

CHAPTER 25

MEANWHILE, ON TELEVISION

When Bruce Benson touted his candidacy for the Republican nomination for governor with the slogan, "I have the money to beat Roy Romer," Benson was talking about money to buy television advertisements. By mid-September of 1994, TV commercials for both Benson and Romer were flooding the airwaves in Colorado.

Bruce Benson continued to run his "introductory" commercial, the one showing him as a young man working at an oil drilling rig. It was the same ad he had used so extensively during the Republican primary. He also ran more-or-less stock ads on the twin subjects of crime and welfare, two issues which national polls indicated were of prime concern to the average American voter.

Roy Romer also had an introductory commercial playing. His campaign staff described it as "fluff stuff," a low-key biographical TV advertisement concentrating on the incumbent Democratic governor's small-town roots and his political career.¹ A closer analysis indicated this particular Romer commercial was anything but "fluff stuff."

The TV ad appeared to be mainly designed to portray Roy Romer as a conservative governor who was tough on crime and, most importantly, not in tune with the "liberals" in the Democratic Party. By early September of 1994 it was clear that a Republican tide was sweeping the United States, a tide that was conservative in general and anti-government in particular. Romer's ads were designed to make it appear that, although Romer was a Democrat, his gubernatorial administration had been anything but liberal.

Romer's commercial began by showing the governor in a variety of settings, interacting with a variety of Colorado citizens. In the audio portion of the ad, Romer was given credit for the booming economy and low unemployment in Colorado. The ad also emphasized Romer's recent anti-crime policies. A squad of youths at a prison boot camp for young offenders went marching across the screen. A headline described the anti-crime plan which Romer presented to a special session of the

Colorado state legislature: "Romer slams down his 'iron fist' plan."

The attack on liberals came when the ad reviewed Romer's support for a law prohibiting juveniles to have handguns. The audio portion of the ad intoned: "Now the gun lobby didn't like it, some liberals in my own party weren't happy - but that's what this job is all about." Note that the ad specifically separated Romer from the "liberals in my own party." Also, in what was looking like a Republican year, the writers of the ad clearly went out of their way *not* to mention the specific name of Roy Romer's political party - the Democratic Party.

The Romer TV ad closed with this line printed on the screen: "Fighting the right fights for Colorado." As Peter Blake of the *Rocky Mountain News* pointed out, "the use of the word 'right' is no accident." It was all part of Roy Romer's all-out effort to portray himself as on the political "right," the conservative side of things, rather than the political "left," where the liberals were.²

The Colorado political press corps kept close tabs on the TV and radio ads that Romer and Benson were running and frequently critiqued them in print. Fred Brown of the *Denver Post* was quick to point out that many of the anti-crime programs for which Roy Romer was claiming credit, such as the boot camps for teen-age convicts, were enacted by a Republican state legislature. "Romer has been taking credit for bills he has signed," Brown wrote. "But the Democratic governor couldn't have signed those bills if the Republican-controlled legislature hadn't passed them."

Fred Brown pointed out that both Roy Romer and Bruce Benson, as portrayed in their television commercials, were much more powerful and dynamic than any governor of Colorado can be in "real life." Brown explained this concept at length:

"The governors portrayed in 30-second political ads on television have a lot more clout than the real-life governors who actually sit in the office on the first floor of the Colorado Capitol."

"The governors in the 30-second spots can reform the welfare system, build prisons, enforce the death penalty, fight crime - even raise

taxes."

"Real-life governors can't do any of those things. Not without help from the legislature, anyway."³

A TELEVISION ARGUMENT OVER TAXES

Early in October of 1994, Bruce Benson launched a television ad accusing Roy Romer of being a tax-and-spend governor. The *Denver Post* described the TV commercial as "the first real attack ad of the 1994 gubernatorial race."

Benson's new TV commercial mainly showed unflattering photographs of Roy Romer. The major message was presented vocally. The transcript read:

"Roy Romer never met a tax he didn't like. As governor, he wanted to raise the income tax, the sales tax, the gas tax and even the ski-lift tax."

"Roy Romer called for higher taxes on retirement benefits, movie tickets, health club memberships and utility rates."

"In fact, Roy Romer has proposed more than a billion dollars in tax increases."

"And he opposed the 1992 state amendment to limit taxes."

"But we can stop Roy Romer before he taxes again. Roy Romer. Too liberal with our money."

As newspapers were doing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the *Denver Post* ran an in-depth analysis of Benson's new ad. The *Post* found the commercial to be essentially fair but noted that many of the taxes proposed by Roy Romer had been "trial balloons" and were quickly dropped from the governor's program when they proved unpopular. The *Post* also faulted the line in the ad which said "stop Roy Romer before he taxes again." The Colorado governor never had the power to raise taxes without the approval of the state legislature, the *Post* pointed out. Also the *Post* noted, ever since Colorado voters adopted a "Tax Limitation" constitutional amendment in 1992, a vote of

the people had been required to raise state taxes.

Quite naturally, the Benson for Governor campaign was quick to defend its "tax-and-spend" television commercial. "I don't think we suggest that (Romer) can enact taxes all by himself," argued Benson press secretary Greg Sparrow. "I think what we do suggest is that he has a taxation fixation.... When he sees a problem, his first solution is a tax increase. And we think that's a distinct difference between Roy Romer and Bruce Benson."⁴

Roy Romer's campaign organization was quick to fire back at Bruce Benson's "tax-and-spend" TV ad, and it fired back on the same battlefield, the television airwaves. In less than a week the Romer campaign had an ad on the air that portrayed Romer as "Just Colorado" rather than "too liberal with our money."

In responding almost instantaneously to Bruce Benson's attack ad, the Romer campaign was following the example set by Democrat Bill Clinton's successful campaign for the U.S. presidency in 1992. Rather than ignore attack ads from his Republican opponent, incumbent president George Bush, Clinton would immediately respond with an "answering ad" of his own. Roy Romer carefully followed Bill Clinton's "rapid response" philosophy in the Colorado governor's race in 1994.

Roy Romer's retaliatory TV commercial contained the customary visual scenes of the governor surrounded by typical Coloradans, almost all of them smiling and laughing. The transcript read:

"Another problem for Bruce Benson. He's running attack ads, distorting Roy Romer's record on taxes. He must be desperate."

"The truth is, under Roy Romer, Colorado's taxes are the third lowest in the country."

"Romer was ranked the second most fiscally conservative governor in America."

"So what's this Benson attack about Roy Romer as a liberal? How do you label a guy who strengthened the death penalty and instituted tough welfare reforms but has pioneered quality day-care?"

"That's not liberal or conservative. That just Colorado. And that's

Roy Romer."

The *Denver Post* subjected Roy Romer's ad to the same close scrutiny that had been given Bruce Benson's ad. The *Post* found a major problem with the Cato Institute, the organization which rated Romer, according to his ad, "the second most fiscally conservative governor in America." The Cato Institute had based that ranking only on tax increases actually passed by the legislature, the *Post* discovered, and not on Romer's many tax increase proposals that were killed by the state legislature. The *Denver Post* was hinting to its readers that Roy Romer was anything but "the second most fiscally conservative governor in America."⁵

HUMBLE AND APOLOGETIC

By mid-October of 1994 it had become obvious that the two DUIs and the messy divorce were badly weighing down the Bruce Benson for Governor campaign. The major issue in the campaign now was Bruce Benson's character rather than Roy Romer's record as governor.

The Benson campaign came up with a unique and different television ad to try to counter the unfavorable publicity about drunk driving and divorce. In the ad Bruce Benson was shown talking to himself as he walked away from the camera, through sun-dappled creekside willows, his back to the audience. Periodically he would turn around to admit he had some problems but was ready to govern. The audio portion of the ad spoke to the idea that all human beings make mistakes in their lives but can go on and accomplish a lot of good things, too.

Benson was shown wearing a pair of jeans with a hole in them. Also the outline of his wallet could be seen through the worn, faded material of his rear pants pocket. At the end of the ad Benson turned full-face to the camera, promised to provide real leadership for the state of Colorado, and then gave a little wink.⁶

The theme of the ad was "redemption." Bruce Benson might have

"sinned" in the past, but now he was back on the "straight and narrow path."

This television commercial was backed up by a letter to voters published as a full-page advertisement in the major newspapers throughout the state. The newspaper ad copy was as contrite and apologetic as the TV ad. It read in part:

"When I entered this race some months ago, people told me politics was a dirty game and I was crazy to subject myself and my family to the kind of negative personal attacks that were sure to come. I never tried - like some politicians - to deny my mistakes or gloss over the rough edges. In fact, I voluntarily raised my driving record, and admitted my mistakes. I told the truth about my personal life, even when it hurt."

"It is true that many years ago I was arrested twice for DUI. I openly discussed, under the glare of the television cameras, the details of my sad and painful divorce. Neither of these subjects are easy to talk about, but I respect the people of Colorado enough to look them in the eye and tell the truth."

The letter in the newspaper ad went on to say the Bruce Benson was proud of "my life, my family, and my campaign." It reviewed Benson's business success, his work for community groups, and the major issues in his campaign such as fighting crime and reducing taxes. "I will never promise you perfection," the ad concluded. "What I will promise you is that I will listen, work hard, and do the very best job I can."⁷

Voters and political commentators in Colorado did not know what to make of this new humble and apologetic Bruce Benson. Some supporters urged him to get off the subject of his own problems and get back to attacking Roy Romer. "So many people are saying why doesn't he just stop with this stuff and start talking about the campaign," said one close Benson associate. "It's almost like he's running to maintain his integrity more than he's running for governor."⁸ Phil Klingsmith, the man who dropped out early from the race for the Republican nomination for governor, said of the ad: "It's the only campaign I know of where the candidate ran a negative ad against himself."⁹

Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, staunchly defended what she called Bruce Benson's "Hole in the Pocket" ad. "We had to turn things around," Atkinson explained. "We were at the point where we had to take some chances. We knew the ad was risky, but we had to do something to get voters to take a 'second look' at Bruce Benson. Because of the tremendous overplay on the divorce in the news media, the divorce was all most voters knew about Bruce Benson. The ad was designed to get voters to realize there was more to Bruce Benson than just the DUIs and the 'messy divorce,' and our poll numbers began to improve the minute we started running the ad."¹⁰

In keeping with this image of a new "humble and apologetic" Bruce Benson, the Benson camp produced another TV commercial in which Benson's 24-year-old daughter, Ann Benson, talked admiringly about her father's many accomplishments. The Benson forces saw this kind of ad working well for them. "People ate it up, just ate it up," Ann Benson told the news media.¹¹

"SIG VICIOUS"

With only three weeks to go before election day, the Benson for Governor campaign brought in yet another nationally known advertising specialist to try to help win the election. Sig Rogich, of Las Vegas, Nevada, became famous writing and producing television ads for Republican George Bush in both his 1988 and 1992 campaigns for president. Rogich joined Ed Rollins and Russo Marsh + Associates in a last-ditch effort to orchestrate a media campaign to save Bruce Benson's candidacy.

The Romer camp was quick to respond to the hiring of Sig Rogich. Mike Stratton, Roy Romer's main consultant, noted that Rogich was nicknamed "Sig Vicious" because of the "attack" quality of his ads. Stratton concluded: "We are anticipating a further negative turn relative to the Benson media program."¹²

Notes To Chapter 25:

1. Fred Brown, "Romer TV ads to hit air," Denver Post, 5 September 1994, 1A.
2. Peter Blake, "Romer and Benson fire up the airwaves," Rocky Mountain News, 21 September 1994, 5A.
3. Fred Brown, "Governors are more powerful in TV ads than in the flesh," Denver Post, 30 September 1994, 1B.
4. Jeffrey A. Roberts, "Political SpotCheck: Benson ad technically correct, but misleading," Denver Post, 3 October 1994, 1A.
5. Jeffrey A. Roberts, "Romer hailed in TV ad as No. 2 fiscally conservative governor," Denver Post, 7 October 1994, 6A.
6. There were many newspaper descriptions and analyses of this TV ad. Angela Dire, "High hopes look like pipe dream," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 6 November 1994, A15. Hal Shroyer, "How did Bruce Benson foul up? Let me count the ways...", letter to the Colorado Statesman, 18 November 1994, 3.
7. Newspaper advertisement, "An open letter to the people of Colorado," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 14 October 1994, A5; Denver Post, 19 October 1994, 17A. Note the difference in dates. The ad may have been test marketed in Colorado Springs and subsequently run in Denver newspapers.
8. Angela Dire, "High hopes look like pipe dream," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 6 November 1994, A15.
9. Fred Brown, "Romer win it, or Benson lose it?" Denver Post, 10 November 1994, 1A.
10. Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.

11. "Sex, booze, and anti-incumbency," *Economist*, 29 October 1994, 28.
12. Jennifer Gavin, "Benson recruits ad man; negative spots anticipated," *Denver Post*, 18 October 1994, 4B.