

"Live" with TAE

Dennis Miller

He's a Hollywood celebrity. And he's smart. He's one of the country's favorite comedians. And he's a conservative. Wipe that smirk off your face and meet a patriotic entertainer.

Last winter, while many Hollywood divas were protesting the war with Iraq, there was one incisive voice of dissent: that of increasingly conservative, former liberal Dennis Miller.

For almost 20 years, Miller has challenged audiences with his decidedly intellectual brand of comedy. Not since Mort Sahl in the 1950s has a comedian used politics, literature, and popular culture so astutely in his humorous commentary.

Dennis Miller first rose to national prominence in 1985 via "Saturday Night Live." He then began his own TV talk show, and later, the Emmy Award-winning HBO series "Dennis Miller Live," which lasted for nine years. He hit best-seller lists with published collections of his impassioned observational monologues, under the titles *The Rant Zone*, *I Rant Therefore I Am*, and *Ranting Again*. He spent two years providing commentary for "Monday Night Football," and is now featured on "Hannity and Colmes" on the Fox News Channel.

As this issue was going to press, the campaign in California to recall governor Gray Davis was in full swing. Miller's take on the situation: "Everybody in charge in this state is a Democrat. It's no longer the Andreas Fault, it's Gray Davis's fault."

TAE associate editor John Meroney and writer Patricia Beauchamp visited with Miller backstage just before an appearance on NBC's "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno."

TAE: Hillary Clinton has just sold hundreds of thousands of copies of her book *Living History*. What do you think of her success as an author?

MILLER: She's boring to me. And as for this "Draft Hillary" movement—I don't think it's ever going to happen. She doesn't make a move without consulting her old man, and as soon as she mentions the word "draft" to him, he's going to say, "Stay away from it."

TAE: How would Americans respond to Senator Clinton as a Presidential candidate?

MILLER: Forty percent of voters would probably support her. I'd like to think there's 60 percent who wouldn't. Most people know that the Clintons are just career politicians, but it's amazing to me that some people really believe in them. Bill and Hillary's marriage couldn't have been any more about convenience than if they'd installed a Slim Jim rack and Slurpee machine at the base of their bed.

TAE: Do you dislike Senator Clinton's political ideology, too?

MILLER: I have an across-the-board disapproval of her. In 1998, when Bill was first accused of having an affair with Monica Lewinsky, Hillary went on NBC's "Today" show and attributed the allegations to a "vast right-wing conspiracy." That seemed extremely stupid to me. Name the people. She can spend 30 years of her life apologizing for her husband's indiscretions if she wants to, but at the same time she shouldn't champion

herself as the ideal woman. In 1992, Hillary told the press, “I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas.” That statement really bugged me. She’s in essence as “cookie” as one can get because of the kind of treatment she’s accepted from her husband. I think most women would have said, “Quit screwing around on me or I’m out of here.”

TAE: What do you think of the Clintons reinventing themselves as New Yorkers?

MILLER: I view Hillary as an inverted carpetbagger. I’m convinced that Bill Clinton put her up there because he knew New York was a community property state, vis-à-vis divorce settlements.

TAE: Is it safe to say you were not impressed with how she handled 9/11?

MILLER: Well, Rudy Giuliani, who is often portrayed as an unfeeling, Hitler-like guy by the liberals, attended scores of memorial services for the victims. He exhibited great sympathy for people. Hillary, on the other hand, didn’t go to a single one until it became an issue and then I think she probably hit a couple just to get her record square. She didn’t belong in New York in the first place.

TAE: For bleeding heart liberals, the Clintons don’t seem to be very empathetic when it counts.

MILLER: The Clintons feel everyone’s pain—unless they caused it. Let’s ask Webster Hubbell if the Clintons feel his pain. He was in the blast site of the Whitewater scandal, so he had to go.

TAE: England put a woman in its top post back in 1979, when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. In the U.S. we’ve got women in the Senate, the House, and in high-ranking offices. There’s Condoleezza Rice, who’s national security advisor. Do you think America is ready for a woman President?

MILLER: Yes. I think Condoleezza Rice would make a great President. I hope she runs against Hillary. That would be my dream ticket in 2008: Hillary Clinton versus Condi Rice; an imagined track record versus a real track record.

TAE: What are your thoughts on the current state of Democratic candidates running for President?

MILLER: I haven’t seen a starting nine like this since the ’62 Mets. They lost 120 games. I’m praying they nominate Howard Dean, former governor of Vermont. As they say in the world of tennis, that’s a walkover. Al Sharpton doesn’t have a chance. Somewhere between the “R” and the “P” in the name Sharpton you should get the name Tawana Brawley out. And you should have to say it that quickly just to remind everybody about the divisiveness of that situation. Dick Gephardt seems like a decent man, but he suffers from a Dukakis-ian lack of charisma. Most politicians are transparent; he’s translucent.

TAE: What about North Carolina’s Senator John Edwards?

MILLER: There are enough litigious people in this country. I don’t need the Commander in Chief serving papers on our enemies: “You will be deposed, Mr. Hussein!”

TAE: Many Democrats were pleased with Senator Joe Lieberman’s performance as Al Gore’s running mate. What do you make of him as a Presidential candidate?

MILLER: Joe Lieberman has taken more “great stands” on issues than any man in the history of this country! He should realize that occasionally a great man lowers the other foot. If you’re going to threaten to walk down the reflecting pool and give a piece of your mind as a President, then you’ll have to do it every 20 years or so.

TAE: Democrats have a fondness for Massachusetts politicians. What about Senator John Kerry?

MILLER: I've met John Kerry and I don't think he wants the Presidency. If he did, he wouldn't have said that what we need now is not just a regime change in Iraq, but in the United States, too. That's a stupid play for a smart man. It reminded me of Gary Hart back in 1987 when he told the press to follow him and then got caught with Donna Rice. I think Kerry's statement was a subconscious way of pleading, "Get me out of here!" When you're running for President and it's the culmination of all your supposed dreams, it's tough to get yourself out of it. And you're thinking, "This is what I've always wanted, isn't it?" And then some deep unconscious alarm goes off. It says, "No, no! Wife has \$500 million! Have place on Nantucket! Get out now! Golf! No, no!" So you blow it up yourself.

TAE: Florida was a pivotal state in the last election, and now Senator Bob Graham is running. Do you think he'll get any traction?

MILLER: Bob Graham might be the smartest of them all, but it's just not going to happen for him. Two words why it's not going to happen: Bob Graham. I don't care if you're from the South. At some point, you have to be "somebody" from the South and he just doesn't cut that sort of swath.

TAE: Despite continued controversy, Rev. Franklin Graham refuses to back down from his argument that Islam is "a very evil and wicked religion." Do you agree with him?

MILLER: Graham puts himself in danger saying that about Islam because they have religious edicts called "fatwas." Ayatollah Khomeini put one on Salman Rushdie after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, calling for his murder. Besides, making across-the-board religious judgments about people just seems presumptuous and ill-informed.

TAE: Why do you think the U.S. has been targeted by terrorists?

MILLER: We're in Saudi Arabia and Osama bin Laden is repulsed by that. He believes we've sullied the most sacred spots in the Islamic world. He said that, and he's evidently a forceful enough speaker in those conclaves that he can turn young boys into monsters who go on suicide missions.

TAE: In April, actor Tim Robbins spoke to the National Press Club and described the various ways he feels he's been punished for speaking out against the war. He went on to say, "If you oppose this administration, there can and will be ramifications." Robbins and other prominent actors criticized for their anti-war views have even raised the specter of a new Hollywood "blacklist."

MILLER: That's folly. I don't see how that's manifested itself in Tim's life. He might have something to show us in five years if an actor of his great ability doesn't get work, but I don't believe that's going to happen. You can say whatever you want in this country, but Tim is in a business where one's grasp on the public's acceptance is so tenuous that any of us can be whacked in a moment. If I do poorly on two "Tonight Shows" in a row, I'm out the door. There are people who don't have careers because audiences don't like the way they look—so of course the public might not like you for what you stand for. It doesn't take much for somebody to click off and say, "I'm not going to spend the eight bucks tonight." To go to a movie, a person has to get up, put his clothes on, get in the car, drive to a crappy mall, and wait in line—he's looking for reasons not to go! All the average person needs is, "I don't like what that movie star believes." That guy is going to start watching movies at home instead of getting up and going to yours. My guess is that Tim Robbins will continue to work.

TAE: In spring of this year, Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines told a London audience, "We're ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas." This comment sparked a furor—people publicly destroyed their CDs and sales of the group's album dropped. In response to the backlash, the Dixie Chicks

turned it into a free speech issue, appearing in the nude on the cover of Entertainment Weekly with words such as “Proud American,” “Saddam’s Angels,” and “Free Speech” painted on their bodies. Do you think the public’s response to them is unfair?

MILLER: The Dixie Chicks got exactly what they deserved. In a time of war, to go on foreign soil and decry your President should probably cause a hue and cry. When it first happened, I thought, “I’m never going to buy another one of their albums.” And then I thought, “You know what, I’ve never bought one of their albums—I don’t like their music.”

TAE: Do you ever base what you say on how you think the public will react?

MILLER: I considered public reaction more when I was younger. When I was on “Saturday Night Live” the network censor would come up to me and say, “I don’t like that joke. It’s off,” I didn’t fight him. I’m just that sort of a pragmatist. I’m not willing to lose my job over a joke. Plus, I don’t fancy myself an artist. Hollywood is not a “sword from the stone” moment for me. I feel like I’m punching the clock at a job that I’m reasonably adept at and trying to take care of my family. These days, though, I tend to say pretty much what I think.

TAE: You make your living in a very volatile profession. Do you have a philosophy that helps keep you grounded?

MILLER: Jay Leno and I have the same approach to this business. We feel lucky we’ve got it, we work our asses off, and we try to let people know that we don’t take it that seriously. Show business is a freakish break. It’s an amazing confluence of events that affords you a life for which you should hit your knees every night and thank God that you’ve been blessed to be given. One of my favorite quotations is by “Dr. J” Julius Irving: “I live my life trying to never appear to be a small man.” That was so beautifully and succinctly eloquent to me, especially coming from a man who stands 6’8”—I know how he meant it.

TAE: In 2000, you beat out Rush Limbaugh for a spot on ABC’s “Monday Night Football.” What was that job like?

MILLER: It’s the best sports broadcasting job in the world. I was impressed when I got it because I’d never even been to a football game. Then here I was sitting in the booth on “Monday Night Football.” I did it for two years and was hired for a third, but when John Madden left Fox, I called Dan Fouts that day and said, “I bet you we get whacked within 48 hours.” It was 36. Look, there’s a big dog in every field and when he’s loose on the tundra and he’s feeding, you’d best not get in the way because you’ll catch a hoof. I’ve been on “Saturday Night Live” and “Monday Night Football.” Now I’m looking for something iconic to do on Wednesday.

TAE: What sportscasters do you most admire?

MILLER: I really admired Howard Cosell. He’s right up there with Lucille Ball and Johnny Carson as one of the greatest communicators I’ve ever seen on television. I was fascinated by his cadence, his meter. He was almost able to serve the language better because there wasn’t a physical element: Cosell wasn’t a good-looking man. In my book, he’s one of the top five broadcasters of all time.

TAE: Professional athletes seem to make headlines for crime and corruption as much as they do for home runs and touchdowns. Did your work on “Monday Night Football” give you an insight into why professional sports are plagued with such excesses?

MILLER: Any time you hand people who are in their early twenties \$10 million, you’re going to have some problems. By and large, I was impressed by how dedicated and charitable these guys were. We always read about the athlete with the gun who gets pulled over. But look, there are 50 players on a team, and there are 32

teams—about 1,500 players. Take any group of 1,500 men in that age bracket and I'll bet you that over the course of a year one of them gets pulled over for speeding and has cocaine. It's just the nature of the beast. Ninety-nine percent of those football players are some of the greatest guys I've ever met. A couple of them gave me a "screw you." But, you know what, a couple of them should have said that. I'd think I was a punk, too.

TAE: What news programs do you watch?

MILLER: I like Jon Stewart from "The Daily Show." I think he's quite brilliant. Chris Matthews was a bit of a McGuffin because we all thought he disliked liberals but it turns out he just disliked Clinton. Chris got all our hopes up. He turned Clinton into an asshole every night and now he's trying to do the same to Bush. I like Bill O'Reilly and his carnival barker approach to news.

TAE: And the big three—Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, and Peter Jennings?

MILLER: I have to give it to Tom Brokaw— at least he exhibits some human qualities. The other two guys are like Stepford anchors. Jennings seems to think he's out of an Ian Fleming novel. But my favorite newscaster is Brit Hume because he's so even-handed.

TAE: Shortly after 9/11, Bill Maher said, "We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly." In response, Sears and Fed Ex pulled their advertising from his program and later ABC cancelled his show. What do you think of the controversy over his comments?

MILLER: It's dangerous to try to look witty about something in the wake of the biggest tragedy in the history of this country. I couldn't put together a sentence for two weeks, much less something pithy. It's not a good idea to go on and right away try to make some "wise" remark when audiences aren't in a "wise" mood. The whole country was devastated. Bill now has himself another show. Tell that to Tim Robbins. I don't believe in a blacklist.

TAE: You once considered being a journalist. How did you go from that to comedy?

MILLER: An editor once told me he was going to pay me by the column inch so I opted to move in a different direction. Curiously enough, I ended up being the "Weekend Update" anchor on "Saturday Night Live," which is some bizarre alternative universe journalism job.

TAE: Do you have a routine that you go through when you're preparing your comedy?

MILLER: You mean besides passing a knotted cloth through my colon each morning at 8:30? I read the Drudge Report. Matt probably fancies himself as a latter day Walter Winchell, but he's not as mean as Winchell. I just like Drudge's eclectic accumulation of tidbits. The bulletin board he puts up is fascinating. He filters the kinds of news I'm interested in.

TAE: Many conservatives believe that Hollywood thinks heartland America is just flyover country. Are they correct?

MILLER: I'm hardly a gregarious man but the friends I have in Hollywood are by and large some of the nicest people I've ever met in my life. It's just that their attempts to be solicitous to the heartland sometimes are a little misguided and condescending. When I look at folks from the heartland I don't think, "Boy, are they missing it." I view them as the ones who are smart enough to know that going to Hollywood's not really a cool way to lead your life. They're put together well enough so that they never had to go solicit the approval of strangers to fill their self-esteem void.

TAE: Many of your show business colleagues have sharply criticized President Bush, but you like him. Why?

MILLER: He's much smarter than his enemies think he is. I think he's a genius. People whine about him getting into Yale—the way I see it, if your old man buys a building you should get into Yale! But I think he could have gotten into Yale on his own; he's a very smart man.

TAE: In your interview with Phil Donahue on MSNBC last winter, you said that one of the things you most admired about Bush was that he had stopped drinking at age 40.

MILLER: The fact that midway through his life, he realized he was drinking too much and screwing up and stopped it—that's more impressive than what college he attended. What he did is a fine accomplishment, and I think it's putting him in touch with his God.

TAE: Some of his critics say he's too vocal about his religious beliefs.

MILLER: In this messed up world, I like seeing my President pray. I don't think a person can get answers out of books anymore. This is an infinitely complex world and at some point one has to have faith in one's religion. I find it endearing that President Bush prays to God and that he's not an agnostic or an atheist. I'm glad there's someone higher that he has to answer to.

TAE: How do you think the country would have been different had Al Gore been President on September 11, 2001?

MILLER: Gore doesn't have a real sense of self. He probably would have invaded Afghanistan—but almost anyone would have done that. But go into Iraq? I doubt it. Hans Blix and the Scooby Doo van would still be driving around looking for weapons, like something in a Mack Sennett silent film. You could hear that music where Blix goes in the front door and the weapons come out the back. That's what I used to imagine when I saw Blix.

TAE: You've become more conservative over the years. How do you explain this shift?

MILLER: I'm not as sure of my guesswork anymore. To be on the Left, you have to be amazingly certain about things you're guessing at, and I felt like a phony. I was looking for ideas, and all I was getting from liberals was, "We'd like a little more of your money, and we're kind of reticent to protect you from bad guys." Really? That's all you're offering? I gotta go! I can't stay anymore. Also, when I kept hearing liberals equating Giuliani with Hitler—that's when I really left the reservation. Even before 9/11, I'd travel to New York and say, "Wow, this city certainly seems to be running better." Giuliani is the kind of leader I admire. When it's five degrees below zero and you arrest somebody to get him inside and off the street—that's not something Hitler would do. It made me realize that I was with the wrong group if that's what Hitler looked like to them.

TAE: Where do you see the danger in that?

MILLER: I always wondered how Hitler happened. I even went so far as to read William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. I read all 1,200 pages and at the end of it I remember thinking, "Yeah, but how does Hitler happen?" Part of it has to do with the Left mislabeling people as Hitler. It's like Pierce Brosnan at the end of the remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair*. He dressed everybody up in the same Bowler cap and overcoat, and then he walks right through the middle of them without being noticed. The Left is so busy saying John Ashcroft is Hitler, and President Bush is Hitler, and Rudy Giuliani is Hitler that the only guy they wouldn't call Hitler was the foreign guy with the mustache who was throwing people who disagreed with him into the wood-chipper.

TAE: When filmmaker Michael Moore won the Oscar for Best Feature Documentary for Bowling for Columbine, he took all of the other nominees on stage with him, and proceeded to make a statement about a “fictitious” Presidency and a “fictitious” war. Given your support of the President, this must have outraged you.

MILLER: The Oscars are pretty much the quint-essential American hood ornament, so if you’re a real iconoclast, you don’t show up at the ceremony. Eminem at least had the balls not to show at the Oscars because he disagreed with it. Michael Moore just seemed like a big sloppy angry guy to me. He thinks he’s more of a patriot than we are because he “questions” our government. That’s boring. My yawn gets so big that they almost want to assign it a hurricane name. For Moore to go so far around the Cape of Good Hope that he finds that America is the problem is tedious. We’re not perfect, but we’re not the problem. At the same time, I think we should fight to preserve a country where people such as Michael Moore get to miss the point as badly as he misses it.

TAE: In one of your rants, you argue that America is less tolerant today than ever before. Explain.

MILLER: It’s the conundrum of the closed-minded, “open” society. Everyone seems to have an agenda, and everyone is such a complete unyielding pain in the ass about it that we have a shrieking cacophony of heartfelt sentiment. We have the fascism of absolute freedom. Somehow, everyone thinks that his core beliefs should translate to the law of the land. My feeling is that my core beliefs shouldn’t go any further than the tips of my fingers, and maybe my children.

TAE: So you’re not planning a vacation in France anytime soon.

MILLER: Absolutely not. The French have never had a backbone and that’s fine because they’ve got a pretty city. I’ve heard French passports were provided to fleeing Iraqis in Syria. They better watch their asses, because that’s going beyond being just a contentious ally. It’s not quite to Basher Assad status yet, but they should not aid and abet our enemies or we should cut off all relations with them.

TAE: So should Americans boycott French products?

MILLER: Yes. That’s a no-brainer. People say, “Are you gonna fight every country you disagree with?” To which I respond, “Yes.” If they’re providing passports, I’m going to ask for Pellegrino.



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