's very difficult to do. In terms of beating McCall - I think we had talked about earlier - I knew that he could not match his own image - I've already said that - and that all he could do was come down, he couldn't go up. And as it turned out, of course, that's what happened. So that, to me, was more of a campaign mode I was in more than slaying Goliath. Approaching on Straub, I had also mentioned to you my decision to run was do I think Bob can be beat or don't I think he - well, yeah, I think he can be beat. So it was my own political judgment that I think I can beat Bob Straub. So here again, it was a matter of, again, not thinking that I've got this huge hurdle to get over, that now I'm thinking in terms of a political campaign and what needed to be done to win the election. But yeah, it's true, it's - that's quite a feat.

CH The paper also said that the defection rate to Atiyeh among Democrats was about 35 percent to 37 percent, a good 10 percent above the maximum a Democrat can afford to lose in a narrow election, a close election. Is that sort of the way you saw it too?

VA you mean the number of Democrats I got?

deteriorate from what [laughter]. When the tree's already cut beyond halfway, you know, if you go another few inches, it won't make that much difference. I suppose in terms of a political sense, we always got along together very well. You know, face to face. Hell, I always liked Irv. When he was down there, he - he won his reelection one time when I was down there at the convention, and I told him - I reminded him recently of it, I don't know, within the last two or three months, whenever I happened to see him - I said to him, "Irv, you owe your election to me." He looked at me, "How's that?" I said, "I was thinking of supporting you" [laughter]. My very first session, 1959, and the labor leaders - and they actually came up to me at the end of the session and said, You know, Vic, we disagree on most things, but I really appreciate the way you approach government. In other words, I left with their respect. They couldn't count on me to do what they wanted to do, but actually, if you really look at it, nobody could count on me to do what they wanted me to do. I was going to do what I thought was the right thing to do, meaning back to - I can tell you, and we'll get to it because it was near the end of my term, the lowest point in my term as governor was the kind of abuse I was getting from business side. So, you know, what I'm trying to say to you, that - I shouldn't say abuse. Criticism. But business - what I was doing wasn't because business says they want to do this, or I wasn't doing what - because labor said this is what I want you to do. I was doing it because I thought it was the right thing to do for Oregon and not because somebody said, Vic, I want you to do this. Obviously with my background as business...

[End of Tape 25, Side 1]