

CHAPTER 24

A CAMPAIGN OF REVELATIONS

A few days after he so decisively won the 1994 Colorado Republican gubernatorial primary, Bruce Benson responded to Roy Romer's challenge to do "30 debates" around the state. Benson said 30 was too many and proposed 11 debates instead. Benson also insisted that each debate be one-hour long, be limited to a single topic, and be conducted without open questions from the news media or the public.

Romer campaign manager Alan Salazar described Benson's 11 debate counteroffer as "pretty wimpy" and a "disservice to the people of Colorado," but he said that, if it was the best that could be arranged, Romer would likely agree to it. Slowly but surely a debate schedule was arranged between Bruce Benson and Roy Romer, and these face-to-face confrontations between the two candidates soon got underway.¹

Debating Bruce Benson was an integral part of the Roy Romer strategy for winning reelection as governor. According to Scott Chase, the deputy campaign manager, the Romer forces wanted to take every opportunity to allow the voters to "compare and contrast" Bruce Benson with Roy Romer. The Romer team wanted the voters to see that Roy Romer "loved people and loved talking issues." They also wanted the voters to see that Bruce Benson did not know very much about Colorado and "did not like to meet his competitors in face-to-face confrontation."

"This is where the Mike Bird and Dick Sargent campaigns really helped us," Scott Chase explained. "Bird and Sargent forced Benson into a small number of debates, and we were able to see Benson's weaknesses. We particularly noticed that Benson had no interest in the state and local issues that Roy Romer considered so important. We also saw that Bruce Benson was just plain uncomfortable when debating and preferred to do his campaigning in television ads. We decided to exploit these Benson vulnerabilities that came out so clearly in the Republican primary."

The Romer forces found negotiating with Bruce Benson over a debate schedule to be as difficult and frustrating a process as the Bird

and Sargent forces had found it. When Romer campaign manager Alan Salazar went to negotiate a debate schedule with Benson campaign manager Katy Atkinson, he was stunned to find newspaper reporters invited to and present at the meeting. Salazar had to sit and listen to the Benson camp's many "restrictions" on conducting the debates with Jennifer Gavin of the *Denver Post* and Thaddeus Herrick of the *Rocky Mountain News* listening to every word and taking extensive notes. What Salazar had thought was going to be a "private negotiating session" had been turned into a "campaign event" by the Benson people.

"In the end this public negotiating session backfired on the Benson campaign," opined Scott Chase, Romer's deputy campaign manager. "It sent a clear message to the press that Bruce Benson had to be handled closely by his campaign managers and consultants and could not be allowed to think and act on his own in the free-wheeling style that Roy Romer liked so much. That was exactly the side of Bruce Benson that we wanted the press to see."²

The arguing back and forth over debates between Roy Romer and Bruce Benson left a strong impression in voters' minds. Roy Romer, similar to Mike Bird during the Republican primary, was the candidate who appeared to be most anxious to debate. As he had during the GOP primary, Bruce Benson appeared skeptical, hesitant, and almost hostile about debating. In essence, when it came to constantly challenging Benson to debate, or to debate more, Romer took over where Bird left off.

DEBATING UNDER THE INFLUENCE

On Wednesday, September 7, 1994, two days after Labor Day, Democrat Roy Romer and Republican Bruce Benson met for their first debate. The setting was the KRMA-TV Channel 6 television studio in Denver. Moderating the debate was Clifford May, an associate editor of the *Rocky Mountain News* and host of KRMA-TV's "Roundtable" news discussion program.

The three men sat around a circular wooden table in the television studio with Romer and Benson facing each other. Roy Romer debated in his shirtsleeves. Bruce Benson kept his suit coat on. The debate was being taped to play on the air the following Friday evening, but the Colorado political press corps, as they had done during the Republican primary, covered the debate taping as if it were a live political event.

The debate began routinely enough. Democrat Romer opened by reviewing his major campaign themes - jobs, education, the environment, and crime. But then, in a surprising move, Republican Benson responded by talking about some of the problems he had in his business career and his life.

"There are things in business that don't always work out right," Benson said. "Oil spills and water spills and things like that, but we've cleaned them up."

Benson appeared to be pleading guilty to the Benson Mineral Group having some environmental problems at its various oil drilling sites over the years.³ The Bird campaign had been provided some data on Benson's wells polluting streams and ruining adjacent agricultural lands, but Mike Bird decided not to pursue the issue because these seemed to be the normal results of any oil drilling operation.

Before either Roy Romer or moderator Clifford May could react to Benson's comments on the environmental problems with his oil wells, Benson came out with an additional confession. "To be real honest with you," he said, "I have a rotten driving record." Benson then revealed he had been arrested twice in the early 1980s for DUI (driving under the influence of alcohol). "I think the voters of Colorado need to know that," Benson concluded.

Clearly Bruce Benson had come to the KRMA-TV Channel 6 debate intending to make this "drunk driving" confession. He brought up the subject the first time he was asked to speak, with no prompting from either Romer or the debate moderator. Benson's campaign manager, Katy Atkinson, was prepared to talk about it too, and she willingly answered reporters' questions.

Both arrests for drunk driving took place in Lakewood, an upscale suburb to the southwest of Denver. One was in the spring of 1980 and the other in December of 1981. In both cases police reports said Benson's car was observed weaving through traffic and following other vehicles too closely. Police said Benson flunked roadside drunk tests but was cooperative and not abusive with arresting officers.

Tests revealed that Benson's blood alcohol level at the time of the 1980 incident was .117. At the time of the 1981 arrest it measured even higher at .148. Anything over .100 is considered driving under the influence in Colorado. Neither case involved an accident, campaign manager Atkinson pointed out. Bruce Benson pleaded one case down to reckless driving and the other down to driving a defective vehicle. Benson was ordered by the court to go to substance abuse classes but did not undergo treatment for alcohol addiction.

In addition, it was revealed that Bruce Benson's driver's license was suspended in November of 1978 because he received too many speeding tickets. Benson got most of the tickets driving between Denver and Kansas, one of the main states where his oil drilling company does business. Benson was allowed to drive on a provisional license until he got his regular license back. Then, in March of 1992 in Denver and July of 1993 in Westminster, a Denver suburb, Benson received two more speeding tickets. These tickets were pleaded down to driving a defective vehicle.

The Colorado political press corps was as interested in why Bruce Benson had picked this moment to confess to drunk driving and speeding as it was in the confession itself. Campaign manager Atkinson said the occasion of the first debate with Roy Romer was "an appropriate day to do it because it was the first day of the (general election) campaign." Atkinson gave no explanation as to why the subject of Benson's two DUIs was not brought up until after the Republican primary was over. "It was always going to be disclosed," she said. "It was a question of the right opportunity, the right time."⁴

Bruce Benson was very apologetic as he made his confession. He

admitted to being a bad driver but denied that he had a drinking problem. He described himself as a "moderate social drinker." Benson explained:

"It was just a bad mistake I made. I apologize to the public. It's something I'm embarrassed about. But I think in a campaign if you're going to tell people you want to lead them, you better tell them who you are and where you've made your mistakes in life."⁵

Watching the debate at the KRMA-TV studios was Ed Rollins, Benson's nationally-known, out-of-town political consultant. Rollins had suggested Benson voluntarily own up to the DUI arrests. Rollins said: "The strategy is to inoculate against your own vulnerabilities."⁶ Benson told reporters he had wanted to confess to the DUI charges earlier but his advisers urged him to wait until voters had gotten to know him better.

At the end of the debate taping, Roy Romer and Bruce Benson shook hands. They assured each other the remainder of the campaign would concentrate on political and governmental issues and would not focus on personal attacks or mudslinging. Romer said: "Look Bruce. I didn't bring this up.... There is going to be no issue in this campaign of anything of that kind of personal nature."⁷

The Colorado political press corps, and particularly the *Denver Post*, had different ideas about whether things of a "personal nature" would be a big part of the 1994 Colorado gubernatorial general election. The *Post* blasted the story of Bruce Benson's DUI and speeding arrests all over page one of the next morning's paper, as did the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*. Over the two weeks the Benson DUIs story played in Colorado newspapers, the *Denver Post* ran two news stories, three byline political columns, one editorial, and one political cartoon on the subject.⁸ The *Rocky Mountain News* ran two news stories and one byline political column.⁹ The *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* ran one story and one political cartoon.¹⁰

The *Denver Post* worked both sides of the street on the Benson DUIs story. It played the story very big in its news columns. In several of its

byline political columns and its editorial on the Benson DUIs, however, the *Denver Post* argued that such personal information about Benson should not be a major factor in the 1994 Colorado gubernatorial election campaign.

In an effort to make things more even, Roy Romer was asked if he had any shocking personal revelations to make. "Yeah, I got a confession to make," Romer joked. "I'm worried about world population and I have seven children."¹¹

BEA ROMER'S NEW CAR

On Sunday, September 18, 1994, the *Rocky Mountain News* ran a major story on Bea Romer, Governor Romer's wife, being assigned a brand new, state-leased, \$30,000 Chevrolet Caprice automobile complete with such luxuries as a compact disc player. The large full-size sedan, in which state police officers would drive Colorado's First Lady to official events, was ordered for Mrs. Romer by Governor Romer himself.

The sticker price on the car was only slightly more than \$20,000, but a six-year lease-purchase agreement inflated the cost an additional \$10,000 to a total of about \$30,000.

And there was another problem. The automobile had been purchased from an automobile dealer, which explained why it had those additional luxury options such as the compact disc player, power seats, special tires, and a heavy-duty cooling system. The vehicle had not been purchased as part of a state fleet order direct from the manufacturer, which would have produced a less luxurious car but at a highly discounted price.

Roy Romer's initial reaction was to defend his wife having a more luxurious and comfortable automobile provided by the state. He pointed out that previously the state police had been driving Bea Romer around in a five-year-old 1989 Chevrolet Caprice with 70,000 miles on it. Roy Romer said:

"I was riding in that car and it was absolutely - it was one that a person ought not be riding in, in terms of its functionality. It was a very old car and very hard and uncomfortable to ride in."

Roy Romer justified his wife having a state car and driver at her disposal on the grounds that Bea Romer worked as a full-time volunteer for the state. During Roy Romer's eight years as governor, Bea Romer actively promoted early childhood education and literacy programs in Colorado. She worked to establish a preschool program for four-year-olds in deprived neighborhoods that had grown to serve more than 4,000 children.

Governor Romer defended his wife's efforts and her need for a decent automobile quite vehemently. He said: "Just let me tell you, Bea Romer serves without pay and she needs a car and she deserves a car that is comfortable to ride in...."

As would be inevitably expected, Republican gubernatorial candidate Bruce Benson jumped on the *Rocky Mountain News* bandwagon and criticized Roy and Bea Romer for wasting the taxpayers' money. "The Benson administration will be a no-perk administration," said Benson press assistant Greg Sparrow, "and Marcy (Benson) will not have her own car and driver."¹²

Most political observers believed that Roy Romer had really gotten his timing wrong on this operation. Why had he ordered a new state car for his wife in the middle of a hard-fought reelection campaign? Isn't that just the time the voters would be most sensitive about even the slightest appearance of government waste on the governor's part? Further, it appeared that Roy Romer was so confident of winning reelection that he ordered his wife a new state car *with a six year lease*. To some of the political cognoscenti, with Romer and Benson running neck-and-neck in the early polls at the time, that looked like foolhardy - and perhaps embarrassing - overconfidence.

Three days after the *Rocky* ran its exposé, Roy Romer dramatically changed his tune about how expensive and luxurious a state motor vehicle his wife needed. He ordered the 1994 Chevrolet Caprice

returned to the automobile dealership where it was leased. Bea Romer was assigned a 1991 Chevrolet Caprice that was already owned by the state, had 47,000 miles on it, and had a current value of \$8,900, more than \$20,000 less than the \$30,000 lease-purchase cost of the 1994 vehicle.

Romer defended his wife getting a better car but admitted the 1994 Chevrolet Caprice was too loaded with luxury items. He said: "I don't want a car purchased for any more money than it has to be. This one was, and to the extent that I contributed to that, I want it corrected.... I think to have ordered a car with the accessories on it was wrong."¹³

The *Rocky Mountain News* had scooped the *Denver Post* with this story about Bea Romer's new car. When the dust had cleared, however, the *Denver Post* came to Roy and Bea Romer's defense. The *Post* ran an editorial that called the entire affair a "flapdoodle" and described the compact disc player and other luxury items on the 1994 car as too insignificant to worry about. According to the *Post*, "Bea's Caprice was not capricious."¹⁴

OPENING THE BENSON DIVORCE FILE

Eight days after Bruce Benson won the 1994 Colorado Republican gubernatorial primary with a smashing 60 percent of the vote, KUSA-TV Channel 9 in Denver filed suit to have Benson's divorce file opened.

Bruce Benson divorced his first wife, Nancy Benson, in October of 1993 after 30 years of marriage. He married his second wife, Marcy Benson, one month after the divorce became final. As Colorado law permits, Bruce and his first wife, Nancy, had their divorce file sealed and thereby made unavailable for public inspection. After Bruce Benson turned down a request from KUSA-TV to open the divorce file voluntarily, KUSA-TV went to court to get the file and its contents made public.

KUSA-TV said it sued to open Benson's divorce file because that is part of the responsibility of a free press in the United States. "The

public interest is as great as it can be," argued Richard Holme, the attorney for the television station. Bruce Benson was a candidate for "the most important office up for election" in Colorado, attorney Holme continued. "The people have a right to know and should know as much as they can about their candidates."¹⁵

KUSA-TV personnel acknowledged this was an obligation they did not necessarily feel good about carrying out. "The one misperception is that we, the media, enjoy this sort of thing," said Dave Lougee, vice president and news director at KUSA-TV. "We really felt that we didn't have any choice."¹⁶

Dave Lougee explained that KUSA-TV had received more than one telephone call about the existence of Bruce Benson's divorce file and that the file had been sealed from public view. "One of our staff members got a tip," Lougee said, "and the tip was not from someone in the Roy Romer campaign for governor. From the very beginning, our interest was in gaining access to a sealed file. We never addressed the issue of whether or not we would report on the contents of the file."

The investigative reporters at KUSA-TV found the Bruce Benson campaign team to be hostile and non-responsive to their request for the sealed divorce file. "At one point Bruce Benson called the station personally," Dave Lougee said, "and directly charged that we were politically motivated and acting on behalf of the Romer campaign. But it was our position that no public figure - and above all not a party candidate for governor - should have a sealed court file. The sealed divorce file raised a journalistic question that had to be answered completely separate from what was or was not in the divorce file."¹⁷

Bruce Benson and his first wife, Nancy Benson, strenuously contested the opening of the divorce file by the courts. In mid-September of 1994, however, only six weeks before election day, Colorado District Court Judge Morris Hoffman ruled against Bruce Benson and Nancy Benson. To keep the divorce file sealed, Hoffman said, one of the persons involved - Bruce Benson or his ex-wife - would have to demonstrate they had a privacy interest that was more important

than the public's interest. The fact that Bruce Benson was running for governor, the judge said, added great weight to the public interest in the case. Judge Hoffmann concluded:

"The Bensons have failed to show their privacy interests outweigh the public's interest. This is a domestic case not unlike the thousands we see all the time. I see nothing in this file in which the Bensons have a particular privacy interest."

The judge acknowledged the divorce file might contain materials that were embarrassing or that might portray one of the persons involved as "not a nice person," but he said those sorts of charges were part of almost every divorce case.

Judge Hoffmann also dealt with the issue that he was appointed to the Colorado bench by Governor Roy Romer, the man whom Bruce Benson was opposing in the current gubernatorial election. Hoffmann said he met with Romer only once while going through the judicial appointment process. The judge claimed to be as "apolitical an animal as you can find on this planet."¹⁸

The judge gave Bruce Benson and his ex-wife, Nancy Benson, the opportunity to keep the divorce file sealed until his decision could be appealed to the Colorado Supreme Court. The Bensons decided not to appeal, however, because they believed it likely the high court would uphold the lower court. Reluctantly, Bruce Benson scheduled a press conference at which the contents of his divorce file would be opened for all to see.

Prior to the press conference, the Benson forces made it clear they disapproved strongly of a private matter such as a divorce file being forcefully made public during an election campaign. "I'm quite frankly appalled by it," Benson campaign manager Katy Atkinson said. "I think it is a sad development on the Colorado political scene." Bruce Benson's daughter Ann was even more critical. "I'm completely outraged," she said. "Of course I'm going to cringe, because it's my family's personal, private life."¹⁹

DIVORCE IN AMERICAN POLITICS

At one time divorce was considered a major problem for anyone seeking elected office in the United States. Supposedly there were four great symbols that all candidates had to claim to represent and support - the Bible, the United States flag, the United States Constitution, and "family life." There was definite agreement that "family life" involved a hard-working husband, a loving wife, and a home filled with happy children. Divorce was not considered an acceptable part of this "family life" scene.

By the mid-20th Century, however, it was slowly becoming acceptable for a candidate for a major political office - such as president of the United States or governor of a state - to be divorced. Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic candidate for president in 1952 and again in 1956, was divorced and had never remarried. Although Stevenson lost both elections to Dwight D. Eisenhower, the fact he was divorced did not become an issue in either election campaign.

In 1964 Nelson Rockefeller, the governor of New York, ran for the Republican nomination for president. A member of one of the nation's most prominent and wealthy families, Rockefeller was considered a strong candidate. He had recently divorced and remarried, however, and his new wife, Happy Rockefeller, was pregnant with their first child. The baby was born just days before the California Republican presidential primary, and Rockefeller narrowly lost that primary to U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona. Goldwater went on to win the 1964 Republican presidential nomination, and a number of political commentators attributed Rockefeller's loss to his divorce, remarriage, and the birth of the baby just prior to a key presidential primary.

By the 1980s, however, divorce appeared to no longer be any factor at all in important national and state election campaigns. Ronald Reagan, a well-known Hollywood movie actor, divorced an equally well-known movie star, Jane Wyman, and later married his second wife, Nancy. Being divorced and remarried appeared to have no effect

whatsoever on Reagan's two successful campaigns for the California governorship. Reagan was elected president of the United States in 1980 and thunderingly reelected in 1984. In neither campaign was his divorce and remarriage raised as an issue.

As for Ronald Reagan's first wife, Jane Wyman, her former husband getting elected president enabled her to revive her acting career. During much of Reagan's tenure in the White House, Jane Wyman starred in a weekly television dramatic series.

Although divorce and remarriage were not considered political assets in the 1990s, they definitely were not viewed as a bar to anyone seeking elected office. Many divorced men and women held important elected offices by the mid-1990s. Marital status had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to be an issue in United States election campaigns.

THE BENSON DIVORCE FILE

The opening of the Bruce Benson-Nancy Benson divorce file made all the intimate details of the Benson family's private life available to the public and the news media. Every event, every charge and countercharge, and even the "harsh words" of a failing marriage were revealed for all to see. The major news media in Colorado carefully combed through the three-inch-high divorce file and then ran long articles or broadcast lengthy news items summarizing the "highlights."

Also revealed were the details of the Bruce Benson-Nancy Benson property settlement. These items were made more interesting by the fact that Bruce Benson was a very successful businessman. Among the items mentioned in the divorce file were an expensive home in Denver, a luxury condominium at the Vail ski resort, a Mercedes-Benz automobile, and a valuable James Abbott McNeill Whistler painting.

The divorce file was released to the news media and then, two hours later, Bruce Benson held a press conference. Joining him were his second wife, Marcy, and two of his children from his first marriage, David and Ann. More than two dozen news reporters crowded into the

press conference and peppered Benson with questions. He responded openly and adroitly, projecting the image of a political candidate who was able to take a hard punch as well as give one.

Bruce Benson began with an apology about the contents of his divorce file. "I'm fully admitting the errors of my ways in my life," he said. "Are there things in my life I'm not proud of? You bet!"

The Republican nominee for governor of Colorado then acknowledged that the contents of the divorce file might possibly ruin his chances to be elected. He said: "If it's too much and it takes me down, it takes me down."

Benson went on to note that, in the end, he and his family had made every possible detail about their lives available to the scrutiny of the electorate. "If you care enough about your state and country, you've got to put it out there," he said. "I think we've probably set a record in Colorado for opening up our lives."

Benson then publicly charged the campaign staff of his opponent, incumbent Democratic governor Roy Romer, with slipping word to KUSA-TV about the damaging contents of the divorce file. The Romer reelection campaign immediately denied the charge in a strongly worded statement. It said:

"The Romer campaign has been very clear that we have had no hand in making Mr. Benson's divorce records an issue in this election.... Attempts by the Benson campaign to 'spin' the idea that the Romer campaign is somehow behind or connected to this story is a political tactic, and we will not allow this suggestion to go unchallenged."

Bruce Benson made it very clear the divorce file revelations were not going to hinder his drive to be elected governor of Colorado. They would not change his view that there was much about the state - and the nation - that needed fixing. "I made a commitment to get into this race because I'm tired of what's going wrong in this country," Benson said, "and if it means I'm going to get the crap kicked out of me for a few days, I'm going to take it because I want to get something done in this country and we aren't doing it. We don't have leadership."²⁰

HOW HARD A HIT?

The Colorado political press corps was very careful not to comment directly on Bruce Benson's divorce file. There was a great deal of speculation, however, on how the contents of the file would affect his campaign for governor. The timing could not have been worse for Benson. The divorce file was made public six weeks before election day, just at the time many citizens were beginning to pay real attention to the election.

"I think he's toast," said pollster Paul Talmey, implying that Benson could not possibly be elected. Talmey, who conducted polls for the *Denver Post*, said the divorce file raised the question: "Is this the kind of guy you want to be top dog in the state?"

Talmey said the messy divorce was particularly "devastating" because it came right after Bruce Benson's disclosure of two drunken driving arrests in the early 1980s.

On the other hand Don Bain, state chairman of the Colorado Republican Party, speculated that the release of Benson's divorce papers could spark a wave of sympathy for Benson because his personal privacy was so directly invaded. Bain said: "Divorces are kind of private matters between people who are unhappy with each other.... I would expect a lot of people would be somewhat offended at invading the anticipated privacy" of a sealed divorce file.²¹

Another Republican, political consultant Doug Goodyear, said the public's reaction to Benson's divorce file would be tempered by the large number of recent revelations about the private lives of prominent United States politicians. "We have a president who's admitted adultery," said Goodyear. "That doesn't seem to shock people nowadays."²²

Robert Gardner, chairman of the El Paso County (Colorado Springs) Republican Party, argued the voters would rapidly tire of the contents of Benson's divorce file and get back to evaluating the two candidates for governor on the issues. "It's going to be old news next week," Gardner said. "The public's going to look at it and see there's nothing really very

astounding there."

But for every Republican comment that the divorce file would not hurt Bruce Benson too badly, there was a Democratic soothsayer ready to predict that the damage would be substantial. Eric Sondermann, a Denver political consultant and occasional adviser to Roy Romer, linked Benson's divorce to Benson's DUIs. "When it turned out the worst news [the divorce file] was still to come, you started getting a cumulative effect," Sondermann said. "All of a sudden you have a gubernatorial candidate who's playing some pretty intense defense. You're not going to defeat a reasonably popular incumbent governor by playing defense."²³

Fred Brown, the political columnist for the *Denver Post*, saw Bruce Benson's divorce file as another piece "of negative political baggage that weighs him down." It was Brown's view that, revelation by revelation, Benson was progressively losing more votes than he was gaining. No one revelation was a "mortal wound," Brown wrote, but the combination of Benson's DUIs plus Benson's divorce plus Benson's overemphasis on money in the campaign was starting to hurt Benson badly.

Despite all that, Fred Brown continued to see Bruce Benson as "the strongest candidate the Republicans have run for governor in the past 18 years."²⁴

The Colorado political press corps was having a field day with the Benson divorce file. After the first round of stories about the divorce file itself, there was the second round of stories about how badly the messy divorce file would hurt Benson's campaign. It almost seemed that every political analyst and commentator in the entire state of Colorado had been asked to speculate, in print or on television and radio, on how the divorce revelations would affect Benson's chances of being elected.

Three days after he released his divorce file to the news media, Bruce Benson accused the press of overplaying the "messy divorce" story and misinterpreting several of the items in his divorce file. Benson made his comments at a meeting of Republican campaign workers. "I think I got a bad deal and I think everybody knows it," Benson fumed.

"The last 36 hours have been a real tough time." Benson then complained about "inaccurate reporting" by the press, although he declined to say what the inaccuracies were. He concluded: "I'm not going to take any crap from the media."²⁵

BENSON'S COLLAPSE IN THE POLLS

Two weeks after Bruce Benson made his divorce file public, the *Denver Post* and KCNC-TV Channel 4 published the results of their latest poll on the governor's race in Colorado. The poll had been conducted during the period immediately following the revelations concerning Benson's "messy divorce," so the poll purportedly was a good measure of how the divorce issue was affecting the gubernatorial contest.

The news was all bad for Bruce Benson. As of October 5, 1994, just one month before election day, Democrat Roy Romer was leading Republican Benson by more than 20 percentage points. Romer had the support of 53 percent of the persons surveyed. Benson had the support of only 31 percent.

Even more disturbing for the Benson campaign was the fact that Benson had been doing better against Romer the previous summer than he was doing in the fall. The previous *Denver Post*/KCNC-TV Channel 4 poll, taken in mid-July shortly before Benson won the Republican gubernatorial primary, showed Romer only 12 percentage points ahead of Benson. At that time 45 percent of poll respondents supported Romer and 33 percent supported Benson. In the three months from July to October, Romer had gone from being 12 points ahead of Benson to 22 points ahead.

Pollster Paul Talmey considered the poll results particularly notable in view of the fact that Benson had been spending so much money on television ads and direct mail during September and early October. "It isn't so much a surprise that Romer is ahead as it is that Benson's so far behind," Talmey commented. "It ain't over 'till it's over, but for all the

money Benson has spent, he's not doing well.... It's rare to see a challenger against an incumbent who goes up and then drops back so fast. It really does have to be laid at the feet of some of the personal problems he's had."

The early October *Denver Post*/KCNC-TV Channel 4 poll indicated that Bruce Benson was doing particularly poorly with the women's vote in Colorado. Among women voters, Romer was leading Benson 59 percent to 24 percent, a 35 percentage point lead. Among men voters, Romer was leading Benson by only 47 percent to 37 percent, a 10 percentage point lead.

In a series of issue contests concerning the two gubernatorial candidates, the poll found that Bruce Benson was more popular than Roy Romer on only one issue - cutting taxes. Forty-one percent of poll respondents said Bruce Benson would do the better job of "keeping taxes down" while only 23 percent said Roy Romer would. Particularly ominous for the Benson campaign was the fact that only 19 percent of those polled believed Benson would do the best job of "setting the right moral tone for the state." Forty-eight percent of respondents ranked Roy Romer high on the moral tone scale.

Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, said the Benson campaign was not surprised to see a dip in the polls after getting so much bad publicity over the divorce file. Atkinson explained: "We expected, after the kind of play we had in the media - especially the broadcast media - to take a bump in the polls.... We expect the numbers to fluctuate, and we expect...the presentation of Bruce's message to the voters will bring us ahead again."²⁶

Atkinson's optimistic view was countered by Eric Sondermann, a Democratic political consultant in Denver. The big problem, Sondermann said, was timing: "[Voters] don't want (personal problems) to matter, but on some subconscious level it plays a role in shaping opinion.... The state was just beginning to tune in and say, 'Who is this guy?' And all they found out for about a month is the drunk driving and the messy divorce and the liberal spending on a level no average citizen

could relate to. Whether that's a final image, time will tell."²⁷

The bad news about the Bruce Benson divorce file, and its dynamic effect on Benson's standing in the polls, caused a great deal of soul-searching in the Colorado Republican Party. Many leading members of the GOP told Mike Bird and members of his campaign staff that it now appeared the party would have been much better off with Bird rather than Benson as its 1994 gubernatorial candidate.

There was a popular television commercial some years earlier in which a frustrated man, having just drunk a sugary and fattening softdrink, lamented the fact that he could have had a healthful vegetable juice drink instead. "I could have had a V-8," was the final line of the commercial. After the release of Bruce Benson's divorce file, some Colorado Republicans were going around saying: "We could have had a Mike Bird!"

Clearly, by the time of the October 5, 1994, *Denver Post*/KCNC-TV Channel 4 voter poll, Roy Romer was comfortably ahead in the 1994 race for the Colorado governorship. From this point on, incumbent Democratic governor Roy Romer only had to hold on to the better part of his 20 percentage point lead to easily win the election. If Bruce Benson wanted to win, he would have to play catch-up politics - as aggressive and confrontational a brand of catch-up politics as he possibly could.

Notes To Chapter 24:

1. Jennifer Gavin, "Benson OKs 11 instead of 30 debates," *Denver Post*, 20 August 1994, 4B. Associated Press report, "Benson counters on debates: Let's hold 11 instead of 30," *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, 20 August 1994, B3. Jennifer Gavin, "Gubernatorial debate schedule taking shape," *Denver Post*, 25 August 1994, 6B.
2. Author's notes, telephone interview with Scott Chase, 23 December 1994.

3. For a discussion of the Benson Mineral Group's various environmental problems, see Bruce Finley, "Benson opens books on his ecology record," *Denver Post*, 10 September 1994, 3B.
4. Jennifer Gavin, "Benson admits 2 DUIs," *Denver Post*, 7 September 1994, 1A.
5. Katie Kerwin, "Benson tells of 2 DUI arrests," *Rocky Mountain News*, 7 September 1994, 5A.
6. Thaddeus Herrick, "Benson advised to come clean," *Rocky Mountain News*, 7 September 1994, 6A.
7. Angela Dire, "Benson comes clean at debate," *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, 7 September 1994, A1.
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17. Author's notes, telephone interview with Dave Lougee, vice president and news director at KUSA-TV in Denver, 27 January 1995.
18. Howard Pankratz, "Benson divorce file to be open," Denver Post, 17 September 1994, 1B.
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