

CHAPTER 18

THE CREATION OF "MR. TV-HEAD"

A few days after the Republican State Assembly adjourned, Mike Bird selected Wilson Communication Services to be the Bird campaign's political consultant. Located in the Washington, D.C., suburb of Alexandria, Virginia, Wilson Communication had run a number of Republican gubernatorial campaigns in the Midwest that had been successful. A group of Wilson Communication officials had visited Mike and Ursula Bird at their home in the summer of 1993 and made a presentation on their services and past successes. Most important, Mike Bird had reviewed Wilson's video tape of TV ads from previous campaigns. Bird thought the Wilson ads were a good combination of humor and hard-hitting political advertising.

The Wilson Communication official designated to "handle" the Mike Bird campaign was Jim Arnold. Helping with the decision making was Paul Wilson, the founder of the firm. The television ads were to be produced and directed by Steve Grand, the media specialist at Wilson Communication.

On June 8, 1994, Jim Arnold flew into Stapleton Airport in Denver. His plane connection had been scheduled so that he would have 2 to 3 hours to have lunch with Mike Bird and his campaign staff. The lunch was held at Morgan's Restaurant at the Sheraton Inn adjacent to Stapleton Airport.

Jim Arnold had been reviewing a batch of newspaper clippings about the campaign which Bird headquarters had sent him. Typical of an out-of-town consultant, he was going to have to spend considerable time "getting up to speed" on what had already happened in the Bird for Governor campaign. His major impression about the campaign to date was the unusual similarity of the "identifier" words that the press used when talking about Mike Bird. Mike was always described as "a nice guy," a "gentleman," "quiet," "mild mannered," etc. Arnold acknowledged that this was a positive image, but he worried that it might not be the right one to project in a hard-fought gubernatorial

election campaign.

Mike Bird stated that, due to the shortage of money in the Bird camp, the campaign could only afford to produce and run a single television commercial. Bird further stated that he wanted that one commercial to be humorous as well as effective. Jim Arnold agreed with this basic strategy, adding that the campaign needed to have a TV commercial that was "immediate" and "sensational" and that "people will instantly be talking about."

Jim Arnold agreed that, since money was tight, videotape rather than film would be used in shooting the one TV commercial. That might not be all bad, he said, because a less-expensive looking Bird commercial would contribute to the idea that Bruce Benson has no other characteristic than having a lot of money. It could help sell the idea that "Bruce Benson has the money, but Mike Bird has the message!"

Another way to save money, Jim Arnold suggested, would be to put the commercial heavily on TV for four days, then not run it at all for ten days, then go heavily again for four days, etc. People would think the commercial was playing on their TV sets all the time, but it would not be, and the savings would be substantial.

Jim Arnold also argued that Mike Bird's extensive knowledge of and experience in Colorado government was a positive characteristic that had to be exploited. Arnold particularly liked Colorado Speaker of the House Chuck Berry's description of Bird: "He knows more about Colorado than anyone, including the present governor."

The meeting broke up with general agreement that the major responsibility of Wilson Communication Services in the campaign would be to write and produce a humorous and effective television commercial. Wilson Communication also would be in charge of buying the television time needed to run the commercial. It was further agreed that the TV ad would be run mainly on Denver-area television and that the Bird campaign would deliver the vote in El Paso and Pueblo counties by making heavy use of Bird volunteers.¹

One week after the luncheon meeting, Jim Arnold telephoned from

Washington to Bird for Governor headquarters in Colorado Springs. He shared some further thoughts with the Bird campaign staff. The amazing thing about the campaign so far, he said, was that Mike Bird had not been discounted entirely by the press and public given Benson's great wealth and willingness to spend that wealth to win the primary. Arnold asked rhetorically: "Why haven't people written Mike Bird off?"

Arnold then confirmed the thought that Bird could only win the primary against Benson by producing and running an outstanding television ad. He repeatedly referred to the ad as the campaign's "one spear." He explained: "We have one spear. If we don't hit Benson right in the heart with that one spear, we lose. Badly!"

This was a situation, Arnold said, that required the Bird campaign to "gamble big." In order to get more attention paid to the one TV ad, it might be necessary "to roll the dice" and put the ad on the air early (three or four weeks before primary election day) rather than late (the week before primary election day). More people would pay attention to the ad if there were not a lot of Benson ads running at the same time. Also, putting the TV ad on early might inspire additional persons to contribute money to Bird during the final weeks of the primary campaign.

Jim Arnold then answered his own question about how Bird could still be a viable candidate when Benson had so much money. "Mike Bird is the sort of candidate you drool over in a statewide race," Arnold said. "People want their gubernatorial candidate to have experience and know the state, and Mike Bird fills that bill perfectly. The problem is to get the word out that Mike Bird is *uniquely qualified* where experience is concerned, particularly when compared to Bruce Benson."

The telephone conversation ended with Jim Arnold's final thought on just how effective the Bird campaign's one TV ad would have to be. Because of the lack of money to buy expensive television time, the TV ad by itself would not win the primary election. "Our one TV spot ad has to be so memorable," Arnold concluded, "that people who see it then go looking for Mike Bird in their newspapers and on the television

newscasts they watch."²

WRITING THAT ONE COMMERCIAL

When the Bird campaign staff sent a batch of press clippings to Jim Arnold to familiarize him with what had happened so far in the campaign, they included the script of a proposed television commercial that had been bouncing from desk-to-desk around the office. The script was written to highlight the idea that Bruce Benson was spending a great deal of money on television commercials and little else. The script read:

THEY SAY MIKE BIRD IS A GREAT GUY.

THEY SAY MIKE BIRD WILL MAKE A WONDERFUL GOVERNOR.

BUT THEN THEY SAY THAT MIKE BIRD'S PERSON-TO-PERSON APPROACH TO CAMPAIGNING IS OUT-OF-DATE.

THEY SAY HIS GRASS ROOTS APPROACH JUST CAN'T COMPETE WITH EXPENSIVE TELEVISION ADS DESIGNED BY HIGH-PRICED EAST COAST POLITICAL CONSULTANTS.

THEY SAY MIKE BIRD'S THE BEST CANDIDATE FOR GOVERNOR OF COLORADO, BUT THE WORD WILL NEVER GET OUT.

THAT'S WHAT *THEY* SAY!

WHAT DO *YOU* SAY?

I LIKE MIKE!

MIKE BIRD FOR GOVERNOR.

It is unknown exactly how much influence this sample TV ad, written at Bird for Governor headquarters, might have had on the ad writers at Wilson Communication Services. Whatever the sample ad's effect, at the end of June four suggested TV ad scripts were faxed to the Bird campaign staff by Jim Arnold.

One of the four scripts was a more-or-less routine campaign commercial, showing Mike Bird speaking on the floor of the Colorado state Senate in Denver. The script played up Bird's extensive experience in Colorado government. It contained no humor or satire. That script was quietly put aside and never seriously considered for adoption.

A second script was somewhat more exciting. It showed the hands of a group of people playing cards. A particularly well-dressed pair of hands was seen dealing off the bottom of the deck and pulling various other unfair card tricks. At one point the well-dressed pair of hands pulled an "ace" out of one its sleeves. An announcer's voice criticized Bruce Benson for avoiding the Republican State Assembly and refusing to debate his Republican opponents. The announcer directly accused Bruce Benson of "cheating Republican voters."

This ad, known as "Cheating Voters," received some serious consideration from the Bird campaign staff. One suggestion was that the well-dressed pair of hands that was doing all the cheating also have a mammoth pile of poker chips. The poker chips would symbolize Bruce Benson's great wealth and overemphasis on spending money. There was nothing really wrong with this script. It just turned out that there was another script that Mike Bird and his campaign staff liked better.

A third script was very aggressive and shocking in tone. It flatly stated that, by bypassing the Republican State Assembly and refusing to debate his Republican primary opponents, Bruce Benson was "slapping

Colorado voters in the face." The script called for actual television images of voters being slapped in the face as Bruce Benson's various actions, or lack of actions, were described by an announcer. The focus of the script was on the idea that, by not doing things the way they are conventionally done by Republican candidates in Colorado, Bruce Benson was insulting the voters.

In a subsequent series of telephone conference calls, Paul Wilson and the staff at Wilson Communication Services acknowledged that "Slap," as the proposed TV ad was called, was very compelling television. "'Slap' is meant to be shocking, a little bit over the edge, and there is risk there." The Wilson people further argued that "Slap" could be comical as well as compelling, particularly the visual images. One proposal was for a brief scene where Bruce Benson, riding in the back seat of a luxurious stretch limousine with the rear window open, would slap 30 faces of Republican voters as he drove by. "Done right, that could be the funniest part."

Clearly the Wilson staff believed "Slap" to be a "bold" and "exciting" choice. Mike Bird, however, said he felt it was simply too "aggressive" and "in your face" (pun intended) for Colorado campaign politics. The main concern, Bird said, was the physical violence, particularly having a man slap a woman. The ad would be particularly inappropriate, Bird added, given all the recent public concern regarding domestic violence against women.

After much discussion and several low key sales pitches by Paul Wilson and Jim Arnold, "Slap" was flatly rejected by Mike Bird and the Bird for Governor campaign staff.

The fourth TV ad script proposed by Wilson Communication Services was very unusual and inventive. It began with the image of a well-dressed man in a business suit who had a television set for a head. On the television set would be playing a Bruce Benson television commercial. After an initial close-up of "Mr. TV-Head," the camera was to pull back and widen the shot so that viewers could see that "Mr. TV-Head" was standing at a podium holding a press conference. The

script read:

REPORTER #1: Mr. Benson, why did you duck 30 debates with Senator Mike Bird?

SUBCONSCIOUS VOICE OF MR. TV-HEAD: When you're running thousands of TV ads, you don't have to answer tough questions.

REPORTER #2: Why did you avoid the Republican convention?

SUBCONSCIOUS VOICE OF MR. TV-HEAD: Fools. Only TV counts.

REPORTER #3: Are you trying to hide something?

SUBCONSCIOUS VOICE OF MR. TV-HEAD: When you're Mr. TV-Head, you don't have to talk to the voters.

MIKE BIRD (on Senate floor walking toward camera): I'm Senator Mike Bird. I'm *not* a TV-Head. I'm a leader in the Senate. I have the knowledge and the record to beat Roy Romer.

ANNOUNCER: Mike Bird for Governor.

There was general agreement, among both the Wilson staff in Alexandria and the Bird staff in Colorado Springs, that "Mr. TV-Head" was the most unusual and potentially the most humorous of all four of the proposed TV scripts. It also appeared to be the most technologically difficult to make, but the Wilson people assured the Bird people they could rig up a television set and get it to fit over an actor's head. The latest digital video technology would permit them to superimpose a Benson TV ad on "Mr. TV-Head's" television screen after the first part

of the ad had been videotaped.

Sherman Griffin, the deputy campaign manager, asked Paul Wilson during a conference call whether the proposed "TV-Head" ad was perhaps "too slick" and might "turn off" voters on Mike Bird as well as Bruce Benson? Griffin was concerned that some "uninformed" Republican voters might not know that Benson was spending so much money on television commercials. The "TV-Head" ad could give such unaware voters a negative feeling for both of the candidates.

Paul Wilson replied: "No one objects to television being used in politics. People object to television being the *only* thing that's used in politics. That's the issue this ad speaks to."

Mike Bird confessed that he had at first been skeptical of the "Mr. TV-Head" script, but the more he heard it discussed the more he liked it. Paul Wilson and his staff agreed that the ad had real potential to be "funny" and "devastating to Benson" while being "a lot safer ad than 'Slap.'"

By degrees rather than all at once, "Mr. TV-Head" was selected as the "one spear" with which the Bird campaign would try to bring down Bruce Benson. It was decided that two members of the Wilson staff, Jim Arnold and Steve Grand, would fly to Colorado Springs to direct the shooting of the ad on video. Arnold and Grand would perfect the script and find a suitable television studio in which the video taping could take place. The Bird campaign staff would provide 20 actors and actresses to perform in the commercial, would see that the actors and actresses were properly costumed for a mock press conference, and would decorate the set with "Benson for Governor" signs and banners. In essence, the shooting of the "Mr. TV-Head" television commercial would be a combined professional-volunteer activity.³

THE MAKING OF "MR. TV-HEAD"

On Friday, July 8, 1994, a small army of Bird for Governor

volunteers gathered at Image Quest, a small studio for the commercial production of films and videos located in northern Colorado Springs. Image Quest had a delightfully homemade quality to it. The studio, which was about the size of a four-car garage, was attached by a covered breezeway to the large ranch-style house where the owner lived with his family. Jim Arnold and Steve Grand obviously had saving money in mind when they chose Image Quest as the place to make Mike Bird's one television ad.

The job of getting everything ready to videotape the TV commercial had fallen mainly to Michelle Provaznik, the campaign manager. Provaznik had spent the previous week thinking of which Mike Bird volunteers might be good for the various parts in the commercial. She then telephoned them and had to talk them into giving up almost an entire day for the videotaping. Furthermore, each volunteer had to provide his or her own costume, and Steve Grand had said he wanted an "old-time Hollywood atmosphere" with the three reporters looking "scruffy."

In addition to recruiting the cast, Michelle Provaznik designed and hand painted a large, wall-sized "Benson for Governor" banner to serve as the major backdrop for the commercial. In a moment of political inspiration, she painted in the "S" in Bruce Benson's name as a "\$," so that the banner read "Ben\$on for Governor." Almost everyone who saw the banner thought putting the "\$" in Benson's name was funny and would greatly reinforce one of the major messages of the commercial.

The people at Wilson Communication Services had gotten really lucky where "Mr. TV-Head's" television set for his head was concerned. Originally they had thought they would have to rig up a real television set so that it would fit on a man's head, something that promised to be a difficult and time-consuming process. One evening, however, a member of the Wilson team was out shopping at a Sears store in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C. He noticed that, in the furniture department, Sears had a number of cardboard mock-ups of TV sets, complete with a painted screen and dials, to demonstrate where a TV set

might fit on a set of shelves or as part of a "home entertainment center."

The cardboard mock-ups of TV sets were not for sale, so the Wilson staff member had to talk the furniture salesman at Sears into letting one go. Once that was successfully done, it was an easy job to cut a hole in the bottom of the cardboard mock-up of the TV set so that a man could get his head into it. "Mr. TV-Head" had come to life much more easily than anyone had expected. Jim Arnold and Steve Grand brought the "TV-Head" on the airplane with them when they flew from Washington, D.C., to Colorado Springs to videotape the commercial.

The amateur cast appeared to be in a happy and ebullient mood as videotaping of the commercial began. The actors and actresses had done a good job of wearing striped suit coats and straw hats and other items of clothing that gave them an "old-time" look. It was exciting to see imaginative ideas that previously existed only on paper slowly begin to turn into actual visual images. Steve Grand had his actors and actresses stand in accentuated positions and videotaped them from unusual angles so that the commercial would have something of a cartoon quality. Lines such as "Fools. Only TV counts!" and "When you're Mr. TV-Head, you don't have to talk to the voters!" elicited smiles and laughs from the assembled multitude as they were said over and over again to get just the right inflection. If the TV commercial ended up seeming as funny to the viewing audience as it seemed to the people making it, then the commercial was going to be a big success.

The cast that Michelle Provaznik had assembled represented every age group and every conceivable status in life. Reporter #1 was played by Paul Vander Veer, the college student serving as a staffer in the Mike Bird for Governor Denver office. Reporter #2, a woman, was played by a personal friend of Mike and Ursula Bird's who had professionally performed on television. She was wearing professionally-applied theatrical makeup and lent a real aura of Hollywood glamour to the proceedings. Reporter #3 was played by Bill Stokes, a man in his 60s, who had helped the campaign earlier by organizing the floor demonstration for Mike Bird at the Republican State Assembly. "Mr.

TV-Head" himself, the actor with the cardboard mock-up of a television set on his head, was played by a business associate of Dan Provaznik, campaign manager Michelle Provaznik's husband.

Although the script did not call for it, several scenes were videotaped in which "Mr. TV-Head" had a group of three young men standing behind him saying "Uh-huh! Uh-huh! Uh-huh!" to everything "Mr. TV-Head" had to say. These Benson "yes-men" were dressed in suit coats and ties and all had \$20 bills sticking out of their suit coat handkerchief pockets. These scenes elicited raucous, unrestrained laughter from the other actors and actresses at the time they were being videotaped. In the end, the scenes did not appear all that funny when played back over a television set and had to be dropped from the final version of the TV commercial.

The videotaping of the "Mr. TV-Head" portion of the commercial was completed by 1 P.M. After a quick picnic lunch of sandwiches and soft drinks provided by the campaign, it was time to do the portion of the commercial where Mike Bird himself said he was "not a TV-Head" and had "the knowledge and the record to beat Roy Romer." Originally this part of the commercial was to have been shot on the floor of the Colorado state Senate in Denver, but it was decided to save travel costs by finding a place in Colorado Springs that looked like the state Senate in Denver. That place turned out to be the wood-paneled City Council chamber at the Colorado Springs City Hall.

The mood of this part of the TV commercial was completely different from the "Mr. TV-Head" part. The desks and chairs in the City Council chamber were filled with well-dressed, serious-looking Mike Bird volunteers pretending to be the members and staff of the Colorado state Senate. To add life to the scene, a few men and women were talking with each other or taking papers from one desk to another. In the foreground, covered with several layers of theatrical makeup to keep the light from reflecting off his face, Mike Bird walked toward the voters, saying the reassuring words that would convince viewers he was a much better choice than Bruce Benson to be governor of Colorado.

This final scene was videotaped over and over again. Because this was going to be the only TV commercial for the Bird for Governor campaign, Mike Bird had to look and sound exactly right. Jim Arnold and Steve Grand kept shooting and shooting until they were confident they had captured Mike Bird on videotape at his very best.

That evening, with the videotaping completed, Mike and Ursula Bird took Jim Arnold and Steve Grand and the Bird campaign staff out to a Colorado Springs restaurant for dinner. It was a joyful evening. The "Mr. TV-Head" portion of the TV commercial had produced genuine laughter while being made, and humor was one of the major things Mike Bird wanted in the ad. Furthermore, Mike Bird had come across strong and convincing in his part of the commercial. There was every reason to believe that the out-of-town, Washington, D.C., based political consultants had really done their job and been worth their money. The Bird for Governor campaign just might have in hand that "one spear with which to bring down Bruce Benson."

To save money, Jim Arnold and Steve Grand stayed overnight in the guest room at Mike and Ursula Bird's home in Colorado Springs. When they got back to Wilson Communication Services in Alexandria, Virginia, they edited the "Mr. TV-Head" commercial into its final form. As they said they would, they used advanced digital computerized image techniques to have a Bruce Benson commercial playing perfectly on "Mr. TV-Head's" television set head, even though that television set in actuality was no more than a cardboard mock-up.

Mike Bird and his campaign staff were delighted with the final version of "Mr. TV-Head" when they finally saw it. The people at Wilson Communication Services immediately began scheduling the ad to play on all the major Denver-area television stations.

Did the Bird campaign really have to go "outside of Colorado" to get a political consultant who could make a "really good" campaign TV commercial? In the end, that seemed to be the case. Paul Wilson, Jim Arnold, and Steve Grand had been able to "talk politics" and think in "campaign terms" in a way that probably never could have been done by

"business-oriented" television commercial producers in Colorado. Above all, they had produced scripts that highlighted the issues the Bird campaigners wanted highlighted, and they also succeeded in achieving the humor and sarcasm that Mike Bird asked for. Until Colorado develops its own full-time political television ad maker - and there probably is not enough political business in Colorado to support one - serious candidates for political office in Colorado are going to have to go out-of-state to get their political consultants.

Notes To Chapter 18:

1. All of Jim Arnold's remarks from author's notes, lunch meeting at Morgan's Restaurant, Stapleton Airport Sheraton Inn, with Jim Arnold, Wilson Communication Services, 8 June 1994.
2. Author's notes, telephone call to Mike Bird for Governor headquarters from Jim Arnold, 15 June 1994.
3. All quotes by both the Wilson staff and the Bird staff are from author's notes, conference calls concerning the TV scripts, 28 June 1994, 30 June 1994.