

CHAPTER 11

DRAWING BENSON INTO THE FIGHT

The Bird for Governor campaign staff was actually running two campaigns during the spring of 1994. One campaign was the drive to win delegate votes at the June 4, 1994, Republican State Assembly. The second campaign was to counter and compete with the "outsider" campaign for the Republican nomination for governor being run by Bruce Benson.

This second campaign took an unusual twist on Tuesday, April 19, 1994. As was their habit, Mike Bird and Dick Sargent both participated in a forum for Republican gubernatorial candidates sponsored by the Jefferson County Women's Republican Club. It was a fairly major political event, with a nice dinner served beforehand and Bird and Sargent seated at the head table with all the best-known Republicans in Jefferson County. Adding to the importance of the evening was the fact that Jefferson County is one of the most heavily populated and most Republican counties in the Denver metropolitan area.

Just before the discussion and debate between Bird and Sargent began, a letter was read to the assembled Republican activists on behalf of the Benson for Governor campaign. The letter had been written by Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager. The gist of the letter was that Bruce Benson would not be appearing with or debating his fellow Republican gubernatorial candidates until they stopped saying things about him that were not very nice.

"[Former Republican president] Ronald Reagan once defined the 11th Commandment as 'Thou shalt not speak ill of any other Republican,'" the letter began. "Until our opponents demonstrate a willingness to abide by this 'commandment,' Bruce will not be participating with them in any forums or debates."

The letter then pointedly rebuked Benson's Republican opponents for their "slash-and-trash campaigning." It continued:

"From anonymous flyers to scurrilous rumors to snide remarks about Bruce's family, these candidates have truly chosen to take the low road.

It is a sad day when Republican candidates level their sites (sic) on their fellow Republicans rather than on the Democrats."¹

One newspaper described the crowd's reaction to the Benson letter as "rather stunned."² To most observers, as of that date the battle for the 1994 Republican nomination for governor had not seemed acrimonious or negative at all.

Contacted by the news media the next day, Benson campaign manager Katy Atkinson refused to give any details of what was meant by "slash-and-trash campaigning." She also refused to directly accuse either Bird or Sargent of any specific campaign dirty tricks. "I don't want to go into a lot of specifics because I think if I do I'm guilty of the same thing as our opponents," Atkinson said. "It splits the party wide open, and the only possible candidate these kind of attacks can help is Roy Romer."

Mike Bird told the press he was frankly puzzled by Benson's vague and unspecific charges. He explained: "I certainly haven't been hard on Bruce. I said I disagree with the route he's taking to win the nomination, but that's about it."³

Dick Sargent, on the other hand, attempted to take full responsibility for the negative things that were being said about Benson's somewhat unorthodox candidacy for governor. Sargent began by citing a famous quote by Harry S. Truman, the president of the United States in the years immediately following World War II. "I don't give hell," Truman said. "I just tell the truth and some folks think it's hell."

Sargent then said he was "disturbed" that Benson's letter referred to Benson's opponents in the plural. "I would like to accept responsibility for anything I might have said," Sargent declared, "and would appreciate the heat being put on me instead of on Mike Bird."

The Golden investment adviser then did a good job of reviewing all of the negative things he had said about Bruce Benson that had subsequently appeared in print. Sargent had called Benson "a political freeloader" and a "renegade." Because Benson was petitioning on to the ballot rather than going the caucus/assembly route, Sargent accused him

of "slumming" when he showed up at Republican county assemblies "sucking up to Republicans for votes." Sargent also had described Benson as a "self-centered, extremely wealthy guy on an ego trip. He's got a new wife, and he's got a lot of money. I think he'd like to prove to her that he's a big shot."

Sargent also noted that he circulated a memo pointing up the dismal electoral success of the Colorado Republican Party during the years that Benson was state party chairman. The memo stated that the Colorado Republicans lost a gubernatorial election, a U.S. Senate contest, and several seats in both houses of the state legislature during the period when Benson was the state party leader. "He almost destroyed the Colorado Republican Party," the memo concluded.⁴

No matter who was to blame for the "slash-and-trash campaigning" against Bruce Benson, campaign manager Katy Atkinson made it clear that her candidate's ban on joint appearances with Bird and Sargent would be in effect until those two Republican candidates turned their full attention on Roy Romer, and only Roy Romer. The end result was that Bruce Benson began to consistently skip all the candidate forums and debates that also featured Mike Bird and Dick Sargent. It was not enough that Benson was not going to go through the caucus/assembly nominating system. Benson also was not going to do any debating with the two candidates - Bird and Sargent - who were going through the caucus/assembly nominating system.

According to Katy Atkinson, the Benson for Governor campaign never made a "conscious decision" not to debate Mike Bird and Dick Sargent. It was more a case that Benson was not going to do 30 to 40 debates with Bird and Sargent, particularly when Benson was going for petition signatures rather than delegate votes at the state assembly. "There were more preprimary debates scheduled than I have ever seen in my life," Atkinson said. "It made no sense for Benson to go to all of them. Bruce just began skipping debates, and it was misinterpreted as a refusal to do any debating at all."⁵

From the perspective of the Bird and Sargent campaigns, however,

there were other, more "political" reasons that Bruce Benson had decided not to debate his two Republican opponents. (1) Benson had the money to buy a great deal of television advertising and did not need to debate to get publicity. (2) Bird and Sargent were better debaters and knew much more about Colorado governmental problems than Benson did. (3) Benson was the front runner and saw no reason to share his attention-getting abilities with Bird and Sargent. (4) Benson could saddle Bird and Sargent with the "dirty campaigning" label, whether it was true or not, by refusing to debate with them.⁶

THE MIKE BIRD "CHALLENGE" TO BRUCE BENSON

The Bird for Governor campaign staff, as well as Mike Bird himself, was thrown into something of a tizzy by Bruce Benson's surprise announcement that he would not debate his Republican opponents because of their "slash and trash campaigning." To begin with, Mike Bird felt it was casting aspersions on his character, and his 20-year career in Colorado politics, to even vaguely assert that he was using "unfair" or "questionable" campaign techniques against Benson. There also was the problem that Benson was "taking the high ground," claiming he was above the kind of "dirty campaigning" that Bird and Sargent allegedly were doing.

In the midst of a campaign staff discussion of all these issues at Bird for Governor headquarters in Colorado Springs, Michelle Provaznik, the campaign scheduler, suggested that Mike Bird could regain the initiative by challenging Bruce Benson to come to the Republican State Assembly. The challenge could be made more newsworthy and worthwhile, Provaznik said, by having Bird offer to drop out of the race if Benson got more delegate votes than Bird did at the state assembly.

The Colorado Springs campaign staff really liked Michelle Provaznik's idea and immediately telephoned her suggestion to Mike Bird in Denver. His response to the idea was equally favorable. It was decided that Bird would issue his challenge to Benson at the Gilpin

County Republican Assembly, to be held Monday, April 25, 1994, at the Gilpin County Court House in Central City. Since no reporters were expected to cover a Republican county assembly in a small city deep in the mountains west of Denver, the word about Bird's challenge to Benson went out in the form of a press release. Highlights of the press release were:

"Mike Bird, candidate for the Republican nomination for governor, today challenged rival candidate Bruce Benson to 'come to the Republican State Assembly in Denver and settle the battle for the Republican nomination there....'"

"Bird said that if Benson would put his name in contention at the state assembly, Bird would drop out of the race if Benson received the most votes...."

"Bird explained: 'The reason Colorado law provides for a Republican State Assembly is to provide the opportunity to unite the party behind a single candidate for governor. If Bruce Benson will join with me in putting his name in contention at the Republican State Assembly, we can settle it there and unite the party there. Sadly, if he persists in his drive to petition on to the ballot and thereby bypass the Republican State Assembly, he guarantees the tough Republican primary that can only work to the benefit of incumbent Democratic governor Roy Romer.'"

"Bird concluded: 'Come to the Republican State Assembly, Bruce! Let's settle it there! Let's really unite the [Colorado] Republican Party!'"⁷

This Mike Bird challenge to Bruce Benson did not have a big impact on the Colorado news media at first. The *Denver Post* gave it just two column inches in the middle of a roundup column on Colorado politics, running it under the headline, "Outpoll me, I'll quit."⁸ The *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* ran a story but buried it on the fifth page of the local section.⁹ The *Rocky Mountain News* hid its coverage on page ten of its first section.¹⁰

What the challenge did accomplish, however, was that it gave Mike

Bird a vehicle for talking about Bruce Benson and his outsider strategy of bypassing the caucus/assembly nominating process. It also gave Bird the opportunity to answer Benson's veiled charges that Bird had indulged in dirty campaigning. Over the ensuing weeks, the news media in Colorado repeated over and over again, in story after story, Bird's challenge to Benson to come to the state assembly. An interview printed in the *Colorado Statesman* illustrated how this process worked:

"I just want Bruce Benson to stand up and fight like a man," Bird told the *Statesman*. "I'm going to keep turning up the heat until he is forced to go through the state assembly just like the rest of us who are candidates. If you can't take the heat, stay out of the game! What would he do in a race against (Governor) Romer? Stay home?"

The *Colorado Statesman* also quoted Bird on the subject of Benson's dirty campaigning charges, noting that Bird was "still seething over the accusation." The *Statesman* printed:

"(Benson) has impugned my integrity with this 'slash-and-trash' stuff," Bird said, declaring his innocence of such shenanigans. He also thought it was cowardly of Benson not to deliver his disgruntled message in person to the candidates, but have it delivered in a letter penned by his campaign manager Katy Atkinson and read aloud at a Jefferson County Republican forum."¹¹

Mike Bird also used his "challenge" at the Pueblo County Republican Assembly, held in the East High School auditorium on Saturday, April 30, 1994. Bird was speaking to the 150 or so Pueblo Republicans at the assembly when he noticed that Bruce Benson had walked in and begun shaking hands. Looking straight at Benson, Bird demanded: "Come to the [assembly], Bruce! Use the process. If you get more delegate support than I do, I'll happily support you. But use the process." As was to be expected, Benson ignored Bird's strident challenge, but the press did not. The *Pueblo Chieftain* began its next day coverage of the Pueblo County Republican Assembly with Bird's direct attempt to get Bruce Benson to compete at the Republican State Assembly.¹²

The challenge to Benson to come to the state assembly pepped up Mike Bird and his entire campaign organization. The Bird campaign was now on the offense, and Benson and his staff were suddenly playing defense. Knowing a successful campaign technique when he saw it, Mike Bird decided to issue additional formal and well-publicized challenges to Bruce Benson during the spring of 1994. He challenged Benson to come and debate Bird and Sargent at the various candidate forums being held in increasing numbers around the state. He challenged Benson to stop hiding behind paid television ads and simplified mailings and really let the people of Colorado know where he stood on major issues facing the state. As the intensity of Mike Bird's various challenges to Bruce Benson increased, so did the coverage in the news media.

In an effort to highlight the fact that Benson had not made his issue positions known, Bird held a press conference on the steps of the state capitol in Denver. To offer a sharp contrast with Benson's comparative silence, Bird outlined a detailed proposal for reorganizing and improving the efficiency of Colorado state government. The proposal underlined the point that Mike Bird had a working knowledge of Colorado government matched by very few, and not matched in any way by a newcomer such as Bruce Benson. Bird coined a "punch line" for the occasion that received heavy coverage in the next day's newspapers. Bird admonished millionaire Benson for keeping silent on his issue positions with the line: "It's OK to be *wealthy*, but it's not OK to be *stealthy*!"¹³

Most of all Mike Bird's three challenges to Bruce Benson - to come to the state assembly, to debate, and to make his issue positions known - allowed Bird to begin to shake off the image of being "polite" and "mild mannered." The quiet professor from Colorado College was working hard to project the image of a tough-talking, hard-charging candidate who was ready and able to fight and letting everyone know it.

THAT TATTERED "BENSON" SIGN

By early May Benson had skipped over 20 candidate forums and debates with Bird and Sargent. One evening Mike Bird took an old piece of cardboard, printed the word "Benson" on it with a black marker, and tied a string to it so it could be hung on an empty chair. When Bird arrived at the debate hall, he pulled up an empty chair, placed it where Bruce Benson could be expected to have been sitting, and hung the "Benson" sign on the empty chair.

This technique of Bird's proved to be very popular with the committed political types who were coming out to hear Bird and Sargent debate. At a debate in Greeley, Colorado, on May 3, 1994, Benson once again did not show up. Bird looked at the audience and said in accusing tones: "There is one candidate who is not here. He refuses to meet with the other candidates.... I believe that's very wrong. I believe that's very divisive." Bird then pulled up the closest empty chair and hung his "Benson" sign on it. Periodically throughout the debate Mike Bird made it a point to look over at the empty chair and say: "And what do you think about that, Bruce?" The line frequently got a laugh.

The next day the Bird campaign scored one of the bigger "earned media" hits of the campaign. The major newspaper in Greeley, the *Greeley Tribune*, ran a large photograph of Mike Bird debating the empty chair with the "Benson" sign on it. Best of all, the paper ran a separate story under the picture talking about Bruce Benson's refusal to debate Bird and Sargent and the way Bird was using his empty chair routine to highlight that point.¹⁴

A week later, on May 11, 1994, the "Benson" sign on the empty chair proved its real value to the Bird campaign. Peter Blake of the *Rocky Mountain News* concluded his tri-weekly political column, which is widely-read throughout Denver and Colorado, this way:

"Benson will have been a no-show at more than 25 debates before June 4. Bird put a dog-eared 'Benson' sign on an empty chair at each of them."¹⁵

Notes To Chapter 11:

1. Angela Dire, "Benson calls for end to GOP gubernatorial candidates' backbiting," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 22 April 1994, B9.
2. "The Broken Commandment," Colorado Statesman, 22 April 1994, 5.
3. Angela Dire, "Benson calls for end to GOP gubernatorial candidates' backbiting," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 22 April 1994, B9.
4. "The Broken Commandment," Colorado Statesman, 22 April 1994, 5.
5. Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.
6. Sherman Griffin was particularly convinced that Bruce Benson made a conscious decision not to debate rather than "stumbling" into such a position. Sherman Griffin, assistant campaign manager, Mike Bird for Governor, written comments to the author, May 7, 1995.
7. Press release, Mike Bird for Governor campaign, 25 April 1994.
8. "Outpoll me, I'll quit," Denver Post, 27 April 1994.
9. "Bird vows to drop bid if Benson wins assembly vote," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 27 April 1994, B5.
10. Peter Blake, "Bird wants Benson at GOP state assembly," Rocky Mountain News, 26 April 1994, 10A.
11. Jody Hope Strogoff, "Fear & loathing on the (GOP) campaign trail," Colorado Statesman, 29 April 1994, 2.
12. Peter Roper, "At GOP meet, Bird unable to lure Benson into debate," Pueblo Chieftain, 1 May 1994, 1A.
13. Thaddeus Herrick, "Bird attacks 'stealth' candidate," Rocky Mountain News, 2 June 1994. Fred Brown, "Benson too fuzzy, Bird says," Denver Post, 2 June 1994. Angela Dire, "Governor's race

heats up on eve of GOP assembly," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 2 June 1994, B1.

14. Bob Kretschman, "Benson's absence noted at debate," Greeley Tribune, 4 May 1994. See also Ann Elisabeth Addison, "Republican hopefuls meet in Conifer," Conifer High Timber Times, 12 May 1994, 1.

15. Peter Blake, "Much ado about job that means nothing," Rocky Mountain News, 11 May 1994, 5A.