The Joke Is on Liberals, Says Dennis Miller, Host of His Own Show Again
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Published: January 15, 2004

LOS ANGELES, Jan. 14—Dennis Miller, the liberal-turned-conservative comedian and defender of President Bush and the war in Iraq, is less than two weeks away from being the host of a new talk show on CNBC. For him it can't come soon enough.

"People say I've slid to the right," Mr. Miller said in his office at the NBC Studios in Burbank, speaking in his rat-a-tat-tat style. "Well, can you blame me? One of the biggest malfeasances of the left right now is the mislabeling of Hitler. Quit saying this guy is Hitler," he said, referring to Mr. Bush. "Hitler is Hitler. That's the quintessential evil in the history of the universe, and we're throwing it around on MoveOn.org to win a contest. That's grotesque to me."

Mr. Miller, who was speaking about television advertisements submitted to a competition held by MoveOn.org Voter Fund, a liberal political group, was just getting started.

"Did you see the Democratic debate the other night?" he asked. "To me Dennis Kucinich's politics are more scrambled than Rod Steiger's dream journal. And Clark? He's a wizard in many ways, but when I hear him speak, it's almost like he's slumming. There's a mensch discrepancy there. At least John Edwards, who to me is a reasonably shallow guy, at least he can dog-paddle around in that park and not look out of place."

Mr. Miller's rapid-fire monologues and obscure, even weird cultural references—Rod Steiger's dream journal?—have made him one of television's most visible comedians over the last two decades. He was a regular on NBC's "Saturday Night Live" from 1985 to 1991; had an Emmy Award-winning weekly series on HBO, "Dennis Miller Live," in the 1990's; worked as a film and television actor; was a commentator for two seasons on ABC's "Monday Night Football"; and most recently was an essayist for Fox News.

Mr. Miller's metamorphosis from iconoclastic liberal to free-wheeling conservative—which he partly attributes to the Sept. 11 attacks—has not only made this 50-year-old comedian an esteemed figure on the Fox network. It has also made California Republicans, who have triumphed with a movie star in the governor's mansion, look to Mr. Miller as a possible opponent to Senator Barbara Boxer, the liberal Democrat who is up for re-election this year. (Mr. Miller supported Arnold Schwarzenegger's campaign for governor and performed last summer at California fund-raisers for President Bush.)

Mr. Miller said he told the Republicans he had no interest in running against Ms. Boxer, largely because winning would mean moving to Washington from Santa Barbara, where he lives with his wife and two children. "They inquired about my availability to run against Barbara Boxer, but I'm not at the point where I would consider it," he said.

His new hourlong show, "Dennis Miller," at 9 p.m. weeknights (with a repeat of one show on Sunday), will have its premiere on Jan. 26. It will include his usual venting on current issues, as well as interviews with political figures, journalists and others, and a nightly "right-left" debate among figures at different points on the political spectrum.

Pamela Thomas-Graham, president and chief executive of CNBC, said Mr. Miller's "kinetic energy" appealed to the network, now mostly an outlet for financial news. By hiring him, she said, CNBC hoped to retain and expand its daytime audience with a politically savvy show. She added that the CNBC daytime viewers were probably "interested in relaxing at night" with material that reached beyond Wall Street.

Ms. Thomas-Graham said Mr. Miller's political positions had played no role in the decision to hire him. "We are completely agnostic in that direction," she said. "We were looking for someone who has a point of view and is willing to defend that point of view."

Mr. Miller is also not a traditional conservative. "I've always been a pragmatist," he said. "If two gay guys want to get married, it's none of my business. I could care less. More power to them. I'm happy when people fall in love. But if some idiot foreign terrorist wants to blow up their wedding to make a political statement, I would rather kill him before he can
do it, or have my country kill him before he can do it, instead of having him do it and punishing him after the fact. If that makes me a right-wing fanatic, I will bask in that assignation."

Mr. Miller said he remained socially liberal. "I think abortion's wrong, but it's none of my business to tell somebody what's wrong," he said. "So I'm pro-choice. I want to keep my nose out of other people's personal business. I guess I fall into conservative when it comes to protecting the United States in a world where a lot of people hate the United States."

The Sept. 11 attacks, Mr. Miller said, changed him. "Everybody should be in the protection business now," he said. "I can't imagine anybody not saying that. Well, I guess on the farthest end of the left they'd say, 'That's our fault.' And on the middle end they'd say, 'Well, there's another way to deal with it other than flat-out protecting ourselves.' I just don't believe that. People say we're the ones who make them hate us because of what we do. That's garbage to me. I think they're nuts. And you've got to protect yourself from nuts."

Mr. Miller's decision to join CNBC came after a somewhat troubled time in his career. He said he was fired by ABC in 2002 after two seasons as a commentator on "Monday Night Football" when the network had a chance to hire John Madden. Mr. Miller's reviews had been mixed. He said he enjoyed being a sports commentator and had no ill will toward ABC. "As soon as Madden left Fox, I pretty much knew I was going to be whacked," he said. "Here was Madden, the Pliny the Elder of football announcers. And they were going to stay with the kid?"

"I was having fun," Mr. Miller added. "I had alienated half the community, and probably half of them liked me. Which is pretty much my batting average. I began to see maybe a decade ago that my career was never going to be in complete approval. I wasn't endearing."

As open as he is about his political views, Mr. Miller is reticent about his private life. He grew up in Pittsburgh and says his mother, now dead, is "a sainted figure to me." His parents were estranged, and he declines to talk about his father. (One of Mr. Miller's brothers, Jimmy, is a partner in Gold/Miller, a Hollywood management company that represents stars like Jim Carrey.)

Mr. Miller said that as a youth he worked in delis and scooped ice cream until he realized that his life was going to turn into a "Kafka novella" unless he began seriously pursuing comedy. He started performing in clubs and on local television in Pittsburgh, then moved to Los Angeles, where he met other struggling comedians. Jerry Seinfeld got him a gig at the Improv, and Jay Leno found him an apartment. He remains close to both. He appeared on television with David Letterman and later auditioned for Lorne Michaels for "Saturday Night Live."

"He looked at me and goes, 'Would you like to do my newscast?,' " Mr. Miller recalled. "And I said, 'Yeah, I would,' and he said, 'Well, I'll see you tomorrow.' And then I walked out. And I remember thinking, 'My life has just changed.' "

Mr. Miller said his own comedic influences include Jonathan Miller, Richard Pryor, Richard Belzer and Mr. Leno. He speaks more hesitantly about the two comedians with whom he has often been compared, Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce.

He said he had transcripts of some of Mr. Sahl's early shows and was amazed by them. But then he lost interest. Mr. Sahl, he said, became too close to the Kennedy family and was "a savage name-dropper." Mr. Miller added, "It always reminded me to watch myself."

Surprisingly he is tougher on Lenny Bruce. "Lenny was a heroin addict, and I could care less about heroin addicts," Mr. Miller said. "Once I hear a guy is a heroin addict, and they tell me he's a genius, I think, really? I'm not trying to be judgmental. But anybody whose last vision is of a tile pattern on a bathroom floor, I don't know what kind of genius they are."