

# ***PART I***

## ***MIKE BIRD FOR GOVERNOR***

### ***CHAPTER 1***

#### ***THE DECISION TO RUN***

Mike Bird first confided to close friends that he was thinking about running for governor of Colorado in mid-November of 1992, a full two years before the 1994 gubernatorial election would take place.<sup>1</sup>

Most observers had expected him to wait until four years later, in 1998, to make the race. But Mike Bird carefully explained to his inner circle of advisers the logic of his decision. His thought patterns were typical of a political activist and candidate, filled with the finite details that are never quite comprehended, at least not in all their subtlety, by the general public.

In a statewide referendum in 1990, Colorado voters had placed term limits on all state elected officials. All state legislators and statewide officers, including the governor, were limited to eight years in office. In the case of the governor, that meant two four-year terms and out.

These term limits were not retroactive, however. No matter how long a state elected official might already have been in office, the clock on the eight-year term limit began ticking as of the 1990 general election. Any state official elected to office in 1990 would have to give up that office eight years later in 1998.

The governor of Colorado at that time was Roy Romer, a very popular Democrat. Romer had first been elected to the governor's chair in 1986. He had been thunderingly reelected over a little-known

Republican opponent in 1990. Romer was considered by most political observers to be "hard-to-beat" if he chose to run for reelection in 1994.

It was assumed that any Republican who really wanted to be elected governor would wait until the eight-year term limit forced Roy Romer to step down in 1998. It would be much easier to run for the "open seat" in 1998 than attempt to oust a solidly-entrenched Democratic incumbent in 1994.

Mike Bird's thinking was running along a different line, however. The Colorado attorney general at this time was a Republican woman named Gale Norton. In a major upset in 1990, Norton had defeated incumbent Democratic attorney general Duane Woodard. Her victory had been a particularly sweet one to Colorado Republicans, because Duane Woodard was a "renegade" who had been elected attorney general as a Republican and then converted to the Democratic Party while in office.

Gale Norton was expected to have an easy time getting reelected attorney general in 1994. Four years later, in 1998, term limits would force her out of the attorney generalship. There was a strong possibility she would run for governor at that time. Mike Bird, as most politicians are, was sanguine in summing up his political prospects in such a situation: "It would be very difficult to beat Gale Norton in 1998 for the Republican nomination for governor. That's one reason I have decided to run in 1994."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to Gale Norton, there were a large number of other prominent Republican elected officials who would be forced out of their current office by term limits in 1998. For example, Chuck Berry, the speaker of the Colorado House of Representatives, would hit his eight-year limit that year. The governorship would be the next logical office for Berry to attempt to win. There was much to be said for not being the third candidate, as Mike Bird would have been, in a Gale Norton-Chuck Berry shoot-out for the 1998 Republican nomination for governor.

Another problem was that Mike Bird and Chuck Berry were both from Colorado Springs (El Paso County). If both ran for the Republican

nomination for governor in the same year, they would be "splitting their base." That would weaken both candidacies.<sup>3</sup> Mike Bird and Chuck Berry met over lunch in the fall of 1992, and Berry assured Bird he would *not* be running for governor in 1994 if Roy Romer ran for reelection. The conversation gave Bird added encouragement to make his run in 1994.

So Mike Bird declined to join the expected crowd of Republicans running for the "open seat" in the Colorado governor's office in 1998. He would run in 1994, when there should be less competition for the Republican nomination. At the end of the road in 1994, however, would be the super difficult task of unseating a powerful Democratic incumbent - Roy Romer - in the general election.

### ANNOUNCING WITHOUT ANNOUNCING

An announcement that one is running for governor is a formal event that automatically receives major coverage in the news media. Candidates for statewide office in Colorado tend to schedule their "official" announcement about one year before the general election. It was two years before the general election when Mike Bird made his personal decision to run, and he wanted to let that fact be known so he could begin some early campaigning. He therefore "announced without announcing," saving his formal announcement for that more propitious time a year later.

Mike Bird was a member of the upper chamber of the Colorado state legislature, the Colorado state Senate. When the Republicans in the state Senate held an "organizational meeting" in early November of 1992, Bird attended, of course, as did the principal members of the Colorado press corps. At the end of the meeting, Bird stood up and surprised almost everyone present by stating that he would be a candidate for the Republican nomination for governor of Colorado in 1994.

In electing to run for governor in 1994, Mike Bird was ending his

career in the Colorado state Senate four years earlier than he needed to. The eight-year term limit in Colorado would not have forced him to give up his state Senate seat until 1998. Bird represented a very safe Republican district in northeastern Colorado Springs - one of the safest Republican Senate seats in the state - and there was little question that he would be reelected to the state Senate in 1994 if he wanted to be. By running for governor in 1994, Bird was making a big "trade-off" - giving up a safe seat in the state Senate in return for a chance shot at being governor.

In reality, the "trade-off" was bigger than it first looked. Mike Bird not only was a state senator but had risen to a position of unusual power in the Colorado state legislature. Colorado has legislative budgeting, which means that the major taxing and spending decisions in Colorado are made by the state legislature rather than the governor. Bird had risen to be chairman of the state legislature's most powerful fiscal committee - the Joint Budget Committee - thus making him one of the most powerful and influential elected officials in the state. Bird was not just giving up his seat in the state Senate to run for governor. He was also giving up the chairmanship of what everyone agreed was *the most powerful committee* in the Colorado state legislature.<sup>4</sup>

The Colorado news media took notice of Mike Bird's statement that he intended to run for governor. Because it was not a formal "announcement," however, there were no really big "first local page" photographs and newspaper stories. His impending candidacy was written about, usually in an "inside page" political story or in a regular political column.<sup>5</sup> Those who followed Colorado politics closely all read that Mike Bird was off and running - a full two years before the general election.

Mike Bird had a definite purpose in mind in revealing his intention to run so early and making it clear that his candidacy was a serious one. One of the biggest questions in a race for political office - and whether that race is going to be successful or not - is: Who is going to be running against you? All kinds of people would like to *be* governor of Colorado,

but very few look forward to the daunting task of *running* for governor. This is particularly true if they are going to have to run against a serious, hard-working opponent with a substantial record of accomplishment in the Colorado state legislature.

Mike Bird, in getting the word about his candidacy out early, was letting every other Colorado Republican who was thinking about running for governor know that he or she would be facing a race against Mike Bird for the Republican nomination. Would this tactic actually scare some would-be GOP candidates out of the race? Chances were it would. No one likes the thought of expending a great deal of time, energy, and money in a hard-fought party primary election. By putting word of his plans to run for governor out early, Bird was hoping that the prospect of "taking on Mike Bird" would, possibly, scare one or two other Republican candidates out of the race.

### THE MAN FROM HOLLY

The office which Mike Bird decided to seek was quite firmly occupied by incumbent Democrat Roy Romer, who was completing his second four-year term in the Colorado Governor's Mansion. Romer had grown up in Holly, a small agricultural town in southeastern Colorado located on the Arkansas River just a few miles from the Kansas border. He graduated from Colorado State University in Fort Collins, where he was elected student body president. He went to divinity school, then to law school, and served in the U.S. Air Force.

Roy Romer returned to Holly and went into the grain elevator business. He later made a small fortune as a John Deere dealer, selling tractors and other farm implements to his farmer neighbors. He ended up with a chain of tractor dealerships, some of them in states other than Colorado. The newspapers frequently reported his net worth at about \$5 million.

Romer proved to be a success in politics as well as business. He was elected as a Democrat to the state legislature, serving for a time - as

Mike Bird had - on the legislature's "powerful" Joint Budget Committee. He made an unsuccessful try at getting elected U.S. Senator from Colorado in 1966, losing to incumbent Republican Gordon Allott. When Democrat Richard Lamm won the Colorado governorship in 1974, Lamm appointed Roy Romer to a series of jobs in the governor's office. Romer was serving as treasurer of Colorado, an elected post, when he ran successfully for the governorship in 1986. He was reelected in 1990 with a smashing 63 percent of the vote.

At the time Romer came into office, Colorado was in the midst of a major economic downturn. One of the Republicans who ran for governor in 1986, Steve Schuck of Colorado Springs, narrowly lost the Republican primary but made a strong impression around the state. Schuck based his unsuccessful campaign on advocating an all-out state effort to bring new business and industry to Colorado. Roy Romer picked up on this "economic development" theme in the 1986 general election. As soon as Romer was firmly ensconced in the governor's office, he took immediate steps to make sure that "economic development" was his issue and not a future opponent's.

Romer put Stewart Bliss, a Colorado Springs business executive and a Republican, in direct charge of the state's expanded economic development efforts. The governor himself began jetting to other states and foreign nations, spreading the word that Colorado was "open for business." Romer's active and well-publicized economic development efforts made him extremely popular with Denver-area business leaders, men and women who traditionally allied with the Republican Party but were more than pleased to support this Democratic governor who thought like they thought and did things they wanted done.

All during Romer's years as governor, the Republicans were in the majority in both houses of the Colorado state legislature. Romer demonstrated considerable political skill in working with a legislative body dominated by a rival political party. He made it clear he wanted to work with the Republican legislators, not against them, and he was ready to compromise when that was what was required to keep needed

legislation moving along. Romer skillfully used the technique of asking the Republican legislature for general categories of legislation - like a "crime bill" or a "welfare bill" - and leaving it to the GOP lawmakers to write in all the specific details.

Most of all, Roy Romer was famous for using the "bully pulpit" of the governorship to support major government building projects that would improve the economic competitiveness of Colorado. He backed giving state aid for the construction of a new convention center in Denver. He helped build public support for a metropolitan-wide Denver tax to build a new baseball stadium in downtown Denver, part of the package which brought a professional major league baseball team - the Colorado Rockies - to Denver for the first time in the city's history. Romer also supported DIA - Denver International Airport - a completely new regional airport to replace Denver's old and crowded Stapleton Airport.

In his second term as governor of Colorado, Roy Romer began to play something of a role on the national stage. Serving on a national commission appointed by Republican president George Bush, Romer became an important spokesperson for educational reform in the 50 states. Romer even upstaged President Bush during a press conference on education, interrupting the national chief executive to let the press ask questions, something that was not in George Bush's plans for that particular meeting.

Romer also was a member of the Democratic Leadership Council, a group of progressive Democratic Party elected officials who helped Arkansas governor Bill Clinton win the U.S. presidency in 1992. Romer served as chairman of the National Governor's Association in 1993.

Roy Romer was as famous for his campaign skills as for his gubernatorial skills. He constantly traveled the state of Colorado, giving speeches to school children, welfare recipients, businesspersons, and any other group that wanted to hear what he had to say. He showed up at county fairs, marched in local parades, and soon was Colorado's most available and most enthusiastic after-dinner speaker. He continued a

"Dome on the Range" program, instituted by his Democratic predecessor, under which he would periodically visit the outlying parts of the state. He would talk directly with the people about their problems and what state government could do to help solve them. Many political observers regarded Roy Romer as the most skillful and "formidable" political campaigner in the state of Colorado.<sup>6</sup>

At the time when Mike Bird revealed he was running for governor of Colorado in November of 1992, Roy Romer could look back on a long career of both business success and political accomplishment. Colorado's term limit law allowed him to run for a final four-year term in 1994, even though he already had served eight years as governor.<sup>7</sup> Winning and serving that last four years in the Governor's Mansion would be the perfect conclusion to his political career. Or perhaps more - possibly a stepping stone to being appointed to an important post in the Democratic administration in Washington, D.C., of Democratic president Bill Clinton.

Although Romer made no official announcement, it was generally assumed that the Democratic incumbent would be running for reelection as governor of Colorado in 1994. Mike Bird - and any other Republican who chose to throw his or her hat in the ring - would have their hands full defeating a seasoned and successful politician such as Roy Romer.

## THE NOMINATING PROCESS IN COLORADO

The political party nominating process in Colorado is long and complex. Both political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, hold an August primary election prior to the November general election. To be listed on the ballot in the August primary election, however, would-be party candidates have to garner 30 percent or more of the delegate votes at a party state convention (in Colorado officially called an "assembly") held in early June. The delegates to the party state assembly are selected at party county assemblies held in late April and early May. The delegates to the party county assemblies are selected in

party precinct caucuses held in every precinct in the state on the first Monday in April.

Got all that? The average Colorado voter who does not pay close attention to politics hardly knows about, let alone understands, the subtleties of this complicated nominating system. Over-and-over again the system must be explained to political neophytes getting involved in Colorado party politics for the first time. The progression is a fairly simple one when stated from beginning to end, however. Let's go through it that way:

Voters in each political party attend their neighborhood precinct caucuses on the first Tuesday in April. The party precinct caucuses elect delegates to county party assemblies held in late April and early May. The county party assemblies elect delegates to the state party assembly, which is held the first Saturday in June. At the state party assembly, all candidates who receive 30 percent or more of the vote appear on the ballot in the party primary election on the first Tuesday in August. Their names appear on the primary ballot in the order in which they finish in the state assembly balloting. The winner of the party primary runs against the winner of the other party's primary in the general election in November.

Arcane and unnecessarily complex as it might first appear, this nominating system used in Colorado has its admirers. First of all, it gives a role to play to those party activists who are willing to take the time and trouble to go to their party precinct caucuses and run to be a delegate to their party county assembly. The party county assemblies are large in size, so in most cases anyone who wants to be a delegate *can* be a delegate. Real activists can go on to the party state assembly, which also is large in size (more than 3,000 delegates and another 3,000 or so alternates). At every step of the way, these delegates get to vote to put party candidates on the primary ballot, at both the county and the state level.

In essence, this "Colorado" nominating system enables the party activists to "make the first cut" in winnowing down the number of

candidates running for the party nomination to political office. Where there are six candidates competing for a political office, probably only two or, at most, three will be able to get 30 percent of the vote at a county or state assembly and "make" the August primary ballot. The system thus reduces the number of candidates on the ballot in the August primary, making the choice simpler for the average Republican or Democratic voter in Colorado when he or she goes to vote in the August party primary.

Upon occasion this nominating system enables a political party to avoid a party primary altogether. If one candidate is so popular that he or she wins 60 to 70 percent of the vote at the party assembly, and no other candidate gets 30 percent or more, that candidate wins the nomination by default and is the only name listed on the ballot for that office in the August primary election.

On other occasions a second-place finisher at the party assembly will have received more than 30 percent of the delegate vote but will voluntarily drop out of the race in favor of the candidate who received the most votes. This is done in a spirit of party unity.

However it occurs, having only one name on the party primary ballot is considered to be good both for the party candidate and the political party. The effort and money that would have been expended on a bitter party primary contest can be saved and used against the opposition party candidate in the November general election.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps most important, this complex nominating system used in Colorado creates a permanent party structure of activist volunteers and gives them something meaningful to do - participate in the nomination of party candidates for elected office. This permanent party structure subsequently stays in place for the general election, providing an experienced group of volunteers to organize support for the party's candidates in November.

When Mike Bird revealed his intentions to run for governor of Colorado in November of 1992, he committed himself and his supporters to going down this long and complicated road to winning the

Republican nomination. He would work to win the support of Republican county assembly delegates in each of the 63 counties in Colorado. In order to do that, he would travel extensively around the state, accepting all invitations to speak (always without remuneration).

Next he would work to win the support of the Republican party activists who get elected to the Republican state assembly. If he was able to win 30 percent or more of the vote at the state assembly, he would qualify for the August primary ballot.

He then would go to work winning the votes of rank and file registered Republicans. If he won the primary election, he then would go to work seeking the vote of every registered voter in the state - Republican, Democratic, unaffiliated - in the November general election.

It would be a long and difficult road, requiring two years of Mike Bird's life. Only the high desirability of the prize at the end of the road could make such an arduous journey worth it. If Bird successfully climbed every hill and negotiated each sharp turn on the long route, he would arrive at a lofty destination - governor of Colorado.

### **Notes To Chapter 1:**

1. Mike Bird had been encouraged by some of his supporters to run for governor in 1990. He decided instead to run for reelection to the Colorado state Senate in 1990 and save running for governor for 1994 or 1998.
2. Personal recollection of the author, conversation with Mike Bird, November 1992.
3. Mike Bird was not the only political observer in Colorado who saw Chuck Berry as a potential 1998 gubernatorial candidate. A photograph of Berry and his wife in a weekly newspaper in Denver had a cutline describing them as "Colorado's future 'first couple.'" *Colorado Statesman*, 1 April 1994, 17.

4. One reason Mike Bird announced his candidacy so early was that he thought some of his state Senate colleagues might object to him serving as chairman of the Joint Budget Committee while he was actively campaigning for governor. As it turned out, none of his colleagues had any objections. He served an additional term as Joint Budget Committee chairman during 1993 while in the early stages of his gubernatorial campaign.

5. John Sanko, "State Sen. Bird will run for governor," Rocky Mountain News, 10 November 1992.

6. For a lengthier description of Roy Romer's governorship, see Thomas E. Cronin and Robert D. Loevy, Colorado Politics and Government: Governing the Centennial State (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 223-224.

7. A number of people argued, among them Mike Bird, that Roy Romer running for a third term as governor violated the spirit, if not the letter, of Colorado's term limits. If Romer were reelected, he would be the last Colorado governor elected to three four-year terms (12 years) in the Governor's Mansion.

8. For a more complete description of the nominating process in Colorado, see Thomas E. Cronin and Robert D. Loevy, Colorado Politics and Government: Governing the Centennial State (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 131-141.