

PART V

THE 1994 REPUBLICAN GUBERNATORIAL PRIMARY

CHAPTER 17

EARLY SPARRING

On June 3, 1994, Bruce Benson turned in more than 17,000 signatures to petition himself on to the Republican gubernatorial primary ballot. It remained only for the Colorado secretary of state, Natalie Meyer, to check and certify those petition signatures for accuracy. Once that task was completed, Bruce Benson's name would be officially placed on the ballot.

Colorado law provides a mechanism by which any citizen can protest the authenticity of petition signatures being used to put a candidate's name on the ballot. The protest must be filed within five days of the deadline for turning in the petition signatures. It is important to note that any citizen can file a protest, not just one of the candidates whom the petitioning candidate might be running against.

As described previously, the Bird for Governor campaign had debated and then discarded the idea of openly publicizing or protesting the possibility that Bruce Benson might not have enough signatures to make the ballot, particularly in the fifth congressional district. As far as the Bird campaign was concerned, Benson's name was going on the Republican primary ballot and that was that.

THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY PETITION PROTEST

It turned out, however, that word of Bruce Benson's possible petition signature difficulties had reached the Democratic Party and the Roy

Romer for Governor campaign. For three days, Colorado Democratic Party officials and a group of Romer volunteers reviewed the Benson petitions, searching for discrepancies and inconsistencies. According to Howard Gelt, state chairman of the Colorado Democratic Party, they found plenty of them. A number of petition signers and petition carriers had not been registered Republicans for the time period required under Colorado state law. Furthermore, there were duplicate signatures, inadequately identified signers, and names on petition forms that could not be found on the appropriate voter registration rolls.

"I cannot give you conclusive proof that Mr. Benson has failed to turn in the requisite number of signatures," Gelt told Secretary of State Meyer. "I nonetheless hope that you will execute your duty to fully scrutinize his petitions."¹

At the last minute the Colorado Democratic Party decided to file a formal protest questioning the validity of large numbers of Benson's petition signatures. The protest was due at the secretary of state's office at the close of business on Wednesday, June 8, 1994. The secretary of state's office closed and locked its doors at 5 P.M. that day, as was customary, and four minutes later a Democratic Party messenger, Dan Phelan, arrived with the protest. Not to be dissuaded from carrying out his assigned task, Dan Phelan pounded on the secretary of state's office door until someone opened it and accepted the protest papers.

The Benson campaign was quick to respond to this effort by the Democratic Party and Romer's volunteers to try and get Bruce Benson's name off the Republican primary ballot. Benson campaign manager Katy Atkinson issued an immediate press release describing the petition protest as "a desperate act." The release added: "Their poll numbers for Governor Romer must be dropping like a rock.... Given they're coming after Bruce before he even has the nomination, it's clear Governor Romer is running scared of Bruce Benson, and with good reason."²

As it turned out, the Democratic Party protest of Benson's petition signatures was stopped before it ever was started. Secretary of State Natalie Meyer, at a subsequent formal hearing, rejected the Democrat's

complaint because it came in four minutes late. She ruled the handing in of the protest was "untimely," even though a member of her staff had opened the door and accepted the protest papers after hours. It turned out the person who accepted the papers did not work in the elections section and thus did not know of the necessity not to accept formal papers after the 5 P.M. deadline.

Democratic Party Chairman Gelt gave up the protest at that point, even though Secretary of State Meyer, a Republican, was well known to be strongly supporting Bruce Benson for governor. "She has some rules she applies on an evenhanded basis," Gelt said, "and it's her prerogative to do so. I certainly hope she holds (the petitions) to the same type of scrutiny she held my protest."³

On Friday, June 17, 1994, Secretary of State Natalie Meyer officially certified that Bruce Benson had gathered enough valid signatures to be placed on the Republican primary ballot for governor. The Democrats were not through with Bruce Benson's petition signatures yet, however. Daniel A. Brewer-Ward, who had briefly run for the Democratic nomination for secretary of state earlier in the year, filed a lawsuit in Denver District Court charging that large numbers of Benson's petition signatures were faulty and therefore his name should be removed from the ballot. He claimed to have identified 4,917 signatures that were invalid, mainly because they were not properly notarized, and that invalidation of only 4,286 was enough to bump Benson out of the race.⁴

Once again the Benson campaign was quick to fire off an answer to the latest Democratic charges concerning the Benson petitions. Greg Sparrow, Benson's press secretary, told the *Denver Post* "he suspected Brewer-Ward was put up to his activities by the campaign to reelect Democratic governor Roy Romer." Sparrow concluded: "It's a slap in the face to the 500 people we had circulating petitions."⁵

But this last minute Democratic legal suit in Denver District Court did not work either. On July 29, 1994, a scant ten days before the August 9, 1994, Republican primary, Judge Connie Peterson denied Brewer-Ward's suit for the same reason the Democratic Party's earlier

protest had been denied - it was not filed within the five-day deadline clearly specified by state law. Bruce Benson's name, at last, was on the Republican gubernatorial primary ballot to stay.

After the judge had ruled against him, Daniel Brewer-Ward denied he was acting on behalf of Democratic governor Roy Romer. He explained: "I frankly don't like any of the candidates for governor this year."⁶

Many astute observers of the Colorado political scene believed that Bruce Benson had come very close to not making the Republican primary ballot through the petition process. It was thought that things were really close in the fifth congressional district. If the Democratic Party had gotten its petition in on time - instead of being four minutes late - there was a chance Bruce Benson would have been knocked out of the Republican primary and thereby out of the race altogether. No one will ever know for sure, but Bruce Benson may have stayed in the 1994 race for Colorado governor by only the slimmest of margins - a four-minute margin.

TO DEBATE OR NOT TO DEBATE?

The euphoria in the Mike Bird camp over the successful outcome of the Republican State Assembly came to a quick end. On June 6, 1994, two days after the Republican State Assembly, the Benson campaign delivered a letter to the Bird satellite office in Denver. The letter suggested that the Bird, Sargent, and Benson campaigns get together and come up with a "forum" in which the three candidates for the Republican nomination for governor could have a "constructive" and "high-level" dialogue focusing on "the failures of twenty years of Democrats in Colorado's Governor's Mansion."⁷

The Bird campaign staff's reaction to the letter was extremely wary. The staff suggested to Mike Bird that the letter indicated that Mike's challenge to Benson to debate was hurting Benson badly. The letter was an attempt by the Benson camp to fend off and diffuse the charge.

"Benson's goal," the staff argued, "is to try to get you to stop saying that Benson has missed 27 debates and does not have the courage to face his opponents openly in the public arena." The staff did not want Benson to rob Bird of this powerful "He won't debate!" issue.

The letter suggested that the Bird and Sargent campaigns contact the Benson campaign manager, Katy Atkinson, to set a date and time for discussing the issue. Atkinson was a former student of Mike Bird's at Colorado College and therefore the logical Benson emissary to the Bird campaign. "We have to respond to them," Mike Bird pointed out. "The letter is a legitimate offer to set up some debates, and we have no choice but to see what they have in mind."

A member of the Bird campaign staff telephoned Katy Atkinson to begin negotiations for future debates. Atkinson made a point of telling the Bird staff member that the letter had just been hand delivered to the Sargent campaign. "They were out of the office yesterday," Atkinson said, "so we could not deliver the letter to them until just now." The Bird staff member told Atkinson that negotiations could be held any afternoon all the following week. Any afternoon that was fine with the Benson and Sargent people would be fine with the Bird people.

Shortly after that first contact was made, the Bird campaign staff learned why Katy Atkinson had made a point of saying Benson's letter had finally been received at Sargent headquarters. Newspaper reporters began calling from Denver, saying they had been given copies of Benson's letter and what was the Bird campaign's reaction. The Bird campaign staff's suspicions had been borne out. Bruce Benson's offer to discuss possible future debates was a political ploy designed more for news media consumption than anything else.

To the Bird campaign, this seemed to be a typical Benson-type operation. The Bensonites were saying in essence: "We're ready to debate, but only under conditions desirable for us and where we get to play a leading role."

Fortunately Mike Bird was in the Colorado Springs office at the time the Denver news reporters began telephoning and asking about the

Benson proposal. The reporters caught Bird in a contentious mood, quite anxious to strongly attack Benson on the entire debate issue. As was standard practice in the Bird campaign, Mike Bird answered all the press inquiries himself. "I'm glad he's finally responding to my challenge," Bird told Peter Blake of the *Rocky Mountain News*, "after skipping 27 debates and not having the courage to come to the [state assembly] and be judged by the Republican faithful." Bird concluded by saying he was "ready, willing and able to debate [Benson] anytime, anywhere, under any conditions."

Within half-an-hour additional calls came in from Denver-based reporters for the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* and the *Pueblo Chieftain*. It had become obvious that the Benson people had waited until they knew the letter was in the Sargent campaign's hands (as well as the Bird campaign's) and then released it to every Denver-based newspaper reporter they could find. Mike Bird took each reporter's call as it came in. As the calls steadily increased in number, Mike Bird and his campaign staff grew ever more angry at the Benson camp for being so politically manipulative - and effective.

The next day's morning newspapers gave good coverage to the story, treating Benson's proposal as a major development in the Republican primary campaign. The Bird campaign did well in the exchange, however, because each newspaper story also included Mike Bird's charge that Benson had missed 27 debates and candidate forums and, by skipping the Republican State Assembly, had refused to play by the traditional rules of the Colorado Republican Party.⁸

Political columnist Peter Blake, of the *Rocky Mountain News*, gently chided Bruce Benson for being so cautious in taking "the first tentative steps down from his mountaintop airie." Referring to a heavyweight boxer of the 1960s who was famous for his loud and insulting verbal challenges to his opponents, Blake wrote of Benson's "possible willingness" to debate: "That's not exactly the echo of Muhammad Ali at a weigh-in, but it's a start."⁹

Later that day Bill Stokes, the Mike Bird volunteer who orchestrated

the Bird for Governor floor demonstration at the Republican State Assembly, called into Bird headquarters. He had read all the newspaper stories about Benson's "Let's debate!" proposal and Bird's charged-up response. Stokes shared the Bird campaign staff's strong concerns about the dangers and potential pitfalls hiding in Benson's offer to debate. "Up to now, Benson has been the outsider, the guy who does not quite play by the accepted rules," Stokes said. "Now he wants to be one of the three good guys. He wants to pal around on equal terms with the two guys who went to the state assembly [Bird and Sargent] and thereby hopes that everyone will forget that he circumvented the will of the Republican Party. The Bird campaign should do everything it can to keep Benson from getting away with this. The Bird campaign should do everything it can to keep portraying Benson as the outsider who doesn't quite fit in with the rest of the Colorado Republicans."¹⁰

Bill Stokes agreed with Mike Bird, however, that the Bird campaign had to at least begin talking with the Benson and Sargent people about a series of some sort of candidate debates. Having challenged Benson to debate, Mike Bird had no choice but to talk with Benson now that he was ready to negotiate.

THE "UNITED WE STAND AMERICA" DEBATE

Before such talks could begin, however, an organization called "United We Stand America - Colorado" decided to get involved in the fracas. This group was composed of Colorado supporters of Ross Perot, the computer industry billionaire who made an unsuccessful run for president of the United States in 1992 as an independent candidate. "United We Stand America - Colorado" had scheduled a candidate debate for the following Saturday, June 11, 1994, at Castlewood Public Library in the southern suburbs of Denver. According to the Perot people, Bruce Benson at first accepted their invitation to debate but then, as per his usual practice, called back and turned them down cold. Mike Bird and Dick Sargent had routinely accepted.

Apparently "United We Stand America - Colorado" was not an organization that took rejection lightly. Rumor had it they threatened to issue a blistering press release condemning Benson mercilessly if he did not come to their debate. Just two days before the debate was scheduled to take place, Benson temporarily abandoned his lofty perch above the debate fray and agreed to do verbal battle with Bird and Sargent. "We worked rather hard to do this," said Noell Custer, the local representative for "United We Stand America - Colorado." He noted that the candidates would be subject to "a real grilling, not just a series of statements."¹¹

The Bird campaign staff was collectively angry that "United We Stand America - Colorado" had coerced Bruce Benson into doing such an early debate. The Bird campaign gained mileage in the news media when Benson did *not* show up, not when he occasionally appeared. Furthermore, the Bird campaign staff had no idea how well Bruce Benson might possibly do in a face-to-face confrontation with Mike Bird and Dick Sargent. Benson might turn out to be a good debater, a force to be reckoned with. It would have been much nicer - and safer - if Benson had skipped this debate just like all the others.

Why had Bruce Benson turned down so many other invitations to debate and then given in to the heavy pressure from "United We Stand America - Colorado." The answer was that Benson was intentionally trying to project a Ross Perot style image in his quest for the 1994 nomination to the Colorado governorship. Similar to Perot, Benson was wealthy, a political newcomer seeking his first public office, and intending to spend literally millions of dollars on television commercials that would promote him as a businessperson setting out to reform and revitalize Colorado state government. Perot had received a stunning 23 percent of the vote in Colorado when he ran for president in 1992, a full 4 percentage points more than the 19 percent he received nationwide. Benson knew many of those Perot voters, if not most of them, were registered Republicans who were intending to vote in the 1994 Colorado Republican gubernatorial primary.

As would be expected, a large crowd - about 150 to 200 people - overflowed the public meeting room at Castlewood Public Library at 1 P.M. on Saturday, June 11, 1994, to see Bruce Benson, Mike Bird, and Dick Sargent lock personal horns for the first time. Despite the fact it was the middle of a warm and sunny summer-like weekend, all the major state newspapers sent reporters to cover the debate and all the major television stations sent camcorder crews. The three candidates met and talked pleasantly, if cautiously, with each other before the debate began.

Bruce Benson scored a few points with the casual set by taking off his suit coat long before the debate got under way. As they had done at all their many other meetings minus Benson, Mike Bird and Dick Sargent started the debate with their suit coats on. Mike Bird took his suit coat off when it was his turn to speak.

Mike Bird opened his initial statement with a good one-liner. He said with a wink and a smile: "I want to congratulate Bruce Benson for finally accepting my challenge to appear in a debate." Everyone caught the satire, because there was loud laughter and applause from the audience.

Dick Sargent, in his trademark feisty style, drew first blood from Bruce Benson. When asked what he thought of Ross Perot and his 1992 campaign for president, Benson said he was chairman of President Bush's 1992 campaign in Colorado but then commented: "I did not disagree with what (Perot) was saying.... He did a very great service to our country."

Fully aware there were at least 75 to 100 Perot activists in the audience, Dick Sargent began reading a newspaper account of what Benson had said about Perot at a previous time. "Perot is a dictator," Sargent quoted Benson as saying, "who would have made a dangerous and foolish president." An audible gasp went through the audience as Sargent delivered the quote. Everyone was fully aware that Sargent had caught Benson flat-footed trying to alter a previously stated opinion. All Benson could do after this withering verbal assault was "squirm in his

seat."¹²

Another bad moment came for Bruce Benson when he was answering a complicated question about the governor's power to appoint judges in Colorado. Benson became confused by his own words, his voice trailed off into complete silence, and it was painfully obvious that he could not answer the question and could not think of anything else to say. His wife, Marcy, who was sitting in the front row, finally broke the ever-lengthening silence by prompting him and thereby getting him talking again.

Peter Blake of the *Rocky Mountain News* took this gaffe on Benson's part to be a result of missing "28 earlier debates" and thereby becoming "a bit rusty." Blake commented: "He didn't just lose his train of thought, it jumped the track and plunged into the river. An excruciatingly long, embarrassed silence followed while his brain was calling in the cranes."

It turned out there was little difference between the three candidates on the issues. Peter Blake, who devoted his entire newspaper column the following Monday to analyzing the debate, described Benson, Bird, and Sargent as "close to being Siamese triplets." He wrote:

"Term limits?... Tougher judges? Death penalty? Welfare reform? Better roads? States' rights? School choice? They're for them all. It sounded like Little Sir Echo up there."

Peter Blake also hammered on Benson for repeatedly saying that the two-minute limit on candidate statements at the debate made it hard to really discuss the issues in depth. "That may seem like an odd suggestion," Blake opined, "from a man who is alleged to have spent about \$1 million so far on a series of 30-second television ads."¹³

As the debate went on, however, Bruce Benson recovered from his two early stumbles, gained confidence, and even seemed to be enjoying himself. He turned out to be a more than able debater, leading several members of the Bird campaign staff to wonder just why he was so assiduously avoiding debates in the first place. Benson actually received the biggest applause of the entire meeting when he launched a succinct, sound-bitish attack on Democratic president Bill Clinton's

proposed health care plan, which was under consideration at that time by the U.S. Congress in Washington, D.C.

The only real disagreement between the three candidates appeared to be over how the campaign for the Republican nomination for governor should be conducted:

Dick Sargent argued the Republicans should be working hardest to get the veterans' vote and the "crossover" Democratic vote. Mike Bird issued a call for more debates, more grass-roots politics, and less emphasis on television ads. He asked: "What if [Abraham] Lincoln and [Stephen Douglas] had relied on TV sound bites rather than gotten together and debated?"

Bruce Benson said he should be the Republican nominee because only he could outspend the incumbent Democratic governor. "Roy Romer outspent his opponents in his past elections," Benson concluded. "We're not going to let him do that."¹⁴

Had the ice at last been broken? Would Bruce Benson, having attended the "United We Stand America - Colorado" debate, now attend all the rest of the debates and candidate forums with Mike Bird and Dick Sargent? No one could say, but this much was clear. There was nothing seriously wrong with Bruce Benson as a public speaker or campaign debater. All that could be said was that Benson did not appear to know a great deal about Colorado state government. On balance, the Bird for Governor campaign, and the Sargent for Governor campaign, would both be better off if Bruce Benson continued to avoid debates rather than attend them.

DEBATING DEBATES

The Bird for Governor campaign staff underwent a small reorganization following the Republican State Assembly. As expected Jim Scherer, who had been the campaign manager prior to and during the state assembly, had to leave the campaign to prepare for a new job he had taken as an environmental consultant in the faraway nation of

Indonesia. He was replaced as campaign manager by Michelle Provaznik, who had previously handled scheduling and campaign finance. Sherman Griffin took command of the Denver headquarters with the title of deputy campaign manager. Scotty Wattenburg became the Denver office manager, and Paul Vander Veer was hired as the Denver staff assistant.

To give Michelle Provaznik more time to manage the campaign, her scheduling duties were taken over by Dennis Ritchie, the newly-hired press assistant. Dennis Ritchie was a veteran Colorado Springs journalist. He had served as editor of the editorial page of the *Colorado Springs Sun*, a daily newspaper that had been bought out and put out of business by its rival, the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*. Ritchie then spent several years publishing and editing his own suburban weekly, the *Northern Light*, which had a large circulation in the fast-growing residential areas in northern Colorado Springs. Ritchie was known and respected by many press people throughout the state of Colorado.

The Bird campaign staff, led by campaign manager Michelle Provaznik, drove up to the Denver Hilton Hotel South to meet with the Benson people and the Sargent people to talk about Benson's proposal for a series of "forums" involving the three Republican candidates. Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, represented Benson along with Mark Faull, Benson's "Director of Policy Development." The Sargent campaign was represented by Terry Walker, Sargent's campaign manager, who came by himself.

The meeting was held at a round table with a large umbrella in the covered patio lounge of the hotel just in front of the entrance to the dining room. Although the area was enclosed and air conditioned, a hot June sun was shining through large plate glass windows, creating a pleasant simulated outdoor atmosphere. To add to the air of festivity, a very good piano player was belting out a pleasant medley of standard tunes, many of them from Broadway musicals. Those who wanted them were drinking soft drinks or coffee.

This was hardly the atmosphere in which to hold a hard-nosed political meeting between determined representatives of embattled political candidates. It soon became obvious to the Bird campaigners, however, as to why Katy Atkinson had drawn them into this cushy environment for this particular political meeting.

Atkinson came on strong with the line that the Republican Party could not afford a "bloodletting," a divisive gubernatorial primary that would leave all the candidates tarnished and help ensure the reelection of Roy Romer. It was the same line that had been pitched in the letter suggesting that the meeting be held. Atkinson seemed to be pressing for a written agreement between the candidates that they would not attack each other in any way whatsoever. Although she did not say it directly, the implication seemed to be that Benson would not debate unless there was an agreement by the candidates not to attack each other.

The Bird negotiating team responded that the Bird campaign would not indulge in negative campaigning about the candidate's personal lives but would draw "comparisons" between Mike Bird and the other two candidates for the Republican nomination. "We are ready to sign the Geneva Convention and commit no atrocities," the Bird camp argued, "but even the Geneva Convention does not forbid combatants from firing bullets at each other." It was made very clear that Mike Bird would continue to pull up an empty chair and hang his "Benson" sign on it whenever Benson did not show up for a debate.

Atkinson then issued a counterthreat. "If you continue to shoot," she said, "we're going to shoot back."

Terry Walker then jumped into the argument with the Dick Sargent point of view. He criticized the Benson campaign for not cooperating with the other candidates and for trying to have everything their own way. Similar to the candidate he represented, Terry Walker presented his arguments in a forceful and positive way.

After 45 minutes of this less-than-gentle sparring, the meeting moved on to the subject of whether there would be debates or not. A proposal for three debates, which Michelle Provaznik and the rest of the

staff at Bird headquarters had come up with, was laid on the table. It followed the "presidential" debate model in providing for the three candidates to answer questions from selected members of the Colorado news media.

Amazingly, the Bird campaign was the only one to come to the meeting with a specific proposal. Well, why not? Mike Bird was the candidate who was benefitting the most from holding debates and criticizing Bruce Benson for not showing up for them. Katy Atkinson listened to the proposal but did not respond to it. She said she would take the proposal back to Bruce Benson and see how it fit with his campaign plans, most particularly Benson's personal campaign schedule.

The meeting ended pleasantly. All the participants were working overtime at being outwardly nice, but in reality the meeting had been tense and unpleasant. Clearly the Benson people had come to try to get an agreement to stop the wholesale criticism of Benson for not going to the Republican State Assembly and for not being willing to debate. They got no such agreement.¹⁵

On the drive back to Colorado Springs, the Bird campaign staff discussed the meeting at length and concluded the following. The Benson people wanted to end the Republican candidates criticizing each other so that Benson's millions of dollars of TV ads could be the determining factor - and the only determining factor - in the outcome of the gubernatorial primary election. Such an agreement to end the criticism of Benson would be fair, of course, only if the Benson campaign simultaneously agreed to give Mike Bird and Dick Sargent a million dollars each for television advertising. Only then could it be said the three candidates were leveling the playing field in a fair manner.

One conclusion was crystal clear. Mike Bird was hurting Bruce Benson badly with his high-profile criticism of Benson for not going to the state assembly and not debating. Far from backing off, the meeting was a sure sign the Bird campaign should continue to criticize Benson even more aggressively than before.

In the end, nothing came of the Benson proposal that the three

Republican candidates get together and come up with a plan for "constructive dialogue" during the remainder of the primary campaign. The Benson camp never responded to the Bird camp's proposal for three highly-publicized debates with Colorado news reporters asking the questions. Bruce Benson continued to avoid the majority of candidate forums and candidate debates. He carefully selected the four subsequent occasions on which he did debate with Bird and Sargent. All four were radio or television debates *without* a public audience present.

To the Bird campaign, Benson's proposal that the three campaigns search for an amicable debate format had turned out to be a ruse, a campaign ploy designed to give the appearance of being willing to debate without ever having to schedule any debates. The ploy essentially did not work. Mike Bird and Dick Sargent continued their efforts to make "Bruce Benson's unwillingness to debate" one of the major issues in the 1994 Republican gubernatorial primary.

THE SARGENT CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

Although the Bird for Governor campaign was focused mainly on trying to defeat Bruce Benson in the August 9, 1994, Republican primary, it was also important to keep in mind there was a third candidate in the race - Dick Sargent. Rumors were passed along to the Bird camp in mid-June of 1994 that the Sargent campaign was completely out of money. In fact, the word was that Sargent had used up all his remaining funds at the Republican State Assembly on June 4, 1994, and had little or no prospect of raising additional funds prior to primary election day.

With the money all gone, the rumor mill said, Sargent had no plans for a media campaign - no television ads, no radio ads, no newspaper ads. Other than Dick Sargent himself attending candidate forums and debates, the Sargent campaign mainly would consist of volunteers making local phone calls. Other volunteers would be recruited to "walk their precincts" and distribute the Sargent newspaper that promised

Colorado taxpayers a 20 percent tax cut.

The word also was around that Sargent was under considerable pressure to drop out of the race. The real contest, it was argued, was between Benson and Bird, and Sargent staying in the primary mainly had the effect of splitting the anti-Benson vote between Bird and Sargent, thus guaranteeing a Benson victory. But Sargent could not bow out, the rumor mill said, because Sargent had pledged to give back 80 percent of his contributions to his contributors if he did not get on the primary ballot at the Republican State Assembly. If Sargent dropped out voluntarily after qualifying at the State Assembly, the rumor continued, Sargent's contributors probably would want their money back, and Sargent had no money left to give them. Sargent had to go through the primary, the story concluded, whether he wanted to or not.¹⁶

Dick Sargent was able to enjoy traveling around the scenic state of Colorado in early summertime as he drove from candidate forum to candidate debate to candidate forum, etc. Travel expenses along the campaign trail appeared to be where the bulk of his campaign funds were going. Interestingly, Sargent's campaign was the exact reverse of Bruce Benson's. Benson was heavily emphasizing paid advertising and avoiding candidate forums and debates whenever possible. Sargent was concentrating on candidate forums and debates and doing hardly any paid advertising whatsoever. Benson was avoiding news media coverage. Sargent was actively seeking it out.

There was one aspect of the Sargent for Governor campaign that worried the Mike Bird strategists. They saw clearly that Dick Sargent's best strategy was to be a nice guy, hope that Bruce Benson and Mike Bird got into a real dogfight, and then sit back and get the votes of those voters who were antagonized by the heavy slugging between Benson and Bird. This was a strategy that had worked in a number of other three-way primary elections, most recently in a Democratic primary for U.S. Senate in Illinois in 1992. There, two well-financed white male candidates savaged each other and a third candidate, a black woman, won the nomination when the other two candidates "knocked each other

out." The woman went on to win the general election and became a U.S. Senator.

On balance, however, the Bird strategists were glad that Sargent stayed in the race and felt Sargent's chances of winning were minimal. Without Sargent in the race, the "Benson won't debate issue" would not have worked anywhere near as well for the Bird forces. It was only because both Bird *and Sargent* were available that candidate debates and forums were scheduled at all. Mike Bird would not have had anywhere near as many opportunities to hang his "Benson" sign on the empty chair if Sargent had not been available as a debate partner.¹⁷

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Immediately following the Republican State Assembly and throughout the primary election campaign, Mike Bird made a number of two and three-day swings to visit cities and towns in different parts of the state. There was a trip to southeastern Colorado down the Arkansas River valley, a trip to northeastern Colorado along the South Platte River valley, a trip to the Western Slope, etc. At this stage of the campaign, Bird was always accompanied by a campaign aide, usually a paid staff member but occasionally a volunteer or a college intern.

In each city and town visited, Mike Bird would walk the main street, stopping into local businesses to meet the proprietor, the sales clerks, the customers, or anyone else who might be around. In the larger cities Bird would hold a press conference. In the smaller towns he would be interviewed by the local weekly newspaper or make a brief recorded comment for the local radio station. There often was a campaign "event," such as a talk to local Republicans in a meeting hall or a coffee at the home of a local GOP leader.

These swings through the outlying areas of Colorado went very well and received excellent local press coverage. The Mike Bird county coordinators, the same people who had worked to get their fellow Republicans to support Mike Bird at the Republican State Assembly,

helped set up these local visits. Dennis Ritchie, the press assistant and campaign scheduler, coordinated this effort from the Bird for Governor headquarters in Colorado Springs.

While making his way down this long and winding primary campaign trail, Mike Bird heard from many conservative and moderate Democrats who told him they would support him if he won the primary and became the Republican nominee. Many of these Democrats were people who had come to admire Bird's hard work as chairman of the state legislature's Joint Budget Committee. Others knew about Bird and his abilities because of his service as president of the nonpartisan Colorado Municipal League. In addition, a number of Hispanic voters in Colorado, who normally vote Democratic, were supporting Bird because of his ability to speak fluent Spanish and his knowledge of Latin American economic problems. Bird often argued that neither Bruce Benson nor Dick Sargent had the potential for attracting this kind of Democratic voter support.¹⁸

A highlight of the primary election campaign was a candidate debate organized by the Colorado Municipal League for its annual meeting in Vail, Colorado, in mid-June of 1994. All of the candidates were invited, including incumbent Democratic governor Roy Romer. As usual Bruce Benson refused to participate. Before a cheering crowd of more than 600 city officials from all over Colorado, Mike Bird and Roy Romer got into a spirited exchange over campaign finance reform. The facts and statistics flew as two elected officials who knew a great deal about Colorado government vehemently argued their respective cases. A number of the city officials remarked after the debate that, if Mike Bird won the Republican nomination for governor, a series of Bird-Romer debates would really be something to see.

Dick Sargent also participated in the Municipal League debate with Roy Romer. Sargent attacked incumbent Democratic governor Romer, but not as vehemently or directly as Mike Bird did. In previous campaign appearances, Sargent had repeatedly promised GOP audiences that, if he were the Republican nominee, he would put on a "Dick and

Roy Show that the state's voters will never forget."

Sargent did get a big media "hit" at the Municipal League debate, however. At the same time Mike Bird was putting his "Benson" sign on Bruce Benson's empty chair, Sargent leaned over to the news media and said: "As a former Marine, I say that if you do not show up for a fight, then you are a sissy." This "sissy" quote of Sargent's received extensive coverage in the state's newspapers the next morning.¹⁹

NO "MR. NICE GUY"

As Mike Bird campaigned around Colorado in the period following the Republican State Assembly, an unusual number of people began coming up to him and complimenting him for "running such a clean campaign" and "not going strongly negative" against his Republican primary opponents. When Bird remarked on this unusual series of comments to his campaign staff, he was warned that some of these statements might be the result of a covert Benson campaign strategy. The thought was that the Benson strategists might be trying to "con" Bird into reducing his attacks on Bruce Benson in hopes of enhancing this "clean campaign" image.

The staff urged Mike Bird not to fall into this trap, if it was one, because his only real chance of winning would come from attacking Benson hard and discrediting him with Republican voters. Bird assured his campaign staff he would continue his all-out verbal assault on Benson, particularly for over-emphasizing paid advertising and refusing to attend candidate debates.²⁰

In the meantime, there appeared to be some "dirty tricks" on Bruce Benson's part. Mike Bird's financial supporters, particularly finance chairman Gary Loo, reported to Bird that they were receiving long, argumentative telephone calls from Bruce Benson. The "millionaire" candidate strongly urged them to stop their monetary contributions to Bird and switch to Benson instead.

In addition, the Bird campaign was told that Benson loyalists were

spreading fallacious rumors that Mike Bird was in bad health. Another time, when Mike Bird was appearing on a radio talk show in Colorado Springs, a series of telephone callers asked about Bird's past association with a failed savings and loan association. The Bird campaign team strongly suspected that the questions had been planted with the questioners by the Benson campaign.

NATIONAL NEWS

The June 20, 1994, issue of *Time*, the national news magazine, contained a major article on the increasing presence of wealthy candidates in United States election campaigns. As a result, the 1994 Colorado gubernatorial election briefly but noticeably became a national news story. Halfway into the article, *Time* cited Bruce Benson as a classic example of the new genre of millionaire candidates who finance their own campaigns. *Time* printed:

"Governorships, which used to go for a mere million or so, also appear to have appreciated in value. Colorado's oil magnate Bruce Benson, the favored Republican nominee for the statehouse, anticipates a possible \$6 million general campaign. Benson has a nest egg of \$50 million to \$100 million to draw from, but he hopes to rely mostly on donated money."²¹

The same week the *Time* article came out, the *Christian Science Monitor*, a nationally-distributed daily newspaper, ran a long story on the Colorado governor race and the fact that the Republicans were hoping to pick up a key western governorship from the Democrats. Once again it was mainly Bruce Benson's money that attracted national press attention. The *Monitor* article reported:

"The frontrunner among the Republicans, largely because of the depth of his pockets, is Bruce Benson. The Denver oilman represents a growing phenomenon in American politics: a wealthy first-time office-seeker willing to spend his own money."

In addition to describing Benson, the *Christian Science Monitor* also

gave thumbnail sketches of Bird and Sargent. The description of Bird was somewhat negative: "Mr. Bird, who also teaches economics at Colorado College, touts his 20-year experience in politics. A respected lawmaker, he is considered smart but low-key. Some analysts question whether he has the charisma and money to beat Romer."

As for Sargent, the *Monitor* cast him in a somewhat more favorable light: "Mr. Sargent, who served 26 years in the Marines, is a tough campaigner and debater. He has lost two previous campaigns for state treasurer, though. Even so, the candidate thinks those experiences have given him a strong rural base."²²

This national news coverage of the Colorado gubernatorial campaign mainly benefitted Bruce Benson. Both *Time* and the *Christian Science Monitor* referred to Benson as the "favored nominee" and "the frontrunner," thus giving him more of the "winner's image" that is so highly valued in United States electoral politics. These national news magazine articles undoubtedly helped Benson raise more money, and they increased his stature with the leadership of the Colorado state Republican Party.

Both of these national news articles also repeated what was now the standard Benson spin on the election, i.e, it will take big money to beat Roy Romer, and only Bruce Benson has and can get that big money.

Notes To Chapter 17:

1. Fred Brown, "Benson petitions draw late protest," *Denver Post*, 10 June 1994, 4B.
2. Fred Brown, "Benson petitions draw late protest," *Denver Post*, 10 June 1994, 4B.
3. Angela Dire, "Late anti-Benson petitions rejected," *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, 15 June 1994, B6. Jennifer Gavin, "Meyer: Benson foe's complaint too late," *Denver Post*, 15 June 1994, 4B.

4. Daniel Brewer-Ward repeatedly called Sherman Griffin at the Mike Bird for Governor campaign headquarters in Denver and urged the Mike Bird forces to join the Benson petition signatures lawsuit. Sherman Griffin, deputy campaign manager, Mike Bird for Governor, written comments to the author, May 7, 1995. The Mike Bird campaign stayed with the original decision not to protest Benson's petition signatures.
5. Jennifer Gavin, "Lawsuit challenges validity of Benson's petitions," Denver Post, 29 June 1994, 3B.
6. "Benson petition challenge dismissed," Denver Post, 30 July 1994, 3B.
7. Letter from Bruce Benson to Mike Bird, 6 June 1994.
8. Peter Blake, "Benson is tiptoeing to an actual debate," Rocky Mountain News, 8 June 1994, 5A. Angela Dire, "Benson calls on rivals to avoid GOP 'blood bath,'" Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 8 June 1994, B3. Tom McAvoy, "Bruce Benson now wants forums with his two opponents," Pueblo Chieftain, 8 June 1994.
9. Peter Blake, "Benson is tiptoeing to an actual debate," Rocky Mountain News, 8 June 1994, 5A.
10. Author's notes, telephone call to Mike Bird for Governor headquarters from Bill Stokes, 7 June 1994.
11. Fred Brown, "Park Hill activist has no regrets about closing Stapleton," Denver Post, 10 June 1994, 1B.
12. Mark Obmascik, "Benson targeted in debate," Denver Post, 12 June 1994, 1A.
13. Peter Blake, "Benson a little rusty, but survives debate," Rocky Mountain News, 13 June 1994, 5A.
14. Thaddeus Herrick, "Benson holds his fire under attacks," Rocky Mountain News, 12 June 1994, 5A.

15. Author's notes, negotiating session between Benson, Bird, and Sargent campaign staffs, Denver Hilton Hotel South, 14 June 1994.

16. These rumors and stories about the Sargent campaign circulated mainly in Denver and were picked up by Sherman Griffin, deputy campaign manager, Mike Bird for Governor, written comments to the author, 7 May 1995. After the election, Dick Sargent confirmed that he had pledged to return 80 percent of his contributions to his contributors if he did not get nominated at the state assembly. Sargent said, however, that he was feeling no pressure to quit following the assembly and that he could have paid back his contributors if he had decided to exit the race. Author's notes, interview with Dick Sargent, Colorado Springs, 13 January 1996.

17. All reports and rumors on the Dick Sargent for Governor campaign from author's notes, conversations with Mike Bird for Governor campaign staff, 21 June 1994.

18. After the election, Dick Sargent noted that he specifically appealed for the votes of Hispanics who had served in the military. Author's notes, interview with Dick Sargent, Colorado Springs, 13 January 1996.

19. Dick Sargent shared Mike Bird's view that the mid-June debate before the Colorado Municipal League was one of the high spots of the Republican gubernatorial primary election campaign. Author's notes, interview with Dick Sargent, Denver, 21 November 1994.

20. Author's notes, Mike Bird for Governor campaign staff meeting with Mike Bird, 20 June 1994.

21. David Van Biema, "What Money Can Buy," *Time*, 20 June 1994, 35.

22. Scott Armstrong, "GOP Hopes to Pick Up Colorado Governor's Seat," *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 June 1994, 2.