

CHAPTER 16

THE ASSEMBLY IN SESSION

As the 1994 Republican State Assembly in Colorado came to order, there was an immediate change in schedule. The keynote speaker, U.S. Senator Phil Gramm of Texas, had been delayed. Originally scheduled to give his keynote address at 10 A.M., word was leaked that Gramm would not be speaking until midafternoon. To guarantee there would still be some delegates left to hear Gramm's speech, state Republican Party leaders decreed that the results of the balloting in the governor's race would not be announced until after Gramm finished his talk. It was going to be a long day for those delegates - and there were many of them - who wanted to go home knowing who got the most votes for governor.

In the mode of modern day political conventions, the center of attention at the 1994 Republican State Assembly in Colorado was a giant television screen mounted high above the speaker's platform. A video camera was trained on the speaker's platform, so a giant close-up of the person or persons speaking to the assembly was always visible to the 7,000 plus delegates and alternates. Periodically, the assembly hall would be darkened and pre-recorded videotapes would play on the giant television screen. Although one traditionally thinks of a state assembly as a place for face-to-face, person-to-person contacts, elements of the electronic mass media were definitely creeping in.

Well, why not? It is a media age. People are so accustomed to getting political information from a TV screen, it made perfect sense for the giant TV screen to be the most important part of the state assembly.

The assembly program began with a short video that reviewed Colorado's 20th Century Republican governors and concluded with a look at recent Republican U.S. presidents. Because the photographs of early Colorado Republican governors were in black-and-white, the video had a nostalgic quality which very effectively imparted to the delegates a sense that they were participating in an event (a political party state assembly) that had a long and important role in Colorado history.

The invocation (an opening prayer) was given by Joel Hefley, one

of Colorado's four Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. Representative Hefley's prayer centered on D-Day, the United States-led amphibious military invasion of Europe during World War II. The 50th Anniversary of D-Day, also known as the Normandy Invasion, was to occur two days after the state assembly. Representative Hefley called on Colorado Republicans to continue to support a strong national defense for the United States. This was a logical position for Hefley to take, given that his congressional district contained four active U.S. military installations (the United States Air Force Academy, the North American Air Defense Command, the Fort Carson Army base, and the Falcon Air Station for anti-ballistic missile research).

Following the invocation, a recording of the national anthem was played with the assembly delegates urged to sing along. Inexplicably, it was a jazz version of "Oh, Say Can You See" that no one could possibly sing with.

THE NOMINATION OF MIKE BIRD

Now it was time for the gubernatorial nominations. The Mike Bird forces had won the draw to go first. It was "Show Time" for Michelle Provaznik and Bill Stokes, the two persons responsible for trying to see that Bird had the biggest and best floor demonstration at the 1994 Republican State Assembly.

Just before the demonstration was to begin, Republican state party leaders ordered that the time allotted for each candidate's floor demonstration and nominating speech be cut from 20 minutes to 15 minutes. Bill Stokes, who had scripted the Bird demonstration and speeches to exactly fit into the 20 minute time frame, ignored the order completely. "I just put on mental ear plugs," Stokes said. Michelle Provaznik made it clear to party officials that such a late change in the time available for the demonstration was completely unacceptable.

Bill Stokes was a retired Air Force officer who had spent much of

his military career planning large public events. He designed the spectacular opening ceremonies at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. He thus brought a considerable amount of experience to orchestrating Mike Bird's floor demonstration.

For two weeks before the state assembly was to take place, Michelle Provaznik and the Mike Bird county coordinators had recruited a small army of volunteer demonstrators. Many of the demonstrators were assembly delegates who left their seats in the assembly hall and came down to participate in the Bird demonstration. Others were college students and Bird volunteers who would be allowed on the assembly floor just for the demonstration and nothing more. The demonstrators, more than 200 in number, were lined up in a service area behind the speaker's platform, waiting for the cue to march, yelling and cheering, on to the assembly floor.

Each demonstrator was dressed in the blue-on-white Bird for Governor T-shirt, and each demonstrator carried an "I Like Mike!" sign on a wooden stick. Sixty-three demonstrators carried signs with the message, "El Paso County for Mike Bird" or "Denver County for Mike Bird," one sign for each of Colorado's 63 counties.

Also standing by, but at the other end of the assembly hall, was a Scottish marching band, all dressed in kilts and with bagpipes in hand. There were 30 of these musical Scots present, perhaps the largest Scottish marching band ever assembled in Colorado. They were from both Denver and Colorado Springs. Some were there to show their support for Mike Bird. Others had come mainly to present their particular brand of music and marching to a captive audience.

The Bird for Governor demonstration began with the lights being darkened and an American flag, waving triumphantly in a strong breeze, playing on the giant television screen. A male voice then announced majestically: "To nominate Mike Bird as the next governor of Colorado!" With that, the Scottish marching band, playing the bagpipes as loudly as possible, paraded down the center aisle of the assembly hall toward the speaker's platform. At the same time, the blue-on-white T-

shirted demonstrators began pouring down the outside aisles, in the opposite direction, coming out from both sides of the speaker's platform. As intended, the assembly floor turned into an undulating sea of Mike Bird blue-and-white. There was feet stamping, sign waving, yelling and cheering, music, and even a little dancing around. It was, in short, everything a floor demonstration at a political convention is supposed to be.

From one point of view, the Bird floor demonstration was a disaster. Four major cues were missed by the participants, the main goof-up being that the demonstrators marched into the assembly hall at the same time the Scottish bagpipers came down the center aisle. According to the script, the Scots were to march in, *then* the demonstrators were to make their appearance. The result was an unintended mingling of the bagpipers and the demonstrators. From where the delegates were sitting, however, it all looked like it was coming off as planned, so there was no harm done.

Following this large and noisy floor demonstration, Mike Bird's name was placed in nomination and seconded by a series of well-known Colorado Republicans, many of them Bird's colleagues in the Colorado state legislature. Prominent among them was Chuck Berry, the Republican speaker of the Colorado state House of Representatives. The main nominating speech was given by Thomas Sutherland, a professor at Colorado State University in Fort Collins who had become well-known nationally when he was held hostage for an extended period of time by Islamic revolutionaries in Lebanon.

Mike Bird kept his remarks brief, reviewing the key campaign themes he had been emphasizing for the previous year-and-a-half. He accepted the placing of his name in nomination and pledged to do his best to defeat Democratic governor Roy Romer in the fall. His wife Ursula and his two children, Chris and Andrea, joined him on stage to acknowledge the enthusiastic cheers and waves of a substantial portion of the assembly delegates.

THE NOMINATION OF DICK SARGENT

After the Bird forces had taken their 20 minutes of the assembly's time, it was Dick Sargent's turn. Sargent began his nomination with a video that was longer than the Bird video and emphasized Sargent's military training in the Marine Corps. It was a stirring piece that appealed to patriotic sentiments at the same time it emphasized Sargent's "training for leadership." It was a strong part of Sargent's nomination program.

There was a floor demonstration for Dick Sargent, but it was smaller and less lively than the Mike Bird demonstration. There was no band, and Sargent had only about one-third as many demonstrators. As previously noted, however, the bright red color of each Sargent volunteer's T-shirt showed up well in the assembly hall. Sargent also had very few seconding speeches, preferring instead to address the state assembly at some length himself.

A state assembly in Colorado is a very open affair. When the chair calls for further nominations for governor, any registered Republican can place the name of any other registered Republican in nomination. This happened at the 1994 Republican State Assembly. A man named Marty Nalitz, who had no previous experience or reputation in Colorado Republican politics, was nominated from the floor. Nalitz's main claim to fame was that he hosted an ultra-conservative talk show in Denver. Nalitz and his nominators addressed the assembly on the subject of moral values, particularly their opposition to fetal abortions. That appeared to be all they had in mind, however, because Nalitz declined to accept the nomination once he and his supporters had all finished talking.

When the nominations for governor were completed, computer punchcards were distributed to the delegates by the GOP organizational leaders from each delegate's particular county. After the delegates had made their choice, the "punched" cards were collected and sent to be counted by machine. The state assembly then moved on to nominations

for other statewide offices, such as lieutenant governor, treasurer, and secretary of state.

THE VIEW FROM A SKYBOX

Once Mike Bird's nomination and floor demonstration were over, and after all the "punchcard" votes for governor had been turned in to be counted, Mike and Ursula Bird and their two grown children went up and sat in a "skybox" at McNichols Arena. The skybox, which was assigned to the Bird campaign by state party headquarters, enabled the Birds and their campaign staff to sit in relative privacy and comfort and have an excellent view of the speaker's platform and the assembly floor. It was fun for them to watch the assembly proceedings in the same comfortable chairs in which the elite of Denver watch Denver Nuggets professional basketball games.

As Mike and Ursula Bird sat and watched the proceedings, campaign staff members kept continuously coming in and out of the skybox with messages, rumors, etc. Occasionally a newspaper reporter would stop by and briefly interview Mike Bird on his opinion on some aspect of the assembly. A *Denver Post* photographer also came by. He set up and took what could be described as a "classic" photo. It showed Mike Bird, smiling with both arms raised, making the V-sign with both hands with thousands of assembly delegates visible in the background.¹

Throughout both the Bird and Sargent nominating speeches and floor demonstrations - and all the time the punchcards were being voted and counted - there was absolutely no evidence of any concerted activity by the Bruce Benson forces. There were a few Benson signs being waved here and there around the assembly hall, but not enough to be noticeable. Only a few delegates had Benson stickers or Benson pins visible on their coat lapels or dress tops. The Bird forces were convinced that their strong criticism of Benson for trying to "spoil the assembly with spoiled ballots" was the main reason for this low profile on the part of the Benson forces. There was no way of proving that

contention, however.

About 2 P.M. word was brought to the Bird skybox that Mike Bird had received 57 percent of the delegate votes and Dick Sargent 43 percent. This was before the assembly bean counters had added in the ballots with Benson's name written on them, so those percentages would drop somewhat when the final tabulation was completed. Spirits rose strongly in the Bird camp upon hearing this news. It appeared that Bird was going to get the most votes at the assembly and end up with the coveted "top line" designation on the August 9, 1994, Republican primary ballot. It looked like Sargent was going to make the ballot also but definitely in second place.

THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS

U.S. Senator Phil Gramm arrived in the early afternoon and, accompanied by leading Colorado Republican party officials, circulated around on the assembly floor shaking hands and personally greeting the party faithful. Gramm had let it be known he was a candidate for the 1996 Republican nomination for president of the United States. He already had raised \$6 million for his upcoming presidential campaign. He took his time as he moved from assembly delegate to assembly delegate, working hard at projecting an image of warmth and friendliness rather than an image of being in a hurry and too busy to talk. Gramm answered every question he was asked by the delegates and appeared ready to chat with any particular delegate as long as that delegate wanted to chat.

Then it was time for Phil Gramm's keynote address to the assembly. A well-known Republican conservative, Gramm amused his listeners with a long series of one-line statements on the issues of crime, illegitimacy, and health care. The Republican Party, he said, "will put prisoners in prison and keep them there." As for the prisons themselves, "it's time to stop building prisons like they build Holiday Inns." And when the prisoners get to prison, "we're going to make the prisoners

work as hard as the taxpayers work to keep them in prison."

On the subject of illegitimacy, Phil Gramm said: "We cannot continue to subsidize people having children out of wedlock." On health care he opined: "When my mama gets sick, I want her to talk to a doctor and not to a bureaucrat." Referring to Democratic president Bill Clinton's love for deceased rock-and-roll singer Elvis Presley, Gramm chortled: "Elvis may still be alive, but Bill Clinton's Health Care Reform Bill is definitely dead." As for the Democrats in Washington, Gramm noted that they had lost nine straight elections around the country since 1992, were depressed over their prospects for 1994, and were "sweating and packing to go home."²

Phil Gramm's keynote address was everything it should have been. Although only 3,000 or so of the 7,000 delegates and alternates had waited until late in the afternoon to hear him speak, those who stuck around apparently liked what they heard. Phil Gramm's speech lambasting the Democrats in Washington elicited more cheers and applause from the audience than any of the speeches given by the would-be nominees for the Colorado governorship.

GETTING THE RESULTS

Once Phil Gramm had finished speaking, the results of the balloting for the Republican nomination for governor were announced. To add to the drama of the occasion and make the state assembly a bit more colorful and exciting, Republican state leaders had each of the Republican chairmen from each of the state's 63 counties read the results for the particular county. It was a somewhat superfluous thing to do given that the results had already been totaled by a computer, but it was reminiscent of the way ballots for major party nominations are reported at national political conventions, and that was the effect Republican state party officials were looking for.³

The 63 county chairmen lined up on the stage and began reading their county's results. Instead of going alphabetically, the counties with

small populations (and small numbers of delegates) went first and the counties with large populations (and large numbers of delegates) went last. That way, it was impossible to tell for certain who the winner was going to be until the more populous counties reported their results at the very end.

Exactly as state party leaders had hoped, the candidates and their close supporters kept running totals as the results came in county by county. The process was leisurely, because each county chairman had been urged to say something descriptive about his or her county. "Alamosa County, the jewel of the San Luis Valley, where they grow the world's best potatoes and barley, casts 0 votes for Mike Bird, 8 votes for Dick Sargent, and 0 write-in votes for Bruce Benson." Some of the county chairmen made such extravagant claims for the "wonders" of their particular county that the remaining assembly delegates and alternates broke out into hearty laughter.

It had been the conventional wisdom that Dick Sargent would do well in the rural counties with the small populations. It did not turn out that way. Mike Bird carried more of the rural counties than Sargent did, building a narrow lead that slowly grew larger as more and more county results were reported. Bird's partisans enjoyed this surprise, but then worried that the populous counties in the Denver suburbs, which was where Sargent lived, might come in heavily for Sargent. The Bird camp's fears did not materialize. Sargent did better than Bird in the Denver suburbs, but not by very much. When El Paso County, Mike Bird's home county, came in strongly for Bird (although Sargent polled a good vote there), it was clear that Bird had defeated Sargent. Mike Bird would be listed on the "top line" on the August primary ballot. Sargent would make the ballot, too, but his name would be below Mike Bird's.

As for Bruce Benson, only 8 percent of the delegates cast a "write-in" vote for him or spoiled their ballot in some other way. This did reduce Bird's and Sargent's margin of victory, but not by very much. It was nowhere near enough to keep Bird or Sargent off the primary ballot

in August. The final delegate vote at the 1994 Colorado Republican State Assembly was: Mike Bird - 50 percent; Dick Sargent - 42 percent; Bruce Benson or spoiled - 8 percent.

Off to the right of the speaker's platform, and just below and easily visible from the Mike Bird for Governor skybox, was the press table for the 1994 Republican State Assembly. All of the leading political reporters in Colorado were there during the roll call, some of them already typing their stories for the next morning's newspapers. Also there was Katy Atkinson, Bruce Benson's campaign manager, and Steve Durham, a former Colorado state legislator who was a strong Benson supporter. Both were busily giving the press the Benson "spin" as the final results became known.

Dennis Ritchie, the newly-hired press assistant in the Bird campaign, kept a close watch on Katy Atkinson's and Steve Durham's faces as the final results were announced. Ritchie said both Atkinson's and Durham's facial expressions sagged when it became known that Mike Bird had received 50 percent of the delegate vote and, furthermore, had beaten Sargent and Benson in 48 of the 63 counties.⁴ There was very little there for Atkinson and Durham to spin to the press, except to repeat their claim that the Benson forces had made no real effort to win delegate write-in votes at the assembly and that Benson had spent the day several miles away - at a People's Fair in downtown Denver.⁵

Why had Dick Sargent done so well? He had spent very little money, but at 42 percent of the delegate vote he was only 8 percent behind Mike Bird's 50 percent. Mike Bird had a theory about this phenomenon. In the end, Bird speculated, the Benson faithful voted for Dick Sargent in an effort to reduce the size of Mike Bird's expected victory at the state assembly. The suggestion to vote for Sargent was probably passed to trusted Benson supporters by word of mouth, although there was no way to definitely prove that such verbal instructions had been given out. Some members of the Bird campaign staff were told, however, that Benson supporters were encouraging delegates to vote for Dick Sargent rather than cast a write-in vote for

Benson or vote for Mike Bird.⁶

After the results of the balloting for governor were announced at the state assembly, Mike Bird and Dick Sargent were given one minute each for an acceptance speech. Bird went first, saying that competition between candidates was good for the party and "pledging his support for the caucus and [assembly] process." "Together we're going to go forward in November," Bird continued, "and we are going to whip Roy Romer."

Dick Sargent surprised many at the assembly by taking a harsh and confrontive tone towards his fellow Republican candidates in his acceptance speech. He castigated Bruce Benson for spending so much money in his efforts to win the Republican nomination for governor. He then charged that Mike Bird "lacked the statewide base" to win the general election in November." Sargent concluded: "I'm confident I can beat both of them."⁷

There was a reason for Dick Sargent's hostile tone towards his opponents. He had directed his campaign toward winning support in the rural counties, and he was disappointed when he lost most of the delegate votes in the rural counties to Bird. "I just could not believe, after all the campaigning I did in them, that I lost the rural counties to Mike Bird," Sargent explained. "That was the reason for the tough character of my acceptance speech at the Republican State Assembly."⁸

And then at 6 P.M., after being in session for almost nine hours, the 1994 Colorado Republican State Assembly was over. Bird volunteers scoured the assembly floor, gathering up uncrumpled Mike Bird signs and brochures for use later in the campaign. What remained of all the paraphernalia that had been brought up from Colorado Springs for the assembly was packed into the trunks of cars and taken back to headquarters, hopefully to be used another day.

As she walked to her car in the parking lot at McNichols Arena in Denver, Ursula Bird turned to Mike Bird and the Bird campaign staff and commented on what it was going to be like in a Republican primary with an opponent as wealthy as Bruce Benson. "From here on out,"

Ursula said, "it's money, money, money!" If the Bird campaign hoped to be competitive with Bruce Benson, it was going to have to raise every last dollar it could get its hands on.

Exactly as the Bird campaign staff expected, Bruce Benson ran a barrage of television commercials the weekend of the Republican State Assembly. One Bird for Governor staff member saw one of the Benson ads on television in Colorado Springs after getting home from the state assembly late in the evening. The Benson commercial ran right after the 10 o'clock news report that Mike Bird had come in first and earned "top line" at the state assembly.

But the next morning's newspapers - the Sunday papers - all belonged to Mike Bird. He received the lion's share of the headlines, and the political reporters went out of their way to make clear the significance of getting "top line." Best of all, the *Denver Post* ran the great photograph of a smiling Mike Bird, giving the victory sign, with the convention delegates cheering in the background.⁹

EVALUATING THE STATE ASSEMBLY

As Colorado law provides, in 1994 Republican Party precinct caucuses had elected delegates to Republican Party county assemblies which in turn had elected delegates to the Republican Party state assembly. As expected, almost 7,000 Republicans from all over the state of Colorado had gathered in Denver and, at least for one day, talked about and voted upon the *statewide* concerns of their chosen political party.

The delegates had a wide variety of experiences. Many were first-time attendees at a state party assembly. They arrived knowing few other people and had very little to do but sit and listen and, periodically, cast their punchcard votes. Some of them were bored by the process, shocked by the high cost of the stadium-type food they had to buy and eat for lunch, and left the assembly hall at the end of a very long day with little enthusiasm for ever coming to a state assembly again.

Others of the delegates were repeat visitors. They had come to two or more state assemblies in the past. They knew a large number of their fellow attendees in their county delegation, and they probably had met and could renew acquaintances with the many elected officials from the political party who were at the state assembly. For them it was an easygoing social event as well as a political event.

A limited number of people were having an intense experience - in some cases a quite memorable experience. Youthful college and high school students were participating, in most cases for the first time in their lives, as floor demonstrators. Elected officials, and "wannabe" elected officials, were taking advantage of this unique and convenient opportunity to meet and socialize with (and work to impress) Republican Party activists from all over the state.

Candidates and their campaign staffs were having an action-packed day. They were hard at work, making certain everything was going the way they organized it to go and constantly anticipating - and thinking of ways to head off - moves by their political opponents. For them the day was demanding and, much of the time, stressful.

In addition to the personal experiences of the participants, other important things were happening at the 1994 Republican State Assembly. Prospective Republican candidates for the major statewide offices in Colorado were being "showcased" to the delegates and, through them, to the wider world of Colorado Republican politics beyond the assembly hall. The Colorado political press corps was present, closely observing the various candidates and their political styles. The press corps was making important judgements about how they would present these candidates to the newspaper-reading, radio-listening, and television-watching public. The state assembly also produced "winners" - candidates who gained publicity and celebrity because they received more votes than their competitors in the assembly voting and would carry that "winner" label into the August 9, 1994, Republican primary.

The role of the press was particularly significant. The press gave

scant attention to the kinds of things highlighted in this book. The reporters paid little or no attention to the political strategies of the various candidates for winning delegate votes. The floor demonstrations were mentioned only in passing, if at all. The myriad candidate signs and posters, the giant video screen, the millions of conversations taking place between activist party members - none of these kinds of details caught the attention of the Colorado press corps. The press concentrated mainly on which candidates received the most votes at the assembly and what they said after the vote results were announced.

But these stories were played prominently in the local news sections of Colorado newspapers and on the Saturday evening 5:30 and 10 o'clock television news. True to form, the press covered the 1994 Colorado Republican State Assembly as if it were a "horse race," and thus the big news was the winners and what they had to say.

Probably the press coverage alone will justify continuing to hold state party assemblies in Colorado. But other values are important also. State party assemblies give those political party members in Colorado *who choose to do so* the opportunity to participate in the "first round" of designating party candidates for statewide office. State party assemblies, because they bring party members together from all over the state, are a unifying and consolidating influence on the party.

Some observers argue that state party assemblies are an outmoded form of "person-to-person" politics - particularly outmoded in a mass media age. These critics argue for relying on primary elections - and only primary elections - for nominating party candidates for office. To those who value strong political parties based on face-to-face relationships, however, the goings-on at the 1994 Republican State Assembly in Colorado suggested that state party assemblies are well worth preserving.

Notes To Chapter 16:

1. Dave Buresh, photograph entitled "Pleased," Denver Post, 5 June 1994, 6A.
2. Author's notes, speech by U.S. Senator Phil Gramm of Texas, 1994 Colorado Republican State Assembly, Denver, 4 June 1994.
3. Having the results reported individually by county was a return to a previous practice that had been dropped at recent Republican state assemblies. Apparently a sizable number of Republican regulars wanted to go back to the old way.
4. Dennis Ritchie, press assistant to Mike Bird for Governor campaign, discussion with the author, Colorado Springs, 6 June 1994.
5. Fred Brown, "Bird bests Sargent in GOP voting," Denver Post, 5 June 1994, 1A.
6. Although the Mike Bird forces heard that Bruce Benson supporters were being asked to cast their assembly votes for Dick Sargent, no such rumors ever reached Dick Sargent himself. Author's notes, interview with Dick Sargent, Denver, 21 November 1994.
7. Thaddeus Herrick, "GOP convention clears way for bitter primary," Rocky Mountain News, 5 June 1994, 4A. Fred Brown, "Bird bests Sargent in GOP voting," Denver Post, 5 June 1994, 1A.
8. Author's notes, interview with Dick Sargent, Denver, 21 November 1994.
9. Dave Buresh, photograph entitled "Pleased," Denver Post, 5 June 1994, 6A.