

CHAPTER 12

THE CANDIDATES AND THE PRESS

Throughout the spring of 1994 a "hot potato" had been building in Denver and Colorado politics. Several years earlier, the City of Denver had decided that the existing airport, Stapleton, was technologically outmoded and needed to be replaced. The principal problem was that the runways at Stapleton were too close together to permit a heavy schedule of landings and takeoffs in bad weather. At a cost of billions of dollars, a spacious new airfield, Denver International Airport, was being built on empty prairie far to the northeast of Denver.

The decision to build Denver International Airport, or DIA as it was known, was controversial. Critics argued that Stapleton was not being used to capacity, so why spend taxpayer dollars to replace it? Furthermore, the new airport was much further from downtown Denver, thus requiring more gasoline and creating more air pollution for people to drive to it. Those who opposed DIA argued it was just another government boondoggle designed to enrich building contractors and labor union members at the expense of the taxpayers.

The citizens of Adams County, where the new airport was to be located, had narrowly approved building Denver International Airport in a referendum election. One of the leaders in the drive to get Adams County voters to support the new airport was Colorado governor Roy Romer. Although building DIA was a city and not a state issue, Roy Romer had voluntarily, and successfully, used his influence as governor to get Adams County voters to give it the OK.¹

DENVER INTERNATIONAL ALBATROSS

By early May of 1994 Denver International Airport had become something of an albatross around Governor Roy Romer's neck. There had been serious cost overruns in building the airport, and the entire project had been delayed when a high-tech computerized baggage system failed to work as projected. The opening date of DIA had been

postponed four times, a very embarrassing development for Roy Romer and everyone else who had supported Denver's new airport.

As might be expected, Bruce Benson decided to exploit Roy Romer's involvement with the now highly controversial Denver International Airport. When Benson's Colorado bus tour passed through the mountain town of Rifle in late April, Benson told listeners: "I've been totally opposed to things such as the new airport." The next day, as Benson's Blue Bird bus stopped in Granby, near the western entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park, Benson continued the attack on DIA. He said: "The airport for example; now it not only is a problem, in that we don't need it, and I've always been opposed to it; it's causing a major drain on people." Benson finished the job at a news conference at the state Capitol in Denver when he said flat out: "I was not an airport supporter."

The *Denver Post* immediately called Bruce Benson to task for his statements that he had not been a supporter of Denver International Airport. In a front page story published on May 3, 1994, the *Post* charged that Benson had contributed \$500 to Adams County Partners in Progress for a New Airport, a group trying to win voter support for DIA in Adams County. When asked by the *Post* reporter, Robert Kowalski, why he contributed money to an airport project he said he did not support, Benson initially played dumb, saying he did not recall making the contribution. "Well, I can't answer it then," Benson said to reporter Kowalski's direct question.

Furthermore, the *Denver Post* revealed, Bruce Benson had served on the Board of Directors of the New World Airport Commission, a volunteer group organized to celebrate and publicize the opening of Denver International Airport. Benson had resigned from the commission in late February of 1994, about a month after it became known that he would be running for the Republican nomination for governor.

The *Denver Post* completed its story by letting incumbent Democratic governor Roy Romer get in a few licks at Benson for appearing to be two-faced on the airport issue. "I was aware of his

financial support" for DIA in 1988, Romer told the *Post*. "I'm surprised he now claims he's not a supporter." When asked about Benson, now claiming to be an airport opponent, serving on the New World Airport Commission board, Romer replied: "It doesn't sound plausible."²

Two days later Bruce Benson held an emergency news conference at the state Capitol to try to stem the tide of unfavorable publicity that was being generated about him on the airport issue. By this time the issue had become so hot that Mike Bird even entertained the notion of attending the news conference and underlining the point that he had *never* been a supporter of DIA. Bird decided not to attend the news conference after the idea produced a negative reaction from his campaign staff. The sentiment was that the Colorado press corps was doing a great job of "raking Benson over the DIA coals," and Bird would only confuse the issue by getting into it.

At the news conference Bruce Benson said he contributed to the pro-airport election fund simply to get pro-airport officials "off my back." He implied that he opposed the airport but wrote "one small check" so that airport supporters would stop bothering him for money. He also said he agreed to serve on the New World Airport Commission only because it had become obvious the airport was going to be built and it was time to help make it work.

Benson then accused Democratic governor Roy Romer's reelection campaign of "digging around in the dirt" and leaking the story of the \$500 contribution to DIA to the *Denver Post*. "I'm angrier than hell this kind of stuff is going on," Benson said.

For its part the Romer campaign flatly denied any part in giving the DIA story to the press. Mike Stratton, a Romer campaign adviser, said: "For the record...that did not come from the Romer campaign." Stratton also said Benson could not get out of acknowledging his support for DIA by claiming \$500 was not very much money. "To any person, with the exception of maybe Bruce Benson, \$500 is a lot of money," Stratton concluded.³

The Denver International Airport imbroglio was a political mini-

disaster for Bruce Benson. Reporters and political columnists all over the state seized on the story and used it as a vehicle for commenting on Benson's integrity and honesty. *Rocky Mountain News* political columnist Peter Blake described Benson's behavior as "Nixonian."⁴ Charles Roos, another columnist at the *Rocky*, said it was not believable that a wealthy businessman such as Benson would give \$500 to a cause he strongly opposed and then forget about it.⁵ A *Denver Post* editorial pointed up that "Benson actions don't always jive with Benson convictions on tough issues."⁶

In an effort to recoup his position and get the Denver International Airport issue firmly on Roy Romer's back, Bruce Benson began running a television advertisement on DIA. Entitled "Finish the Job," the ad began with a photograph of Roy Romer in a crowd. "Governor Roy Romer led the charge to build the new airport," the ad said. "Now the airport's in trouble. It costs Colorado a million dollars a day...." The scene shifted to a view of Denver International Airport's tent-like main terminal building. "Romer blames everyone but himself," the ad continued. "The airport is his baby.... Romer is waffling.... He should take responsibility.... Come on, governor. Stop the politics. We need to finish the job."

The minute the Benson ad began running on television, it was attacked strongly by the Romer campaign. Strategist Mike Stratton said: "Clearly the Benson campaign was embarrassed by the flip-flopping of Mr. Benson on the airport issue and the press it has received. This new ad is clearly an attempt to stop the bleeding and turn the issue around for them."⁷

Then Federico Peña, the U.S. Secretary of Transportation and mayor of Denver at the time DIA was initiated, called Benson "careless and self-serving" for running such negative advertising. "At a time when the eyes of the country are focused on our state," Peña said, "Bruce Benson's reckless politicization of DIA is a great disservice to the people of Colorado.... This destructive political tactic is an affront to over 30,000 people who sweated and worked hard to build the airport. Mr. Benson's

conduct does not represent the kind of people we are. We are not whiners."⁸

Then, three days after Federico Peña's attack on Benson, 99 civic and business leaders in Denver made public a letter to Benson urging him to stop running "outrageous" and "negative" television commercials about Governor Roy Romer and Denver International Airport. The letter said in part: "The negative ads your campaign is running...are not only contrary to the spirit of fair play Colorado voters expect in politics, they are hurting Colorado's image and making the job of finishing Denver International Airport more difficult."⁹

In the end Bruce Benson's TV ads on Denver International Airport hurt rather than helped him. They produced a second round of newspaper stories that Benson had been two-faced on the DIA issue, and in the process they gave the Romer campaign another opportunity to publicly question Benson's honesty and integrity. They also earned Benson the ire of key and well-known members of the Denver business community. Benson's attempt to slam Romer on the Denver International Airport issue had clearly backfired, producing more negative publicity for Benson than it had for Romer.

Katy Atkinson, Benson's campaign manager, agreed that the DIA encounter had harmed the Benson for Governor effort. "That one really threw us," Atkinson said. "We simply had not done enough research on the extent of Bruce Benson's involvement in the campaign to get a new airport. Bruce himself simply did not remember the extent to which he had written checks supporting the pro-airport side of things. No matter how hard we tried, we could not convince people that Bruce's support was minimal and inconsequential, particularly when compared with Roy Romer's all-out support of DIA."

Katy Atkinson sincerely believed that, one way or another, it was the Roy Romer forces that got the story of Bruce Benson supporting DIA into the newspapers. "That clearly was a Romer leak," Atkinson stated firmly.¹⁰

WORK FOR NO PAY

At the same time Bruce Benson was dealing with his Denver International Airport gaffe, he suddenly had another one on his hands. Speaking at a news conference on May 2, 1994, Benson offered to forego his \$70,000 a year governor's salary if elected. Noting that incumbent Democratic governor Roy Romer was a millionaire too, Benson challenged Romer to do the same thing.

In addition, Benson said, he would pay for his own official out-of-state travel rather than charging it to a state expense account. He offered to use the money saved from his salary and travel expenses to pay for establishing satellite governor's offices around the state. Benson explained:

"My plan is to forego taking a salary once I'm elected, and to personally pay for any official travel...outside the state to conduct state business. This savings to the taxpayer should fund a good chunk of our satellite office plan."¹¹

Benson's statement once again opened him up for attack by Roy Romer and the Colorado press corps. Romer charged that Benson's offer "doesn't make sense." The incumbent governor said political office "ought not be available only to those so sufficiently wealthy they don't need to be paid for their time."¹²

The strongest editorial attack on Benson's offer to be governor for free came from the *Colorado Statesman*. It printed:

"By pledging to skip the state salary if elected governor, Benson has managed to use his wealth in a way that most people cannot. All along the candidate has stressed that he in no way purports to buy the election. But by promising people he will forego a salary, he immediately sets himself apart from the candidate fray.... Political office shouldn't be available only to the wealthy."¹³

There was a certain irony in Bruce Benson coming under heavy attack in early May of 1994 for his Denver International Airport and "I'll work for free" statements. One reason Benson was petitioning on to the

Republican primary ballot was to avoid the negative publicity of being attacked by his Republican opponents in a knockdown, drag out battle at the Republican State Assembly. His "loose lips" as he campaigned against Roy Romer, however, were costing him just as much bad publicity as if he had gone to the GOP state assembly. Bruce Benson was learning that it is very difficult to rise above controversy - and direct attacks from your political opponents and the press - in American politics.

MIKE BIRD AND THE PRESS CORPS

Given that there was no spare money for the kind of television advertising campaign that Bruce Benson was running, the Mike Bird campaign had to rely mainly on the Colorado press corps to put Bird's name and ideas before the voters. As assiduously as Benson seemed to be avoiding the press, the Bird campaign was courting it. All requests for interviews were immediately granted, and they were granted with Mike Bird personally rather than with a member of the campaign staff.

The problem with relying on the press to carry the campaign's message to the voters was that neither Mike Bird nor his campaign staff could completely control what the press might write or put on the television and radio. There is a tradition in United States journalism of covering politics in a fair, unbiased, and balanced manner. The result was that stories about Bird often contained negatives as well as positives. The task facing Bird was to try to handle the press in such a way that, story by story, the positives outnumbered the negatives.

When it was three weeks to go before the Republican State Assembly, there was a noticeable increase in newspaper coverage of all the pre-assembly activity. Three questions were coming to the fore in people's, and the press reporters', minds: (1) Will Bruce Benson decide at the last minute to come to and put his name in at the Republican State Assembly? (2) If Benson stays out, will Mike Bird or Dick Sargent get the most votes at the Republican State Assembly? (3) If Benson stays

out, many delegates at the state assembly will be for Bruce Benson. Will they vote for Mike Bird - or Dick Sargent - or will they find some potentially disruptive way of showing their support for Bruce Benson?

It was in this politically charged atmosphere that Thaddeus Herrick, one of the political reporters for the *Rocky Mountain News*, asked Mike Bird for an "in-depth" interview. Bird granted it, as usual, and Herrick stopped by the Colorado Springs campaign headquarters and talked with the candidate for almost an hour. The interview was general in nature, ranging widely over all the major events and issues in the campaign to date.

Early on in the interview, however, the pitfalls of relying on the news media to carry a campaign's message to the voters became obvious. Herrick asked if Bruce Benson's emphasis on expensive television ads - and lots of them - had not "totally disrupted the Bird campaign strategy?" The real answer to the question, of course, was: "Yes." On the other hand, this was the kind of question that any candidate for political office would dance around and try to "spin" an answer to his or her own benefit. Mike Bird noted, accurately, that he was still following his original campaign strategy of going to the "grass roots." He then launched his customary attack on Benson for "bypassing the system" and not playing by the customary Republican Party rules.

Bird then highlighted his desire to fight it out with Benson at the state assembly, rather than in the August primary, by saying to Thaddeus Herrick that in recent speeches he had been telling audiences: "Come to the state assembly, Bruce Benson, and *make my day!*" The reference was to a famous line from a Clint Eastwood movie of the 1980s. The implication of the line was: "Let's settle it here and now."¹⁴

Two days later Thaddeus Herrick's article on Mike Bird appeared in the *Rocky Mountain News* along with an excellent photograph of Bird speaking to the Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce. From the Bird campaign point of view, there was much that was good in the article. It began by suggesting that Bird's "grass roots" form of campaigning might work, that Benson's overemphasis on television

advertising could "backfire," and that Republican Party voters might revolt against Benson's attempts to "bypass the system."

Thaddeus Herrick then cast himself in the role of campaign consultant and suggested attacking Benson's overuse of his "wallet" might be a better strategy than criticizing him for bypassing "the antiquated caucus and county assembly process." The article was printed under Thaddeus Herrick's byline, so it was fully within the bounds of good journalistic practice for him to make such an interpretive comment. Herrick even went and got a quote from a local Denver political consultant, Eric Sondermann, to back up this idea. "There's ample sentiment for a millionaire free spender to be rejected," Sondermann said. "If someone can exploit it."

That was the good news. The bad news for Bird supporters was that Thaddeus Herrick decided to answer his own question about how disruptive Benson's entrance into the campaign had been to the Bird campaign. Herrick wrote:

"Eighteen months since announcing for governor, Bird appears to be in trouble. Benson's decision to challenge Governor Roy Romer has thrown the state senator from Colorado Springs to the back of the pack."

Herrick also struck a theme that many newspaper reporters had begun using that was bedeviling the Bird campaign. This was the often repeated comment that Mike Bird was too "mild mannered" to be a really strong candidate for governor. "Bird has raised the issue of Benson's money," Herrick wrote. "But those who know him say the 54-year-old economics professor is not one to go for the jugular." Later in the article Herrick described Bird as "ever the gentleman."

The newspaper article ended on a really bum note for the Bird campaign. It gave Denver pollster Floyd Ciruli's prediction for how the 1994 race for the Republican nomination for governor would eventually turn out: "More likely, Bird wins the state assembly, limps into the primary and loses."¹⁵

The reality of campaign press relations was now clear. Through press releases and Mike Bird interviews the Bird campaign *proposed* -

but the press *disposed*.

Thaddeus Herrick was by no means the only news reporter portraying Bruce Benson, for no other reason than his money, as the front-runner over Bird and Sargent. The *Denver Post* particularly acted as if Benson already had the nomination during the pre-Republican State Assembly period. Tom Gavin, a *Post* columnist who only periodically commented on election issues, published a column on May 18, 1994, that flat out referred to Benson as "Mr. Romer's probable Republican opponent." Later in the column, Gavin referred to Benson as "Bruce Republican."

The Bird campaign thus found itself forced to rely on a medium of communication with the voters which it could not completely control. Although three-fourths of the press coverage of Mike Bird was highly favorable - and all the stories mentioned his name and reminded the more uninvolved voters that he was, indeed, running for governor - there was a great deal of unfavorable information presented at the same time. It revealed all too clearly that Bruce Benson had a good reason for staying out of the media eye and letting his carefully controlled paid advertising, which contained no negatives, carry the Benson message to the voters.

Perhaps the most serious slight to the Bird campaign came from an anonymous headline writer at the *Rocky Mountain News*. Two days before the Republican State Assembly, a *Rocky* story about Mike Bird contained many positives but ran under the headline: "Senator Mike Bird is likable, but is he electable?"

Notes To Chapter 12:

1. Governor Romer had particularly antagonized some Adams County politicians by arguing that the new airport would create jobs for residents of Adams County. Denver had a law requiring that all Denver city employees live in Denver, which meant that Adams County residents would have had to move to Denver if they wanted to work at the "city" airport.

2. Robert Kowalski, "Benson not always a foe of DIA," Denver Post, 3 May 1994, 1A.
3. Robert Kowalski, "Benson admits he donated," Denver Post, 6 May 1994. Thaddeus Herrick, "Benson says stand on DIA consistent," Rocky Mountain News, 6 May 1994.
4. Peter Blake, "'Guilt money' lands Benson in a jam," Rocky Mountain News, 6 May 1994, 5A.
5. Charles Roos, "\$500 might not be a lot, but it's too much to forget," Rocky Mountain News, 13 May 1994, 50A.
6. "Benson needs to show us his friends won't call the shots," Denver Post, 15 May 1994, 2D.
7. Robert Kowalski, "Benson's ads hit Romer over airport," Denver Post, 13 May 1994, 1B. Peter Blake, "Benson wants Romer to take fall on DIA," Rocky Mountain News, 13 May 1994, 5A. "Thursday At The Movies," Colorado Statesman, 13 May 1994, 2.
8. Jim Carrier, "Benson ads draw barb from Peña," Denver Post, 15 May 1994, 1C.
9. Steve Lipsher, "Group decries Benson TV ads," Denver Post, 18 May 1994, 1B. Angela Dire, "Leaders tell Benson: Stop lashing Romer over DIA," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 18 May 1994, B8.
10. Author's notes, telephone interview with Katy Atkinson, 19 December 1994.
11. Jennifer Gavin, "Money no issue to oilman," Denver Post, 3 May 1994, 17A. Also see Thaddeus Herrick, "Benson says he'll head state for free," Rocky Mountain News, 3 May 1994, 10A.
12. "Romer and Benson trade charges as campaign heats," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 6 May 1994, B5.

13. Jody Hope Strogoff, "'Free' offer may prove costly for Benson," Colorado Statesman, 6 May 1994, 2.
14. Author's notes, Thaddeus Herrick interview of Mike Bird, Colorado Springs, 17 May 1994.
15. Thaddeus Herrick, "Sen. Bird expects wealthy front-runner Benson to slip," Rocky Mountain News, 11A.