

KILOMETER ZERO INTERVIEWS THE NOTORIOUSLY SUBVERSIVE POLITICAL CARTOONIST TOM TOMORROW...

HOW DARE
THEY PRINT
SUCH FILTH?



TOM TOMORROW'S CARTOON THIS MODERN WORLD HAS LONG BEEN AN INSPIRATION AND SOLACE FOR THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTINGENT OF THE KILOMETER ZERO FAMILY. HIS WORK APPEARS IN ALTERNATIVE NEWSPAPERS, ON SALON.COM AND IN MAGAZINES LIKE THE NEW YORKER. TOM TOMORROW, WHOSE REAL NAME IS DAN PERKINS, CONDUCTED THIS INTERVIEW WITH KMZ FROM HIS BROOKLYN APARTMENT.

KMZ: *To start, could we get some biographical detail?*

TT: I was born on April 5, 1961 in Wichita, Kansas. We moved to Michigan and then to Iowa City, Iowa, by the time I was five—foreshadowing the impermanence and dislocation which have defined much of my life, I suppose. My parents divorced when I was about ten, and I went off with my mother and spent the next few years living in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, Stone Mountain, Georgia—birthplace of the modern Ku Klux Klan—and a couple of very small towns in Arkansas, before going back to live with my father in Iowa City.

I moved to New York City for the first time in 1981, and spent the first

month or so sleeping on the floor of a friend-of-a-friend's flat in the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn. The neighborhood has gentrified considerably since those days, when stores along Fifth Avenue would stock maybe three items—a candy bar, a single record album, something like that—and have a Prohibition-style shutter set into a door in the back where the real business of the store was conducted, in five and ten dollar transactions.

A group of friends and I then moved to Williamsburg, which has become an exceedingly hip artists' colony, but which was in those days just a strange intersection between Puerto Rican immigrants and Hasidic Jews, with the occasional starving artist thrown in here and there.

There were four of us living in a three-bedroom apartment—one guy dragged in a bunch of old wooden packing pallets and partitioned off a section of the living room for privacy. We were all dirt poor—I was living on about \$100 a week, which was no mean feat in New York City even in 1981. I used to pretty much survive on ramen noodles and, when I really felt I could afford to splurge, the occasional slice at Ben's pizza. I was really, really skinny when I left New York.

I worked on a magazine about comics for a while, and then when the magazine folded, drifted through a succession of crappy jobs—making copies, doing picture framing, things like that. After a couple of years of living hand-to-mouth like this, with no particular focus, I moved back to Iowa City, followed a girlfriend to Champaign-Urbana and then to Chicago, at which point I decided I'd had enough of mid-western winters and headed to San Francisco.

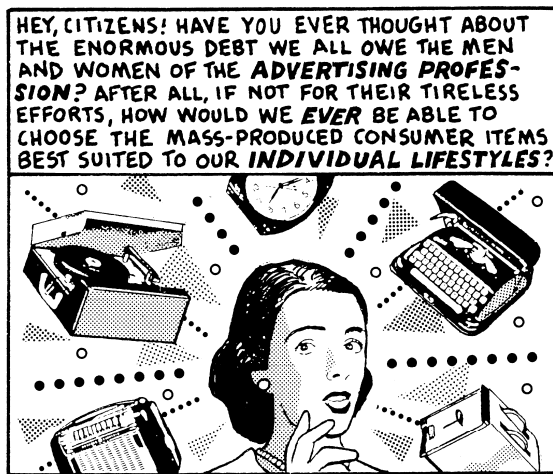
I actually stayed put in San Francisco for about twelve years and would probably be there to this day,

but I fell in love with an East Coast girl and for various reasons, the only way to make it work was to move back East for awhile. That was about five years ago now, and we've been married for two and a half years. And strangely, this long circuitous route led me back to Park Slope, where we live, though as I say the neighborhood isn't quite as funky as it used to be.

KMZ: *How did you start out?*

TT: As a kid—and I mean, maybe eight or nine years old—I'd draw these *Mad* magazine-style movie parodies, one-pagers, things like that (on lined notebook paper, of course). Later on I experimented with various newspaper strip formats, different things like that—but this was all stuff I was trying to develop because I thought maybe I could sell it to a syndicate. What I was really excited about were these collage-comic

hybrids I was experimenting with, which were more about consumerism and technology. That's where the look of my strip really began to develop.



Like a lot of—though not all—cartoonists, I have an admittedly limited artistic range, which reminds me of something Schulz said once in some interview, something to the effect of: “If I was a really good writer, I’d be writing novels. If I was a really good artist, I’d be painting pictures. I’m sort of good at both, so I’m a cartoonist.”

KMZ: *Who were your early influences?*

TT: Well, earliest influences would go back to the stuff I was reading as a little kid—*Mad* magazine, *Peanuts*, and when I was a bit older, *Doonesbury*. I can’t overstate the importance of *Mad* magazine at that time—in that long ago time before society became drenched in irony, it was *Mad* that taught us to distrust advertisers, politicians, and the media, and I guess it was probably *Mad* that taught me that cartooning was an effective way to communicate with people. *Peanuts*, I just loved for its whimsy and creativity—at the time, nothing else pushed the envelope the way that strip did.

As I got older, I read pretty much every underground comic I could get my hands on (*Zap*, and maybe more importantly *Zippy the Pinhead*, which was also hugely influential) and went through a *Marvel* phase (*X-Men*, Ditko’s *Spiderman*, Kirby’s *Fantastic Four*, that sort of thing).

KMZ: *I've heard a lot about this 1991 anti-Gulf War protest you attended in San Francisco and how it turned you into a political cartoonist.*

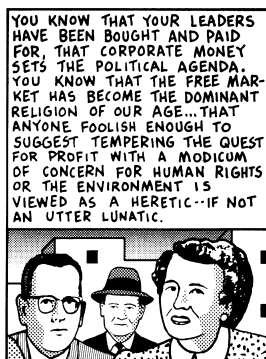
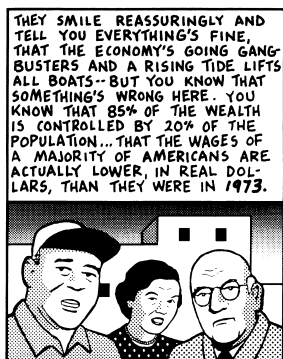
TT: This story has gotten somewhat simplified over the years—and this is mostly my own fault—because if you go back and look at the earlier stuff, there was always a political context to the work. But it had never really occurred to me to think of myself as a political cartoonist. The day you mention specifically, I went to one of many rallies against the Gulf War in which there were thousands and thousands of people marching, as far back as you could see—and then went home to

see it effectively dismissed as an unimportant aberration on the evening news. I called up the TV station and yelled at their answering machine, which was less than satisfying, and then I suddenly realized—and this seems painfully obvious in retrospect—that I had a little public forum of my own.

KMZ: *What is your opinion of the current state of media and journalism in the USA? You turned down Time magazine and were asked to leave both Brill's Content and the US News and World Report. Your work was even too controversial for the television program Saturday Night Live.*

TT: Since the attack on the World Trade Center the mainstream media are in full flag-waving mode, so I would have to say that my always shaky faith is less than bolstered at the moment. I turned down *Time* because I just couldn't figure out how to do cartoons in that small space they have without letting my work devolve into cheap gags about the news. At the same time, I was offered a larger spot in *US News* and chose that instead. But the readership of *US News* skews old and conservative, and they really had no idea what to make of my cartoons, and I was quickly dropped—apparently by order of the publisher personally.

Saturday Night Live was a different story. I had a development deal with them a few years ago, which sort of fell in my lap—before this I had given almost no thought to animation, so it was like being dropped in behind the wheel of a race car barreling down the track and you don't even know how to drive. I spent a lot of time on that project trying to come up with something that had some integrity to it and trying to fight off the pressure from



SNL to squeeze in as many cheap shots as possible. T&A jokes, racial stereotypes, I kid you not. It was a very difficult time. I wanted to do political satire and they wanted cheap quick humor.

We produced three pieces, all of which I think hold up pretty well, but the SNL people just thought about stuff way too much—they'd decide on Friday night that a piece needed a half second shaved off so it would flow better. Darryl Hammond, who did Clinton on the show, did a Clinton voice for one of the cartoons, and one of the objections was that viewers would be confused, watching the cartoon and hearing Darryl's voice. Crazy stuff like that, but I guess that's how TV works—too many people obsessing over insignificant details. You can imagine how much fun this was, having every microsecond scrutinized and endlessly debated—particularly in light of what does make it on the air on that show, those tedious endless sketches with Goat Boy or whatever.

KMZ: *What is the role of an artist like yourself when it comes to politics and activism? Why don't you just do a cute cartoon about overweight cats?*

TT: You do what you have in you. I think the people who do cartoons about overweight cats genuinely believe in what they're doing. I don't think it's something you can fake. As for the first question, I have no good answer for you. I just do what I do and hope that it strikes a chord with someone.

KMZ: *Why are there always references to your criticism of Dilbert?*

TT: I did one cartoon about *Dilbert*, back when that strip was first taking off and constantly being written up in newspapers and magazines as “the voice of the downsized,” that sort of thing, and I was bothered by that, in the same way that I was bothered by Bill Clinton's politics being defined by his conservative opponents as “far left,” when in fact he was very firmly planted in the middle of the road. If Clinton is

defined as the furthest to the left it is possible for any human being to possibly go, then anyone to the left of Clinton is simply no longer relevant, no longer exists in the political debate. Similarly if the critique in *Dilbert* defines the discussion vis-a-vis corporate downsizing, then that discussion is severely limited. *Dilbert's* a fine comic strip for what it is—I did enough office work to enjoy it on that level—but it is a comic strip about people who work in cubicles and are resigned to their fate. It is not a comic strip about the fate of the downsized, or the corporate mindset responsible. It does not “champion the oppressed.”

It was something that I was thinking about one week, maybe six, seven years ago. Which is all any of these cartoons really are, ultimately—just something I was thinking about one week. They're like conversations you might have with the guy on the next barstool, except that they are archived and preserved for all time, so you find yourself constantly being called on to defend some barstool conversation you had in 1993.

KMZ: *You do a lot of work in your cartoons with universal health care in the US, you have a definite pro-environment stance, and you constantly attack the American electoral system and the two-party system. What are the important political and social issues you work with in your cartoon?*

TT: Certainly the pathetic state of the U.S. health care system is something I have returned to time and again. I guess the common thread is that all of these issues have been simplified into sound bites which do not in fact reflect reality—the notion, for instance, that a single payer health care system means that government bureaucrats will be assigning you a doctor and denying you necessary medical care.

KMZ: *What foreign political systems and social policies do you find inspiring? Where would you live if it wasn't the USA?*

TT: There's nowhere else I'd rather live. I read a line once, I wish I could remember who wrote it: "Think of the nation as the coun-

try's day job." The country is the place, the people, the extraordinary absurd exuberance of giant fiberglass animals and palaces made of corn and crazy folk artists in rural Georgia and, yes, twin towers that pierce the sky. The nation is an ever-shifting set of political priorities arising from and imposed on that country—corporate tax breaks, welfare reform, a few missiles lobbed here and there. This seems so obvious, but apparently needs to be reiterated: You can love the country and still find fault with the nation.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. Do conservatives and hawks really believe that anyone not in line



with their view of America is in fact secretly sympathetic to the Taliban? Secretly rooting for the terrorists and mass murderers? Actually, on some level they do, and that's the frightening thing. I am getting truly irritated by the latter-day McCarthyism springing up around me. Exercising that "freedom to disagree" to which our president gave lip service the other night does not make one a traitor. Freedom of speech doesn't mean anything if it exists conditionally. And exercising that freedom of speech doesn't make you some sort of enemy within, some infestation that "real Americans" must grudgingly tolerate in order to uphold their ideals. I'll be frank: if you are the sort of person who is stirred by the sight of an American flag waving in the breeze, I will not pit my unthinking patriotism against yours, because I would surely lose. I'm too cynical, too aware of the lessons of history.

KMZ: *What in your opinion is the root of cause the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon?*

T. I watched the towers burn from the rooftop of my building in Brooklyn, watched the first one collapse. I've seen the aftermath of earthquakes, fires, tornadoes, I've seen the twisted metal wreckage of the car in which my mother died—but I've never, never seen anything so terrible as that. No honest person can claim to understand with certainty what the hijackers were thinking and assigning them motives at this point is to some extent an exercise in hubris. Having said that, we can look at the conditions which breed this sort of fanaticism and one of the common threads is almost always desperation.

When people have nothing to live for, they are ripe candidates for a group like the Taliban. And part of the reason people in this region are so abjectly and utterly desperate is that we used them and cast them aside like a dirty tissue as soon as we were done. After the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan, so did we—leaving behind a whole lot of guns and bombs and very little else. Perhaps if we had poured in a little humanitarian aid at that point, given people

alternatives, given them some hope, none of this would be happening now.

I don't know. I'm actually not one of those people who believes that the world would be a better and more peaceful place if the United States didn't exist—nature abhors a vacuum, and if this country were not the geopolitical 900 pound gorilla, I'm sure another country would take its place. But as Peter Parker the Amazing Spider-Man learned to his everlasting sorrow as the burglar he could have stopped later murdered his uncle—with great power comes great responsibility. The world is a vast interconnected matrix. Borders are a more fragile metaphor than ever.

We can no longer afford not to clean up after our own messes—because something will inevitably come back and bite us in the ass. The Taliban is a Frankenstein monster of our own creation, even more than most people realize. Most people are aware at this point that the CIA funded and trained these terrorists during the Soviet invasion, but it goes

back further. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was Carter's national security advisor, admitted in a 1998 interview that part of the plan in funding the Afghan resistance before the invasion in 1979 was to induce that invasion. Asked if he regretted this in retrospect, he stated, "Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I



wrote to President Carter: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire.”

My guess, and forgive me if this is breathtakingly banal, is that it's a combination of political anger and religious fanaticism—a really scary combination wherever it springs up, which is why I'm somewhat troubled by all the immediate talk of “God and country” in the wake of this thing. I just read a really smug op-ed piece in USA Today about how great that response was, how great it was to see God back in public life in America—as if this country has ever been anywhere near as secular as the fundamentalists pretend, as if a politician could ever get elected without making it abundantly clear that he or she believes fervently and wholeheartedly in a Supreme Being, preferably of the Christian faith.

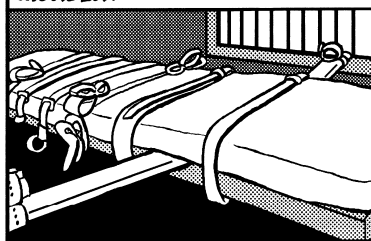
To me, the lesson of this thing should be that religion and politics are highly volatile compounds which can react explosively when mixed. But when you add in the hatred born of desperation, all bets are off. The hijackers themselves may not have been desperately poor, but without those conditions, neither bin Laden nor the Taliban could ever have risen to power.

KMZ: What will This Modern World have to say about the rush to war?

TT: Personally I believe in the “bomb them with butter” approach. There's a massive humanitarian crisis brewing in Afghanistan, and demonstrating our commitment to helping the people of that beleaguered nation would probably do us a hell of a lot more good in the long term than military action.

AND NO MATTER HOW MANY DEATH ROW CONVICTS ARE, IN FACT, GUILTY OF TERRIBLE CRIMES, ONE THING IS SIMPLY NOT DEBATABLE: IF OUR SOCIETY HAS EVER EXECUTED A SINGLE INNOCENT PERSON--

--THEN WE ARE ALL ACCESSORIES TO MURDER.



WELL! THAT ONE ENDED ON A RATHER UNPLEASANT NOTE, DIDN'T IT?



I THINK TOM TOMORROW NEEDS TO TURN HIS FROWN UPSIDE DOWN!

KMZ: You've always said you didn't think you could change the world, but say you could, say you were omnipotent ruler. What are the first things you would do if you could rearrange the way humans live and interact on this planet?

TT: The first thing I would do is make the use of a car alarm punishable by a long and mandatory prison sentence. Zero tolerance. This would win me the everlasting loyalty of my subjects, and I could move on to war, famine, disease, and so on. But definitely, I'd have to start with the car alarms.

KMZ: *What social responsibility does the average individual in a wealthy Western nation have? Why don't we all just hole up in the suburbs with our DVDs, SUVs, and high-speed Internet connections?*

TT: As I said, there are no more borders. There's the old saying about a butterfly flapping its wings halfway around the world causing a hurricane, and never has this been more true than today. We can't afford to turn our back on the world, can't afford to walk away from international treaties like Kyoto and germ warfare and ABM and so on. A kid is starving halfway around the world, and the next thing you know there's a crop duster overhead with a load of anthrax. In this modern world, we all live at ground zero.

KMZ: *What do you think of Noam Chomsky?*

TT: Probably the most honest person in the country, therefore—unfortunately—destined to be reviled and ignored.

KMZ: *What are some of your favourite books?*

TT: Since you're in Paris, I'd suggest *The Last Time I Saw Paris*, which is a really beautiful memoir of the Rue de la Huchette in the thirties. I've just finished the third book in Tom deHaven's *Derby Dugan* trilogy, which is a fictional history of the comic strip in twentieth century America, but I'd recommend starting with the first one and reading them in order. There's always Raymond Chandler, whose writing exemplifies the blending of 'high' and 'low' art, something I take a certain interest in as a cartoonist. I don't have as much time for fiction as I'd like, so mostly I am grateful when a novel doesn't waste my time. Some genre novelists, like Chandler in his day, and like Martin Cruz Smith or James Lee Burke, are simply a pure joy to read, whereas some writerly novels seem like a complete waste of time to me, nothing more than testaments to the

writer's own cleverness. I want to be transported by fiction. I want the language to soar but I also want the story to captivate.

KMZ: *The philosophy of our magazine has always been to try and present our stories with as much truth as possible and in a way that will make both Kilometer Zero and the story subject as happy as possible. Is there anything we could do for you that would make you really really happy?*

TT: Prior to a few weeks ago I would have suggested that you fly me over to Paris and throw a fabulous magazine release party, but I think it may be awhile before I get on an airplane again. Barring that, I can't really think of anything.

