

## *CHAPTER 20*

### *WHO'S THAT CHICKEN?*

By the following Tuesday, July 26, 1994, the Bird campaign staff believed it had a real campaign going despite Bruce Benson's great advantage in terms of television and direct mail advertising. The "Mr. TV-Head" television advertisement had received good play in the newspapers, and wherever Mike Bird spoke and met the public his supporters would mention that they had seen the ad while watching television. Most important, the "phony polling" and "dirty tricks" charges against Bruce Benson had played big in the newspapers all weekend, and some of the newspaper stories had filtered on to local television news reports.

The first of the three candidate debates to which Bruce Benson had finally agreed was scheduled for that Tuesday afternoon on KVOR-AM, an all-talk radio station in Colorado Springs. The Bird campaign staff was most anxious to maintain the momentum that had been built up in the news media over the previous weekend. A memo was handed to Mike Bird urging him to confront Bruce Benson "face-to-face" on the issues of "phony polling," "dirty tricks," and "lying." "This raises the question of whether Bruce Benson has the integrity and honesty to be governor of Colorado," the memo said. "This is another example of the fact that Bruce Benson and the Benson campaign have never dealt openly with the voters of Colorado. There is a pattern here of avoiding meeting the voters and not dealing honestly with the voters. This makes trust, honesty, and integrity key issues in the 1994 race for the Republican nomination for governor."<sup>1</sup>

Mike Bird hardly needed this memo from his staff to spur him on. He had been attacking Bruce Benson with great spirit for months, mainly on the issue of missing so many candidate debates but also for not knowing very much about what goes on in Colorado state government. With primary election day now only two weeks away, there would never be a better moment than this one to directly confront Benson and charge that he lacked the necessary qualities, and

qualifications, to be governor.

Chuck Baker's *On The Carpet* show on KVOR-AM radio was something of a community institution in Colorado Springs. KVOR-AM had put a phone-in talk radio program on the air for more than 30 years, long before talk radio had become so popular. Under Chuck Baker's guidance, the show in the years prior to 1994 had become a popular venue for conservative guests and conservative callers alike. The listening audience for the show was quite large, even though it could only be heard in the Colorado Springs metropolitan area. Chuck Baker's show reportedly had the largest percentage of listeners in its audience area of any radio show in Colorado.

Ordinarily a candidate forum on a Colorado Springs radio station (and in the afternoon at that) would not attract very much attention. Because Bruce Benson had designated this as one of his "official" three debates with Mike Bird and Dick Sargent, however, several members of the Denver press corps drove down to Colorado Springs and listened to the debate in an adjoining room in the radio station. The best-known news reporter present was John Sanko of the *Rocky Mountain News*.

The Chuck Baker Show got off to a routine start that Tuesday afternoon. Each candidate gave an opening statement, after which there was general discussion among the candidates interspersed with telephone calls from listeners with questions. The only thing unusual about the early part of the show was that, as encouraged to do by his staff, Mike Bird concluded his opening statement with a lengthy criticism of Benson for his "dirty tricks."

The excitement began when the anonymous person in a chicken suit, who had been dogging the Benson campaign for the past month or so, suddenly appeared outside the station window at KVOR.<sup>2</sup> The broadcast studio was located on the first floor, and the chicken was readily visible to everyone inside. The now infamous bird pressed its beak up against the glass. At the same moment the chicken appeared, a box of chicken was delivered to the radio station inscribed "From Chicken to Benson."

During a commercial break in the talk show, Bruce Benson, Mike

Bird, Dick Sargent, Chuck Baker, and *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* photographer Stuart Wong were still in the studio. Just at that moment the chicken appeared one more time at the window. Bruce Benson turned to Mike Bird and said sarcastically: "There goes your brother again."

Mike Bird's response was direct and heated: "You son of a bitch! If you say that one more time, I'm going to punch you right in the nose!" A short time later, still during the break, Mike Bird turned to the *Gazette Telegraph* photographer and said words to the effect of: "You heard quite a story here."<sup>3</sup>

Bruce Benson decided not to wait for the *Gazette Telegraph* photographer to spread the word that Mike Bird had threatened to punch him "right in the nose." He walked to a nearby room, poked his head in the door, and told his wife, Marcy Benson, and his press assistant, Greg Sparrow, about what had happened. The news of Bird's angry comment was quickly spread to the reporters present, all of whom now sensed the rising personal rancor between Bird and Benson.

As the talk show went back on the air, Dick Sargent, who was seated between Bird and Benson, commented humorously on the Bird-Benson confrontation: "If this keeps up, may I move? I want to get the heck out of here (the middle seat)!"

Bruce Benson then gave a defense of political polling in general: "When you are polling, you ask questions. You ask about your opponents, and you want to find out where their weaknesses and strengths are."

"That's a bunch of garbage," Mike Bird shot back. "We had some action here when the listeners weren't listening. I think they deserve to know everything that went on here.... Bruce has continually said the chicken was planted by me. He's been making cracks...and I got fed up with it! I told him if he said it again, I was going to punch him right in the nose, and I meant it."

A few minutes later Benson said in a frustrated voice: "I didn't come down here to have you guys sit and take pokes at me all afternoon." He

then said the three candidates should spend most of their time attacking incumbent Democratic governor Roy Romer rather than each other.

But Bird refused to let Benson off the hook. "Don't express those platitudes," Bird said, "and then come down here and...[do] some kind of phony sham survey. That is rotten!... Everybody says, 'Oh Mike Bird, he's such a nice guy, a nice guy, etc., etc.'" It takes a lot, but this really makes me angry!"

When the radio broadcast was over, Benson chatted briefly with reporters as he left the station, expressing surprise at Bird's sharp reaction to Benson's accusations concerning the chicken. "Am I going to get into a fist-fight?" Benson asked. "Over a chicken?"

As would be expected, the chicken and Mike Bird's threat to punch Bruce Benson "right in the nose" suddenly became the "big story" of the 1994 Republican gubernatorial primary in Colorado. John Sanko of the *Rocky Mountain News* scored something of a scoop because he had been present at the radio station and could give an eyewitness account of the appearance of the chicken and its effect on Bird and Benson.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* missed getting the story the first day. Angela Dire, the state capitol reporter for the *Gazette* based in Denver, thought the KVOR radio debate was going to be covered by a local reporter in Colorado Springs. The *Gazette* editors thought the debate was going to be covered by Angela Dire. Thus, although the *Gazette* was the one newspaper that had one of its people (photographer Stuart Wong) present when Mike Bird made his now-famous "punch you right in the nose" comment, the *Gazette* was a day late with the story.

When the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph* did run the story, however, it added some hard-nosed political analysis. The *Gazette* interviewed a Denver political consultant, Floyd Ciruli, about what effect Mike Bird's remarks might have on his chances for winning the primary election. "Voters in general are not going to be very impressed by this spat within the Republican Party," Ciruli said. "While people like to see their candidate with fire and enthusiasm, there's also a

problem of turning this into a circus."

Ciruli then pointed out that, with plenty of money to spend on television ads, Bruce Benson wanted to reduce conflict and keep the primary campaign out of the newspapers. "It's smart strategy for [Benson] to stay out of these fist fights. With his money and his name recognition, he knows he'll win without controversy." As for Mike Bird, Ciruli said Bird had nothing left to lose and therefore needed controversy. "He's getting the attention he needs," Ciruli said of Bird, "but the question is, is it the kind of attention he wants?"<sup>5</sup>

Mike Bird believed that, on balance, the "punch you right in the nose" comment helped his campaign. He received a large number of favorable telephone calls and a number of financial contributions as a result of the incident. One big donor said: "Anyone who can call Bruce Benson a son of a bitch ought to be governor."

The feathers had hardly settled from the dustup over the chicken at KVOR-AM when Bird, Benson, and Sargent met again on Mike Rosen's morning radio talk show on KOA-AM in Denver on Thursday, July 28, 1994. Benson began the show with something of an apology, saying that he had only been "kidding" when he suggested at KVOR-AM that the chicken was Mike Bird's brother. "The chicken did identify himself to my daughter [Ann]...as working for you," Benson explained. "If the chicken lied to her, I apologize to you. I think the chicken is kind of funny myself."

Once the apology was out of the way, it soon became clear the Benson forces had decided the best defense is a good offense. They sent their candidate back into the radio debate fray with a countercharge of dirty campaigning against Mike Bird. Benson chastised Bird for the letter Bird sent to delegates to the June 4, 1994, Republican State Assembly. In the letter, Bird criticized Kathy Arnold, Benson's campaign co-chairman, for telling the delegates she was going to "spoil" her assembly vote for governor by writing Bruce Benson's name on her computer punchcard ballot rather than cast a vote for Mike Bird or Dick Sargent.<sup>6</sup>

"I'm getting tired of these attacks...the slash-and-trash," Benson said in a heightened voice. "I was really offended when your campaign compared [Kathy Arnold] to Tonya Harding. Kathy Arnold is one of the most upstanding people in the community. When that letter went out at the state assembly, I was horrified."

Mike Bird was quick to answer back, sharply pointing out that the Tonya Harding comparison was made only after Benson tried to sabotage the Republican State Assembly. It was a party assembly, Bird reminded the radio program's listeners, that Benson "did not have the courage to attend."

Mike Bird also homed in on Benson's use of the words "slash-and-trash." Bird reminded Benson that, early in the campaign, Benson campaign manager Katy Atkinson had issued a letter saying Benson would not debate Bird and Sargent because of their "slash-and-trash" campaign tactics. Bird said it was the first and only time in his 20-year political career that his integrity had been questioned.

"Mike, did we actually question your integrity?" Benson asked with a great deal of sarcasm in his voice. "Gee Mike, I'm sorry the words are too, too hard for you...."

At this moment Dick Sargent decided to offer some comic relief. Referring to his supporters and friends who might be listening, Sargent said: "They're nervous about my health and condition. I just want them all to know, I'm the guy sitting closest to the door. If it gets any heavier than this, I'm out the door!"

Newspaper coverage of the candidate debate on KOA-AM radio mainly concerned what did not happen - no candidate threatened to throw any punches as had happened on KVOR-AM in Colorado Springs two days earlier. The headline in the *Rocky Mountain News* was typical of the general attitude taken by the press: "Gubernatorial hopefuls spar on talk radio show, but no blows are thrown."<sup>7</sup>

Peter Blake of the *Rocky* devoted most of his Friday, July 29, 1994, column to summing up both the chicken and the confrontive candidate behavior it had inspired. Blake began by humorously describing the

Republican gubernatorial primary campaign as "FULL CONTACT POLITICS." Then, in his customary satiric style, Blake theorized that no fight had broken out at the KOA-AM radio debate "because so many reporters, photographers and television cameramen were squeezed into Mike Rosen's tiny studio...that the candidates seated at the table had no room to wind up and swing."

Blake next mildly criticized Mike Bird for taking Benson's remarks about the chicken so seriously. He wrote:

"Bird still professes to be very offended by Benson's earlier suggestion that just maybe he, Bird, had something to do with the chicken."

"Bird denies it, which is too bad. If he didn't think up the chicken act, he should have. When Benson made the accusation, he could have responded with a smile and a shrug...."

"Methinks Bird protests too much. He's been on the campaign trail a long time (since November 1992) and the strain is beginning to show. But it's not too late for him to develop a thicker skin and a lighter touch."<sup>8</sup>

Peter Blake was not the only political writer in Colorado who decided the "chicken" was worth an entire column. Raymond McCaffrey, author of a thrice-weekly column of general commentary in the *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, decided to relate the chicken incident to the age-old question of which came first - the chicken or the egg?

"Was it the appearance of a person in a chicken suit at a recent radio debate that caused the candidates to appear like they had egg on their faces?" McCaffrey asked. "Or was the egg there long before the chicken appeared - a product of a fractious campaign that some believe is blemishing the [Colorado Republican] party?"

McCaffrey then proceeded to review all the recent developments of the campaign - from Bird's charges of "dirty tricks" in Benson's telephone polling, to the appearance of the chicken at KVOR, to Bird's threat "to punch Benson." McCaffrey concluded the chicken was so

controversial and so mysterious that the entire affair "may well become known as *Chickengate*," a reference to the Watergate scandal that forced Richard Nixon to resign the presidency of the United States back in the early 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

There was one person who was directly affected by the hullabaloo over the chicken and its apparent negative effects on all the candidates for the Republican nomination for governor. That was the person in the chicken suit! Although there was still two weeks of the primary campaign left to go when the chicken made its appearance outside the windows at radio station KVOR-AM, that was the last anyone ever saw of the chicken. It was probably a wise decision. If the person in a chicken suit had reappeared at another major campaign event, he or she would have been instantly chased, tackled, and unmasked by a pack of determined news reporters.

### THE BIRD RESPONSE

In one sense the chicken incident was everything the Bird for Governor campaign could have hoped for. The story was playing all over the news media all throughout the state, giving the Bird campaign the thing it needed most - free media coverage. Although Mike Bird could be given low marks for "losing control" and "hurling a schoolboy taunt," he could be given very high marks for countering Bruce Benson's big advertising budgets with lively coverage of the campaign in the daily newspapers and on television.

The big question for the Bird campaign was: What should be done next? There were two schools of thought on the Bird campaign staff. One school argued the campaign had achieved its main goal - getting the 1994 Republican gubernatorial primary to be a big story in the newspapers - and that the campaign should work at making it an even bigger story. One idea was to try to make it appear that Mike's threat to punch Bruce Benson "right in the nose" was planned rather than a loss of personal control. The way to do this would be to have Mike Bird



constantly repeat the statement: "Once all the Republicans in Colorado hear about all the dirty tricks Bruce Benson has been pulling, they'll want to punch him in the nose too!"

It also was argued that the "chicken" story, which had garnered so much publicity for the Bird campaign, should be kept alive. The way to do this was to replace the "chicken," a symbol which the Bird campaign had nothing to do with creating, with a "duck," a symbol which the Bird campaign could claim as its own. The "duck" idea was nicely summarized in a Bird campaign memorandum humorously entitled: "ONCE A CHICKEN, NOW A DUCK!" The memo read:

"The Republicans are not going to beat Roy Romer by ducking every punch. So far, Bruce Benson has ducked every punch that has come his way. He ducked competing for delegates at the precinct caucuses. He ducked competing for the votes of the Republican Party faithful at the Republican State [Assembly]. He ducked more than 30 candidate debates and forums. He ducked meeting the voters one-on-one and ran TV ads instead."

"Ducking and hiding like that is not the way to win elections. It certainly will not beat Roy Romer in November."

"There's been a lot of talk about the 'chicken' in this campaign. The problem with the 'chicken' is that no one knows who it is or whom it is supporting for governor. I [Mike Bird] think it's time to replace the 'chicken' with a 'duck' - a 'duck' who symbolizes every challenge Bruce Benson has ducked since the gubernatorial election campaign began. And no one will have to wonder where the 'duck' comes from or who it is supporting for governor. The 'duck' comes from Mike Bird, who faces challenges rather than ducking them."<sup>10</sup>

One of the major arguments for adopting the "duck" was its relationship to the word "punch," as in "ducking a punch." News reporters and other close observers of the primary election might conclude that Mike Bird had made his "punch in the nose" comment intentionally so as to pave the way for introducing the "duck" into the campaign. If the "duck" idea was adopted, at future debates at which

Benson did not appear Bird could place a large stuffed duck on the empty chair with the "Benson" sign on it.

The "duck" suggestion obviously represented high-risk politics. The press might regard it as "more silliness" and make a joke of it rather than take it seriously. On the other hand, it was now only nine days or so before primary election day, and the responsibility of keeping the election "big in the newspapers" rested firmly on the shoulders of the Bird campaign. The news media had certainly covered the "chicken." Maybe they would give equal attention to the "duck."

After the "duck" memo had circulated throughout Bird for Governor headquarters, Mike Bird met with his campaign staff to resolve the question of where the campaign should go during the final ten days before election day. After a lengthy discussion, Bird decided not to act on the suggestion that he replace the "chicken" with a "duck." It was Bird's feeling that the fireworks from the previous week were generating questions at candidate forums and on talk shows that gave him the opportunity to quietly repeat his "dirty tricks" charges against Bruce Benson in a "gubernatorial" way. He felt it was better to go after Benson in this manner rather than using the previous strategy of hurling "charges" and "challenges" at Benson at candidate forums backed up with scathing press releases.

This decision had an immediate impact on the newspaper and television coverage of the campaign. Except for criticizing Benson for spending so much money in his effort to win the governorship, Bird laid off on Benson during the taping of a Colorado PBS (Public Broadcasting System) television debate on Friday, July 29, 1994. Adding to the pressure for Bird not to attack Benson was Don Kinney, the host of the television debate, who specifically asked that the candidates refrain from any attacks on each other.

Although the PBS debate taping was well-attended by leading Colorado newspaper reporters, some of whom questioned the candidates during the debate, there was only minor coverage of the debate in the next day's newspapers. The Associated Press story described the debate

as "lacking...fireworks."<sup>11</sup>

The "chicken" and the "punch in the nose" thus were quickly forgotten by the Colorado news media. The political reporters and columnists turned their attention to a new subject - the large amount of money that was being spent in the Republican gubernatorial primary.

### **Notes To Chapter 20:**

1. Campaign staff memorandum to Mike Bird, 25 July 1994.
2. See Chapter 19, 252-255.
3. Personal recollection of Mike Bird, conversation with the author, Colorado Springs, 27 July 1994.
4. John Sanko, "Bird gets steamed when chicken gets his goat," *Rocky Mountain News*, 27 July 1994, 4A. See also Jennifer Gavin, "Bird assails Benson over 'dirty tricks,'" *Denver Post*, 27 July 1994, 1B. For partial word-by-word coverage, see Carl Hilliard, "The great chicken-suit debate," *Boulder Daily Camera*, 30 July 1994, 14A. The most complete account of the KVOR radio debate appeared in the *Colorado Statesman*, which obtained a tape of the broadcast from the radio station. See Leslie Jorgensen, "Republican roosters Bird and Benson scratch and scrap!" *Colorado Statesman*, 29 July 1994, 7. The author also worked from his own tape recording of the KVOR candidate debate.
5. Angela Dire, "GOP feud almost gets physical," *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, 28 July 1994, B1. For other "second day" stories on the KVOR radio debate, see John Sanko, "Bird's feathers are still ruffled," *Rocky Mountain News*, 28 July 1994, 8A, and Jennifer Gavin, "Fowl words ruffle candidates' feathers," *Denver Post*, 28 July 1994, 3B.
6. See Chapter 15, 175-181.
7. John Sanko, "Gubernatorial hopefuls spar on talk radio show, but no blows are thrown," *Rocky Mountain News*, 29 July 1994. For

additional material on the KOA radio debate, see Leslie Jorgensen, "Republican roosters Bird and Benson scratch and scrap," Colorado Statesman, 29 July 1994, 7. The author listened to the debate on a car radio while riding as a passenger from Denver to Colorado Springs and took extensive notes.

8. Peter Blake, "Bird still boiling over chicken attack," Rocky Mountain News, 29 July 1994, 5A.

9. Raymond McCaffrey, "Gubernatorial candidates cry fowl play as race is sidetracked," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 29 July 1994.

10. Mike Bird for Governor campaign memorandum, "Notes: 'Once A Chicken, Now A Duck!'" written approximately 29 July 1994.

11. Associated Press report, "Benson defends war chest in GOP candidates' debate," Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, 30 July 1994, B1. See also Jennifer Gavin, "Governor hopefuls debate," Denver Post, 30 July 1994, 3B. John Sanko, "Warning from Bird: Beware the running of the 'hogs,'" Rocky Mountain News, 30 July 1994. The debate was scheduled to play the following Wednesday, 3 August 1994, on educational television in Colorado, KRMA Channel 6 in Denver and KTSC Channels 8 and 15 in Pueblo-Colorado Springs.