

Tape ~~62A~~<sup>64</sup>

June 11, 1998

CH ...Victor Atiyeh at his office in downtown Portland, Oregon. The interviewer for the Oregon Historical Society is Clark Hansen, the date is 6/11/98, and this is Tape 62A, [sic 64] Side 1.

So, I was just asking about your family, and you had mentioned Tom, and your daughter is doing well. .

VA She's doing - it's a tough deal for her. She's got the four children, but they're growing up and getting older, and she's doing a good job of it. And we have the five grandchildren. Tom's daughter, Megan[?], is a graduate of college, and Suzanne's four children are just doing very well.

CH So, any great grandchildren?

VA No, not that I can tell so far. Megan, who's our best prospect, is just enjoying life.

CH And what about travels? Any travels you've been doing?

VA Last year - in terms of large travel. Now, I mean, I've gone around the state to different places for different times and have gone down to Los Angeles for a bank board meeting, but last year I went to Japan, and that was for the dedication - opening of the Fuji Television new headquarter building, which was a huge affair. That's a big, big building. In American dollars it seemed to me that figure was a billion three hundred million for the building, and,

then, the equipment and moving in. Dolores and I went together. And, then, in October I went to Beirut, Lebanon. I've been wanting to hook up with my mother's side of the family over all these years, and the opportunity came up, and I went to Beirut, Lebanon, for a week. It was kind of a - well, I met my cousins that I knew I had, and it was a delight to do that. I even met a cousin I didn't know I had, which was wonderful. But it was - you know, you see the town all shot up and buildings still, you know, just there.

CH It's still a mess over there?

VA Oh, yes. It's just tragic, really. It took them fifteen years to shoot up the town. They were kind of anxious to get it put back together again, but I told my cousin, I said, "It took you that long to tear it down, you can't build it up in a year and a half." But it was kind of nice to hook up with them.

CH Did you go back to your family's hometown during that trip?

VA Well, Mother came from Beirut.

CH Right, but I remember your telling me about the trip that you took - you went back to Syria.

VA My father came from Syria. I haven't been there lately, but I have been there in recent years. I mean, I was there in - the first time in '84, I think it was, and, then, I was there subsequent. I've been to Syria three

times of recent years, and so this trip to Beirut, Lebanon, was something I had been hoping to do for a long time. But it's been quite a while since I've been back to Syria.

CH And, you know, I know one thing that we talked about in the last interview, and I'm not sure if it was on the tapes that were missing or not, but I had asked you about George Atiyeh and his involvement with Opal Creek and all that, so I know that the family had a mining interest there, didn't they, at one point?

VA My father-in-law had a mine up there, and I used to enjoy going up there. There was always something to do, you know, fixing the flume line or a few things like that, because it really wasn't operating that much as a mine. And I enjoyed going up there and going fishing. But when my father-in-law passed away - my mother-in-law died first, and then my father-in-law passed away, and we finally sold it to this group from Hawaii. There's a long history to the whole thing. I think Nature Conservancy finally - I think that's who funded the Friends of Opal Creek, or something, to buy it. But anyway, we sold it, and I'm out of it, and - you know, it was just something I didn't know about or need. George was there with the Hawaiian company, and then, I think, with the Friends of Opal Creek. He's not with them anymore, he's not doing that.

CH So, in looking at the recent administrations, your successors down in Salem, what's your assessment, the people that have followed you? You've already talked a little bit about Kitzhaber - I mean, not Kitzhaber but Goldschmidt.

VA You know I have some thoughts on that subject.

CH I know you do.

VA Yes. However - like, when somebody asks me what's history going to say, I said, well, somebody else is going to decide that. I'll let somebody else decide that.

CH But even though somebody else may decide that, they may not know how you feel about it.

VA Well, okay. I'll be as fair as I can, and I mean that sincerely.

I went there with twenty years in the legislature and thirty-five years as a business person, and it's been said many times, and it's true, that no one has come to office with that kind of a background. The standards that I personally set are certainly different with the knowledge that I had. As I told you earlier, and even on the tape today, I didn't have to go to school. I mean, I got there off and running. And so in terms of fairness, I must tell you that my successors, none of them, even the current one - the current one, of course, had been in the legislature, had been president of the Senate; however, he's never really been on the other side of it, which was a business person. And so to the extent that they have the ability, I guess they've done okay. But by the standard that I would apply to it because of my particular background, they don't measure up.

But I'm trying to be as fair as I can, because I had a background and experience that they don't have, so how can you really judge it in terms of what my standard might be.

According to my standard they haven't done all that well, but according to maybe the standards of what normally apply they probably - well, they've done pretty well. I guess that's the best I would say.

You know after having interviewed me that probably my least favorite was my immediate successor. I think Barbara had some opportunities to tell the people of the state of problems that were involved in terms property tax relief and schools and all the rest, and she didn't do that. And that was the time to do that; I mean early on in Ballot 5.

When I look over the whole scene as governor, I didn't have the time. By that I mean my economist would come to me and say, "Governor Atiyeh, we're not going to have the money we thought we were going to have." And so, bang, right away I'm thinking about calling a special session to rebalance the budget. Ballot 5 gave you a road map: this year this much, this year that much, I mean, there was a road map, they could see it, they had plenty of time - "they" would include the legislature and the governor's office - and there wasn't a proper response to what was going on.

The current governor I think is doing, you know, a good job. Again, I'm saying that the standard, which may be an unfair standard, meaning my own because of my experience and background - well, let me put it another way. People have said to me, Gee, do you miss it? My answer is I don't miss the process, but I miss the opportunity to get my hands on a problem that I know can be solved and is not being solved and hasn't been solved. That's the thing that frustrates me.

CH And what are the problems that you...?

VA Well, Ballot 5 is one of them, there's no question about it. Maybe it's almost too late to solve that problem. You know, I can't think of them, but 5 is the biggest of the lot, and schools. But there's - repeatedly, you know - even crime, for example. One of the things I couldn't do as a governor - and I think that's on the tape - that I wanted the state to get involved in, prevention. But I couldn't do that. I didn't have the money to do that, it was just keep going with whatever we had to do. But, you know, instead of talking about jails, prevention. Well, nobody's gotten involved with prevention, and I can't seem to convince anybody that they ought to get involved with it, yet, to me it's the most important thing.

From the station of governor, for whatever it's worth, I think - you know, they talk about that I belong to the National Rifle Association, and a life member and been there for a long while, but I hope that doesn't taint what I'm going to say, that the minute there are the terrible tragedies that have been taking place, most recently in Springfield, Oregon, that the first thing you say, Got to do something about guns. Well, I watch - I don't watch the television, but you see coming attractions of movies and of the TV programs, and everybody's got a machine gun and they're blowing up buildings and they're jumping in and out of bed, and you see the movie stars having children without being married and all, and then they say they made that - that children are being influenced by the ads for Joe Camel, so we're going to pass a whole congressional act to say you can't have Joe Camel. If they're being influenced by some advertising with Joe Camel, what in the hell are they being - and not only that, but video games.

Well, nobody's going to pay attention to a - and I

don't mean this pathetically - a former governor. But from the position of governor, that's where I would be talking about things like that. Not as a matter to be defending the NRA, it's a matter that I'm saying, Hey, it isn't just the guns. It is true, if you really think about it - and I don't mean to put a cliché to it and say guns don't kill people, people kill people. Well, it's true. The gun is just laying there. Until that young man in Springfield picked it up and started shooting, it was just laying there.

CH But a lot of people would say that it's a combination. I mean, it's not only the people that are creating the problem, but it's the accessibility to the weapon. You know, for instance, you have a license for a car, you have a license for other things, how come you don't have a license for guns, how come they can't control...

VA Again, I've tried to be practical. I'm not defending the NRA. But there are so many - unless one were to say - and no one ever would - we're going to confiscate all the guns in the United States from everybody, unless you do that, there's no assurance, because they'll be stolen, there will be a - just like, say, in prohibition, there's going to be an underground. If somebody wants a gun, they're going to get a gun. And it's true. The only one that really is affected is an honest person. You're going to register, I'm going to register the gun. If it's the law, I'll do that. But can you imagine any crooks going to go register a gun? They're not going to register a gun. Now, again, this isn't defense. I'm getting to the practical side of it. I wrote a letter to Kennedy, only because he sent me a letter asking...

CH President Kennedy?

VA Yes. Well, when I say he sent the letter, obviously he didn't know he sent a letter to me...but some money for anti guns. And - well, where was I going to go with this? I've lost my train of thought on it. Well, anyway, what I'm saying is - oh, I know. His objective and mine is the same. I am not advocating for people to go out and kill people as an NRA member, or injure people with a gun. I'm not for that. I'm for what they're for, which is to not have that happen, to have safety.

As a gun collector I never had a loaded gun in the house, ever. Well, that's not quite right. I came back once from my vacation in the mine, and about, oh, several days later - and I remember this - I had my gun up on a shelf in the closet. My kids couldn't get it, but when I finally discovered it there and it was loaded, I was really very upset, personally upset. My children knew about safety with guns, I told them about that, and that's what you really need to do, just like you have to learn how to drive.

And so I am not for killing people with guns, but I'm for the practical way of trying to achieve public safety, and that's where I'm coming from. I am not a purist in terms of the NRA; you know, all the things that they oppose I don't necessarily oppose, and I think sometimes they go a little bit too far. But, basically, I think they're really on the right side.

And so what we're doing - I'm afraid that what we're doing is not going to achieve what we all want. If you just say, all right, let's clamp down on the guns, you really - and then say, Ah, now we've solved the problem - the tape didn't pick that up [laughs] - we really haven't solved the

problem. We've solved - what we've done is we've said okay, you can't use a gun. You can use a knife, you can use a club, you can use a bat, you can use whatever you want, but you can't use a gun. And all of those things that I just said could happen as long as you have all this mayhem going on on this other side.

CH And, yet, the consequences of using bats and knives and clubs are not nearly as devastating as the consequences as easy access to guns. And, also, not only are criminals able to get a hold of guns, which they might be able to do in any case, but a lot of crimes are done out of passion. And I'm not necessarily thinking of the kid in the Springfield school that shot everybody, but things that are done on a more or less spontaneous basis. That accessibility allows them to do things that have great consequences, whereas a legitimate - which is different than a legitimate gun owner who has...

VA What could we have done to prevent the young man in Springfield from doing what he did?

CH When you go into specifics like that, I don't know, because I haven't really studied the case. But, obviously, he did have...

VA You see, I'm not trying to be...

CH Right. But, for instance, they're trying to have locks on guns. Obviously, there wasn't a lock on this gun.

VA But these aren't necessarily family guns. As a matter

of fact, he was initially picked up with a gun stolen from a friend's house.

CH That's right.

VA I'm trying to be practical about what it is. Okay, let's back up here, and how could we have stopped this from happening, and why was it initially done? Who knows? It may even have been because of what they call copycat stuff, because of the other shootings that took place. Who knows what's in this kid's head. Apparently, he was building bombs at home.

CH He had problems, there's no doubt about it.

VA I'd have to think his parents had some forewarning of something like that. I'm not trying to give you a simple answer. These are complex problems.

CH That's right.

VA But I have to say to you that how we can ignore a huge part of what's creating this tension in the United States - and I can't help but believe it's all of this stuff we watch on television and - I don't play these video games, but you see them shooting and doing all kinds of things on the video games, and the kids are there doing it all the time. I can't help but believe that has something to do with it. And how Congress and the president can say - and they've said it - that Joe Camel is bad and we're going to pass legislation not to allow Joe Camel because the ads are affecting the children to smoke. Doesn't this affect

children also? But they don't shift over to this side. If - and Joe Camel, incidentally, was, I think, pretty low profile. I don't recall where Joe Camel comes into this thing, myself, but it wasn't on television every day, but it was bad. But how can this other stuff be good, or not - I don't think they'd say it was good, but how can it not be bad?

Anyway, it's - you know, we could have a debate, a reasonable and logical debate. You and I can have one, but not some people. There would not be a reasonable and logical debate.

CH Well, that's right, because people get polarized on their views and they don't think rationally.

I would wonder, then, sort of in conclusion, what sort of advice you would give to Oregonians and people that aspire to go into politics or political service, and to the state in general?

VA First of all, let's talk about the potential candidates. I've actually said this. You know, we go to a candidate school, and I said, Now, look. If you are getting involved in political office because you have some strong feelings about our system of government, because you want to right some injustices or because you have some things you want to solve, God bless you and I hope you win. If, however, you're going in because it's for your ego or you think you'd make more money or this is a neat deal to be called a senator or a House member or whatever, I hope you lose. I don't want you to be there.

My advice is, first of all, you go in for the right reasons. Start into politics for the right reasons, not for

any other reason. This is a democracy. This is what's called a representative form of government. Now, what does that mean? What that means, really, is that, Vic, I can't be governor; you go be governor for me. Vic, I can't be a House member; you go be a House member or a state senator or a school board member or the water district board. I can't do that; you go do it for me. That's what it means. Which also means you're supposed to represent the people. Now, that's not to be interpreted that you're supposed to do what you say or what he would say or what I say or somebody else says, it's what all of us say. But you've got to listen to that, you've got to keep your ears open for that. If you don't listen, you won't be able to discern that's what people want.

Over the years I've observed there are people who run for office - I've seen them, and that's both Republican and Democrat - and they would try to be what they think the people think they should be, which varies. It depends on what audience they're talking to. So then they get elected and they come down to the legislature, and they are absolutely the most skittish people in the world because they don't really know who they are or who they're supposed to be. I was never that way. I'd go out, as I told you on the tape before, and that's who I am, this is what I've done, and I try to - and they elect me and they feel pretty good about it, and I continue doing the same thing, so I'm not nervous. And if they don't like - as I told you, if they don't like what I'm doing, I'll go back to the rug business.

So my point is that you go there with the intention of doing the right thing for the right reasons, and you'd do well. But we need that not only in the states, we need that

in Congress. Congress is a real disappointment, and I would even escalate that to president of the United States. How Americans could have elected Bill Clinton over George Bush is something I don't think I'll ever understand. I've said, If we said, during the course of that election, Gentlemen, we have the office of president open; would you each hand in your résumés and we'll hire the best one, we would never have hired Bill Clinton, if you compared George Bush's résumé with Bill Clinton's résumé. But that's not the way politics work.

What do I say to the people? They have to be more discerning, they have to pay more attention to their society, they have to - that doesn't mean they study it; they don't have time for it. That's what they're supposed to do, just be a little more aware, a higher level of awareness. Listen to the news, read the newspaper a little bit, and don't take - you know, this is not a study. Just kind of keep up with what's going on, and then you'll be a better elector.

CH How has your philosophy of life evolved in the recent years, or has it changed at all, or have you added things to it?

VA No, no. I - no. It's strange how it is. You know, I am what I am, and that's what I am. [laughing] I keep telling my wife, God, honey, we've been married fifty-three, fifty-four years. Quit trying to change me [laughs].

It's still, try to be as good a person as you can. There are times that I'm sure my wife gets very frustrated with me. I've said, I don't think my wife would stand me all day at home. I mean we love each other, we've been

married - it'll be fifty-four years this July. Fifty-four years.

CH Congratulations.

VA Well, thank you. She's to be congratulated for her patience.

But it's just that - no, I guess at this age, this stage of my life, there's not much really - I did stop smoking, so what more do you want from me.

CH Congratulations there, too.

VA Thank you, my friend. Well, there are times. It's not been that tough. But I thought, well, gee, wouldn't be neat to have smoke, but it's not been a yearning. I've just thought, well, it would be kind of nice. But I don't really miss it that much, and it's done.

CH Well, do you have anything else you'd like to add to this?

VA No, thank you. I do thank you and the Society for letting me have this last shot here, and maybe it's a road map, maybe some historian might want to follow it. At least, we've said some things that I'd like to have them follow and find out about it. I feel a little bit better about it.

CH Well, I appreciate all the time that you've taken, not only just today, but, of course, this is almost sixty-three hours that we've done this, and so we really appreciate your

contribution to this history. Thank you very much.

VA Thanks, Clark

[End of Tape <sup>64</sup>~~62A~~]

[End of oral history].