

VICTOR ATIYEH
July 15, 1993
Tape 47, Side 2

C.H.: This is an interview with Governor Victor Atiyeh at his office Atiyeh International in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer for the Oregon Historical Society is Clark Hansen. The date is July 15th, 1993. This is Tape 47, Side 2.

We had been discussing the comparable worth plan, you were going to discuss about two ways of saving money - cutting the pay and cutting personnel.

V.A.: That's the thing I could never understand, as we were going through the downturn and talking with the unions, and obviously we have a contract with the union, so it there's going to be any changes you have to renegotiate a contract. And in talking with them, to my way of thinking it was much better that people keep a job even if they had to take a little bit less pay than it would be to be fired. But that's not the way unions see it. If you have to save money, fire people. And I don't understand that, I really don't understand that at all.

The only rationale, of course, I can understand is that if you lower the pay than they are starting at from a lower plateau for the next bargaining session instead of the one they were at. And yet we had no problem with that. Meaning, you know, if we were to make any restoration we'd go back to what that pay was when the time was good and just go from there. But they just couldn't see it that way, and I'd say that's awful. It's so much better to have a job, even if it's a little less pay you've got something coming in.

Incidentally, that reminded me. During the time when we were attracting all these industries and high-tech was coming in, again the labor unions were on me, well on two counts, because these high-tech plants are not unionized, and the labor union doesn't like that. But they kept talking about - and we even hear it today - about low pay jobs. All these high pay jobs to low pay jobs. And my answer was there aren't any high pay jobs. They're gone, at least for now, they're not there.

My answer to them was, "Look, my job as a governor is to create the atmosphere for jobs. Now it's up to Oregonians to decide if they want to apply for them." And Oregonians did. They say hey, I want a job. They don't have this esoteric thinking that some of the labor unions have.

Labor unions are an interesting breed. They represent in Oregon, it's hard for me to tell right, but less than 20 percent of all the workers in the state. I don't know what it is, 18, 19, something like that. Nationally, they're about 17 percent, I understand, 16 or 17. All the rest are non. But boy, you'd think they were every single worker in the U.S. and in Oregon. They really make a lot of fuss.

C.H.: But still a pretty good block, isn't it?

V.A.: It's a good block, but they still don't vote as a block as we talked earlier, so there's the leadership and they're making a lot of waves. It's interesting. You know, I wouldn't ignore them or anything, but I mean my interest is in Oregon workers. It's not my job to organize them. That's up to the unions. I need to create jobs and create jobs for Oregonians and they can decide, the companies can decide or the unions can decide, or, you know, that's not my job. It's not my job to make it easier to unionize

or to make it tougher not to organize. I've never supported the right to work laws. That goes back, way back, beyond my first campaign. A lot of my conservative friends think that's the best thing since sliced bread.

C.H.: The right to work laws? Why?

V.A.: Well, the right to work law says you don't have to belong to a union. That's the basic concept. No one can force you to belong to a union. You could be working for a fully unionized company and you don't have to belong to keep your job. Philosophically that makes good sense. I just couldn't see getting into any big fight about the whole thing.

Now, telling you what I just told you, the number of unionized dues paying unionized workers are very low. It's their job to organize, not my job. It's not my job to make it easier for them to organize. But I cut it both ways. Anyway, that's a long answer to your question. I still today can't figure out why the unions really would sacrifice workers for the point of keeping the wage where it was. To me its so much better that somebody have a job and taking home some money.

C.H.: Have you approached them with that question?

V.A.: Oh, I've mentioned it, and they come up with the answer I told you. They didn't want to have a different plateau for salaries. They don't trust me or the succeeding governors to start bargaining for them from where they were before. Actually that's part of the problem, you know. I've said earlier that I really felt that I was for the worker all along, but you see they come at it from a different philosophy than I do. That is that they've got their conventions and they pass resolutions and they've got to hew to that line and some of them are pretty dumb and they really don't

create a good atmosphere for jobs, and being a businessman and knowing what business people react and how they react, I'm saying look, I'm going to create jobs. I'm going to do the best I can to create jobs. Any jobs. High paying, low paying, medium paying, doesn't make any difference, we'll create them and Oregonians are free to decide if they want to apply for that job or not.

It was interesting. I don't know if I mentioned this. When times were really tough and I had a fellow come in to one of my open house. He was very indignant. He says you've got to do something about the Southeast Asians coming in. He said these people are taking our jobs and you gotta do something about it. And I said well, you know, they're willing to work hard and they're willing to work for minimum pay. And the guy said to me, I can't work for that, you know, I've got expenses and stuff. And my answer to him was, then they're not taking your job. Well, he didn't like that answer. But factually they weren't. He wasn't willing to do that, so how could he say they're taking my job? That's not a job he would take even if it was offered to him. There's a lot of answers I have that isn't oftentimes applauded by the recipient.

C.H.: Is it difficult as a politician to walk a line that's neither pro- or anti-labor, sort of down the middle, without getting enemies on one side or the other? I mean, I thought that was what you were going to do. You were trying to walk a middle road?

V.A.: No. No. No. No. That's why I was having trouble answering your question. This was not what I had in mind. You see, my approach was just exactly what I said to you, that I would do everything I could to create jobs in Oregon. That was the

motivation. Now I made up my mind a long time ago, a long time ago, that my job as a legislator wasn't to create jobs for union labor. That was their job. You know, I said that's what you're supposed to do, that's not what I'm supposed to do. So it wasn't a matter of trying to walk a line. They had their job, I had my job. And my job didn't include doing some of their job. So I wasn't thinking I'm going to walk a line between my business friends and my labor friends. As a matter of fact, I was curious when you asked the question. I never even thought about it. I'm just about there to create jobs.

And you know, I get just as indignant. I mentioned way back about vetoing a bill in which business was coming to try to get a legislated advantage in business, and I was upset about that. And I vetoed the bill. Because that's their job, not my job. So you see, I was really kind of approaching it in a philosophical basis, it had nothing to do with politics. I've always felt, and it appears as all the things I said, that I'm going to do what I think is the right thing to do. This whole idea of pressure you apply on yourself. Oh, I gotta be for the unions, or I gotta be against the unions. When you approach things on the basis of that kind of thing, then you have an awful time. Today I'm for unions, tomorrow I'm for business, you know, it's one of those things. And you know, people identify me pro-business. Well yeah, I'm pro-business. But they don't seem to understand that my pro-business means somebody creating jobs. It isn't to make some one person wealthy. That's not what I'm after. I have my own - way back, beginning day one, in our taped interviews, do you have to be a lawyer ~~to know~~ ^{NO} just ~~to~~ have a set of principles and a little common sense, and that was my guide all the way through. I had my own

philosophy, my own set of principles, and that's what I applied. And these people that tried to - they're voting according to I've got to be for business or I've got to be for labor or I've got to be for gays or I've got to be against gays or I've got to be for abortion - You know what I mean? Where they're doing it because they think that's the political thing to do, I feel sorry for them. They have an awful time. If you apply the subject before you against this set of principles, it's so much easier.

Maybe it isn't a political thing to do, but in my case it worked out quite well. I've gone to the Republican caucuses and I tell them, because I'd hear them say things in caucuses about well, we really ought to do this because that's where the popular opinion would be. I'd say wait a minute. You do the most political thing you can do, to talk about sheer politics is to do what you think is right. But that was ^Never a message I was able to get across. They just couldn't see that.

C.H.: Do you feel that your message in general, or this philosophy of yours, has been understood?

V.A.: No. No. See, what makes it even more difficult is people begin to determine who Vic Atiyeh is, they're doing it from the perception of what most elected people are like. I've said so many times and it's been real frustrating to me, and again I'd mention it - and I used Read My Lips long before George Bush did - Listen to me, what I just said is what I mean. Don't read between any lines. Because if you read between these lines, that's not where I am. I'm on the line. But people don't - They say no, you can't be. No, he really does mean something else. Well, I can't help that. All I can be is who I am and that's who I was.

C.H.: So do you feel that you've been misunderstood?

V.A.: I'm not pouting about it. Misjudged, misunderstood, yeah, but I'm not pouting about it. Remember I told you about the lowest day? I think I told you about it. When I really felt bad and then I went home at night and said I'm not a failure. Or did I tell you that story?

C.H.: I can't recall, but please tell me again.

V.A.: I'd been getting beat up pretty up by the business community. It really disturbed me, because I knew I was doing what they really had been saying all these years they wanted done, and as a matter of fact, not just business people. The folks on the street. You've got to run government like business.

C.H.: This is what year?

V.A.: Oh, probably '86, before I left office. Late. And I knew that I was getting criticized and it kind of bothered me. I said hey, wait a minute. How come these people, these bright people, my friends, free enterprise, all the rest of it, all the things I attributed to them, how come they don't understand I'm doing this the way they'd want it done? As a matter of fact, I was recounting this with ^{GERRY}Jerry Thompson last Sunday, we went down and played golf with ^{GERRY}Jerry and ^{NEFF}NEFF Thompson, and we were kind of talking about it, and I said I can remember one time I had brown bag with some business people, and they were just chewing me up something awful.

Later on that afternoon, I met with a bunch of labor people, and I came back to the office and said, ^{GERRY}Jerry, something's really wrong. I said I got really beat up by my business friends, and later on this afternoon I met with the labor people and we had one whale of a good time. I said something's really wrong here. Well, anyway, she had been up to Portland and she came back and she

delivered a pretty heavy duty message about all this criticism. And it was really, honestly, the lowest point psychologically, in my career. God, I really felt really down, real bad. And it kind of weighed on me the rest of that afternoon. When I got home that night it was still heavy on my mind. And all of a sudden I said to myself, I'm not a failure. I know I'm not a failure. They don't know it, but I know it. That was the end of it. I felt better. And so when you ask me about being mean and misunderstood, I'm satisfied in my mind that I did a good job as governor of the state of Oregon. Now whether somebody else doesn't see it that ^{way} weigh, you know, I sleep at night.

C.H.: But is it frustrating for you?

V.A.: Frustrating only in a different sense. My successor Neil Goldschmidt ran things rather badly, and he treated the tax dollar like poker chips. It had no real meaning. And I'm making a judgment now about him. And what really frustrates me is the fact that my business friends think he's the greatest thing since sliced bread. And yet in my way of thinking is 180° away from where I was. I was doing what needed to be done, he didn't. They think he's great, and they were criticizing me. That's the frustration. I can't do anything about it. I still go back to what I said. I know I'm not a failure. Okay, there you are. I can't change things, I can't go around knocking on anybody's door and spend half a day and tell them how great I am. I'm not going to do that. So, you just have to live with it.

C.H.: You think as time passes and people have a chance to look at your career, your record, the things you've done, the things you've said, maybe even listen to these and read the

transcript, do you think that they'll come to a different understanding? Or a more complete understanding?

V.A.: It's hard to tell. You have to guess what history's going to say, who's going to listen to it, who wants to write about it, who wants to think about it. I'll be very practical about it and think it's very unlikely somebody in the future is going to sit down and write a book about Vic Atiyeh, because my style was not that skyrocket in the air kind of style which catches the attention.

Getting back to what's leadership, remember we talked about it before. Maybe, maybe someday. As I was leaving office, you know, people would say what do you think about your tenure? I said that's not a judgment I'm going to make. It's going to be whoever else is going to make that appraisal in the future. It's not a judgment I can make. I know in my heart how I feel, and that's all I can deal with, I can't deal with it anymore than that. As I thought about all the times we've talked here, and the questions you've asked me, sometimes I can remember a bill, sometimes I can't. When I can't, I would kind of apply a philosophy of mine, and say this is probably where I came down because - or sometimes, again in our tape interviews, people would say you said such and such. And I'd say I couldn't have said such and such. That's not who I am, that's not how I feel.

Now, a person that was trying to be somebody else might have had some doubts in their mind, maybe I did say that, because they're always kind of vacillating. Today I'm this and tomorrow I'm something else, and you can't remember everything. But for me it was no problem. I said no, I couldn't have said that. That's not who I am. So you know, maybe I don't remember that instance,

but I said no, I couldn't have said that, that's not me. That's why I was kind of comfortable in dealing with what I do, because I apply what I believe is the right principle in terms of what a democracy is all about. That's where I come from. But when you start measuring what I just told you against what you would consider a typical elected official, it just doesn't match up. You know, he's just kind of blowing smoke into the tape here.

But again, you know, if that's their reaction, that's their reaction. I can't do anything about it. All I know is who I am. That's who I am. Now how others judge me, that's up to them. It's my intention as we conclude this to kind of recap some of what I think are significant long-term, long-lasting things that I think happened. And I think they're important. But we'll do that as a wrap-up.

C.H.: As you look back across not only your career and the careers of other people in politics, there's such a wide variety even in a state like Oregon, where the population is somewhat more homogeneous than in some other places, the wide variety of people that they elect to statewide office, what do you think the people want? What are they looking for? Why is there such a large variety? Why would they vote for a Vic Atiyeh and then turn to a Neil Goldschmidt the next? Or do they ...

V.A.: Well, Neil Goldschmidt was more a result of maybe not the best campaign by Norma Paulus. It was more that Norma let it slip from her fingers rather than Neil won. Now I'm talking about politics. If we take the next step, Barbara Roberts is governor because an independent jumped in the race. Had that not happened, Dave Frohnmeyer would have been governor. Okay, so we've got some reasons for that. If we take it in a generic sense, we get to talk

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about the difficulty (indiscernible) particularly Herb Harious and the fact that somebody is trying to run is trying to separate themselves the challenger from an incumbent for example. And there, if a person doesn't know, maybe he doesn't know either candidate for legislature. Say, I don't know them, I'm a Republican, I'll ^{vote} for him. Or I'm a Democrat, I'll vote for him. So it isn't a matter of a deliberate choice, then it becomes that's the kind of reaction at the polls, that's why it's hard, very hard, for Republicans to take a majority, particularly in Multnomah County has a lot of senators and a lot more House members. And it's very difficult to get the message out.

Last election in Clackamas County, something very unique happened. A chairman of a large and successful business decided to run for county commission. Now that's very unusual. Usually a businessman, and certainly at that state, chairman, you know, I'm not going to fool around with that, I don't need that. You know, they just won't run. He decided to run. He ran against an incumbent. Former legislator. Actually one that really had never, well, certainly had never run a company, had never had to meet payrolls, had never had to do all things that you have to do to survive in the business world, most often had been in some position that was in public funds, getting a paycheck from public funds.

So here we have someone running, and this now is the challenger against the incumbent Democrat, they lost. I say, I can't believe this. What a wonderful opportunity the people of Clackamas County had to get somebody to run the government, or part of a county commission, that really knew how to run things. But first of all, it was an incumbent. Second, it was a Democrat. He campaigned good. Oftentimes I would fault the campaign. Many

people that would be business people would think they're just going to sign up and I'll go. Everybody's got to recognize I'm a good person. It doesn't work that way. But he campaigned hard. He did. Again, that was also unusual. So I just don't understand it.

You asked me how come all this happens. There are reasons. By that I mean, mechanical reasons. I mentioned the governors races, I mentioned house races, those kinds of things happen. Everybody's got a reason why somebody won or somebody lost. It may be the right or wrong reason. Remember I told you earlier I don't believe in coattails except negative coattails. And some of the losses of the recent races. Now the U.S. Senate race down in Texas, this guy was trying to get as far away from Bill Clinton as he could. He couldn't get unstuck from him. And he lost the race. So that's what I call the negative coattail.

Positive coattails hardly ever work. I left office saying, "Okay, I spent 28 years, I did what I think was right, I knew from day one I wasn't going to please everybody. I was going to be honest and vote the way I feel, and I suppose that in the vernacular let the chips fall wherever they're going to fall. I have no ability to judge where they're going to fall. They're going to fall." [indiscernible] say "Well, God, maybe I see Atiyeh in a different light." But they still won't take - I know enough about history. You know, okay, that's Vic's version, you know, but this is what really happened. And that's probably the right way to treat history. The fact that I said it - the one thing I would hope they would not do is dispute I did what I thought was right, and that I did it against a backdrop of a personal philosophy. I hope they wouldn't misjudge that. But they may say, no, that's not the way it really happened, this is the way it happened, you know.

Okay. That's appropriate, it's not inappropriate, and I would expect it happened. You know, if I wrote an autobiography, you know autobiographies are never taken as gospel.

C.H.: People presume that there's a bias.

V.A.: That's right. And that's the way I think it's properly approached I have no problem with that.

C.H.: You don't think you'll write an autobiography?

V.A.: Oh, I don't think so. First of all, I'm not a very good writer, and second, I don't know who'd buy it. My family might. My close friends would. But when you get past that one, then it's hardly worth the printing.

[End of Tape 47, Side 2]