

## **Looking Back and Facing the Future**

*A frank political discussion with three Oregon statesmen*

Edited by Bridget Barton

### ***Vic Atiyeh***

*Born and raised in Portland, Ore., Vic Atiyeh, Oregon's 32nd governor, 1979-1987, is best known for his no-nonsense, businesslike approach to government and his successful efforts to build Oregon's economic base, even while the timber industry was facing decline. Said Atiyeh in a 1999 interview with BNW, "When I left office in January of '87, I said publicly that the gas tank in Oregon's economy was filled. We had created a better business climate in Oregon than in either California or Washington ... Now 12 years and three governors later, it appears that the last time the tank was filled was in 1987."*

### ***Bob Packwood***

*Also born and raised in Portland, Ore., Bob Packwood, was first elected to the Senate in 1968 at age 32, defeating the powerful Wayne Morse. Packwood served five terms, chaired the powerful Senate Finance Committee from 1985 to 1987, and is perhaps best known for his landmark Tax Reform Act of 1986.*

*In 1965, Packwood created the Dorchester Conference, a yearly Republican gathering on the Oregon Coast to debate controversial public policy issues. Said Packwood about the conference in a March 1998 BNW article, "...we brainstormed as to whether these young, exciting people around the state could be brought together and an esprit de corps developed among them ... Of course, an agenda was needed to be the yeast for spirited debate. But the purpose of the debate was less to conclude a position than it was to excite the passions into further political participation."*

### ***Greg Walden***

*Cong. Greg Walden is currently in his fifth term representing the people of Oregon's Second Congressional District. First elected to the U.S. House in 1998, Walden now serves as Deputy Whip in the House leadership structure, giving Oregonians a stronger voice.*

*From his business background in Hood River, Walden brings a deep commitment to issues on natural resources, agriculture, health care, education, economic development, energy, foreign affairs, and technology. His solid reputation has afforded Walden key appointments to leadership assignments and sought-after committees. In an August 2004 BNW article, Walden commented on the idea of leading Oregonians: "... being governor would be ... an extraordinary opportunity to see if you couldn't move this state forward by bringing in some new blood, by tapping into enormous resources that are out there, intellectual capital that has been shunned for years ... I think the state would be served by a shake-up, a clean out ... it's time."*

Vic Atiyeh, Bob Packwood and Greg Walden, three Oregon statesmen, gathered recently to reflect over the last 10 years in politics and to look forward at the issues facing our

nation and our state. Their conversation covered state, national and international politics and offered some frank, insightful and amusing comments. Here are edited highlights.

**BNW:** How have significant issues caused the political parties to change and adjust their strategies over time?

**PACKWOOD:** In 1950 the Portland City Council passed a very wide-ranging anti-discrimination ordinance. And all five commissioners, who were all Republican, passed it unanimously. But then on the ballot, Portlanders overturned what the council had done. Interestingly, it didn't get overturned in the West Hills and in Alameda; it got overturned in St. Helens and in Sellwood, in the Democratic areas of the city.

I thought that was an indication of where Republican voters were. By and large, in the 50s and 60s in terms of social issues, Republicans were on what was then the "liberal" side of those issues. There was no gun issue, no abortion, no gay rights, but whatever issues they were, liberal Republicans were on that side. (Tom) McCall is a good example. Then somehow we went haywire on these issues and it didn't get talked about. Oregon is a socially liberal state. Republicans, for whatever reason, have decided to spearhead their opposition to gay rights and their opposition to abortion.

**ATIYEH:** Mostly, my view is that the right wing had come forth and exerted a lot of pressure and politicians began to fawn over that. It didn't match up with what Oregonians wanted, or nationally either. It didn't have much to do with other issues.

**WALDEN:** The Democrats also drove social conservatives out of their party. And if you look at the voter registration change in the last 20 years, Republicans by number and by volume have gone up consistently, to the point where there's near parity with Democrat numbers. Independents is where it's grown. And Independents are just like their title says. They get scared off by some of these issues, if those are the focal point issues by the candidates. I think in past times Republicans were successful because they had candidates who didn't make the social issues their issues. They had a different vision and a different agenda that didn't chase away independent voters, and it attracted conservative Democrat voters and you held Republican voters. Absent somebody forcefully articulating an agenda that brings people to the party or the election, then others set the agenda. And we've seen that in ballot measures predominantly. Because we've lacked somebody at the top saying, here's where we need to go in Oregon, here's what matters most for us now and in the future. And if you have that, then you argue over those issues. Absent that, you falter.

**BNW:** So do most people still see themselves as Republicans or Democrats? Were political parties stronger in the past?

**PACKWOOD:** When Vic and I were first running for the legislature, if you had 2 percent of voters that were registered other than R or D, it was unusual. The party was

only modestly stronger. If you mean, in the 60s, if we had a Lincoln Day banquet, could we get 500 to come? Then, yes. But if you mean were the parties stronger? No.

**WALDEN:** I don't think that's changed.

**BNW:** Oregon Republicans have now been handed six straight gubernatorial losses. What are their options for the future?

**WALDEN:** You can't set the agenda without the leadership, the individual. You can't have it the other way either, a leader without a solid agenda. It has to be a package.

**PACKWOOD:** A leader on occasion can run against the tide and win, but he can't change the tide. We are all sort of examples of that — we had to run against the tide and win. But that doesn't make the party change.

**ATIYEH:** There was a time in Oregon when we were in desperate shape, and Bob was out there scouting around trying to find good candidates and support them. So you need good candidates and you need somebody who works hard to get good candidates.

**WALDEN:** Why is it that we're unable to attract the caliber of candidates, with a few exceptions, that we used to get? Part of it is that the playbook for both parties is character assassination now. It's "How do I destroy the other person?" not "How do I debate their ideas?" It was a more civil time, not completely civil, but more civil in the 60s and 70s. You didn't have the enormous amounts of money. There were races that were expensive, and there were races that were personally brutal.

**PACKWOOD:** When I first went to the Senate, at about 5:30 you would go to Everett Dirksen's office and they'd have scotch and bourbon and you'd have a drink for about an hour and there would be Democrat senators there. They don't do that anymore in the Congress now.

I blame Newt Gingrich for part of it. He gets elected in '78, and Bob Michaels is the Republican leader and Tip O'Neill is the Democrat leader, and they got along sensationally. They played golf together. And gradually Newt begins to think, we're not getting any place being nice guys. In appropriations, they get three and you get one. Newt says, we gotta go after 'em; we gotta hit 'em. And by god, they brought down Jim Wright, and Republicans win following Newt's theory. So the Democrats say, okay, if that's the way the game's going to be played, we'll get him. And they succeeded in bringing down Newt. About a third of the Senate, both R and D, is now composed of the people who came from that atmosphere. So now it affects the Senate also.

**WALDEN:** In the Wyden-Smith race it got so negative and ugly that the voters finally did weigh in toward the end. At the exact right time Wyden pulled the plug on the negative and said, I swear it off, I'll never do it again; I was wrong. It was terrible. And it flipped the race. If Gordon had done that, he would have won the race. Voters were so

disgusted with the gutter politics being played that they said a pox on both your houses. But Wyden moved first.

Effective candidates say no, I'm not going there. Candidates who are in touch with the electorate have the hutzpah to say no. Or yes — there are times when we confuse negative campaigning with debating issues. It's the tone of the message in many cases that's off. It's not wrong to argue vociferously for what you believe in. But sometimes they take it and twist it, and things get personally negative. That's the stuff voters hate. I don't think they mind if you say, "Here's where I am, and here's where Vic is, and you decide."

**PACKWOOD:** So long as it's done in that tenor.

**WALDEN:** Right.

**PACKWOOD:** But your opposition is more likely to make up something like this: "I'll tell you where Walden is: Do you realize that he voted to permit children to have sodomy with sheep?"

And the reason somehow that they would justify it is because he voted for some appropriation bill that has 5,000 things in it, and there's one little thing that relates to research on sheep or something like that. And bam — they just take it out of context and hit you over the head with it.

**WALDEN:** We can blame the politicians, and there's certainly plenty of blame there. We can blame the party and the voters. But the press. The press is not without blame. I know that's dangerous for somebody in office to say. It is a "gotcha press" in some cases. Not all. There are some very good journalists out there. But if you want the headline, it's got to be a "take you down," "gotcha" story.

You know, I went through that on the Mt. Hood Wilderness bill with the *Oregonian*, where they made this huge thing out of the fact that my TV ad was done at a waterfall that wasn't part of the wilderness. I never said it was part of the wilderness. In fact it was actually in part of the bill where forest health was to be prescribed. And subsequent to that ad, it's an area that burned last summer. No matter how many times I tried to say, I understand, but I never said this would be in wilderness, the headline came out, "Gotcha, he's not being straight with you." And you couldn't convince Michael Milstein to do anything but write the story. That's just one of a long list of examples.

**PACKWOOD:** I can give you a night and day example too. In the 1963 session of the legislature we had no offices, so our secretaries sat on the floor with us. Toward the end of the session it's the money bills that are relevant, and you're waiting. And maybe the third or fourth day before we adjourned, I said to my secretary, "What about gin rummy, a penny a point?" She says, "Sure." So we're playing gin rummy, and Doug McKean of the *Oregon Journal* comes in with a photographer and says, "Do you mind if I take a picture?" And I said, "No, go ahead."

The next day he comes back and he gives me a print and he gives me the negative. It never appeared in the paper. And he says, "Bob, you're going to go places in politics, and this is the kind of thing you want to avoid."

Today, that would be front page, just like that. A shady-looking legislator playing cards for money on the floor of the House.

**WALDEN:** With a YouTube video.

**PACKWOOD:** That is the difference. The press in those days thought of themselves as part of the establishment. They didn't want to hurt government.

**WALDEN:** Even those of us in office are human. We make mistakes and we say things that we go, "Hmm, I probably shouldn't have said it that way."

**ATIYEH:** So much changed with Watergate. Now every idiot wants to be an investigative reporter. Whatever it is, they want to find it first.

I didn't know about it, but when I was governor some of my friends decided I ought to have a roll-top desk. So they were having one made. They donated the wood, they made this thing, and they finally told me they were going to deliver it. So I said, "Okay, deliver it to the ceremonial office, and invite the press. I don't want them to "find it." If they're going to say something about it, let's have them do it right now.

**WALDEN:** Which is why all this gets back to why it's hard to find quality candidates to run. If you've been around business, around civilians for 20 years, you might as well lay out everything you've ever said or done, clear back to high school, and be prepared to defend it all. Even if it's not accurate, even if there's no way to ever rebut it, it will be in print. And I'm not blaming the press per se. I'm just saying this is the atmosphere those of us in office are in today that did not exist in the 60s and 70s. So I have a lot of really talented, successful people who could bring enormous energy, enthusiasm and vision to government who say, "Why would I ever do that?"

And we lose as a result in government. It diminishes the quality of the product. We chase them out of state.

**PACKWOOD:** Right. Like when you're trying to get some guy to be assistant secretary of energy and the guy is a Ph.D. nuclear physicist for Westinghouse. The guy is perfect for the job. His kids are 14 and 11, and his wife doesn't want to leave Pittsburgh. And the Sierra Club decides they don't like him. And he's going to have to take a two-thirds cut in salary for a job that he'll be in for two or three years. He says, "No thanks."

**ATIYEH:** I'll tell you about a candidate for director of the department of energy. I had a guy who was so qualified. He understood all about energy, he'd been in that field, he knew all about it, fully aware, involved with some nuclear power plants and other things.

And the Senate went crazy — nuclear power, you can't have that. It raised all kinds of trouble. I told him, "I hate to see you take this abuse. Do you want to withdraw?" And he said, "No, let's go all the way. "

And I lost it, which I knew I would. So now I'm trying to find another candidate. I call up this guy. I ask, "Do you have any utility stocks?" I asked him all these questions. Finally he said to me, "Governor, are you trying to find somebody who doesn't know anything?"

**BNW:** Would better party organization prevent so many ballot measures?

**WALDEN:** It isn't about party discipline telling an Oregonian they can't put a measure on the ballot. It is about a failure of leadership to address the issue that precipitates that ballot measure in the first place. In the 1995 session, we passed a takings law, Republicans did, in the House and in the Senate. Kitzhaber proudly went to the Portland Rose Garden and vetoed it. He never came back with anything to relieve the pressure that Oregon citizens had about their property rights. Citizens then passed Measure 7. The courts throw it out. The citizens pass Measure 37. The Legislature refers it.

Same with property taxes. There were efforts in the 70s — the Homeowner Relief Fund and some other things — but the rates continued to skyrocket and seniors were getting priced out in some communities from homes they'd lived in all their lives. And the Legislature didn't act in the 80s. So as a result you get Measure 5 and Measure 47. So this isn't about party discipline stopping voter initiatives; it's about a lack of leadership to resolve issues that Oregonians care about. But they happen to be issues on the other side of the aisle, so the Democrats just stiff-arm them. Until they get a ballot measure.

**ATIYEH:** You're right. How many times did voters come to you, they certainly came to me, during the period of time when property taxes were really big and they'd say, "You've got to do something about my property taxes." And I'd say, "I didn't raise your property taxes. You raised your property taxes." The voters never make that connection — that they voted for that school bond. But then they wanted me to do something about it. Every session we would try our best for basic school support. We'd add more money and our percentage would go down because property taxes were going up faster than what we could shovel in there.

**BNW:** What about the independent voters?

**WALDEN:** In the latest national data, the Independents are back to being undecided. They're available. So they fired their round; they did their part of the electoral job from their perspective. But they're back and available again.

**PACKWOOD:** For either party.

**ATIYEH:** Many politicians have gone away from the party. Now, some see the party platform as gospel, but some politicians don't pay any attention to it.

**PACKWOOD:** Barry Goldwater said all platforms do is get you in trouble. He said we should just have one page for a general statement of principles that doesn't offend anybody. Then let the candidates go at it.

**BNW:** Can Republicans recover from recent losses and recruit new candidates?

**ATIYEH:** I can only speak from experience. I decided to run because I decided to run. I mean, I didn't want the party to support me or anything like that. I believed in democracy and wanted to do the best that I could and see if I could get some assistance. So I went in with some principles of my own. When I first ran, the party was almost moribund. I went to the Washington County Republican Central Committee in Hillsboro and it was like going to a funeral. The party does do some good work. But I've got to elect me; the party's not going to elect me.

**WALDEN:** I'm reminded of a quote that circulated about that time about the Republican Party. I don't remember who said it, but it was, "The Republican Party is like mold; not really alive, but you can't kill it either." It's not my quote, but I read it.

**ATIYEH:** The 2006 election (the Democrat landslide) was similar to 1974 when we lost a whole bunch of Republicans. I remember the 1974 election after Nixon, and it took us a while to recoup. And they blamed the Republicans. It's hard to figure out what's going to happen now.

**PACKWOOD:** You know we've only had two major shifts of party. The Civil War made the country Republican — and made the South Democrat for the same reason — and then FDR made the country Democrat. They had a long run. And I don't think either party now is where the Republicans were from 1860 to 1930 or where the Democrats were from about 1930 to 1990. It's up for grabs. But the fact that we got the stuffing beat out of us in this last election doesn't mean that the Democrats are going to be in forever. They haven't established what FDR established.

**WALDEN:** It reminds me that that same label was applied after the 2004 election to the Democrat Party. Bush had just won re-election with 51 percent. Clinton didn't get that in 1996. Clinton didn't get over 50; Bush got over 50. We took control in the Senate and the House; we had a majority of Republican governors. And people said, "Is this the end of the Democrat Party?"

Yet two years later we're sitting here saying the Republican Party is dead. *No*. Issues drive outcomes of campaigns. And candidates make the biggest difference. The party is about those who are elected and speaking.

**PACKWOOD:** This is why Iraq is a transitory issue. Maybe it can hurt in 2008 depending on where we are. But give us one year out of Iraq and that will no longer be an issue.

**BNW:** What about Iraq? Will the U.S. succeed in bringing democracy to Iraq?

**ATIYEH:** You want to make a democracy? You can't make a democracy; the Shiites and Sunnis are going to kill each other no matter what you do. Why are we there? Bush has not made it clear.

**PACKWOOD:** I think at the start, among the neoconservatives there was a thought that we could make it a democracy. They were looking at it historically. At the end of World War II you only had about a half dozen democracies in the world. They were mainly the British Commonwealth countries and us, Australia, New Zealand. You had no democratic countries in Europe, nothing but France yet. You had no democratic countries in Africa, no democratic countries in Latin America, no democratic countries in Asia. And now you've got about 90 countries that we classify as democracies. I think the neoconservatives are looking at this as a pie, and if we can break free a piece of democracy someplace in the Middle East, I mean other than Israel that is a democracy, that would be the breakthrough that we need. I think they thought we could do it.

We did it in Japan, and Japan never had a democracy. We did it in Germany, and Germany really hadn't had a democracy. So they were saying if we can do it there, we can do it in the Middle East. I think that's what they were thinking.

**ATIYEH:** How are you going to create a democracy when historically and in recent times the Shiites and the Sunnis are going to kill each other no matter what you do? We're talking about decades and centuries. You can't create a democracy in Iraq; it's not possible.

**PACKWOOD:** Apparently not, but the example more people would use, instead of Germany or Japan would be India.

**ATIYEH:** What I'm really fundamentally saying is that we in America don't truly understand that part of the world. And we want to push a democracy on an Arab country. Your chances are quite good in Europe and in other parts of the world, but they are surely not going to be the same in the Arab world. So why do we kill American boys?

**PACKWOOD:** Democracy will come to the Arab world some day.

**ATIYEH:** When? How?

**PACKWOOD:** I don't know, but it will come because they are getting surrounded by democracies gradually throughout the world. You've got two Muslim countries in Africa that are democracies, Malia and Senegal.



**ATIYEH:** Why do we insist that they be democracies?

**PACKWOOD:** Well, because democracies are less inclined to attack their neighbors and bother their neighbors. It is better for world peace.

**ATIYEH:** You're dreaming, Bob. I would yearn for the same thing, but I haven't seen it in my lifetime.

**PACKWOOD:** What I'm saying is that it *will* come, and I think we have fought to make it come here. We thought we could *make* it come.

**ATIYEH:** Don't misunderstand me; I'm not anti-Israel. Anybody who thinks Israel is going to go somewhere is crazy; it isn't going to happen. First of all they've got more arms than all of the Arab countries put together. Second, if it really is dangerous, the U.S. is going to jump in and help them. That's a fact.

**BNW:** So how much does Iraq affect 2008?

**WALDEN:** Remember the Clinton election: "It's the economy, stupid." We're seeing the Treasury Department backing off on issuing debts for bonds because the deficit is coming down so much, maybe \$120 billion this year, half what it was in the Reagan years. Look at GDP. The economy is doing well; we're creating jobs.

**PACKWOOD:** Once we pick a nominee, the Democrat has got to run against that nominee. They cannot run against Bush and the war. It all changes. Republicans may not do well here in 2008, but I don't think there's reason to think we should get wiped out. Could we lose another two or three seats in the State House? Yeah. We might pick up a seat in the Senate. The war thing will be transitory; these other issues we're talking about will not be transitory. They're going to hang around for quite awhile.