

CHAPTER 2

MIKE BIRD GETS STARTED

The minute Mike Bird revealed his plans to run for governor, invitations to speak began pouring in from all over the state. Business luncheon clubs, women's clubs, political clubs - all had come to rely on political candidates to serve as speakers at their weekly or monthly meetings. Bird accepted as many of these invitations as possible, regarding them as an opportunity to meet the voters in an informal environment. Not only was the candidate able to give a short talk and answer questions, but both before and after the meeting he could be available for one-on-one conversations with individual voters.

Mike Bird's speaking schedule was relatively light at first, with two or three talks a week. As the campaign went along, however, the speaking schedule became increasingly intense, sometimes including three or more talks a day. By the time of the Republican gubernatorial primary in August of 1994, Mike Bird had given over 300 speeches around the state of Colorado in his effort to get elected governor. A large number of these talks were at Lincoln Day dinners - Republican political gatherings held in the spring of each year in each county that are heavily attended by Republican activists.

Colorado is a large state in terms of land area, measuring almost 400 miles across and nearly 300 miles up-and-down. That means that giving speeches all over Colorado also means driving long distances all over Colorado. That task is more daunting than it first appears, because Colorado is one of the most mountainous states in the United States. Visiting remote county seats in Colorado often means driving up and down twisting and curving mountain roads at slow speeds. Fortunately the state capital, Denver, is fairly centrally located in the state, but some of the more distant outlying communities in Colorado are more than an eight-hour drive from Denver - one way.

The result was that Mike Bird spent a great deal of time behind the steering wheel of his dark blue Buick Regal sedan, motoring from city to suburb to small town giving speeches. Because he knew he was

going to be in his automobile so much, he had a car telephone installed early in the campaign. Much of the work - and decision making - of the campaign was handled by Mike Bird on his car telephone as he drove around the state giving talks and meeting the voters.

A crucial factor in a mountainous state like Colorado is the weather. Frequently Mike Bird found himself driving through heavy snowstorms or freezing rain to meet his campaign commitments. Also, all the time he was maintaining this heavy speaking schedule around the state, Mike Bird was either teaching a full schedule of economics courses at Colorado College or attending sessions of the state legislature.

There was a reward that politicians in some other states do not get, however. Colorado is a geographically varied state, with rolling high plains to the east, the high Rocky Mountains in the center, and rugged plateau and canyon country to the west. Mike Bird got to look at some of the more attractive scenery in the nation as he campaigned in some of the more remote parts of Colorado.

At the start, the campaign headquarters was located in Mike Bird's home in an outlying residential area in Colorado Springs. A personal computer was installed to keep track of Bird's speaking schedule and tally up campaign contributions as they came in. Bird's wife of 30 years, Ursula, handled the computer work as well as answering the telephone when her husband was "on the road." At this early stage of the campaign, strategy meetings with volunteer supporters and advisers were held in Mike and Ursula Bird's living room.

CAMPAIGN ORGANIZATION

Throughout the spring of 1993, quite some time before the nominating process began in earnest, Mike Bird sought to accomplish three things in organizing his campaign for governor:

1. *A circle of trusted advisers.* Bird made it a point to talk and confer with his close friends and political acquaintances. He simultaneously would tell them what his thinking was about the

impending campaign and then solicit their advice and counsel on what he should be doing. In most cases these close friends and political allies committed themselves to supporting Bird without Bird having to ask. Periodically Bird would have four or five of these advisers over to his home for an evening of "thinking out loud" about possible strategies for a winning campaign. Many of these advisers had a "specialty" - a talent in a particular field that would be helpful to the campaign, such as campaign strategy, campaign fund raising, news media relations, campaign television advertising, etc.

2. *Naming a county coordinator in each of Colorado's 63 counties.* Because each county in Colorado would be sending delegates to the Republican State Assembly in early June of 1994, Bird wanted to have a "Mike Bird for Governor" organization in each of Colorado's 63 counties. This was an unusually challenging task, even for someone who had served 12 years in the Colorado state legislature and, in the process, made friends and connections all over the state. Slowly but surely, county by county, Bird recruited his team of 63 county coordinators. Their first job was to find other voters in their county who were supporting Bird and urge them to participate actively in the caucus-assembly nominating process in that county.

3. *Creating a "Committee of 94 for 94" to begin raising funds for the campaign.* Money is an essential ingredient in any campaign for political office, and a great deal of money is required to finance a viable campaign for governor of Colorado. Mike Bird began organizing friends and acquaintances willing to raise money for him into a "Committee of 94 for 94." The idea was to find 94 people who in turn would raise the money to finance Bird's 1994 campaign. The long range goal was to raise \$250,000, the amount that traditionally had been enough to finance a gubernatorial campaign through the August Republican primary. Once he had won the primary and was the official Republican nominee for governor, Bird was confident he could raise enough money between the August primary and November general election to finance a credible campaign against Roy Romer.

Mike Bird had no trouble recruiting 94 persons to join his "Committee of 94 for 94." In fact, the number of members of the group soon exceeded 94 and eventually climbed to over 150. At various points in the campaign, this group of loyal financial contributors would be solicited to not only contribute themselves but to get their friends and acquaintances to contribute.

From the very beginning of the campaign Mike Bird set a campaign contribution limit of \$2,500 per contributor. Although a number of his friends were willing to give substantially more than that amount, Bird set the limit and stayed with it. Bird had supported a bill in the legislature which set such a \$2,500 contribution limit, and Roy Romer had vetoed the bill. By voluntarily setting a campaign contribution limit similar to what the governor had vetoed, Bird hoped to make "campaign finance reform" a major issue in his effort to unseat Romer.

THE MIKE BIRD CAMPAIGN BIOGRAPHY

The "speaking around the state" portion of Mike Bird's campaign for governor lasted from the day he said he was running in November of 1992 to the fall of 1993. By that time, he had successfully gathered an informal council of close advisers, he had recruited most of his county coordinators, and his fund-raising committee was named and functioning. Something else had been accomplished also. An extremely detailed biographical sketch of Mike Bird was written and printed. The biography was designed to answer every conceivable question any voter or news reporter might have about Bird.

The Mike Bird story was the story of an accomplished professional man who had been drawn into politics by community issues and then, by advancing from elected office to elected office, built a 20 year record of political accomplishment in Colorado.

Bird was born in Washington, D.C., in 1939. His father worked for the National Geographic Society. His mother was a registered nurse. Bird grew up in Silver Spring, Md., a suburb of Washington, and

graduated from high school there in 1957. He ranked in the top five percent of his high school class and was elected to the National Honor Society. He worked a number of jobs while in high school, including delivering newspapers, teaching at the local YMCA, helping at a print shop, working in a car wash, and securing and delivering passports and visas for a Washington, D.C., travel agency.

Mike Bird won a scholarship to Western Maryland College, a small liberal arts college near Baltimore, Maryland. He majored in economics and was elected to membership in Pi Gamma Mu, the national social science honor society. While at Western Maryland he played four years of men's varsity basketball. During this period the Western Maryland men's basketball team had one of the winningest records in its history. Bird graduated with honors from Western Maryland in 1961.

Mike Bird's summer jobs while in college included working on the waterfront in Honolulu, Hawaii, and bell hopping at a hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Upon graduating from college, Bird served in the Naval Air Reserves. Following training in electronics at the Naval Air Station in Memphis, Tennessee, he served as a crew member on an anti-submarine patrol aircraft flying out of the naval air station at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C. He later did reserve duty at Buckley Field in Denver.

Mike Bird met Ursula Steinhoff on a blind date in Washington, D.C. Ursula was in the nation's capital while her father, a former German fighter pilot in World War II, was serving as Germany's representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Washington. Mike and Ursula were married on September 10, 1963, and promptly set out by automobile for Boulder, Colorado, where Mike Bird began graduate study in economics at the University of Colorado. He worked his way through graduate school as a graduate teaching assistant and as manager of the apartment complex where he and Ursula lived.

During this period Mike and Ursula Bird had two children, a son, Chris, born in 1964, and a daughter, Andrea, born in 1967. Mike Bird

wrote his doctoral dissertation while teaching economics (in Spanish) at the Autonomous University of Guadalajara in Guadalajara, Mexico. After receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1968, Bird joined the economics faculty at Colorado College in Colorado Springs.

Mike and Ursula Bird were living contentedly in their home on the east side of Colorado Springs when they learned of plans to build a concrete processing plant (batch plant) in their residential neighborhood. The Birds took the lead in organizing the opponents of the concrete plant, walking door-to-door to warn their neighbors of how badly a batch plant would decrease property values in the area. Mike and Ursula Bird received much of the credit when the Colorado Springs City Council voted down the zoning change that would have permitted the concrete plant to be built.

As a result of the batch plant controversy, Mike Bird became recognized in Colorado Springs as someone who was committed to protecting and improving the city's residential neighborhoods. He was recruited to run for the City Council and was elected in 1973 and reelected in 1977. There is a saying that "there's no such thing as an honest draft," but Bird literally was drafted by his friends and neighbors to go into elective politics in Colorado Springs.

On the City Council, Bird strongly supported good city planning and increasing the number of parks and recreation areas. He also worked to bring quality economic development to Colorado Springs. Bird successfully sponsored a resolution designating Colorado Springs the "America the Beautiful" city. This "nickname" honored the famous poem (later put to music) written by Katherine Lee Bates following a summer visit to the top of Pikes Peak, a 14,000 foot high mountain located just to the west of Colorado Springs.

In 1978 city officials from throughout Colorado elected Mike Bird to serve as president of the Colorado Municipal League. In 1979 Bird's colleagues on the City Council elected him vice mayor of Colorado Springs.

In 1981 Bird chose not to run for reelection to the Colorado Springs City Council. In 1982 he announced his candidacy for a seat in the Colorado House of Representatives, the lower house of the Colorado state legislature in Denver. Bird challenged an entrenched Republican incumbent and had to defeat him in a hard-fought primary election.¹ Once the primary was won, however, Bird coasted to victory in the general election. The district he represented, located mainly in northeastern Colorado Springs, was heavily Republican.

Mike Bird was unopposed for reelection to his House seat in 1984. In 1986 he defeated both a primary and a general election opponent to win an open seat in the Colorado Senate, the upper house of the state legislature. He was easily reelected to his state Senate seat in 1990.

In his 12 years in the Colorado state legislature Mike Bird successfully sponsored many important bills. He led the fight to remove the state tax on the overseas operations of Colorado businesses, a tax that was discouraging international business firms from locating in Colorado. The bill was vetoed by then Governor Richard Lamm, but Bird succeeded in getting a 2/3 vote in each house of the legislature to override the governor's veto.

Mike Bird successfully sponsored a bill that strengthened the state's death penalty in murder cases, particularly cases involving the murder of Colorado law enforcement officers. He worked to expand programs and facilities at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs, particularly the engineering program. He introduced and got passed legislation creating Colorado's "first ever" presidential primary election, which was held in early March of 1992.

In 1987, after he had served only one year in the state Senate, Bird's Senate colleagues elected him to the legislature's powerful Joint Budget Committee, more familiarly known as the JBC. He subsequently served three one-year terms as chairman of the JBC, guiding the state through an extraordinarily difficult fiscal period. The Colorado economy sagged in the late 1980s, thereby cutting the state's tax income. Bird developed a reputation for being skilled at finding fiscal solutions that maintained

an adequate level of state services while not requiring any major tax increases.

A typical Mike Bird fiscal solution was his bill to overhaul medical care for the poor in Colorado. Bird's proposal would have replaced the incredibly costly U.S. Government mandated program with a more efficient Colorado designed and operated system. This bill passed both houses of the Colorado legislature but was vetoed by Governor Romer. The near-enactment of this legislation greatly enhanced Bird's reputation as a responsible fiscal conservative.

The Mike Bird campaign biography thus presented the picture of a man of steady accomplishment. There was no question that he was a "political insider," a person who had "paid his dues," worked his way up "through the system," and knew "the ins and outs of Colorado state government." His record clearly was that of a "fiscal conservative," but a conservative who was willing to look for new and innovative ways to make state government operate in the most efficient and effective way possible.

The campaign biography also included some negative points about Mike Bird. It noted that he had "two operations for melanoma (cancer) in 1974 and 1991." The biography went on to say that "he has been successfully treated and now has a 'clean bill of health.'" Bird and his political advisers were particularly concerned that this "health issue" might be used against him. To completely defuse the issue, Bird let it be known that, if asked to do so, he would make public all his medical records and have his physicians available for consultation with news reporters. This strategy of openness worked, because the health issue was never raised in a substantial way during the remainder of Bird's campaign.

A second negative highlighted in the campaign biography was Mike Bird's service as "an outside director on the board of a Colorado Springs savings and loan firm which did not survive the collapse of the real estate market in the mid-1980s." Bird and his campaign staff were particularly fearful of this potentially damaging issue. Literally billions

of dollars were lost in the savings and loans failures of the 1980s. The U.S. Government was forced to use taxpayer dollars to "bail out" federally insured savings and loans that collapsed. The Bird campaign biography sought to mitigate this issue by noting that "Mike and Ursula lost most of their personal savings" in the collapse. The campaign biography also quoted a Special Master, a former Colorado Court of Appeals judge, who ruled on a law suit involving several land developers and the savings and loan. The Special Master "found no evidence of misconduct by Mike or the other directors."²

This attempt to counter a potentially negative issue by "early revelation" worked. Although the *Denver Post* ran a long investigative story on Mike Bird and the savings and loan failure, the story was balanced and elicited no further comment from the political or journalistic communities.³ The *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* actually praised Bird for mentioning the savings and loan problem in his campaign biography. It quoted Dick Wadhams, a Republican political consultant: "Mike is talking about his connection to that S&L up front, and I think he will be given credit for that."⁴

By being completely open and honest about the two negatives in his campaign for governor of Colorado - his health problem and his savings and loan connection - Bird succeeded in down-grading those negatives and entered the race with an image of being "clean as a hound's tooth."

The Mike Bird campaign biography concluded with a number of homey details about Bird and his family. It noted that Bird liked to spend his spare time playing tennis and going for a jog. It revealed that Ursula Bird was a past board president of the Colorado Opera Festival in Colorado Springs and was chair of the Accountability Committee at a local high school. It gave updates on the Bird children, stating that son Chris was now a graduate student in health administration at Columbia University in New York City and daughter Andrea was an elementary school teacher in southern California.

THE MIKE BIRD CAMPAIGN VIDEO

In August of 1993 a group of volunteers decided to make an amateur campaign "video" to go along with Mike Bird's campaign biography. The video told the same story as the biography but with lots of visual effects and many live scenes of Mike and Ursula Bird and their children. The video began with Mike Bird's life history, including still pictures of Bird as a babe in arms, a kindergarten student, a college basketball player, and a Naval Reservist. One segment included old 8 millimeter movie scenes of Mike and Ursula's wedding reception and their departure in Mike's 1963 Chevrolet Corvair convertible for Colorado.

The video concluded with live scenes of Mike Bird in front of the Colorado Springs city hall and going about his legislative duties at the state capitol in Denver. Being an active tennis player and jogger, Bird looked determined and energetic as he bounded up the lengthy front steps of the capitol building and spoke and debated on the state Senate floor. Periodically throughout the video, the camcorder would close in on Bird's face and he would comment briefly on various political issues thought to be of great importance to Colorado voters.

The original version of the Mike Bird campaign video was 22 minutes long and included almost anything anyone might ever want to know about Mike and Ursula and the children. Although everyone agreed it was "the world's best home movie," the video was deemed much too long for the average viewer to sit through. A shorter 14 minute version was produced and distributed to any Bird volunteer willing to take the time to look at it.

The Mike Bird campaign video proved particularly useful at public gatherings such as Republican county assemblies. A VCR and TV monitor were set up playing the video, and people would see it and come over to look at it. After watching the video for a while, they often would pick up Bird literature and bumper stickers from the Bird campaign table or booth nearby.⁵

There was an additional benefit from the Mike Bird campaign video. It highlighted the need for professional, rather than amateur, film and video production in a statewide campaign for political office. Some

people who saw the Mike Bird campaign video noted the lack of adequate lighting in a number of scenes and the flickering "old movie" effect in others. This was considered good enough for a campaign video, but *not* good enough for television advertisements that would be shown on commercial television throughout the state.

THE BARRY GOLDWATER FUND-RAISER

Money, it has been said, is "the mother's milk of politics." Candidates for political office absolutely have to raise money. A formal campaign event, the fund-raiser, is one of the best ways of getting a large number of contributions with a comparatively minimal amount of effort.

In September of 1993 the Mike Bird for Governor campaign kicked off its formal fund-raising efforts by holding a cocktail party at the Westin, a well-known downtown Denver hotel. Along with the free drinks, guests were also provided with an ample buffet table loaded with hors d'oeuvres. By design, the hors d'oeuvres were substantial enough that those who wanted to call the cocktail party their "dinner" were able to do so.

Tickets to the fund-raiser cost \$100. The event was scheduled so that people could arrive anytime after work on a Friday evening, have a few drinks and as much food as they wanted, and then hear a few political speeches. Both live and recorded music was provided throughout the entire evening, with a Mexican band playing for a while and a male vocalist belting out a few numbers every now and then. The Bird campaign staff had decorated the ballroom at the Westin with balloons and crepe paper and plenty of Bird for Governor wall signs and posters. The atmosphere was a festive one, highly conducive to sprightly conversation about Colorado politics.

Every successful fund-raiser needs a headliner, a famous politician or celebrity who people will enjoy seeing and hearing. The bigger the celebrity, the more money can be requested for a ticket and the more

people are likely to come. In the case of well-known politicians, most will come to a fund-raiser for nothing more than travel and living expenses. They are pleased to build their national reputations at the same time they help a local political friend raise money.

Ursula Bird's father had been a leading West German military leader and diplomat. He had made many connections with American politicians, particularly those who were concerned with national defense and anti-communism issues. Among these contacts of Ursula's father was former U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, a man clearly identified with conservative Republican politics and the unsuccessful Republican candidate for president of the United States in 1964. Through Ursula's father, Barry Goldwater had come to know Mike and Ursula Bird, and the former Arizona senator was more than happy to fly up to Denver and speak at this first Bird for Governor fund-raising event.

A small elevated platform had been placed along one wall of the ballroom at the Denver Westin and equipped with microphones and television lights. When it was time for the speech making to begin, the guests could just stand where they were - drinks and hors d'oeuvres in hand - and watch and listen to the formal proceedings. Mike Rosen, a popular conservative talk show host in Denver and a political columnist for the *Denver Post*, served as master of ceremonies.

Barry Goldwater's talk could best be described as "bread and butter" conservative ideology. He stressed the need for maintaining freedom in people's lives and halting the growth and increasing influence of "big government." He called for maintaining the national defense capability of the United States at a high level. There was nothing new or innovative in Goldwater's talk, but that was OK because people had come mainly just to see and hear and meet the famous man, not hear the particular words he had to say. Goldwater concluded, as expected, with a ringing endorsement of Mike Bird's candidacy for governor.

Following Barry Goldwater's remarks, Mike Bird was introduced by state Senator Claire Traylor, a close colleague of Bird's in the Colorado

state legislature. Following that, Bird mounted the platform, introduced his wife and children and father to the crowd of Republican deep pockets, and then gave his standard call to arms against incumbent Democratic governor Roy Romer. His talk echoed a number of Goldwater's main themes. "Despite what the liberal media says," Bird concluded, "Roy Romer can be, must be, and will be defeated in 1994. Romer has lost touch with the voters - [he is] a typical tax and spend Democrat."⁶

The Mike Bird for Governor fund-raiser with Barry Goldwater was both a political and a financial success. There was a large turnout of paying guests. Many of them were Denver area lobbyists who had worked with Mike Bird at the Colorado state legislature. The conversation was lively, and most of the guests appeared to be having a pleasant as well as productive time. It was also an extra special occasion for Mike and Ursula Bird. It was the day of their 30th wedding anniversary, and both of their children had flown to Colorado, one from New York and one from California, to celebrate both the wedding anniversary and this important event in Mike Bird's gubernatorial election campaign.

Best of all, the Barry Goldwater fund-raiser netted more than \$50,000 for the Bird for Governor campaign treasury. That brought the total of funds raised by that date (September 1993) to \$75,000. It was a good start toward Bird's goal of raising \$250,000 to carry his campaign through the August 9, 1994, Republican gubernatorial primary.

Notes To Chapter 2:

1. The incumbent legislator who Mike Bird defeated in the 1982 Republican primary was Frank Randall, an outspoken conservative who had antagonized various moderate groups in the Republican Party in El Paso County. Several Republican members of the El Paso County delegation to the state House of Representatives urged Mike Bird to run against Frank Randall.

2. "Biographical Sketch of Mike Bird," Mike Bird for Governor campaign document, 1993.
3. Peter Sleeth, "Bird put OK on debatable S&L loan," Denver Post, 19 December 1993, 1B.
4. Angela Dire, "Bird eyes nest in governor's mansion," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 14 November 1993, B1.
5. According to Sherman Griffin, Mike Bird's assistant campaign manager, the video was set up and played at the Republican county assemblies in Arapahoe, Denver, Douglas, and Jefferson counties. Sherman Griffin, written comments to the author, May 7, 1995.
6. Keith Coffman, "Can Mike Bird soar to new heights?" Colorado Springs Independent, 27 October 1994.