

## *CHAPTER 7*

### *NOT YOUR ORDINARY CANDIDATE*

Bruce Benson's life story was one of those tales that reaffirms the collective faith in the free enterprise economic system. Striking out on his own as a very young man, he piled up a major fortune in the oil and gas industry and then used his wealth to finance various philanthropic and political endeavors. He was a Colorado mini version of Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, men who became wealthy but who used their money - and their time - to accomplish important public purposes.

Similar to early 20th Century entertainer George M. Cohan, Bruce Benson was born on the Fourth of July. It was July 4, 1938, to be exact, thus making Benson 55 years old at the time he announced his intention to run for the Colorado governorship.

Benson was raised in Palatine, Illinois, where his father was a farmer and the owner of a water softener franchise. Benson started going to college at Cornell University in upstate New York, but he soon dropped out and headed west, hitchhiking to Wyoming and getting jobs as a ditch digger and a lumber jack before becoming a roustabout on an oil drilling rig.

Benson studied geology at the University of Colorado at Boulder, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in 1964. He was working on a Master's degree at the University of Kansas when, in 1965, he decided to leave graduate school. He and his first wife, Nancy, and their baby son moved to Coffeyville, Kansas, in the heart of the Kansas oil country.

After getting a mineral lease on some farm acreage, Bruce Benson acquired an old portable drilling rig and, as luck would have it, struck oil on his first well. Nine of the first ten wells he drilled were gushers, thus earning Benson a substantial profit on a relatively small investment. Out of this humble "wildcat" beginning Bruce Benson built his multimillion dollar Benson Mineral Group.

By this time Benson had built a reputation for being a maverick - for not doing things the way other people do them. "His father told him to

go with the good Ivy League school. He went west. His college adviser told him to write a master's thesis on drilling for oil. He drilled a few wells instead."<sup>1</sup>

Bruce Benson proved adept at working with government as well as running a free enterprise business firm. He expanded his operations to Oklahoma, where he won a government contract to plug abandoned wells that constituted safety and environmental hazards. He also showed great skill in shepherding his business through the classic ups and downs of the oil and gas industry. At one time his operations were \$30 million in debt, but within five years Benson had them back to solid profitability.

In 1980 Bruce Benson moved his business to Denver. In 1990 he purchased about 10 percent of the stock in a failing Denver savings and loan association and participated actively in its reorganization and revival. Two years later the stock's value had risen from \$1 per share to more than \$15 per share. Benson sold out, making a handsome profit that added more millions to the millions he already had. He always pointed out that, at a time when other savings and loans were going under and costing the taxpayers millions of dollars to bail them out, Benson rescued his savings and loan with no help from the government and at zero cost to the taxpayers.

Bruce Benson became a prominent civic leader in Denver during the 1980s and early 1990s. He served as president of the Denver Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America and as executive vice president of the Denver Zoo Board of Trustees. He also served on the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, a volunteer government board set up to coordinate college and university policy in Colorado. His most important qualification as a candidate for governor was his service as state chairman of the Colorado Republican Party from 1986 to 1991. While doing that job, Benson became famous for his generous political contributions to Republican candidates for office throughout the state of Colorado.

In 1993 Bruce Benson and Nancy Benson were divorced. He

subsequently married Marcy Head of Washington, D.C. The two met when Bruce Benson served on the board of the White House Fellows, a program which brings promising young scholars and business executives to Washington to intern in the executive branch of the U.S. Government for a year. Marcy Head was director of the program.

Bruce Benson and first-wife Nancy Benson had two sons, Jim, 29, and David, 27. Their daughter Ann, 24, actively joined Bruce Benson and second-wife Marcy Benson in Bruce's all out quest for the Colorado governorship.<sup>2</sup>

### THE BENSON CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

Bruce Benson's strategy for getting elected governor of Colorado contrasted almost completely with Mike Bird's and Dick Sargent's. Instead of reaching out to voters on a person-to-person basis, Benson would make his appeal primarily on television and over the radio. There also would be a heavy emphasis on direct mail. Instead of listening to voters personally at campaign events, Benson would conduct public opinion polls, and he would use those poll results to identify the issues to emphasize in his TV and radio advertising and in his direct mail pieces.

Mike Bird and Dick Sargent had carefully lined up longtime Colorado political operatives as their campaign advisers and consultants. Bruce Benson, on the other hand, turned to nationally known political consultants to structure his campaign and select his campaign issues. Principal among those campaign consultants was Ed Rollins, a personal friend of Benson's and a former colleague at the Ronald Reagan White House of Benson's new wife.

Ed Rollins, based on the East Coast, gained national prominence in 1984 when he conceived President Ronald Reagan's highly successful "It's Morning in America" reelection campaign. Rollins became even more famous in 1992 when he briefly served as campaign consultant to Texas billionaire Ross Perot's independent (and unsuccessful) candidacy

for president of the United States.

Ed Rollins was not the only out-of-state political professional hired by Bruce Benson to hype his campaign for the Colorado governorship. Benson's polling was going to be handled by the Tarrance Group, of Washington, D.C. Advertising and media consultants Russo Marsh + Associates, of Washington, D.C., and Sacramento, California, would design and produce the TV and radio ads.

The decision-making team for the Bruce Benson for Governor campaign thus was mainly composed of national consultants rather than persons with Colorado experience. According to Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, the most influential voices at Benson campaign strategy sessions were Tony Marsh and Sal Russo of Russo Marsh + Associates, Ed Goeas and Dave Sackett of the Tarrance Group, and Ed Rollins of Rollins Strategy Group. There was some Colorado input, Atkinson explained, but it came mainly from volunteers who only occasionally attended strategy sessions.

Principal among these Colorado voices were Steve Durham, a prominent Denver lobbyist and former state legislator, and Terry Considine, the unsuccessful Republican candidate for U.S. Senator from Colorado in 1992.<sup>3</sup>

There was nothing revolutionary about Benson's proposal to emphasize TV and radio advertising in his campaign for the Colorado governorship. Ever since the mid-1950s, when Princeton University political scientist Stanley Kelley, Jr., published his landmark *Professional Public Relations and Political Power*, the increasing importance of television and radio advertising in United States electoral politics had been well-documented.<sup>4</sup> This idea had come into the public consciousness a decade later when Joe McGinniss published his best-selling *The Selling of the President 1968*, an inside observer's account of how Richard Nixon used big-time Madison Avenue advertising techniques to win that year's presidential election.<sup>5</sup>

What was unusual about Bruce Benson was the openness and frankness with which he stated his intention to mainly use TV and radio

advertising. He also was completely honest and forthright about his willingness to finance these expensive campaign techniques with his own money. Benson placed the need to do this squarely on Roy Romer. It was because Romer was an entrenched incumbent with the capability of raising millions of dollars, Benson repeatedly explained, that the Republicans had to run a candidate who either had - or could raise - millions of dollars of his or her own. The rationale for Benson's candidacy came down to one simple phrase: "Only Bruce Benson has the money to beat Roy Romer!"

Benson said he was entering the race for the GOP nomination for governor because neither Mike Bird nor Phil Klingsmith nor Dick Sargent had either the charisma or the money to effectively challenge Roy Romer. "I just don't see them catching fire," Benson said. "Roy Romer isn't going to just go take a big nap at the table. You've got to go toe-to-toe with him. You've got to have the ability to go out and get the resources. You can't just call him names. You can't just say I have a better idea. You've got to get that idea to the people."<sup>6</sup>

Katy Atkinson, Bruce Benson's campaign manager, said the need for high-powered, expensive, out-of-state political consultants was "a well-known reality" among Colorado political candidates and political operatives by 1994. She explained: "It was not a planned strategy for Bruce Benson to talk about the need for good advertising and the money with which to buy it. From the point of view of the Benson for Governor campaign, Bruce Benson was just stating the obvious."<sup>7</sup>

## PETITIONING ON TO THE BALLOT

Because Colorado law provides for petitioning on to the primary election ballot, Benson decided to bypass the precinct caucuses, the county assemblies, and the state assembly and petition on to the ballot instead. There was one particular factor, unique to the 1994 election, encouraging him to do this.

That factor was the dismal showing made by Republican candidate

John Andrews when he lost to Democrat Roy Romer in the 1990 governor's race. To petition on the primary ballot, a candidate needs the number of signatures equal to 2 percent of the votes cast for the party's candidate in the most recent gubernatorial election. Since Republican Andrews received only 358,403 votes in 1990, an historic low, Benson needed only 7,169 signatures to get his name on the Republican ballot in 1994. That was 3,000 signatures less than the 10,000 plus signatures ordinarily required to petition on to the ballot in a statewide race in Colorado.

Another reason to petition on the ballot was the difficulty of telling ahead of time what might happen at the Republican State Assembly. If Benson put his name in at the state assembly, there would be four candidates competing for votes, i.e. Benson, Bird, Klingsmith, and Sargent. But a candidate only gets his or her name on the primary ballot if he or she gets more than 30 percent of the vote at the assembly. With four candidates competing, it was likely that only two of the four would get 30 percent or more of the vote and qualify. Why should Benson run the risk of being "knocked out" at the state assembly when he could gather 7,000 plus petition signatures and be guaranteed of a place on the Republican primary ballot?

For these two reasons, Benson decided to go the "petition route" rather than the "caucus/assembly route."<sup>8</sup> His decision meant that he was turning his back on the loyalist Colorado Republicans who faithfully attend precinct caucuses, county assemblies, and the state assembly. On the other hand, he was guaranteeing himself a place on the primary ballot, and in the Republican gubernatorial primary his money could buy him the television and radio ads that customarily guarantee electoral victory.<sup>9</sup>

According to Katy Atkinson, Bruce Benson's campaign manager, there was a considerable debate in the Benson camp over whether to petition on to the ballot or go the caucus/assembly route. Those in favor of "petitioning on" argued that the average Colorado Republican voter knew nothing of the "caucus/assembly" process. It was just "a bunch of

fat guys with cigars." Furthermore, the caucus/assembly process took too long - so long that it often discouraged good people from becoming candidates for statewide office. In addition, well-organized factions, rather than the average Republican voter, tended to dominate the precinct caucuses, the county assemblies, and the state assembly.

On the other hand, Atkinson pointed out, some members of the Benson campaign organization "really cringed at the thought of going around the caucus/assembly system." They continually asked the question of whether it would be "worth the grief of the party activists" who would be offended when Bruce Benson bypassed the traditional caucus/assembly nominating process.

In the end, Atkinson said, it was decided that "petitioning on" provided the opportunity "to present Bruce Benson as an unusual candidate. It was a way to make him intriguing, different," and not just another professional politician.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE BENSON EARLY ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

Although Bruce Benson was bypassing the caucus/assembly nominating process, he did not ignore that process. He timed the major events in his "petition signing campaign" to correspond with the major events in the caucus/assembly process, endeavoring thereby to steal some of the limelight from the three candidates going through the caucus/assembly process. Thus it was that, one week before the April 6, 1994, precinct caucuses, Bruce Benson launched a major television advertising campaign.

There were a number of TV ads, all of them with a slick, professional appearance. One was designed just to acquaint Republican voters with who Bruce Benson was and what he had done over the years for Colorado. With a background shot of a working oil drilling rig playing on the screen, the ad told of how Benson started with nothing and built a million dollar oil business. Then Benson was shown talking with a group of bright and eager young college students, during which

time the names of the many philanthropic institutions to which Benson had contributed "scrolled" down the screen. The ad concluded with Benson telling the voters that Colorado state government was in trouble and that Bruce Benson was the man to "fix it."

A second ad endeavored to link Bruce Benson in a favorable way to what polls showed had become the most compelling issue of the day for most voters - youth crime. In the TV ad Benson talked directly to the voters, telling them his heartfelt concern for what he called "kid crime." He particularly emphasized the growing problem of youth gangs, and the ad concluded with the idea that it was time, with Bruce Benson, to "just fix it."

Benson's television commercials had an air of informality about them. Benson did not like to work from a script, so the ads were essentially spontaneous, off-the-cuff interviews with Benson. In some cases more than two hours of recorded interviews with Benson were edited down to get just one or two 30-second TV ads. The ads were filmed or videotaped in Colorado, but the editing and final production of the ads took place in the Russo Marsh + Associates studios in either Washington, D.C., or Sacramento, California.<sup>11</sup>

All the television ads ended with Bruce Benson's 800 number - 1 800 BBENSON - prominently displayed on the television screen. This was a technique for signing up supporters that had been pioneered by Democrat Jerry Brown, the former governor of California, in his unsuccessful bid for the 1992 Democratic nomination for president. It was part of the "national" character of Bruce Benson's campaign for governor of Colorado that these 800 number calls were answered in, of all places, Florida. *Rocky Mountain News* political columnist Peter Blake slammed Benson for "helping employ someone in Florida" by having his 800 number answered there rather than in Colorado.<sup>12</sup>

Bruce Benson's "buy" of television ads the week before the precinct caucuses was so "heavy" that some persons estimated it cost more than \$1 million. Suffice it to say, everyone concerned with politics in Colorado was seeing the TV ads and talking about them. There was a



crystal clear message from this barrage of television ads - this act of political conspicuous consumption. The message was that this was the kind of television advertising competition Roy Romer would face in November if Bruce Benson were his Republican opponent.

There was also a more subtle message sent to Colorado Republicans through Benson's spate of TV ads. This second message was that there would be plenty of money - Benson's money - in Colorado Republican politics in 1994. The GOP's financial contributors were going to get the benefit of that money without having to contribute a great deal of money of their own. There was going to be a big-spending Republican gubernatorial campaign, and the party's regular financial backers were going to get to come along for a "free ride."<sup>13</sup>

#### THE BENSON DIRECT MAIL CAMPAIGN

The same week that all these Benson television ads were playing, every activist Republican in Colorado received a giant envelope in the mail. The return address on the envelope was the "Benson for Governor" logo. Beneath the address label was printed, in large capital letters, the words: "IMPORTANT: Precinct Caucus & Official Petition Enclosed." Included on the mailing list to receive this envelope were all the Republican precinct committeepersons in the state, the people who would be conducting the precinct caucuses in their home precincts.

Inside the envelope was a Benson brochure summarizing his life history and his reasons for running for governor. Also included was a letter urging the recipient to, number one, go to his or her precinct caucus and talk up the candidacy of Bruce Benson. Number two, start getting signatures on the enclosed petition to put Benson's name on the August primary election ballot.

Bruce Benson's mailing the week before the Republican precinct caucuses was impressive. The envelope was large, the contents were heavy, and the art work was colorful and attractive. The Benson brochure included what Peter Blake of the *Rocky Mountain News* called

the "obligatory cliché: a picture of the shirtsleeved candidate carrying his jacket over his shoulder with his index finger hooked in the collar." Peter Blake also noted that the postage alone for each envelope cost \$1.21, and the packets were sent to so many overlapping mailing lists that some Republican stalwarts received as many as four.

Peter Blake also noted that one Denver committeeperson, a woman, said that Bruce Benson asking caucus attendees to sign his petition was "the height of chutzpah," or insolence. If Benson succeeded in petitioning on to the ballot and getting the Republican nomination, her reasoning went, Benson could possibly destroy the existing caucus/assembly nominating system.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE BENSON ANNOUNCEMENT LUNCHEON

Bruce Benson's next ploy was to "officially" announce his candidacy on April 4, 1994, the day before the precinct caucuses.<sup>15</sup> The announcement was done in good style. Benson reserved a large ballroom at Denver's downtown Radisson Hotel and invited 400 key Republicans over for a "free lunch." With a rented jazz band blaring Dixieland music in the background, Benson supporters were given a box lunch of cold fried chicken, potato salad, an apple, and a cookie. There was free lemonade for the thirsty. Just in case anyone might think a box lunch a little bit tacky, there was full waiter service with silverware provided.

After a reasonable amount of time had passed for eating, the lights dimmed and the no-longer-hungry GOP multitude was shown a five-minute video about Bruce Benson and his various accomplishments. He was shown in a hard hat next to an oil drilling rig. He was shown riding a horse. He also was shown discussing his campaign plans with his new wife, Marcy.

Standing by and participating in all the "photo ops" were Benson's mother and father, Virginia and Bruce, and his two sons and his daughter. It all added up to a more than appropriate family

atmosphere.<sup>16</sup>

The Benson announcement luncheon concluded with a short speech by Bruce Benson. He said crime, education, and welfare reform would be the top issues in the campaign and his top priorities as governor of Colorado. He also made a reference to the Colorado economy, which had experienced healthy growth during Roy Romer's governorship. "The economy is good now," Benson said, "but will it stay good?" Benson said he would support a system of taxation for the state "that rewards work."

One sentence in Benson's announcement speech rolled the welfare, crime, and education issues altogether into one big lump. "Does welfare prime the pump for juvenile crime and problems in education?" Benson asked. He answered his own question: "Folks, Colorado deserves better."<sup>17</sup>

Benson received a long round of applause when he said he would, as governor, appoint tougher judges to Colorado criminal courts. "Most people are trying to pass along real values to their children," Benson noted, "but how do you teach a child personal responsibility when violent juvenile criminals are treated like victims?"

Benson then read a list of statistics designed to shock his listeners. He noted that a violent crime was committed in Colorado every 37 minutes, and that 1,000 gang members were in Colorado jails in 1994 compared with 50 five years previously. "Do you feel safe?" Benson asked. "I know at times I sure don't."<sup>18</sup>

Benson also received a loud burst of clapping when he said it was clear to everyone that Democrat Roy Romer had been too long and was "too comfortable" in the Governor's Mansion. "One thing baseball players know is they can't play forever," Benson said. "This should be a rule for politicians, too. The time has come to retire Roy Romer's jersey."<sup>19</sup>

## THE BENSON BUS TOURS

Because he was not putting his name in contention at the precinct caucuses, the county assemblies, and the state assembly, Bruce Benson and his advisers felt the need to come up with a new and more imaginative way of meeting Republican voters in Colorado. The result was the Bruce Benson for Governor bus tours - having Bruce Benson and his staff ride around the state on a bus and stop and have coffee and conversation with Republican voters along the route.

The Benson bus tours in Colorado were a direct copy of the Clinton-Gore "buscapades" during the 1992 presidential election. Following his nomination for president at the Democratic National Convention in New York in July of 1992, Bill Clinton and his vice-presidential running mate, Al Gore, and their wives set out by bus to campaign across the midwestern United States. The Clinton bus tours were closely followed by the press and reported upon extensively. Bruce Benson hoped to get the same sort of publicity out of his buscapade in Colorado that the Clinton-Gore team had been able to generate with their buscapade nationally.<sup>20</sup>

The traveling team on the Benson bus varied from trip to trip but usually consisted of Bruce Benson himself, his wife Marcy, his daughter Ann, and either campaign manager Katy Atkinson or campaign press assistant Greg Sparrow. Local Republican politicians and members of the local press were invited to ride the Benson bus from town to town if they wished to do so.

The bus chosen for this operation was not a spectacular one. It was a Blue Bird bus, the kind that is customarily painted yellow and used to haul children to public school. This particular bus was painted white and rented from Colorado Charter Lines. It was appropriately decorated with Benson banners and signs. A colorful mailing, complete with a humorous cartoon of the bus and Bruce Benson making their way across Colorado, was sent to activist Republicans as the bus bore down on their particular community. The mailing told when the Benson bus was scheduled to pull into town and where Bruce Benson would be holding his confab with the local GOP faithful.

The Benson bus tour began the week after the precinct caucuses and started in the Arkansas River valley in southeastern Colorado. On Wednesday evening, April 15, 1994, the bus rolled into Lamar, a county seat located just west of the Colorado-Kansas border. Because there is extensive irrigated farming in the Arkansas River valley, Lamar is mainly an agricultural center.

About 50 people crowded into a small meeting room in Lamar to hear Benson take potshots at Roy Romer and defend his decision to bypass the caucus/assembly nominating system. Benson said he was using the petition process to attract the support of the large number of Colorado Republicans who do not go to precinct caucuses and attend county assemblies. He said his campaign was particularly targeting unhappy Democrats and Ross Perot supporters, in short, the kind of people who do not ordinarily think of themselves as the Republican faithful.

"This is not the easy way," Benson told his audience in Lamar. "I could get the 30 percent (the amount of GOP support needed to make the primary [at the assembly]) if I wanted to."

Bruce Benson's bus tour visit to Lamar was not without its problems. A former Colorado state representative, Brad Young, asked Benson about water issues in rural Colorado, a subject of major importance to a town such as Lamar with its economy based on irrigation water from the Arkansas River. Benson had to "plead ignorance" on Colorado water issues, admitting he knew next to nothing about the subject but agreeing with Young that the state needed an overall water strategy.<sup>21</sup>

The Benson bus tour worked its way westward from Lamar, making brief stops in the towns of Las Animas and La Junta, both located further up the Arkansas River valley from Lamar. By Thursday, April 14, 1994, Benson's Blue Bird bus was pulling into Pueblo, the largest Colorado city on the Arkansas River. As in Lamar, about 50 people, most but not all of them Republicans, gathered at Pueblo's former railroad depot to hear what Benson had to say.

In Pueblo Bruce Benson expounded a strongly anti-government

theme. "I'm tired of how the government works," said Benson. "I don't think it works for our benefit. We have a governor going to Washington, D.C., to solve education problems. I think the place to solve problems of education is in Pueblo, Colorado."

Benson also attacked hard on the welfare issue. He said the time had come to break what he called "the welfare trap." He explained: "We need to make the fathers responsible for these children they're making with these teen-aged girls. Train 'em, teach 'em, and get 'em out on their own."

Benson said the welfare system was "out of control" and "lacks accountability." If elected, he pledged to "get really tough on welfare. We have to - it's killing us."

Benson then amused his audience by telling them what he was "for" and what he was "against." He was "for" the death penalty, vouchers for schools, term limitations, and "privatizing anything that can be privatized."

He was "against" President Bill Clinton's health care plan, gun control, and government involvement in funding abortions.

As he had done in Lamar, Benson strongly defended his decision to bypass the caucus/assembly nominating system and petition on to the Republican primary ballot. "We're trying to bring people back into the Republican Party - the Perot people and people who voted for Reagan," he explained. "We want to include everybody. The way to do that is you get on this bus and travel the state and talk to everybody you can."<sup>22</sup>

Benson's bus tours were sporadic rather than constant. After his swing through southeastern Colorado along the Arkansas River valley, he took a few days off before heading west from Denver into the Rocky Mountains. About 30 people showed up to drink Benson's coffee and eat Benson's donuts in Evergreen, one of the more Republican Denver suburban communities. Only five women showed up, however, at Marion's of the Rockies, a restaurant in Idaho Springs, an old Colorado mining camp which is a more distant Denver suburb. Up in Leadville, one of the most famous of Colorado's silver mining towns, a crowd of

only eight turned out to hear Benson at the Golden Burro Restaurant.

Speaking to the five women in Idaho Springs, Benson once again stoutly defended his plan to petition on to the Republican primary ballot. He said: "I chaired the [Republican] party for six years, and I know how the system works. I know how to get 30 percent (of delegates to the state GOP convention). But that won't win you a general election.... We're plotting a strategy to November."

To win, Benson concluded, he had to appeal not only to party stalwarts but also to "Democrats, unaffiliateds, and Perot types." The petition route - and the bus - were the vehicles that would accomplish that purpose.<sup>23</sup>

As Benson's bus tour wended its way further westward into the Rocky Mountains, the size of his audiences picked up a little. He drew 25 listeners in Frisco, 71 in Glenwood Springs, and 48 in Grand Junction. Not all listeners were totally receptive to Benson's anti-government line, however. In Frisco, a former U.S. Government worker named Bob Masslich cautioned Benson against taking "cheap shots" at government employees, mainly because there were a lot of them in Colorado and they worked as hard as other people do. "[Benson] means well," Masslich said after Benson finished his talk, "but he's a neophyte" and eventually will get his "comeuppance" if he doesn't watch what he says.<sup>24</sup>

Bruce Benson's bus tours of rural Colorado were only partly successful. Relatively small crowds turned out to hear Benson speak and to sign his petitions for getting on the primary ballot. There also were no more than two or three stories in the Denver and Colorado Springs newspapers about Benson's forays into the Colorado hinterlands.

The bus tours were a big success as a talking point, however. They enabled Bruce Benson and his staff to argue, throughout the remainder of the election campaign, that Benson had gone to the people of Colorado, shaken their hands, told them his ideas and his values, and answered their questions and listened to their problems. Whenever

anyone criticized Benson for relying too heavily on television and radio advertising, he could honestly reply that his bus tours had exposed him, on a direct personal level, to the hearts and minds of thousands of Colorado residents.

### THE BENSON SURGE

From the very first moment he hinted he was going to run for governor, Bruce Benson was cast by the Colorado news media as the "front-runner" for the Republican nomination. This happened despite the fact that Mike Bird, Phil Klingsmith, and Dick Sargent had been campaigning for more than a year. As soon as Bruce Benson said he was in the race and was going to spend \$5 million to get elected, political reporters and political columnists immediately presented him to the public as the candidate to beat for the GOP nomination.

The press was well aware of the impact that Benson's money was having on the race for the Republican nomination for governor in Colorado in 1994. Simply because he had many more dollars than anyone else, Benson was attracting attention while the other three candidates were rapidly fading. *Rocky Mountain News* political columnist Peter Blake summed up the situation this way: "Benson is already flooding the airwaves with ads while collecting signatures. Rivals [Dick] Sargent, Phil Klingsmith, and state Senator Mike Bird are invisible in comparison."

The Bruce Benson candidacy was most damaging to Dick Sargent and his low-budget effort to win the Republican nomination for governor. Sargent explained:

"Bruce Benson coming into the race stopped the money coming in to me just as if I had slammed into a brick wall. I am convinced that Benson was working on this 'surprise run for governor' deal for at least four years. When I was running for state treasurer in 1990, Republican state party chairman Benson cut off all my state party campaign money. That was Bruce Benson eliminating the competition ahead of time for



his own run for governor in 1994."<sup>25</sup>

What was particularly vexing to Mike Bird and his close supporters was the fact that almost everyone acknowledged that Bird was a highly qualified candidate for governor, much more qualified than Bruce Benson. That argument appeared to carry little weight, however, against Benson's simple statement: "I have the money to beat Roy Romer!"

Again it was Peter Blake of the *Rocky* who reported the essence of the situation. "Poor Bird," Blake wrote. "If he had a dollar for every time a Republican said, 'He's a wonderful guy, and would make the best governor, but he can't get elected,' he'd have more money than Benson."<sup>26</sup>

#### Notes To Chapter 7:

1. Angela Dire, "GOP insider cast as outsider," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 4 April 1994, B1.
2. For detailed accounts of Bruce Benson's life and business career, see Jennifer Mears (Associated Press), "Republican candidates for governor explain views: Benson believes state not operated properly," Boulder Daily Camera, 1 August 1994, 9A. Jennifer Gavin, "Trajectory always has been upward for GOP's Benson," Denver Post, 10 August 1994, 8A.
3. Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.
4. Stanley Kelley, Jr., *Professional Public Relations and Political Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956).
5. Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President 1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969).
6. Angela Dire, "GOP insider cast as outsider," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 4 April 1994, B1.

7. Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.
8. Fred Brown, "Benson to petition for ballot," Denver Post, 19 March 1994, 7B.
9. Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, stated there "was never any doubt that Bruce Benson could win 30 percent of the delegate vote and get on the ballot at the Republican State Assembly. The big worry was that Benson might finish second at the state assembly, get on the ballot, and go into the Republican primary as the assembly 'loser' rather than as the assembly 'winner.'" Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.
10. Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.
11. Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.
12. Peter Blake, "Fearsome maze lies at Benson's feet," Rocky Mountain News, 6 April 1994, 5A.
13. Sherman Griffin believed the "free ride" atmosphere created by the early Benson campaign was a big part of Bruce Benson's appeal to Colorado Republicans in 1994. Sherman Griffin, assistant campaign manager, Mike Bird for Governor, written comments to the author, May 7, 1995.
14. Peter Blake, "Fearsome maze lies at Benson's feet," Rocky Mountain News, 6 April 1994, 5A.
15. Katy Atkinson, Bruce Benson's campaign manager, said the official announcement was made the day before the precinct caucuses because that was the first day that signatures could be legally gathered for Benson's petitions. "Bruce Benson did not want to announce until Republican voters could sign his petitions," Katy Atkinson explained. "It was just by chance that the first day for petition signatures was the day before the

precinct caucuses." Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.

16. For a full page of photographs of the Bruce Benson for Governor announcement luncheon, see the Colorado Statesman, 8 April 1994, 11.

17. Jennifer Gavin, "Benson opens petition bid for GOP nomination," Denver Post, 5 April 1994, 1B.

18. Thaddeus Herrick, "Ex-GOP chief enters governor race," Rocky Mountain News, 5 April 1994, 4A.

19. Angela Dire, "Ex-GOP leader opens outsider's bid for governor," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 5 April 1994, B1.

20. For a fuller description of the Clinton-Gore buscapade in the 1992 presidential election campaign, see Robert D. Loevy, *The Flawed Path to the Presidency 1992: Unfairness and Inequality in the Presidential Selection Process* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 193-197.

21. James Amos, "Former GOP chairman looks for supporters," Pueblo Chieftain, 15 April 1994, 4B.

22. Juan Espinosa, "Benson brings bus campaign to Pueblo," Pueblo Chieftain, 15 April 1994.

23. Jennifer Gavin, "Benson's route: by bus," Denver Post, 24 April 1994, 1C.

24. Peter Blake, "For Benson, grass roots green indeed," Rocky Mountain News, 22 April 1994, 5A.

25. Author's notes, interview with Dick Sargent, Denver, 21 November 1994.

26. Peter Blake, "Demise of caucuses may be mercy killing," Rocky Mountain News, 8 April 1994, 5A.

