

# Vic Atiyeh: A Time for Indians?

An Interview by Cynthia Stowell

If Warm Springs had its way on election day Bob Straub would be preparing for his second term as governor of Oregon. But instead a man who captured only three of every eight reservation votes has been selected to run the state.

The name Victor Atiyeh may not be a household word in Warm Springs, but a number of Oregon Indians know the 19-year veteran of the state senate as a quiet champion of Indians in Salem.

Atiyeh co-sponsored (with Rep. Sam Johnson) the legislation that established Oregon's Commission on Indian Services in 1975 and has served on the Commission ever since. The Commission is the only state-funded Indian advisory group in the country and Atiyeh has fought along with Indian members to maintain that dollar commitment. Before funding was available, Atiyeh showed his own commitment by offering his staff for support service.

Warm Springs' Rudy Clements, as Chairman of the Commission on Indian Services, has had the opportunity to observe and work with Atiyeh. "He is a very strong advocate for minorities," noted Clements. "It's my personal feeling that he would at least make an effort to carry this attitude into the governorship."

It so happens that the governor-elect enjoys a quiet retreat to Kah-Nee-Ta every now and then and has even been known to campaign at the tribal resort. Three days before the election Atiyeh was at Kah-Nee-Ta for a speaking engagement and the tired candidate paused long enough for this exclusive interview.

S.T. What will your involvement with the Commission on Indian Services be if you are elected governor?

V.A. My involvement would be a lot more than the Governor. But I say it having worked with the Commission, which is in the legislative and not the executive branch of government. Having been this close and the one who sponsored that legislation (co-sponsored by Sam Johnson) and one that's been on it since the very beginning, it's very clear that I've got a very close interest and knowledge of the problems and opportunities of the Indians.

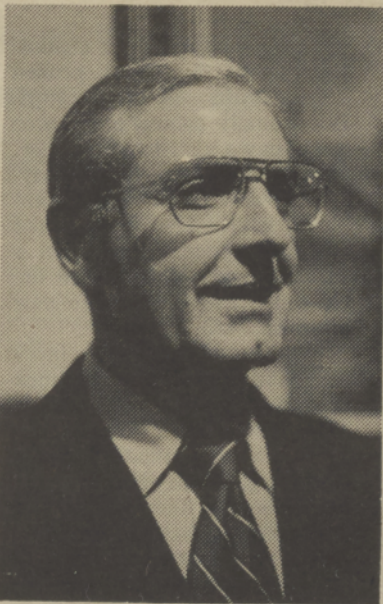
I will say to you that it would be disappointing to me to leave the Commission but obviously I'd have a greater opportunity as governor . . . and I'm going to keep very, very close touch with the leaders that I've met and will give my encouragement as strong as I can to their requests.

There's a lot of things within the governor's office in the executive branch that I can do to expedite those things that relate to the Indians.

S.T. What role have you played on the Commission? What has your input been?

V.A. It's really been a two-way road. What I thought was really important in the beginning was getting started on the right foot. First thing we had to do was get to know each other. And obviously that's been accomplished. Get to respect the problems of each other — from reservation tribes to those who were non-reservation tribes. We still have things yet to do.

I sense a very discriminatory feeling in the minds of people in the various agencies of government. No one says it, you



VICTOR ATIYEH  
Governor Elect

know, but it's there. I want to make sure that everybody understands that I as governor am very interested in this . . .

I think it was very clearly seen when we went with H.B. 2145 in the prior session (priority funding for minority programs through counties) and we got denied the funds for special Indian programs because they had to go through a county unit and some counties put up barriers. There's always kind of a silent thing that goes on and I recognize it.

### "Two of the goals that I see are education and day care."

Two of the goals that I see are education and day care . . .

S.T. How would you assess the relationship that currently exists between the state and Indian tribes? Is the state providing enough in services?

V.A. I think we can do more than we're doing. I really don't think there is as much of a priority in Indian needs as at least I'd like to see.

S.T. Do you think the exclusive relationship between tribes and the Federal Government presents an obstacle to enhancing tribal-state relations?

V.A. No, I don't. Well, obviously there are some rules and regulations and an established relationship between the reservations and the federal government but I honestly don't see any obstacles. I think a government can fight for its citizens. Certainly Indians aren't the only ones who have to deal only with the federal government.

I find that I'm very closely related to our congressional people and I know them all and if there are some changes, I even know those that are running. So I'll be able to deal with the congressional delegation very easily. Abourezk, incidentally, and this is kind of curious, happens to be a countryman of mine. He's Lebanese. I know he's quitting but I can find out from him who are sympathetic to our cause. In other words, I have a bridge to Congress . . .

I can help them fight their fight as governor of Oregon.

S.T. Would you like to see more funding for Indian services funneled through the state?

V.A. No and I don't think they want that either. One of the earlier concerns was that the state was going to intercede itself. I think they understand now that that's not the case. I

**"We don't have to choose up sides . . . Reasonable people can sit down in an air of mutual respect and confidence between human beings and work these problems out."**

don't plan to dominate, take over or anything else. What I plan to do is help them wherever they need help whether it's state help or federal help.

S.T. Have you followed the Tribal-State Compact Act that's now before Congress?

V.A. Is this the one that's going to take away all the rights that Indians have built up?

S.T. No, it would enable tribes to contract with the state for services.

V.A. Oh, well, I'm sorry I haven't. It may have come up in our committee meetings but I have to say I haven't been to some of them lately. If it's something positive, certainly I'd want to look at it.

S.T. I'm sure you are aware of the fishing controversy in the state of Washington and the upcoming Supreme Court review of the Boldt Decision. What would you like to see come of it?

V.A. I'll only give you what really is almost an obtuse answer — and that's "a fair treatment." That doesn't say much.

I'm not going to define how much the Indians should get and how much the commercial should get and how much the sports fishermen should get . . . Let me tell you, rather than take that tack, I'll tell you what I've said as I've gone through this frustrating time now for almost twenty years. It seems like all we're doing is fighting over what's left . . . The only reason there is a fight is that there's a shortage of fish. So who's going to get some of that shortage?

I have declared myself very strongly on improving the fishery — and that's where I'm going to come from.

I think that hatchery up here (Warm Springs National Fish Hatchery) — and I visited it — is outstanding.

### "I have declared myself very strongly on improving the fishery."

S.T. If the Supreme Court decides against the Boldt Decision what can you do as governor to apply a more "fair treatment" locally?

V.A. We deal in conjunction with Washington on the Columbia River so all we're talking now is tributaries. I don't know what "share" is — what's a proper amount. I'm not here to decide it should be half or 40 percent or 25 percent. I'm just going to sit down and say 'Look, we've got a problem. They're entitled to a share of fish. Let's see if we can work it out.'

In the meantime my real efforts will be where I told you before.

S.T. Water rights are a major concern of Indian people especially since Carter came out with his national water policy which does not effectively separate federal reserved rights from Indian water rights. Do you recognize the prior aboriginal rights asserted by Indians to water?

V.A. I do, but I have to recognize this as well: that whenever you talk about water, anytime, anywhere, what you have is a very emotional issue. And what I don't want to

happen, and incidentally I think from what I've sensed, what the reservation tribes don't want to happen either, is that this is going to get people so uptight that we're going to create some friction between the Indians and the non-Indians . . .

So in talking to you about their water rights, I believe in a person's rights. But here again, I don't think they want to start any kind of retaliatory reaction.

S.T. One element of the water rights issue that Indians dread is quantification — that what they believe to be unlimited rights could be measured and limited.

V.A. The Indian I'm sure has surplus water at least in some cases. We can sit down and make sure they have title to it, but that they would share this surplus. We wouldn't argue that they have control over it.

I'm not saying that that's the solution. I'm just saying that we can sit down and work it out. And I am saying clearly that I don't plan to force anything on them.

S.T. What do you think the state's role should be in regulating or protecting Indian water rights?

V.A. I have said in public speeches that I think the next major problem in Oregon is water rights. To be honest with you I wasn't thinking about the Indians at the time I said it. I was thinking of domestic water and water rights between farmers, both river and ground water. Obviously an element in this is Indian water rights and I'm glad you've asked this question because it helps me in my perspective.

There's going to have to be give and take on this deal and everybody's going to have to understand the serious problems involved.

If I went in saying 'Here's my idea' immediately there's a little hostility. I'm going to say 'I know this is a problem, now how are we going to solve it?'

I believe there are some very responsible Indian leaders and I know them and they know me well enough to know I don't fool around with them — that they can trust me. I think we can sit down and talk about it.

### "As governor I would offer the respect I have for the Indians"

We don't have to choose up sides. The atmosphere is: Who are you for? The Indians or non-Indians? I'm saying we don't really have to get to that point and I don't think that they want to get to that point.

Reasonable people can sit down in an air of mutual respect and confidence between human beings and work these problems out. That may sound naive but I believe it very strongly. As long as you play fair and honest and right on top of the table . . .

I think as governor I would offer the respect I have for the Indians — very deep, emotional feelings about them. It's not a phony thing, I really feel them and I think they sense I feel that way. It's not something you need to verbalize. It's a certain "vibe." We get along and respect each other. I think they have confidence in me, they've seen me perform, they've seen how I respond.

## How Warm Springs Voted

### BALLOT MEASURES

#### Warm Springs

1. Yes, 96 — No, 74
2. Yes, 101, — No, 68
3. Yes, 46 — No, 128
4. Yes, 60 — No, 105
5. Yes, 91 — No, 87
6. Yes, 42 — No, 134
11. Yes, 97 — No, 79
7. Yes, 70 — No, 104
8. Yes, 86 — No, 91
9. Yes, 95 — No, 74
10. Yes, 58 — No, 116
12. Yes, 124 — No, 38

#### Countywide

1. Yes, 1523 — No, 1826
2. Yes, 1825 — No, 1485
3. Yes, 894 — No, 2634
4. Yes, 1233 — No, 2162
5. Yes, 2863 — No, 711
6. Yes, 1797 — No, 1750
11. Yes, 1237 — No, 2207
7. Yes, 1872 — No, 1669
8. Yes, 2630 — No, 920
9. Yes, 2119 — No, 1224
10. Yes, 1333 — No, 1963
12. Yes, 2778 — No, 412

### CANDIDATES

#### (Governor)

Atiyeh - 77  
Straub - 102

#### (U.S. Senator)

Cook - 44  
Hatfield - 138

#### (U.S. Congress)

Hicks - 15  
Ullman - 166

Atiyeh - 2328  
Straub - 1265

Cook - 1459  
Hatfield - 2108

Hicks - 1312  
Ullman - 2235

### Ballot Measures Briefly

Ballot Measure 1 — Changes the method for selecting appellate judges.

Ballot Measure 2 — Gives the state Senate constitutional powers to veto the governor's appointments.

Ballot Measure 3 — Increases vehicle registration fees.

Ballot Measure 4 — Changes procedure for formation of people's utility districts (PUDs)

Ballot Measure 5 — Authorizes, regulates the practice of dental technology.

Ballot Measure 6 — Limits

ad valorem (property) taxes.

Ballot Measure 11 — Provides property tax relief from state funds.

Ballot Measure 7 — Prohibits state funding of abortions.

Ballot Measure 8 — Restores death penalty

Ballot Measure 9 — Limits utility rate bases by prohibiting billing for construction work in progress.

Ballot Measure 10 — Nullifies existing state land-use planning goals and strips LCDC of enforcement powers.