

TV Friday

Dennis Miller's back in business and a little...

War hoarse

By MICHAEL GILTZ

WALK into Dennis Miller's hotel room and you won't find him primping for the photographer ("I can't even look at photos of myself") or working the phones to line up more gigs.

He's simply watching the news, soaking up the images of Baghdad falling and the statues of Saddam Hussein toppling to the ground.

Miller's new HBO special — airing Saturday night at 10 — was taped just five weeks ago. But that was before the war started and now it's almost over.

Still, Miller's too smart to get caught behind the curve. His digs at the Saud Royal family ("the Eddie Haskell of the Middle East") and the Catholic Church ("I went to confession the other day and said, 'You first.'") are as timely as ever.

Miller stands out in Hollywood as one of the few people who has argued cogently for taking military action in Iraq — and has been funny doing it. Think of him as Tony Blair meets Lenny Bruce. He was as dumbstruck as anyone by 9/11, but even more astonished that

people would caution against taking an active role in the most volatile part of the world. "It seems like the worst time in history to say you're not going to do anything," says Miller.

"And once Chirac released that statement saying they would never agree to any sort of action, it was like, 'Really? OK boys, rev up the engines.'"

Miller's smart — too smart to pretend the ending of his HBO talk show after nine years (handled quite gracefully by the network) was anything other than a pink slip for the guy that won HBO its first Emmy.

"People said to me, 'What, you just didn't want to do it anymore?' I said, 'No, I got fired!'" laughs Miller. "It was a nice firing. It was as nice as it gets. But I got let go. I would have done that until I got to playing Hume-Cronyn's part in 'Gin Game.'"

So other than his regular appearances on "The Tonight Show," what projects is he working on?

"Nothing! I'm out of the loop," says Miller, at ease with recognizing a little breather when he sees one. "But I had a nine-year run. At that point I'm

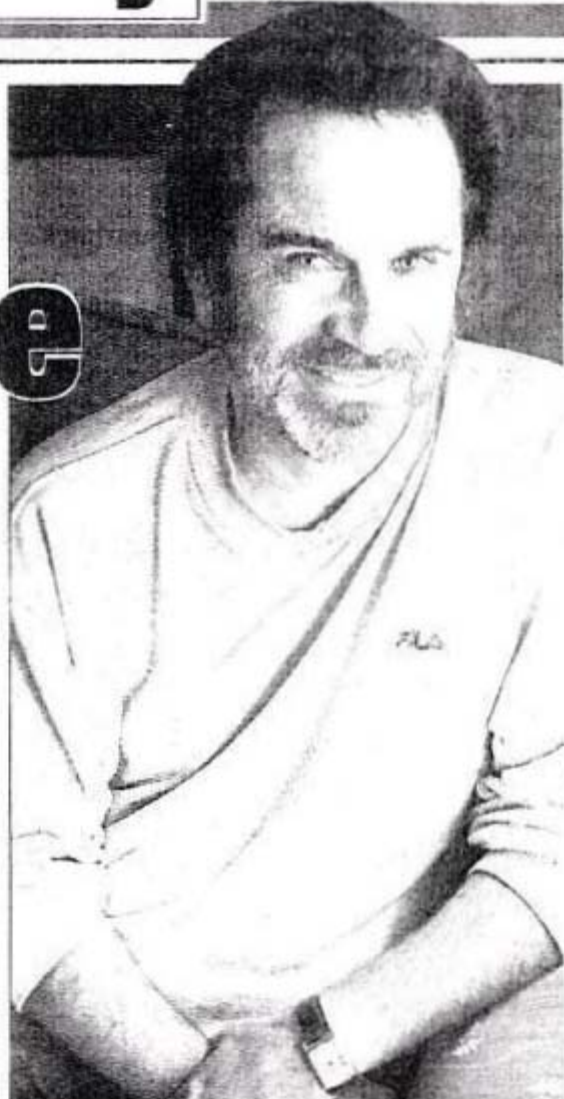
just thankful. They bought me my house, for God's sake."

In his show, Miller deals with much more than just the war. And during an interview, he's happy to riff at length on anything and everything — generous with laughs (unlike most comics) and ready to take issue with the Bush administration when necessary, such as hearing Dick Cheney's old company Halliburton was one of the first in line for post-war contracts in Iraq.

"I did not understand how that name could come into it at this point," says Miller. "They should have been called and told, 'Listen guys, you're not in this.' That kind of shocked me too."

Best of all, Miller's happily married with kids and at ease enough to accept a little time out of the spotlight as not just unavoidable but even healthy.

"I should be able at 49 to figure out how not to be in show biz for a little bit while it's not my time. All I know is this town does not react well to sweat acts. I think they want you to handle your imminent periodic demise with a suitable degree of aplomb and then they'll let you back in."



"It seems like the worst time in history to say you're not going to do anything," says Dennis Miller of the military action in Iraq.