

friends creep in to warm themselves by the fire, which is already suffusing the room with a pleasant, smoky smell.

Senator John Chafee of Rhode Island stops by, saying he wants to discuss the order of business for the day. "It's a hard life," he muses, waiting to be escorted into the inner sanctum. "I don't begrudge him the extra pay he gets." Dole, meanwhile, squeezes in a couple of calls, the first to George Mitchell, the former Senate majority leader. "I just wanted to thank you for all your courtesies." As the conversation turns to the coming Presidential campaign, he chuckles and bounces happily in his swivel chair. "Yeah, well, Cheney dropped out. Kemp's getting nervous. Ain't anybody left but me and Filbert," he says, referring to Senator Phil Gramm of Texas. He takes a call from Ernest Gallo. ("Better talk to him. Guy sent me some wine.") Then it's over to the Rayburn room for a quickie TV interview with WMUR of Manchester, N.H. "New Hampshire's been ahead of the game for a decade!" he tells viewers. "It's Washington that's finally caught up!"

Dole does not come across as a conviction politician, a critic says. He acts and talks as if he's giving color commentary in a football game.

for one on the Committee on Foreign Relations, Dole barks: "Doesn't he want to travel?"

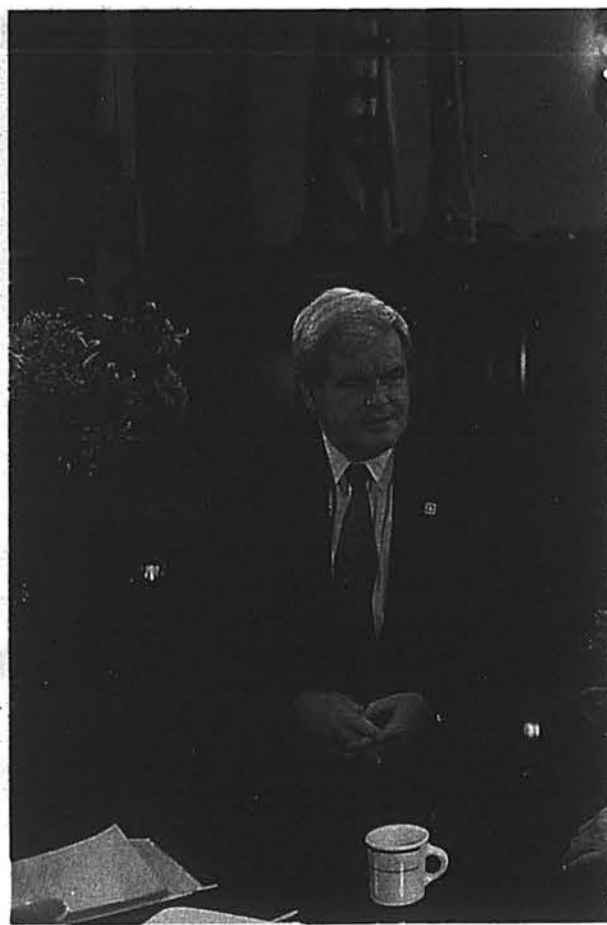
Heading over to the Senate floor to read his elegantly scripted opening statement, Dole notices that the plaque on his door has been changed from "Office of the Republican Leader" to "Office of the Majority Leader." He scowls. "I wanted Republican leader," he says. "I told 'em not to change it. People don't know what majority leader means. They know what Republican leader means."

The title means many things to Dole: listener, arbiter, deal maker and party conscience, to name a few. But this year, more than anything else, it means one more shot at the Presidency. Without having even formally declared his candidacy, he has arrived with amazing speed at what looks like the verge of the nomination. At age 71, he now sees everything breaking his way. Dan Quayle and Jack Kemp have dropped out, leaving — for now — only Senator Gramm and Lamar Alexander, the former Education Secretary, as serious rivals. In the most recent Times-Mirror poll, taken in mid-February, 49 percent of those asked said Dole was their first choice, followed by Gramm at 13 percent and Alexander at 4 percent.

"In a certain sense, the campaign is Dole's to lose," says William Kristol, chairman of the Project for the Republican Future. "You can argue that his support is soft. But you can't totally discount the brute facts of public opinion. Elections are basically popularity contests. He could front-run all the way to the Presidency."

Colleagues attribute much of Dole's resurrection as a Presidential contender to the advent of Newt. Dole, once seen as too old, too nasty and too much a creature of Congress, now seems a kindly elder statesman compared with Newt Gingrich, the House Speaker. "Bob Dole's time has uniquely come," says Senator Robert Bennett of Utah. "Only two years ago, I would have said — and was saying — he's too old, he's too old-fashioned, he's too tied to the processes of the Senate; that the country wanted someone fresh and new and vigorous. After 1994, I think we want somebody with a little gray in his hair; somebody who's not so manic, not solving everything immediately. Frankly, among the people I talk to, Newt scares them a little bit. Isn't there some wise old uncle who can put his arm around him and calm him down a bit? And the obvious candidate to take that role is Bob Dole."

But Dole is also a three-time loser in national campaigns, and there's no guarantee he'll succeed this time, either. As Linda DiVall, a G.O.P. poll-



ster, points out, Republican primary voters seem to like Dole but aren't particularly drawn to him. "One hundred percent of Republicans know Bob Dole," she says. "He's been in Congress for 34 years. He's obviously the front-runner. He has terrific name ID. He's on the national news every night. Yet only 40 percent are for him. Why is that?" Says a Dole strategist: "He's got to change perception, which is tough. He's got to provide new information about himself."

Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi, the new majority whip, concurs. "It will be very interesting to see how he packages himself. This is something Bob really needs to think about. It is absolutely essential that he have a theme. One of the worst things George Bush ever did was to make fun of the 'vision thing.' Bob needs to think... about why he'd like to be President, and what he would do once he got there. And he needs to tell the American people."

Dole has thought about the "vision thing," but what he has to say is rather circular. He says he wants to be the kind of leader who leads; his battle cry, as leader, will be leadership at all costs. And when it comes to outlining a theme, he is vague and elliptical.

"There does have to be a message," he says. "And I think, you know, message is fine... It just seems to me it all boils down to leadership. Not that I'm such a great leader. But I think I'm at least



A lot to smile about: The majority leader addresses the House subcommittee on telecommunications.

Later, over a light lunch of bean soup, corn bread and more skim milk, Dole meets with his Senate leadership team to hash out committee assignments. "Santorum to Rules. Would that make him happy? ... " "How many Budget slots we got? Who wants Budget? Really wants it bad? ... " "We got a spot on Indian Affairs. ... " Dole listens impassively, his head tipped to one side. "Take out Warner," he declares in a flat, cutting voice. "Coverdell's not going to get it. Take him off. Take Ashcroft off. Bond's on Small Business. I'd like to get Grams in there. He pleads with me, the poor guy, every time I go up there." Told that one Senator is refusing to give up his slot on the Small Business Committee

creature of Congress, now seems a kindly elder statesman compared with Newt Gingrich, the House Speaker. "Bob Dole's time has uniquely come," says Senator Robert Bennett of Utah. "Only two years ago, I would have said — and was saying — he's too old, he's too old-fashioned, he's too tied to the processes of the Senate; that the country wanted someone fresh and new and vigorous. After 1994, I think we want somebody with a little gray in his hair; somebody who's not so manic, not solving everything immediately. Frankly, among the people I talk to, Newt scares them a little bit. Isn't there some wise old uncle who can put his arm around him and calm him down a bit? And the obvious candidate to take that role is Bob Dole."

But Dole is also a three-time loser in national campaigns, and there's no guarantee he'll succeed this time, either. As Linda DiVall, a G.O.P. poll-

34 TOP: NIGEL PARRY/C.P.I., FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. LEFT AND CENTER: VINCENT J. MUSI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Opening day of the 104th Congress: Next to Gingrich, Dole seems like a kindly elder statesman.

an inch or two above the others. And that's going to be our message. That, reining in Government and all that other stuff.

"The country, in 1996, as it gets ready to go into the next century, may be looking for some calm, studied, reasoned, seasoned, tested leadership. Not radical, but conservative and willing to work with Congress. Bob Dole has been there, he's been on the firing line, he's been tested, he's provided leadership... Others may raise the age factor, but I don't think that's going to be a problem."

For now, Dole is offering himself more or less as he is — the quintessential Washington insider, absorbed less with the poetry of politics than with the plumbing. His agenda, simply stated, is the ethic of the deal: tackling problems as they land on his desk, cobbling together solutions. "Takes a lot of time, a lot of patience, a lot of listening," he says with satisfaction. "Lotta meetings. Lotta sitting around with people. Sometimes you have to compromise."

He allows a frown to settle on his brow. "I know that's a bad word to some people," he says. "Oh, Bob Dole, he'll compromise. He'll make a deal. Well, in my view, that's not a fault. You retain your principles and try to work something out. That

doesn't mean when you get into the leadership position you suddenly start compromising. But you do understand that you've lost a little bit."

Dole admits readily, even happily, that he can't compete with Gingrich as a big-picture communicator. "Sometimes I kind of wonder: 'Well, jiminy, why can't I think like this guy? Is there something wrong with me?' Then I think, 'Well, maybe not.'" Like a British Tory rather than an American conservative, Dole distrusts visions and visionaries. He views Gingrich's effusions with amused skepticism. "You can go out there and say, 'I've got nine ideas.' Well, maybe one of them is good. We're the party of ideas, but that doesn't mean every idea is a good idea." Dole drops an eyebrow. "You hear Gingrich's staff has these five file cabinets, four big ones and one little tiny one. No. 1 is 'Newt's Ideas.' No. 2, 'Newt's Ideas.' No. 3, No. 4, 'Newt's Ideas.' The little one is 'Newt's Good Ideas.'"

Indeed, Dole's model for the Presidency is far removed from the third-wave, futurist fantasies that Gingrich has come to represent. "I've always thought about Eisenhower as my hero," Dole says. "He was a Republican, but sort of above it all. Not always, but most of the time."

In the absence of an ideological message, Dole bases his claim to leadership almost solely on his personal conviction, bordering on obsession, that he is the best qualified to run the country. "It's very difficult for him," says Senator Alfonse D'Aмато, a close friend in the Senate. "Again and again, he sees people not nearly as well prepared, not nearly as knowledgeable, go into that high office. Now, finally, his time has come. And he's ready to serve and to lead."

But Dole's brand of leadership begs several questions. Can this caustic Washington insider proffer any theme more galvanizing than his mastery of the Senate's intricate folkways? More important, will his pledges of competent leadership please both the suspicious right-wing ideologists he needs to win the Republican nomination and the more moderate voters whose support could sweep him into the White House?

Dole is certain he is up to the challenge. "I wouldn't do this unless I thought I could win," he says. "A lot of this '96 stuff is momentum, perception. And if we can put this thing together, I think we really are going to be the dominant player." He bounces forward on his toes, gripping his right hand with his left. "People are saying, 'It's your turn,'" he says. "Didn't know people took turns in this business. But there's a strong feeling in the Republican Party of when your time has come."

POSSESSING A VIBRANT VOICE AND HANDSOME face, Dole the elder statesman is in person a surprisingly elegant presence. Over the years, his

sharp features have grown more defined: his eyes lie deeper in their sockets and his nose juts forward in a strong curve. In public appearances, he clutches a pen in his clawlike right hand to warn off eager handshakers who have not noticed his withered arm as they crowd around him, clamoring for autographs. He responds patiently — "M'a little left-handed!" — and awkwardly signs with his left hand, a trick he learned after coming home to Russell, Kan., a badly wounded veteran of World War II. His recovery took three years, including seven operations and months in a neck-to-waist cast.

Dole is never more laconic than when he talks about the grenade explosion in the Po Valley in 1945 that broke his neck, paralyzed him for a year and left him reluctant to this day to look in the mirror. When asked about it, he gazes out a picture window, watching snowflakes coat the jumbled roofs and domes of Capitol Hill. "During the '88 campaign, people kept saying, you gotta talk about yourself," he says, finally. "Cause everybody out there in the audience has had a tough time. Well, that's hard for me to do. I don't know if it's generational. You don't want to get up and talk about yourself, how tough it was, how you had all these problems in the hospital. You can be too self-serving in this business. There's a balance there that I still haven't found."

The nation got its first look at Robert Joseph Dole in his 1976 Vice Presidential debate with Walter F. Mondale, during which he ranted about the "Democratic wars" of this century. In his 1988 Presidential campaign, he further reinforced that truculent impression by telling George Bush to "stop lying about my record" on the night



Getting her husband to talk about his war wound, says Elizabeth Dole, has mellowed him a bit.

he lost the New Hampshire primary. Today, Dole is working hard to shed the hatchet-man image: offering up his Senate conference room for use during the baseball strike negotiations,