

CHAPTER 13

DICK SARGENT APPEALS TO THE RIGHT

The third candidate in the race, Golden investment counselor Dick Sargent, continued to campaign as hard as he could for delegate votes at the Republican State Assembly. Similar to Mike Bird, Sargent never missed a candidate forum or candidate debate anywhere in the state. As the date of the state assembly approached, however, Sargent did two things. First, he began to more directly attack Bird. Second, he began sharpening his appeal to the more conservative elements in the Republican Party, particularly on the issues of the death penalty and gun control.

Sargent's newly evolving strategy was very evident at a candidate debate held at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS) on May 17, 1994. Between 50 to 100 people from Mike Bird's hometown turned out to see the two candidates debate each other and take questions from a panel of UCCS students. Bruce Benson did not attend, and Bird, as ever, began the meeting by hanging his "Benson" sign on an empty chair.

Dick Sargent began his talk by saying he had spent his professional life preparing for "leadership." Both his military career, he said, and his operation of a suburban Denver investment office had prepared him to lead people. He clearly implied that such "leadership training" was better preparation for being governor of Colorado than teaching economics classes at Colorado College or serving for a long period in the state legislature.

This constituted an attack on Mike Bird because Bird had been arguing that his eight years of experience as a Colorado Springs City Council member and his twelve years in the state legislature made him, by far, the more experienced candidate when compared to Dick Sargent.

Sargent then moved on to the subject of election victories and defeats. "When Richard Nixon lost his bid for the presidency in 1960 and the California governorship in 1962," Sargent said, "that was preparation for winning the presidency in 1968. When Ronald Reagan

lost the Republican nomination for president to Gerald Ford in 1976, that was preparation for winning the presidency in 1980 and 1984. When George Bush lost the Republican nomination for president to Ronald Reagan in 1980, that was preparation for winning the presidency in 1988."

Sargent then went on to draw the obvious conclusion that his two losses in statewide races for state treasurer (in 1986 and 1990) were preparation for winning the governorship in 1994. To back up this contention with some statistics, Sargent handed out a printed sheet showing the large number of votes he had received in those two races for state treasurer (481,176 votes in 1986 and 441,792 votes in 1990). The only indication that he had lost the two elections were small notations that he had received only 43.8 percent of the vote in 1986 and even less, 41.6 percent, in 1990.

Sargent's statistical handout made no mention of his electoral record as a City Council member in the western Denver suburban city of Golden. He was elected to the Golden council in 1981 by 416 votes to 63. After four years in office, however, he was defeated for reelection in 1985 by 421 votes to 255.¹ The handout also did not mention that Sargent's four years on the Golden City Council constituted his only experience at holding public elected office.

All of this election talk on Sargent's part was designed to counter the fact that Mike Bird had won two elections to the Colorado Springs City Council and four Republican primaries and four general elections in getting elected and reelected to the Colorado state legislature. Sargent was trying to counter Bird's often repeated statement: "I have never lost an election, and I do not intend to lose this one!"

In addition to skillfully painting the very best picture possible of his experience and electoral record, Sargent was moving ideologically to the right of Bird on a number of major issues. "There are three convicted murderers awaiting the carrying out of their death penalties in Colorado," Sargent told the audience. "When I am governor, I will personally see that they are executed *immediately*." Sargent did not

bother to mention that the state courts, and not the governor, have the most to say about who gets executed in Colorado - and just how quickly those executions are carried out.

Sargent then moved strongly to the right side of the political street on the issue of gun control. "When I am governor," he pledged, "I will appoint no one to a job in my administration who is not 100 percent in favor of protecting the constitutional right to bear arms." This "litmus test" on gun control for prospective Sargent appointees was backed up by a second printed handout filled with unequivocal statements opposing gun control in any form whatsoever. When the debate was over, Sargent volunteers saw to it that everyone leaving the meeting received a copy of Sargent's strong statement on gun control.²

Sargent's new strategy was worrisome to the Bird for Governor campaign staff. The kind of people who take the trouble to attend Republican state assemblies tend to be considerably more conservative than the average Republican voter. Clearly Sargent was moving his campaign statements and campaign positions in a more conservative direction in order to appeal to this "far right" element, which would be strongly represented at the 1994 Republican State Assembly.

Dick Sargent himself acknowledged that he was more conservative than Mike Bird, and that this conservatism gave him his best chance of winning the most delegate votes at the state assembly. He also saw himself as "the closest thing the Christian Right, with its strong support for strengthening the American family, had to a candidate." But Sargent said he supported "tough enforcement of the death penalty" and "no gun control" because he thought they were winning issues, not because they were right-wing issues.³

Sargent's strategy of moving to the right just prior to the Republican State Assembly made sense. It made enough sense that some members of the Bird for Governor campaign staff began to worry - and worry a lot - that Dick Sargent just possibly might get more votes than Mike Bird at the Republican State Assembly.

Notes To Chapter 13:

1. Election results for Golden city council elections provided to Mike Bird for Governor headquarters by the Golden City Clerk's office.
2. Author's notes, candidate debate at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, 17 May 1994.
3. Author's notes, interview with Dick Sargent, Denver, 21 November 1994.