

PART II

BRUCE BENSON FOR GOVERNOR

CHAPTER 6

A DISTURBING RUMOR

It was only a newspaper column, but it hit the Mike Bird for Governor campaign like the proverbial ton of bricks. On January 19, 1994, Peter Blake, the political columnist for the *Rocky Mountain News*, revealed that Bruce Benson, a former state chairman of the Colorado Republican Party, was "on the verge of jumping into the Colorado governor's race."

The Benson candidacy was presented as rumor rather than fact. It was duly noted, however, that Bruce Benson was a highly successful businessman who could more than afford to finance his own campaign - big time. Blake wrote:

"The word from Washington is that Benson has been sounding out possible high-profile consultants. He'll end up having to fight them off. When a Big Spender goes there with his wallet open, he draws consultants like blood draws sharks."

Peter Blake's column contained another surprise. Instead of going through the caucus/county assembly/state assembly process to get into the Republican primary, Benson might decide to petition on to the ballot directly. Colorado law provides that, if a candidate for political office can get a sufficient number of voter signatures, that candidate's name will be put on the primary ballot without the candidate having to receive a certain percentage of votes at the state assembly.

Columnist Blake speculated that Benson might be bypassing the caucus/assembly process because of the enemies he may have made while serving as Republican state chairman. "But a petition drive would be understandable," Blake wrote. "Party chairmen, even warm-hearted ones, inevitably make enemies among the [party] regulars who go to caucuses, and Benson has never been Mr. Warmth."

Bruce Benson was not only described as wealthy, but it was noted that he had contributed generously to Republican candidates for office in Colorado in the past. Those candidates now would feel obligated to make contributions to Benson in return. The process is known as "cashing in on your political chits."

Blake suggested Benson was tired of spending money on other Republican candidates and now wanted to spend money on his own campaign. "This year," Blake wrote, "apparently [Benson] doesn't see front-running GOP candidate Mike Bird catching fire and wants to spend the money on himself."¹

Two days later, after briefly interviewing Mike Bird, Peter Blake wrote a follow-up column on the rumored Benson candidacy. The opening paragraphs suggested the 1994 race for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in Colorado was about to become a Benson-Bird shootout:

"Suppose oilman Bruce Benson suddenly leaps into the governor's race firing both of his pearl-handled checkbooks on full automatic."

"Will state Senator Mike Bird, currently the leading GOP contender, spare Benson the added expense of waging a primary campaign by running for cover?"

"'Hell no,' replied Bird. 'We'll just keep pushing ahead like the Energizer Bunny, day after day.'"

The "Energizer Bunny" Mike Bird referred to was currently starring in a television commercial. The bunny got so much power from its Energizer batteries that it just kept "going and going and going."

Bird made it clear that, despite the rumors Bruce Benson might petition on to the ballot, Bird would "stick with the traditional

caucus/[assembly] system." Bird told Peter Blake:

"This is a two-year commitment, so we're in to stay. We've worked hard the last 12-14 months, building the organization and raising the money. We can't write a check for \$2 million, but we've raised over \$100,000. Even though Roy Romer's got more, we feel we have enough to be competitive."²

It was not all that unusual for these Bruce Benson for Governor rumors to make their first appearance in print in the *Rocky Mountain News*. The *Rocky* is the Denver newspaper with the more conservative and Republican proclivities, so Benson supporters would be expected to "leak" the story to the *Rocky* first.³ The *Denver Post*, which leans more to the liberals and the Democrats, caught up with the story on January 22, 1994, three days after the rumor had first appeared in Peter Blake's column in the *Rocky Mountain News*. The *Post* reported simply that Bruce Benson was thinking "very carefully and very thoughtfully" about running for governor.⁴

Mike Bird was personally taken aback by the rumors of a Bruce Benson candidacy. In November of 1992, when Bird first announced he was running for governor, Bruce Benson was quoted in the *Rocky Mountain News* saying that Bird was "a very, very superior person" and "a true intellect."⁵ In 1993 Mike Bird met at least twice with Bruce Benson, seeking Benson's help for the Bird for Governor campaign. At no time during these meetings did Benson say he was thinking of running for governor himself.

As late as August of 1993, Bruce Benson once again assured Mike Bird personally that he had no intention of running for governor himself and would help out Bird by introducing him to potential financial contributors in Denver. Bruce Benson failed to follow through, however, on this offer to help in the Bird campaign.

BIRD GETS THE WORD - FROM BENSON

The Benson rumors stayed rumors for about two weeks. Then, on

February 9, 1994, the Bird for Governor campaign staff had gathered for a meeting at the satellite office in Denver. The original agenda for that meeting became irrelevant when Mike Bird arrived and announced he had a private meeting at the Burnsley Hotel in Denver with Bruce Benson at 10:30 A.M. that morning.

According to Bird, Bruce Benson did most of the talking, telling Mike he was definitely going to run for governor and that he had the money to do it right. Benson said words to the effect that grassroots campaigns do not work anymore and that only the Benson approach of spending lots of money on high-priced political consultants and television advertising would win the gubernatorial election for the Republicans.

Benson told Bird he was undecided about whether he would try to get nominated at the Republican State Assembly or whether he would petition directly on to the ballot, as the newspapers had been suggesting. Benson also said he might do both - petition on to the ballot *and* put his name in contention at the Republican State Assembly.

The discussion ended, Bird later said, with Benson talking about his family and his experiences on the board of directors of a Denver savings and loan association.⁶

It appeared to the Bird campaigners that Benson was trying to scare Mike Bird out of the race. Well, why not? The Bird campaign had worked hard at trying to scare people such as Colorado Springs developer Steve Schuck, Aurora mayor Paul Tauer, and national committeeman Jim Nicholson out of the race. In the private opinion of some members of Bird's staff, Benson's strategy appeared to be working. Mike Bird was visibly upset by his meeting with Benson and by what Benson had to say.

Two political consultants who wanted to handle the Bird campaign, Dick Dresner and Bob Wickers, were present when Bird announced that Bruce Benson was definitely running for governor and would have plenty of money to spend in the race. Dresner made a recommendation: "The 1994 Colorado Republican gubernatorial primary begins today."

He suggested that Mike Bird spend \$150,000 on an early television blitz, at a time when no one else was advertising, to "get your numbers up." The TV blitz would be designed to increase the number of Coloradans who would know Bird's name and know that he was running for governor.

The Dresner idea of an early TV blitz was a great idea, but it was instantly rejected because the Bird campaign did not have a spare \$150,000 to pay for it.

There then ensued a lengthy discussion of how Mike Bird, with his limited campaign resources, could keep up with a wealthy candidate such as Bruce Benson. Dresner recommended, and everyone else agreed, that Bird should concentrate all his resources on a two-week advertising blitz in Denver and Colorado Springs the two weeks before primary election day in early August. Dresner offered to check on how much money would be required to buy a respectable two-week television advertising campaign in Colorado during the summertime, when rates should be low. He pointed out that Benson could only spend so much money on television advertising. There was a point at which he would oversaturate the market and the additional ads would either be wasted or, worse yet, start to turn voters off.

At the same time, Dresner continued, the Bird campaign would get great efficiency out of the more limited number of television commercials that it could afford: "Those first few ads really pick you up and start to get your message across. You don't have to spend more money than Benson. You just have to spend enough money that you are a presence on Colorado television along with Benson."

After the meeting was over, and as everyone was leaving, Mike Bird pulled a close adviser aside and confided: "It was much worse than I told the others. Benson said he is going to raise and spend \$5 million dollars on his campaign - \$5 million! He said he was willing to spend several millions of his own money and would spend \$500,000 to raise funds from other donors."

This was disturbing news indeed. The Bird campaign had projected

that it *might* be able to raise a total of \$250,000 for both the Republican state assembly and the Republican gubernatorial primary. Here was Benson proposing to spend *twice* that amount, \$500,000, just on his fund-raising operation.

Benson's threat to spend millions of dollars on his own campaign was believable. Some sources estimated his personal wealth at over \$100 million.⁷

The meeting at the Denver satellite headquarters broke up with the Bird campaign team in a combined state of despair and renewed determination. Surely this was a major disaster - the news that Benson was definitely running - but it also was a challenge. The dream that all the really serious contenders could be scared out of the race for the Republican nomination for governor had proven to be just that - a dream.

That dream had come pretty close to reality when Jim Nicholson dropped out of the race, but Benson's late decision to enter the fray had shattered the dream completely. Now the Bird organization was going to have to battle for every vote possible. Things had looked pretty good for Bird when there was only relatively underfinanced competition in the form of Dick Sargent and Phil Klingsmith. Suddenly the Mike Bird campaign was in a major fight - perhaps one of the toughest in all of Colorado political history.

BENSON JUMPS IN

Mike Bird scheduled a press conference for February 15, 1994, to announce the endorsement of his campaign for governor by more than 20 prominent Republicans in the Colorado state legislature. The press conference was held in the press room at the state capitol, and the lineup of legislators backing Mike Bird was truly impressive. It included: Chuck Berry, the speaker of the Colorado House of Representatives; Jeff Wells, the majority leader in the state Senate; and state Senator Claire Traylor, Mike Bird's well-known colleague on the legislature's Joint

Budget Committee.

Bruce Benson calculatingly stole some of the attention from Mike Bird's endorsement by his fellow legislators. Benson chose that same day to tell the press he definitely was going to run for the Republican nomination for governor, and he also announced that his campaign manager would be Katy Atkinson, a well-known political worker in Colorado Republican circles. The Benson story played much more prominently than the story of Bird receiving the endorsement of his fellow lawmakers. The *Denver Post* combined the two stories, as did the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*. In both newspapers Benson's declaration of candidacy was covered first.⁸ The battle to electoral death between Bruce Benson and Mike Bird had begun in earnest.

Benson may have stolen a bit of the news media spotlight when Mike Bird announced his legislative endorsements, but those endorsements proved to be a strong part of the Bird for Governor campaign. Having state senators and state representatives from many different parts of Colorado on the Bird team proved unusually valuable whenever Bird hit the campaign trail. Bird's fellow legislators introduced him at local Republican meetings, gave endorsement speeches at Republican assemblies, and sometimes shook hands with voters with Mike Bird. The additional publicity helped to raise money and to win delegate votes at the Republican state assembly. When it came to having enthusiastic support from Republicans in the state legislature, "Mike Bird was unsurpassed by his rivals."⁹

WITHDRAW?

In mid-December of 1993 Mike Bird began experiencing a bothersome pain in his lower back. Sitting for hours in the automobile while driving around Colorado to various campaign events apparently had taken its toll. By late January the pain had become so acute Bird was not able to sit for more than a couple of minutes. He had to stand at his desk on the state Senate floor and in legislative committee

hearings. He could not sit through a meal with potential financial supporters. Worst of all, Bird could not sit in his car. Various campaign assistants drove him the long miles to his speaking engagements so he could lie prone in the back seat and get some relief.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) revealed that Bird had a herniated disk, which was pressing on his sciatic nerve and causing the intense pain. An epidural cortisone injection, a fairly major and unpleasant medical procedure, was recommended. Fortunately, the cortisone injection relieved the pain. Bird did not have to have surgery, which would have put him in bed - and out of active campaigning - for several weeks.

During this same time period Ursula Bird's father, the former West German military leader and diplomat, passed away in Germany. Mike and Ursula Bird suddenly had the added stress of losing a beloved relative and planning a long and tiring round-trip flight to Germany for the funeral.

The same day he received the cortisone injection, Mike Bird told a close adviser that, with Benson and all his money coming into the race for governor, Bird had no chance of winning and was considering withdrawing his candidacy. The adviser believed it was the ailing back and the after effects of the cortisone injection speaking - and not Mike Bird. The adviser urged Bird to wait at least a week before making a definite decision. Bird asked the adviser to prepare a withdrawal statement, which the adviser wrote and delivered to the Bird home in the late evening for Mike and Ursula to consider.

The next morning, with the effects of the cortisone injection wearing off and some time expended in mature reflection, Bird thanked his adviser for writing the withdrawal statement but said it would not be used. Bird said he could not let down the volunteers who had worked so hard in his campaign. Furthermore, he could not go back on all his statements that Mike Bird would be in the campaign for the long haul. Bird said that, although getting the Republican nomination for governor now would be much more difficult, he was going to keep

running and continue to do everything in his power to win.

Notes To Chapter 6:

1. Peter Blake, "The latest buzz puts Benson in the wings," Rocky Mountain News, 19 January 1994, 5A.
2. Peter Blake, "Senator Bird undaunted by rumor of GOP rival," Rocky Mountain News, 21 January 1994, 5A.
3. According to Katy Atkinson, Bruce Benson's campaign manager, Peter Blake and the Rocky Mountain News had the story of Benson's impending candidacy in the newspaper before Bruce Benson had finally made up his mind to run. Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, campaign manager, Bruce Benson for Governor, 19 December 1994.
4. "Bruce Benson 'looking carefully,'" Denver Post, 22 January 1994, 4B.
5. John Sanko, "State Sen. Bird will run for governor," Rocky Mountain News, 10 November 1992.
6. Author's notes, Mike Bird's comments on meeting with Bruce Benson, Denver, 9 February 1994.
7. Bruce Benson subsequently announced his net worth was only about \$25 million, although there was some private speculation that skillful bookkeeping kept this figure lower than it actually was.
8. "Bruce Benson files for gov," Denver Post, 16 February 1994, 3B. Angela Dire, "Ex-GOP chief to run for governor," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 16 February 1994, B1.
9. Sherman Griffin, assistant campaign manager, Mike Bird for Governor, written comments to the author, May 7, 1995.