

CHAPTER 4

MIKE BIRD ANNOUNCES

On Monday, November 15, 1993, Mike Bird officially announced his candidacy for the 1994 Republican nomination for governor of Colorado. Although he had been actively campaigning for an entire year, the news media responded to the "official" announcement by giving him big spreads on the first local page of the newspapers and big sound bites on the evening television news. Bird's wife, Ursula Bird, joined him for all the photo sessions, and the *Denver Post*, the *Rocky Mountain News*, and the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* all ran large color photographs of the announced candidate and his spouse.

It is a Colorado tradition that, on the day they announce for governor, candidates visit a number of major cities on the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. Not wishing to flaunt tradition, Mike Bird announced in Denver in the state capitol press room at 8:30 in the morning. After that was done, Bird and his entourage of staff and supporters piled into a small fleet of cars and drove up to Windsor, Colorado. Windsor is located midway between Greeley and Fort Collins and Loveland, the three major cities on the Front Range north of Denver, so Windsor was the perfect place for Bird's second announcement of the day.

Then it was down to Colorado Springs for announcement number three. Because Colorado Springs was Bird's home town, a sizeable crowd had gathered in a large meeting room at the Antlers Doubletree Hotel, the principal downtown hotel. As his supporters chanted "I Like Mike!" (the official slogan of the Bird campaign), Bird mounted the podium and gave his best speech of the day. Seeing so many people supporting his candidacy fired up Bird's spirits, and he responded by speaking to them with extra force and fervor.

"My sights are fixed on Roy Romer," Bird told the crowd. "There is hardly a tax in this state that he has not tried to increase at one time or another." Bird also attacked Romer for accepting large campaign contributions. Bird said Colorado voters are disgusted with the

"dominance of the governor's office by big bucks and out-of-state special interest groups." He particularly chastised Romer for accepting \$35,000 in contributions from "Las Vegas [Nevada] gambling interests."¹

THE WESTERN SLOPE ANNOUNCEMENT TOUR

There was only a little rest for the announcing weary. After spending a few hours napping at home in Colorado Springs, Mike and Ursula Bird and their campaign entourage headed up to Denver and then drove west through the late evening hours on Interstate Highway 70. Six persons traveling in two vehicles, they crossed the Continental Divide via the Eisenhower Tunnel and then stopped for the night at the Comfort Inn in Avon, a town deep in the heart of the Rocky Mountains on Colorado's Western Slope.

This Mike Bird for Governor announcement tour of the Western Slope had been scheduled and arranged by Michelle Provaznik, a paid staff member. Provaznik had worked on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., for Republican U.S. Senator John Danforth of Missouri. She had moved to Colorado Springs with her husband and was looking for a job involving politics when she signed on with the Bird campaign. She was pleased to be working with a Republican candidate for the Colorado governorship whose moderate-to-conservative ideology was somewhat similar to Danforth's.

The Bird campaigners were elated when they gathered for breakfast in the Village Inn in Avon the morning after the Denver, Windsor, and Colorado Springs announcements. The Denver newspapers were available there, and the picture of Mike and Ursula on the first local page of the *Denver Post* was an attractive one. They were shown in front of a big blue and white "Mike Bird for Governor" wall sign. They were standing behind a podium with a large "I Like Mike!" emblem on it. Mike Bird was dressed in a blue business suit and Ursula Bird was in a contrasting red suit. The result was a colorful photograph that was

eyecatching and prominently displayed on the page. It was one of the bigger newspaper "hits" of the entire campaign.

The Bird mini-motorcade drove on to I-70 West again and motored down the Colorado river valley to Grand Junction, the principal city on Colorado's Western Slope. The fourth "announcement" was soon under way in a meeting room in the Holiday Inn in Grand Junction. Only one television crew and one newspaper reporter and one newspaper photographer were present. Despite that fact, however, Grand Junction received the same full treatment that Denver, Windsor, and Colorado Springs did. Mike and Ursula Bird posed for photographs, and Mike gave his entire announcement speech, complete with all his many criticisms of Democratic incumbent Roy Romer.

After having a fast food lunch in Grand Junction, the Bird campaigners made a 180 degree turn and wound their way back across Colorado on U.S. Highway 50 East. They handed out some Bird for Governor brochures in Delta, a county seat in the fruit-growing part of western Colorado, and held a fifth "announcement" in Montrose, another important Western Slope city. Two Bird supporters from Durango, a city some distance from Montrose, drove up to meet and talk with Mike Bird and show their support for his candidacy.

The "announcement" in Montrose was held in a large meeting room in the back of a real estate office located on U.S. 50. The meeting room doubled as the official meeting place of the Montrose Chamber of Commerce. Television coverage consisted of one young woman with a small camcorder who did a standup interview with Mike Bird. To get the right effect, Bird staffers put an "I Like Mike!" sign on the wall behind the two of them. The young woman, who worked for Montrose's lone television station, set up the camcorder, focused it, started it running, then walked around it and "into the picture" to do the interview.

The equipment was "small town," but the questions were not. The reporter asked Bird about his proposed policies and programs for the western part of Colorado, particularly his views on preserving Colorado's scarce water supplies. It was exactly the kind of interview

the Bird campaign had been hoping for. It gave Bird a chance to demonstrate that he knew and understood Western Slope issues and had serious ideas and proposals for solving Western Slope problems.

Once the "announcement" in Montrose was completed, the Bird entourage made the long drive back to Colorado Springs. After an early evening crossing of the Continental Divide via Monarch Pass on U.S. 50, the miniature motorcade rendezvoused for dinner at a restaurant in Salida.

The restaurant had a strong western motif, with a big western style bar, bare wood floors, and waitresses in gingham dresses. The dinner table conversation revealed good feelings about the Bird for Governor announcement tour of western Colorado. Newspaper reporters and television crews had turned out to cover the appearances in Grand Junction and Montrose. Western Slope citizens, who often criticized Denver and Colorado Springs based politicians for not paying enough attention to them and not coming to see them often enough, had seen Mike Bird on their local television news and would soon be reading about his visit in their newspapers. The Western Slope announcement tour had more than accomplished its purpose.

THE PRESS PASSES JUDGMENT

It is the tradition in Colorado, as in other states in the United States, that candidate announcements for public office are covered "straight." Newspaper and television reporters relay to their readers and viewers exactly what is presented to them by the announcing candidate. The candidate is photographed and televised exactly as he or she looks. Statements by the candidate, even wild charges against his or her opponents, are put in the newspaper and on the television screen exactly as they are stated, with no editorializing by the newspaper or television reporters allowed.

In accordance with this tradition, Mike Bird's announcement of his candidacy for governor of Colorado was covered straight and covered

well. His criticisms of Roy Romer's eight years as governor were relayed to readers and viewers exactly as he stated them, often in direct quotes in the newspaper or in live sound bites on TV. His photograph was displayed prominently in the newspapers, often with Ursula, and in some cases his life history was briefly summarized and highlights from his political career were reviewed. It was Mike Bird's "day," and the Colorado press corps very nicely gave him his day.

It is important to note that, as an influential member of the state legislature and chairman of the legislature's Joint Budget Committee, Mike Bird was already known to the press and had a good working relationship with them. He had generated a great deal of news in the past, and his reputation with the press was one of being open and helpful.

The day after Mike Bird's announcement, however, the political analysts went to work, telling their readers in byline newspaper columns their opinion of Bird and his chances for being elected governor of Colorado.

Peter Blake, the triweekly political columnist for the *Rocky Mountain News*, took a lighthearted but upbeat attitude toward Bird's candidacy. He began his column by teasing Mike Bird for making an official announcement when everyone had known for a year that he was running. "Is this the end of it?" Blake asked his readers. "No more official announcements from Mike Bird that he's running for governor.... The state senator from Colorado Springs made his first official announcement a year ago...and has declared his candidacy almost daily ever since. But his latest 'official' announcement Monday was, with any luck, the last. He's had so many bites from that apple he's swallowed the core."

Blake then noted that, as Bird was announcing, most of the people who had been talking about running for the Republican nomination for governor were quietly removing themselves from the race. Blake wrote: "Meanwhile, the field is thinning fast. While Bird was announcing, his potential Republican rivals were withdrawing."²

These positive statements about Republican Mike Bird's candidacy for governor were to be expected from a columnist for the *Rocky Mountain News*. Of the two major daily newspapers in Denver, the *Rocky* tends to take a more conservative line and is somewhat more favorable to Republican candidates for political office. In line with its slight slant toward the GOP, the *Rocky* boosted Mike Bird's candidacy rather than belittling it.

The *Denver Post* was another matter. Known as the more liberal of the two papers in Denver, the *Post* took a somewhat less positive view of Republican Mike Bird's prospects for the difficult gubernatorial race that lay ahead.

Fred Brown, the *Denver Post* political editor, devoted a full length column on the op-ed page to the Bird campaign. Brown began by noting that Bird was one of the most respected members of the state legislature. Brown went on to say, however, that "members of [Bird's] own party say privately they're not convinced of his electability. He's not exactly Mr. Electricity."

Brown then wrote: "The rap on Bird - and it's a shame that it's a liability in today's politics - is that he's too serious. Too serious to be taken seriously."

Fred Brown then gave the positive side of the case for Mike Bird as a candidate for governor. "Bird is extremely well-organized. He has thoughtful, thorough position papers, an impressive list of county coordinators and an intelligent campaign staff. He was a superbly knowledgeable chairman of the Joint Budget Committee...."

Brown cited Mike Bird's speaking style as needing improvement. "He's working hard, almost painfully to juice up his style," Brown wrote. "But it's a reach and often comes across as awkward, out of character."

The clear implication of Fred Brown's column was that the Republican Party in Colorado was looking for something more than Mike Bird for its candidate for governor. "Bird is an extraordinarily appealing contender in the brains and talent categories," Brown concluded, "but the big-money machine of the Republican Party seems

to be waiting for Mr. - or Ms. - Congeniality."³

Carl Hilliard, the longtime political reporter for the Associated Press in Colorado, picked up on Fred Brown's theme that Mike Bird needed more pizzazz to be elected governor. Hilliard, whose political column was carried in daily newspapers in cities such as Boulder, Pueblo, and Grand Junction, gave concrete suggestions for improving Bird's speaking style. "Learn that being loud isn't being forceful," Hilliard wrote. "Wear something other than a dark blue suit and white shirt.... Avoid economic terms, in fact, avoid looking and acting like an economist. Quit being so nervous. Develop a sense of humor...."⁴

The Bird campaign organization took Fred Brown's and Carl Hilliard's criticisms to heart. Mike Bird worked hard on his speaking style, developing a more relaxed way of talking while at the same time getting the point across that he had the brains and the ability to beat Roy Romer. He also acquired some western style clothes and wore them when appropriate. As the campaign developed through late 1993 and the spring of 1994, most observers agreed that Bird greatly improved both his appearance and performance on the stump.

Notes To Chapter 4:

1. Angela Dire and Jeff Thomas, "Bird: My sights are set on Romer," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 16 November 1994.
2. Peter Blake, "Bird's last word scatters GOP foes," Rocky Mountain News, 17 November 1993, 5A.
3. Fred Brown, "Too serious to be taken seriously?" Denver Post, 17 November 1993, 7B.
4. Carl Hilliard of the Associated Press, "Bird's candidacy needs bigger wings," Boulder Daily Camera, 21 November 1993.