Miller Time?
Now that they've got the Governor, are Californian's ready for Sen. Dennis Miller?
by Bill Whalen
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IS CALIFORNIA READY for Dennis Miller as its next United States senator? Laugh if you like, but some Republican strategists (including a few who just sent a certain movie star to Sacramento) see Miller, the sardonic comedian whose late-night talk show lasted just a little longer than Wesley Clark's Iowa campaign, as wholly capable of defeating incumbent Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer next year.

Yes, that's the same Dennis Miller who does commentary Friday nights on Fox News' "Hannity & Colmes"--and also has a recurring role on Fox's "Boston Public." The same Dennis Miller who was unceremoniously drop-kicked from ABC's Monday Night Football. The same comedian and author whose "Dennis Miller Live" ran for nine years on HBO, following a turn on "Saturday Night Live" as the Weekend Update anchor.

It's also the same Dennis Miller who emerged earlier this year as the loudest pro-Bush/pro-war voice in Hollywood--and, during recall, was one of Arnold's biggest boosters in the entertainment community. So supportive of the Governator was Miller that he took part in post-debate spin following the infamous Arnold-Arianna insultfest.

"There's a lot of us who'd like to see him campaign," Rob Stutzman, the governor-elect's communications director, told the Los Angeles Times in late September. "Dennis Miller is at the cutting edge of biting political commentary."

That, in fact, seems to be Miller's strongest allure--the Santa Barbara Republican's bite is as bad as his bark.

CONSIDER THIS MILLER OBSERVATION from a June "Hannity & Colmes appearance: "Folks, it has hit the fan in California, but luckily there will probably be no power later this summer in California to run the fan with. And you know something else? The California-Mexico border is now leakier than Mark Geragos on a diuretic drip. I remember thinking that the other day as I observed a traffic jam in the illegal alien lane of the San Diego freeway.

And there's this, from a "Tonight Show" appearance back in February: "I say we invade Iraq and then invade Chirac. You run a pipe--you run a pipe from the oil field right over this Eiffel Tower, shoot it up and have the world's biggest oil derrick. . . . Yeah. Listen, I would call the French scum bags, but that, of course, would be a disservice to bags filled with scum."

Miller also told Jay Leno: "You know, Jay, I used to be a liberal. You look at what happens in the state of California with untethered liberalism. Everybody in this state in charge now is a Democrat. It's no longer the San Andreas Fault, it's Gray Davis's fault. This is what happens when you elect lawyers. Shakespeare said: 'First, kill all the lawyers.' I've been doing some thinking, I think we could get away with it because if you kill all of them, at our murder trial, we wouldn't have adequate representation."

IF YOU THINK these diatribes get under the left's skin, you're right. Earlier this month, at Andre Agassi's children's fund-raiser in Las Vegas, Miller once again called the French les bags du scum. That prompted this reply from Sir Elton John: "It's not an occasion to air your political dirty laundry. When people say, 'Why do they hate us so much?' Dennis Miller."

Which is exactly the sort of righteous leftist indignation that could make California Republicans fall in love with Miller in a hurry, depending on which course the party chooses in 2004. Do California Republicans look for a Senate candidate with a record of public service and campaign experience? Or do they go the Arnold route
and hitch a ride on a star? (In addition to Miller, "Frasier's" Kelsey Grammer has indicated that he'd like to run for the Senate one day.)

Regardless, Barbara Boxer is a vulnerable incumbent heading into 2004. A mid-October California Field Poll had 45 percent of registered voters giving her a third term, with 40 percent opposed. In July, it was 48-41. On the Republican side, it's a wide-open race. Bill Jones, the former secretary of state who may become a candidate, gets 24 percent of the GOP vote (Jones ran for governor in 2002, so he benefits from high name ID), followed by Assemblyman Tony Strickland (4 percent), former U.S. Treasurer Rosario Marin (3 percent), and former Los Altos Hills Mayor Toni Casey (2 percent).

In the head-to-head matchups, Boxer leads all of her would-be rivals: Jones (48-34), Strickland (50-28), Marin (50-27) and Casey (49-26). However, there's a trend that's worrisome for Democrats: Boxer doesn't top 50 percent, even against unknown opponents. That puts her in the same boat as Davis, whose own support was stuck in the low to mid-40 percent range during recall.

It's that Davis dynamic that has some strategists searching for the next Terminator. But, should he give politics a try, is Dennis Miller the kind of entertainer who translates into a popular candidate?

DURING RECALL, Arnold Schwarzenegger embodied optimism, as did Ronald Reagan in his runs for governor and president. The late congressman Sonny Bono sang, but he also played the role of straight man/likable schmo—whether he was standing next to Cher or cruising on "The Love Boat." Miller's, on the other hand, is both terribly erudite (while on post-debate spin patrol for Arnold, Miller compared Cruz Bustamante to Sancho Panza) and decidedly yuppie (the comedian endorses DirecTV and Amstel Light, not his namesake brew). Not to mention a little too edgy for some Republicans. In June, the comedian did a stand-up routine at a presidential fund-raiser in Los Angeles. When he said the West Virginia senator Robert Byrd "must be burning the cross at both ends," some in the audience booed. "Well, he was in the Klan. Boo me, but he was in the Klan," Miller responded.

Such is the challenge of a Miller candidacy—he'd be an HBO politician trying to play to a TGI Friday electorate. (He's not even the first HBO star to toy with a political run—"Sex & the City"s Sarah Jessica Parker has told reporters that she can see herself as a U.S. Senator from New York.) In Miller's case, it's hard to imagine a candidate quicker on the draw or more withering in a debate. But, given the daily opportunity to go off on rants, he could bring to life Mort Sahl's catch-all phrase: "Is there any group I haven't offended?"

Such is a quandary for California Republicans in an age redefined by Arnold: to decide if a Dennis Miller candidacy tastes great, or is politically less filling.

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