

Robert D. Novak

THE SHIFTY RICHARD GEPHARDT

The K-car congressman retooled himself for his 1988 presidential drive and he's not likely to change models as the House Democrats' new majority leader. His style may not be racy, but his interior is showroom clean.

Richard A. Gephardt had been all but invisible in Washington for over a year, dating from the collapse of his 1988 presidential campaign to his elevation to the House majority leadership. That posed a question: Was he undergoing yet another retooling?

No, an all-new '89 Gephardt model was not being prepared behind the closed doors of his political garage. He is still basically the '88 model, safely liberal on nearly all litmus issues where a Democrat must be liberal and bearing not much resemblance to the 35-year-old social conservative who arrived in Washington as a freshman congressman in 1977. When comprehensive retooling for his presidential campaign did not impress the Iowa customers, it was topped off early last year by a radical change in style—to populistic economic nationalism—to make him marketable.

Gephardt is sticking with that. In his year out of the spotlight, he has been learning a little Japanese, refining his formulations, and preparing himself for what he believes is a great test of survival for the United States. There was no secret that he was also getting ready for the 1992 presidential election, honing arguments that worked well in 1988 until he ran out of money, and making sure this time that he would have an ample war chest.

But plans for 1992 were shelved by the chaos in the House Democratic leadership that has resulted in Gephardt's unscheduled election as majority leader (though his staunchest supporters insist that another race for the White House lies somewhere in the future). As majority leader, he will no longer enjoy the unrestricted freedom of a private member to pursue the theme of economic nationalism that he feels is central to the survival of his par-

ty and, indeed, his nation. Even so, no previous leader of the House of Representatives has been so tightly bound to a single issue. At the same time, few have been so ambivalent about their ideological base.

There is something elusive about this lifelong politician, still boyishly red-haired and freshly scrubbed at forty-eight. His earnestness as a 30-year-old alderman in St. Louis earned him the enduring label of "Little Dickie Do-Right." He was not then and is not now one of the boys. "Not a guy for pizza and beer," says a colleague on the House Ways and Means Committee. Yet his quick rise to authority in the House was powered not only by his presumed invulnerability to the current ethical inquisition but also by a hardness of purpose behind that bland facade.

Nowhere is that hardness more evident than in his changed outlook toward abortion. A Baptist married to

a Catholic, Gephardt through his first four terms was as pro-life as any member of Congress. Contending that life "begins with conception," he told the House a few weeks after being sworn in: "The Declaration of Independence asserts that 'all men are created equal.' It follows that a person becomes such when he is created and that, in my opinion, is the factual point when life begins."

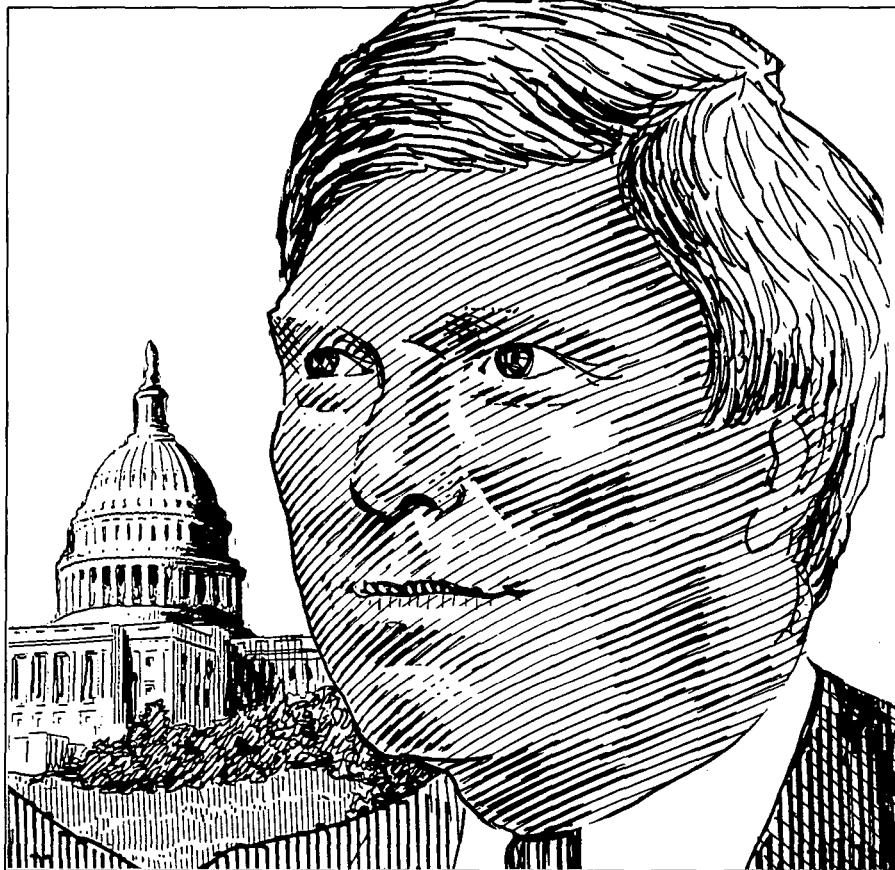
Nearly ten years later, Gephardt withdrew his longtime support for the pro-life constitutional amendment. "I've not changed my beliefs on abortion," he insisted. Then why change his position? A matter of "mechanics," he said. There is no "clear consensus in the country or the Congress to initiate an amendment." Asked to respond to complaints from the St. Louis Catholic Archdiocese that "we feel disappointed and betrayed," Gephardt cited his 70 percent re-election victory in the election imme-

diately following his shift as popular validation for his new position.

He has continued to vote against federal financing of abortions for the poor, most recently last year when the House voted to bar locally raised District of Columbia funds. But in his campaign for President, he vowed never to veto abortion-funding. Nor did his name appear on the letter of pro-life Democrats to National Chairman Ron Brown, urging a change in national party policy. Rep. David Bonior of Michigan, then chief deputy majority whip who in almost all other respects is far more liberal than Gephardt, signed it. Why not Gephardt? Because a pro-life position on abortion is as poisonous for an ambitious Democrat today as a pro-choice position is for a Republican. Bonior's pro-life position may not account for his poor showing in a race for majority whip on the day Gephardt was elected majority leader, but it certainly didn't help.

Gephardt is not unique in inching leftward as prospects for advancement loomed. Both Jim Wright and Tom Foley were markedly more centrist in their voting records a decade earlier than on the day each was elected Speaker. What makes Gephardt unusual is the thoroughness of his conversion. It is truly as though the middle-roading congressman, who by dint of hard work had made his way to election as chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, decided that if he were to be the first sitting House member elected President since James Garfield, he would need a top-to-bottom retooling to create a 1988 presidential model.

Nowhere was his shift more thorough than on national defense issues. In a two-man debate at Des Moines in the summer of 1987, Michael Dukakis took Gephardt by surprise in recounting some of Gephardt's old congressional votes: in favor of the neutron bomb, the MX missile, the B-1 bomber,



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and the Strategic Defense Initiative. Gephardt defended nothing. In fact, his more recent votes were against the contras, for the nuclear test ban, against chemical weapons, against SDI. As calculated by the American Security Council, his defense rating was 90 percent in 1982, zero in 1988. "On any issue," Gephardt told Dukakis in Des Moines, "I'd rather change and be right than be rigid and wrong." This year for the first time he voted, along with only eighty other House members, for the Congressional Black Caucus budget radically reducing defense spending.

The change is not limited to abortion or national defense. Tuition tax credits for parochial schools: formerly supported, now opposes. Department of Education: formerly opposed, now supports. Increase in the minimum wage: formerly opposed, now supports. The minimum wage flip-flop was consistent with a general move toward pro-labor positions. His lack of interest in tax reform after co-sponsoring the pioneer Democratic bill with Sen. Bill Bradley coincided with organized labor's hostility, although Gephardt never fully accepted, as Bradley did, the tradeoff of lower tax rates for the rich in return for repeal of special tax benefits. At the height of the tax reform fight in July 1986, Gephardt accused President Reagan of being "severely misguided about the whole idea of tax reform" in wanting a top rate of 28 percent.

But it was Gephardt who seemed confused. In 1981, he broke party ranks to support the Reagan tax cut. In 1984, he was pressing—even before Walter Mondale—for a massive tax increase. Missing the entire political rationale of tax reform, he declared after Mondale's defeat: "I think it is very hard to have tax reform unless you have the sweet-coating of deficit reduction." On the campaign trail in 1987, he defended the 1981 tax cut as preventing a worse recession and prophesied that Dukakis's implied support for higher taxes might make him another Mondale.

His overall voting record, as rated by the American Conservative Union, hovered around 33 percent in the late seventies but slipped to zero in 1986. His liberal rating, evaluated by the Americans for Democratic Action, averaged around 50 percent in the 1970s but rose as high as 85 percent in 1983 and was 75 percent last year.

That 1988 performance was marred in the eyes of the ADA only by his anti-abortion vote and his support of the death penalty for drug dealers. On the other issues measured by the ADA—welfare, civil rights, defense spending, South Africa, gay rights, female rights—Gephardt voted the straight liberal line. Also included in the ADA rating was support for a proposal, defeated in the House, to put a seven-day wait-

ing period on handgun purchases, with ineligible purchasers blacklisted by the federal government. That was the belated finishing touch in Gephardt's retooling. As recently as February 22, 1987, the day he formally announced his presidential candidacy, he declared opposition to further gun controls: "I'm for leaving it the way it is."

This course led to tough anti-Gephardt commercials in 1988 accusing him of flip-flopping. But he doesn't explain his transformation as a conversion to a higher truth. "My basic outlook is unchanged," he told me the

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day before his election as majority leader. "It never has changed."

The retooled Gephardt set out for Iowa in 1987 with the gritty work ethic that has characterized his entire life, determined to spend more time there than any other candidate. Not only his tactics but his basic campaign speech conveyed that message. "Ronald Reagan made us feel good," he told Iowans. "Now we must be good." In other words, work harder!

The dogs—those in Iowa, anyway—were turning up their noses at that dog food. I vividly recall a dreary campaign Sunday in the summer of 1987 when Gephardt tried to persevere through the torment of Iowa retail politics, seeking to sell himself to doctrinaire liberal activists in groups of not more than twenty. At one stop, a grim-faced harri- dan asked his position on national defense. When Gephardt obligingly replied he would cut spending, she bristled and snapped: "Cut it? I want it eliminated!"

With his Iowa poll ratings vegetating at the five percent level as 1988 began, and the political insiders consigning his campaign to the scrap heap, an event that goes to the heart of Dick Gephardt saved his candidacy and arguably his future in national politics. This was the radical styling change that made the '88 model marketable.

The memorable nub of his new speech and his new television commercial was a demand that South Korea remove tariffs that he said lifted the price of a Chrysler K-car there to \$48,000. "If they refuse," Gephardt added, "they are going to leave the table wondering how they are going to sell a Hyundai in America for \$48,000 a copy." His speeches blasted "the big grain companies and food companies,"

OPEC, and the editorial writers of the *Wall Street Journal* and other papers. "Unfair trade practices [by foreign countries] do not lower the standard of living of economists; and the editorial board of the *Washington Post* does not have to worry about its jobs being shipped abroad," he said. His own advisers privately described this as an appeal to people who are losers and are afraid of being losers, two groups which in combination compose a considerable portion of Democratic primary voters.

The dogs loved that dog food. His

"new approach" resurrected his campaign, won the Iowa caucuses, and might well have won the nomination had he not run out of money. His supporters believe he would have been elected President against George Bush, and there is no sign Gephardt disagrees. Bill Carrick, an experienced Democratic professional operative who managed Gephardt's presidential campaign, believes he is the first Democrat in a generation with an economic program that appeals to Joe Sixpack.

But for the first time in his career, the liberal news-media pack turned against Gephardt. "Everything about Gephardt's plodding political career and his bland personality suggests that his new-found progressive-populist pas-

sion is phony," stormed *New Republic* editor Michael Kinsley. "But even if the passion is sincere, the populism is a fraud." The *Washington Post's* columnists also unloaded broadsides on Gephardt. "He has fine-tuned the art of demagoguery," wrote veteran financial columnist Hobart Rowen. The newspaper's book critic, Jonathan Yardley, called Gephardt the Artificial Man and compared him with Bill McKay, the protagonist in the 1972 film *The Candidate*. Political columnist Richard Cohen sneered that "Righteous Richard" had become "Demagogue Dick."

Gephardt, who is remarkably affable in the face of most criticism, to this day burns over media criticism that his populist surge in Iowa was the creation of speechwriter Bob Shrum and media consultant David Doak. He rejects as "silly" the notion that "handlers" restyled him. With no little justification, he defends the Hyundai speech as a refinement of what he had been saying for years. What Shrum and Doak contributed was advice not to worry about offending a few people.

Indeed, Gephardt's Hyundai speech was grounded on beliefs about international competition more rigid than his positions on other issues. He had long since embraced the radical farm plan by Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa that would subsidize American farmers by keeping out foreign competition. "The free market is not sacred," he has said, calling for penalties against "countries that violate international labor agreements." Like many Japan-bashers, he is fonder of Japanese practices than free traders. "America has to become more like Japan," he has said (adding that "Japan has to become more like Ameri-



ca"). He has gone out of his way to be able to recognize a few words and phrases in Japanese "because the Japanese are great at learning our language."

Gephardt's stylistic change in Iowa is described by friends in pop sociological terms as his father's worldview winning out over his mother's.

Loreen Gephardt, a legal secretary and devout Baptist, inculcated in her son the doctrine that all good things will come to those who work hard enough. As he worked his way through Northwestern University (where he was student body president) and the University of Michigan Law School, joined an establishment St. Louis law firm, became an alderman, was sent to Congress at age thirty-five, and was elected chairman of the Democratic Caucus after serving four terms, it certainly seemed that Loreen's formula had succeeded. So why shouldn't it mean that her son's early bird announcement for the presidency and tireless work would also send him to the White House?

But the late Lou Gephardt experienced a different world. Farming in Missouri and hating every unprofitable minute of it, he came to St. Louis to sell life insurance and was none too successful at that either. Forced to support his family by selling milk door-to-door, he strained his back and suffered a permanent disability. Life is not always so sweet for those not privileged, Lou learned, and his son was rediscovering that truth as his presidential campaign went nowhere. Although described as a pinstripe populist, he had enough personal experience to stand with the losers of the world against the winners.

To do that, Gephardt employed a little political license in his Hyundai speech. The cost of a K-car in Seoul is more like \$38,000 than \$48,000. More to the point, heavy Korean taxation means even domestic cars don't cost much less. Similarly, when Gephardt at the same time claimed that an Apple computer costing \$1,500 in the U.S. costs \$3,000 in Japan because of "unfair trade practices," he received a quick rebuttal from the head of Apple Computer in Japan for displaying "a modicum of ignorance."

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The computer costs more in Japan not because of unfair trade practices but because Japanese-language word processing is much more complicated and the company chooses to match rather than undercut the prices set by the competition.

Adjusting facts to fit theories is congenial for politicians, but Gephardt has been especially prone to the practice. A presidential fund-raising letter over his signature declared: "The Reagan Administration has cut aid to veterans while more Vietnam veterans have committed suicide than were killed in the war." That perpetuated a flagrant, widely disseminated falsehood that should have been caught by Gephardt, who reviews all mail going

out over his signature. According to a 1983 government study, 9,200 Vietnam vets had committed suicide, compared to 58,000 American soldiers killed in the war. The Gephardt campaign acknowledged and apologized for the error when it was pointed out, but no retraction was sent to the mailing list.

That is minor league deception for House Democrats stunned by the disgrace of Jim Wright and Tony Coelho. The near-consensus selection of Gephardt as majority leader was prompted

Shearson Lehman, and RJR Nabisco.

He is the leading House member on the PAC circuit, with a first-place \$612,854 reported for his congressional campaign last year. The contributors read like the Fortune 500: Hughes Aircraft, TWA, Owens-Illinois, Heublein, Anheuser-Busch, Bristol-Myers, Allstate, RJR Nabisco, Grumman, J. C. Penney, Chrysler, United Airlines, Philip Morris, Allied-Signal, Texas Air, Ralston Purina, American Airlines, Exxon, Transamerica, Boeing, Drexel Burnham, AT&T, and many, many more. Gephardt does not follow the egregious congressional practice of hoarding unspent campaign funds; he has only \$1,000 left over.

Gephardt's continuing popularity with corporate contributors after his corporate-bashing rhetoric adds to his ambiguity as a political figure, but the same elusiveness applies to his personality. He is a man whom most of his colleagues find difficult to dislike, though he turns off some committed liberals. "He seems disengaged from what you're telling him," one corporate lobbyist, who happens to be a fervent Democratic activist, told me, "like he's thinking back to some Baptist Sunday school class." Rep. Charles Rangel of New York, a senior Democratic colleague on the House Ways and Means Committee, makes no secret of his astonishment that Gephardt ever was elected caucus chairman, much less majority leader.

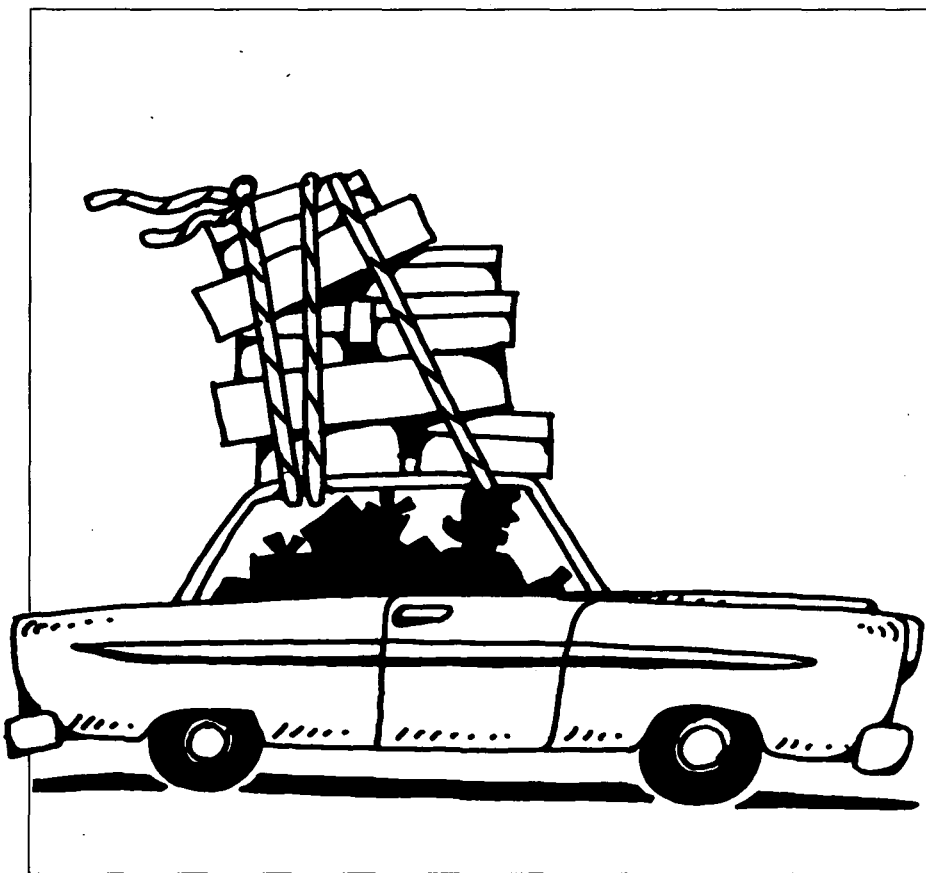
The key, apart from Gephardt's presumed invulnerability to the ethics police, is his skill in harmonizing differing viewpoints. That was most apparent in his effort to work out a Gramm-Rudman deficit-cutting act that Democrats could support (a labor his defenders say prevented him from participating more actively in the 1986 tax reform fight). The *Washington Post*, which was not at all pleased by his campaign performance in 1988, commented editorially after his election as majority leader: "Mr. Gephardt had a mercifully brief and rather scratchy populist phase on trade and farm policy that coincided with the Democratic presidential primaries, but most of his career has been spent as a blender of divergent views; that is the skill on which he has mainly risen."

But that suggests the Hyundai speech was an aberration, and a talk with either Gephardt or his closest associates makes clear it was not. A hard-nosed economic nationalism is part of his political persona, and he will not abandon it because of his new role. "The Democrats and the country need a consensus—but one with an edge," he said. The edge is what Dick Gephardt preached on the campaign trail in Iowa, and that surely achieves no consensus—adding another contradiction to the new majority leader's list. □

by the perception that he had passed the magnifying glass inspection given a presidential candidate. Actually, the Gephardt campaign's financial operations were on the edge, in getting two unsecured loans from banks whose officials were associated with his campaign and in fudging the figures to pretend that his spending had not gone over legal limits in Iowa.

He clearly is no candidate for an Ethics Committee investigation. Unlike some prominent Democratic colleagues, Gephardt has not magically transformed himself into a millionaire while serving on the public payroll. He doesn't own a single share of stock or a bond, junk or otherwise. He recently sold his \$500,000 home in fashionable Great Falls, Virginia, to buy a \$350,000 house, relatively modest by Washington suburban standards, and sold his \$105,000 home in St. Louis to get an \$80,000 condo. The purpose of these transactions is to raise enough capital to send his eldest son, Matt, to Duke University (\$17,509 a year), a sacrifice that has drawn expressions of awe in the House Democratic cloakroom, where acquisitory greed has been the rule. The trading down in his two houses has given him a money-market nest egg of around \$125,000 to educate his three children, which he says is the extent of his net worth.

Clean though he is, Gephardt is not one of those congressmen who have foresworn speech honoraria or campaign contributions from political action committees (PACs). He reported \$32,421 in honoraria for 1988 (of which \$5,572 was contributed to charity to put him under the limit), including payments by the Tobacco Institute, the Wine Institute,



Micah Morrison

THE YELLOWSTONE SCAM

The National Park Service cons the President, the press, and the public.

Mammoth Hot Springs

The historic fires of '88 were snuffed by the autumn snows nearly a year ago, but the smoke is thicker than ever. These days, a smoke screen is billowing out from here at the Yellowstone headquarters of the National Park Service (NPS), where federal officials, in a successful damage-control effort, have hoodwinked the President and the press, misled the public, and turned some of the biggest forest fires in recorded memory into nothing more than Mom Nature's little weenie roast.

It's a complicated story, and the NPS is not the only culprit. It's more a story of dishonor than of outright villainy, a story of the cowardly and arrogant behavior endemic to the bureaucratic mind. It's also a story of lazy journalism missing the story once again, crumbling beneath its own sloth and a kill-the-messenger campaign by the NPS. And it's a story of certain environmental groups enjoying a rather too cozy relationship with the Park Service. As a result, the public has been presented with a sanitized version of the fires of '88 and their political and economic repercussions—a curtain is being drawn around events that could reshape not only the boundaries of Yellowstone National Park but also the traditional culture of the American West.

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The NPS might as well adopt the tune "Don't Worry, Be Happy" as its anthem for 1989. The fires that swept across nearly one million of the park's 2.2 million acres and through surrounding forests are being portrayed as simply another turn in the ecological cycle. "Welcome to a Changing Yellowstone," announces a special supplement handed to every visitor entering

Micah Morrison, roving correspondent for The American Spectator, is working on a book about Yellowstone and the fires of 1988 for Harper & Row.

the park. "Yellowstone: A New Beginning" trumpets another glossy publication. The company holding the contract for Yellowstone's lucrative tourist trade, TW Recreational Services, produced a dreamy 17-minute videotape featuring idyllic landscapes, happy tourists, graceful elk and lumbering buffalo, sparkling streams, and, oh yes, about four minutes of heavily edited fire footage. Thousands of copies were mailed to travel writers and agents, along with copious printed material. The message: forget about the fires, come to Yellowstone.

According to numerous NPS publications and official reports, "meteorological events"—drought, heat, wind—were responsible for the fires. The NPS policy of letting naturally caused fires burn is defended. "Yellowstone: A New Beginning" explains that mapping inside the park's boundaries "indicates

that a maximum of 988,925 acres experienced some kind of burning. Of that, 562,350 acres was 'canopy burn,' meaning that the forest was blackened. Another 372,350 acres was 'surface burn,' meaning that only the forest underbrush burned, and most trees will not die. . . . Recovery has started and biologists say much of the burned area will be green and lush come spring." The publication features sixteen color photos, only two of which show burned forest areas.

The news from the NPS gets better. There is, for example, the case of the lodgepole pines and their heat-sensitive, seed-releasing serotinous cones—cited in virtually every media report. Lodgepole pines form approximately 80 percent of the park's trees. Thankfully, according to the NPS, the "vast forest of lodgepole pines are fire tolerant. Fires caused many cones to open

and release their seeds; preliminary surveys at several sites in the park revealed that within a few days after the fire, densities of new seeds on the ground ranged from 50,000 to one million per acre (which equals one to twenty seeds per square foot). Yellowstone's forests have regenerated countless times and are well on their way to doing so again."

With fire heat estimated as high as 1000° Fahrenheit on the surface, some biologists have expressed concern about soil sterilization. Not so, says the NPS. "Soil surveys have shown that no more than one-tenth of one percent of the park received severe enough burn intensity to kill the roots, rhizomes, bulbs, and seeds that lie a few inches under the surface. . . . The fire released nutrients that will enrich the soils, further promoting growth." As for the animals, the NPS reports that "mammal populations sustained only small losses." Humanoids, too, are not abandoning Yellowstone. In June, park officials announced that spring visits were up 23 percent over the previous year.

The only sobering note in all this good cheer, and it is a note sounded over and over, is the role of those damn reporters. "Enormous public confusion resulted from hasty reports in the media," notes one park document. There was "frequent and unfortunate oversimplification and exaggeration," says another. Park Superintendent Robert Barbee has appeared in Washington and a number of European capitals with the message that the media distorted the Yellowstone fires. Apparently, the only group he hasn't met with is local residents.

When the park launched a May public relations blitz, the media, chastened and apparently unwilling to do any digging on their own, trumpeted the NPS line. "Yellowstone Lives!" announced *U.S. News & World Report*; "From Yellowstone Ashes, New Life



WIDE WORLD PHOTOS