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In the land of opportunity, the new Hummer H2 is built to protect our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of ... well, just about anything. For D.J. Ahrens, general manager at Bergstrom Cadillac-Hummer-Oldsmobile of Madison, nothing says "get the heck out of my way" quite like a Hummer.

First built in 1985 by AM General, the "High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle" (HMMWV), or "hum-vee," became popular in the 1990s, when it was featured widely on CNN during the Gulf War. Celebrities like Arnold Schwarzenegger made the first civilian-owned Hummer, the H1, a Hollywood prop. In 1999, General Motors seized on the popularity of the Hummer and negotiated a contract with AM General. They now make both the H1 and the newly released, more street-friendly H2 out of a new AM General-owned plant in Indiana.

According to Ahrens, whose dealership began selling Hummers in January, the H2 is a vast improvement over its predecessor, which was prohibitively loud and rode "rough."

"You can't drive down the highway and talk on the phone in that beast," he explained. The quieter, non-diesel H2, on the other hand, aims for a balance between the stark utility of the H1 and, well, the sport of its SUV contenders.

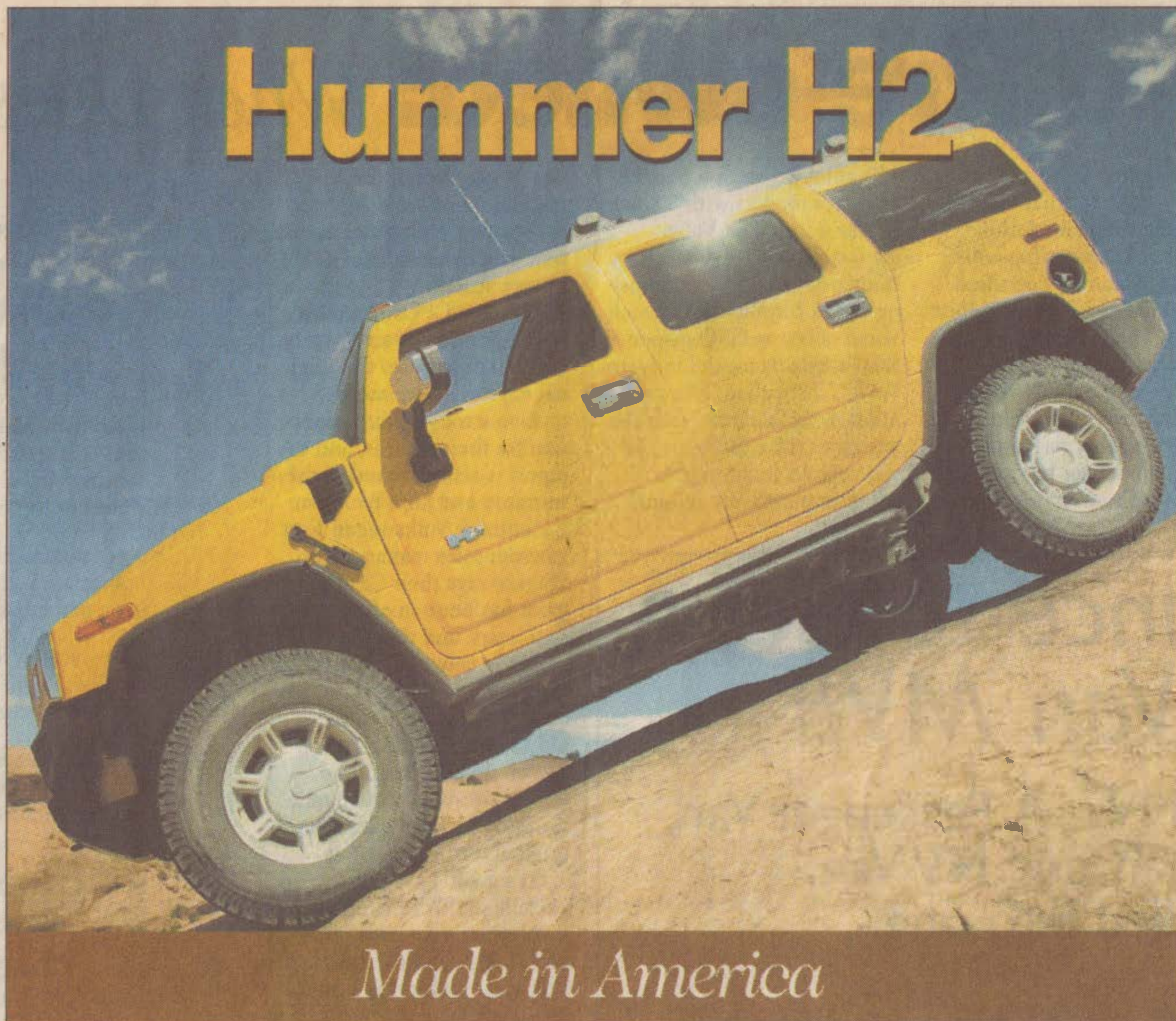
Indeed, the H2, sometimes called the Baby Hummer, forges a new path for luxury vehicles. While less than half the price of the H1, it still starts at around \$50,000 — add to

that features like the optional heated leather seats, high-tech audio system, dual-zone climate control and a power sunroof. Yet, while the H2 can hold six adults (one in the single third-row jump seat) to the H1's four, it has far less storage space than SUVs, mostly because the spare tire

takes up most of the back (and also impedes rear visibility).

Lest we forget its origins, the H2's more unique features still say "Desert Storm." These include an on-board air compressor to adjust wheel inflation, fog lamps, and, of course, the vertical windshield. With

just 10 inches of ground clearance, the H2 has a steel plate bolted to its belly to shield it from rough terrain. Like its predecessor, the H2 can ford deep water (up to 20 inches), climb 16-inch steps or rocks and even tackle a 40-degree slope. Still, with two child seat tethers standard in the



back seat, the H2 is likely not headed for combat anytime soon.

While a few inches narrower and 750 pounds lighter than the H1, the H2's stance is no less powerful. With a 316-horsepower, 6.0-liter V-8 engine and 360 pound-feet of torque, the H2 hardly says "suburban." And that edge, says Ahrens, is its main appeal.

Indeed, for most Hummer owners, the H2's off-road capabilities are of secondary importance. When asked what Hummers add to the daily commute that SUVs can't, Ahrens declares "uniqueness."

"You wouldn't believe the looks you get when you drive it. I've never seen the reaction I get when I drive a Hummer, it really stands out." The reaction is overwhelmingly positive, he insists, except for environmentalists.

Given the low gas mileage of the H2 (10 miles per gallon in the city and 13, at most, on the highway) environmentalists have something to criticize. While the H2 won't win any awards for environmental-friendliness, Ahrens shrugs, "It's what people want. And if people want it and they can afford it," he reasoned, "then who are [environmentalists] to say they can't have it?"

This appeal to rebelliousness, machismo and — above all, personal freedom is at the heart of the Hummer's popularity. Indeed, perhaps nothing is more patently and patriotically American than a car whose tagline promises "an incredible feeling of freedom" and the opportunity "to experience the world, and your place in it, like never before."