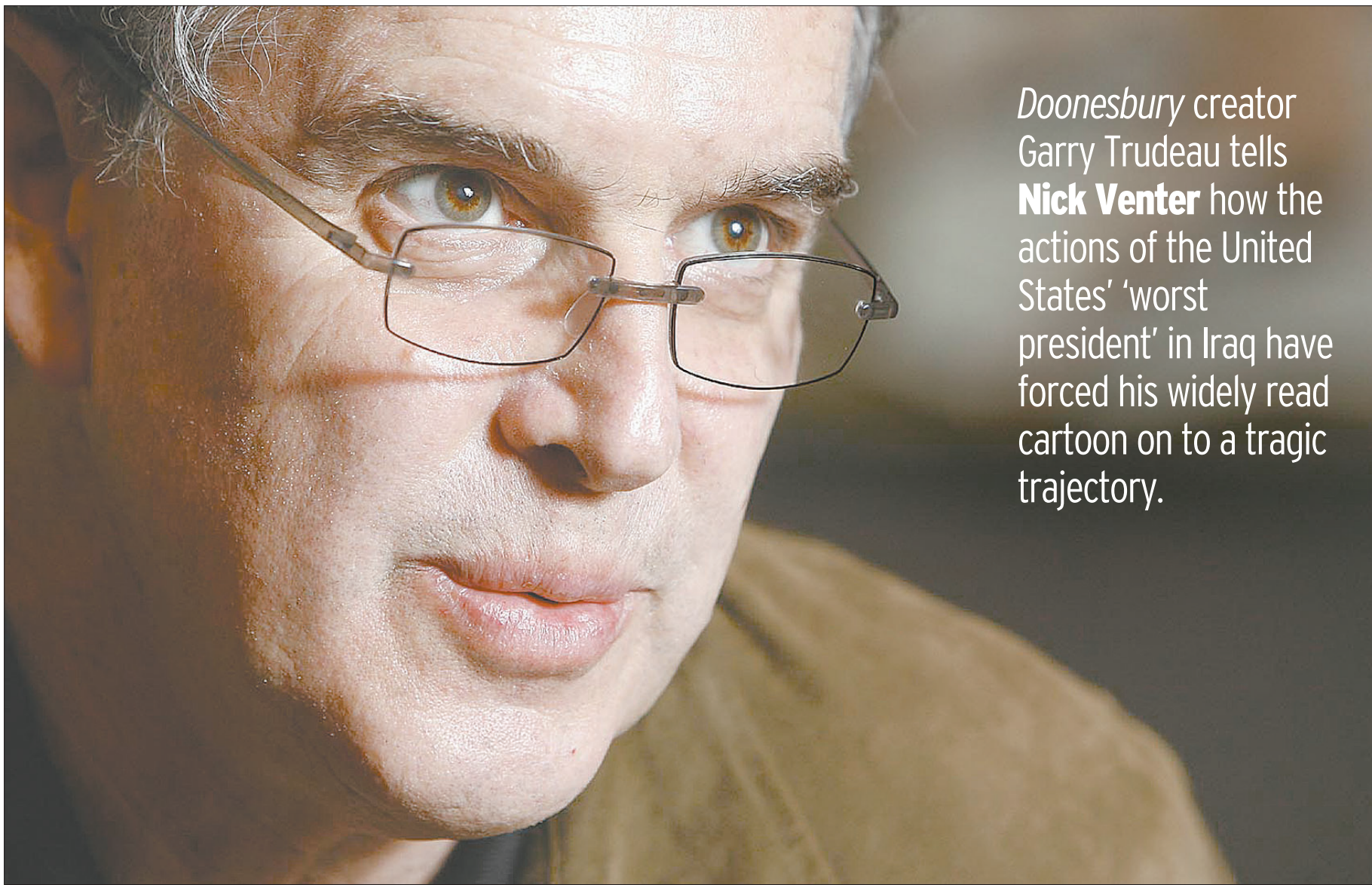
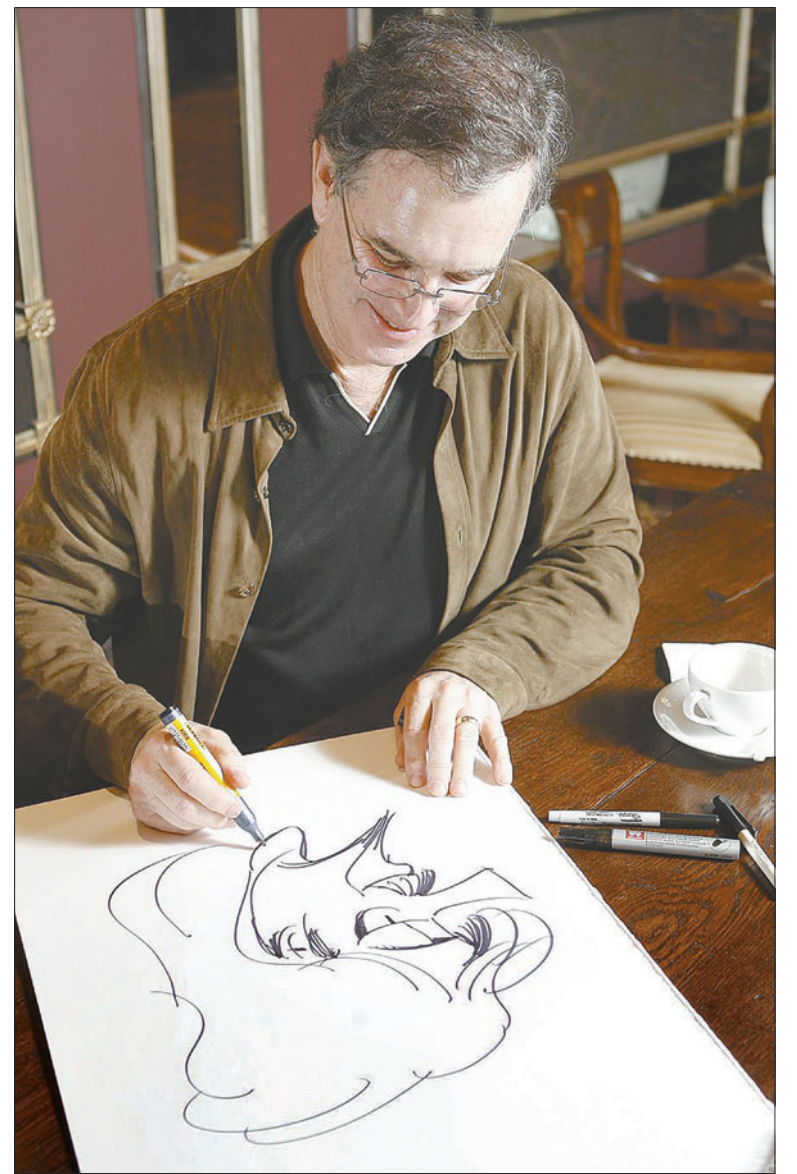


LongWeekend



Doonesbury creator Garry Trudeau tells **Nick Venter** how the actions of the United States' 'worst president' in Iraq have forced his widely read cartoon on to a tragic trajectory.



Stars and strips: Garry Trudeau has sacrificed the wellbeing of some of *Doonesbury's* most beloved characters to highlight the suffering of US troops in Iraq. Right, Trudeau draws one of the strip's many characters, Zonker. Pictures: MAARTEN HOLL

Bursting the president's bubble

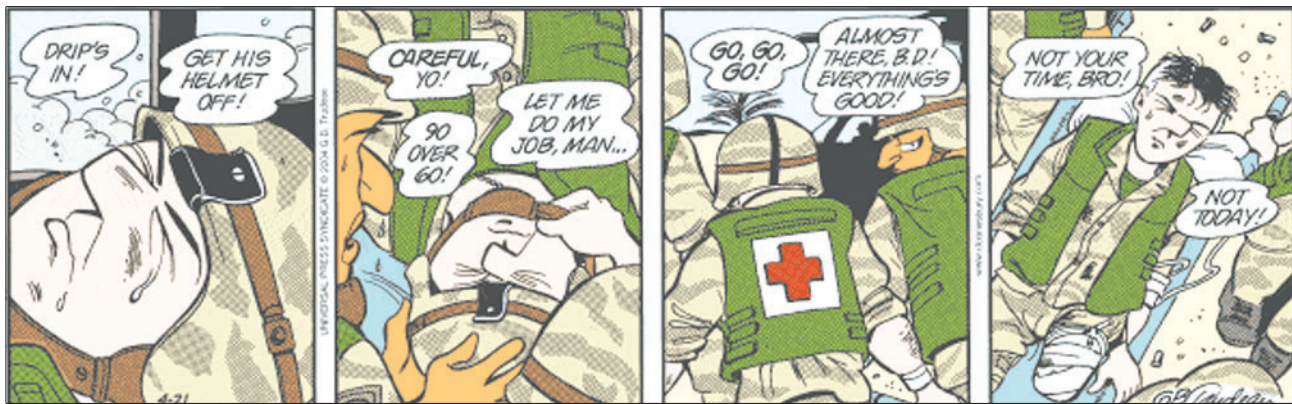
FOR someone with a reputation for being media shy, Garry Trudeau, the creator of *Doonesbury*, the cartoon strip that serves as a daily window on America, could not be more obliging. Forty-five minutes, an hour? No problem. A sketch so he can be photographed at work? Sure, says Trudeau who gave just two substantive interviews during his first 35 years of drawing the strip that appears in almost 1400 newspapers, including *The Dominion Post*, and reputedly earns him a seven-figure income.

Which of the 30-odd characters who regularly appear in the strip would we like?

How about Zonker? He's been there from the start. He was one of the players in the huddle when a 20-year-old graphics student first offered his college newspaper a handful of cartoons contrasting the down-to-earth relationship Yale University's football hero had with his teammates with the worship afforded him by the 50,000 fans who cheered him on each week. Zonker, the bearded, pot-smoking dropout, who became a two-time "grand national tanning champion" it is.

Trudeau, a slim 59-year-old, whose hands flap with boyish enthusiasm when he becomes excited, uncaps the proffered felt tip pen and, with a quick flurry of strokes, sketches a long-haired hippie with a goatee beard, a beatific smile and a nose shaped like a blunt turnip.

The resulting figure looks just like the real one, which is hardly surprising. Trudeau has been drawing Zonker, football hero B.D. Boopsie, "the drinking man's Meryl Streep", intrepid newsman Roland Hedley and



In harm's way: Readers were shocked when main character BD had his leg amputated after being injured in Iraq.

the scheming Uncle Duke for the best part of 40 years.

Not that that is what Trudeau had in mind when he submitted those first cartoons to the *Yale Daily News* in 1968. At the time he was planning a career as a graphic designer. But the founder of a new syndication service stumbled upon the strip while looking for a column written by a visiting professor. The rest, as they say, is history.

Renamed after its principal character, Mike Doonesbury, an innocent who bears more than a passing resemblance to his creator, the strip was launched as the Universal Press Syndicate's first syndicated feature on October 26, 1970.

Trudeau's wry take on the vicissitudes of college life — the difficulty of getting girls and the clash between youth culture and the establishment — struck an instant chord.

But the strip also possessed a cutting edge. The ever-growing cast was used to comment on the issues of the day and the strip made periodic visits to the White House for more

pointed commentary. In the early years, presidents were portrayed as bubbles emerging from the White House, but around the time George H Bush became the president, Trudeau hit upon the idea of using symbols, or "icons" to depict politicians. George Bush senior became a point of light, a reference to his description of non-profit organisations as "a thousand points of light".

"He used that phrase a lot so I picked it to represent someone I thought of as an empty suit, a nowhere man."

Bill Clinton, for whom the liberal Trudeau admits an early infatuation — "he seemed like the most natural, gifted politician of our generation" — became a greasy waffle, and George W Bush, a fellow student at Yale — "all noblesse and no oblige" according to Trudeau — underwent a humiliating metamorphosis. He started as a stetson hat atop an asterisk, a play on the Texan saying "all hat and no cattle", then became a Roman soldier's helmet atop an asterisk to depict imperialism. But the helmet has now

lost its feathers and its gloss and is so battered as to be barely recognisable.

"Frankly he [Bush] is the worst president we've ever had," says Trudeau. Worse even than Richard Nixon who resigned in disgrace over the Watergate scandal? "Oh yeah, and far more damaging to the country. Nixon took a good deal longer to get outside of Vietnam than he probably should have and extended the war to Cambodia and Laos illegally, and those are not insignificant acts, but he did inherit that war. He didn't recklessly create one where there shouldn't have been one."

There has, however, been an upside to the Bush presidency for Trudeau and his cartooning colleagues.

"The sad fact of life for our business is that what's terrible for the country is great for us. So we'll be just inconsolable starting next January, no matter who wins. It's not going to be nearly as much fun."

Keeping up with the characters in *Doonesbury* takes some doing. Some have become as familiar at the break-

fast table as Garfield, Charlie Brown and the Wizard of Id.

But unlike the casts of other popular cartoon strips, Trudeau's characters age (slowly) and experience changing circumstances. The cartoonist jokes that he does not know why he has any readers who have not been there right from the start. "It's rather like opening a Russian novel in the middle. I have maybe 30 characters who I revisit with some regularity and I throw them into this Dickensian thicket of coincidence and hope they'll sort themselves out and that people will stay with them and remember their history."

THE strip is also not always funny. On April 19, 2004, readers woke to find that B.D., serving as a media liaison officer for the army in Iraq, had been injured in a rocket-grenade attack in Fallujah. Two days later they got to see the extent of his injuries. His left leg had been amputated and, just as shocking for some, his helmet had been removed for the first time in 36 years, revealing a sweaty matted mop of greying hair.

Other *Doonesbury* characters have gone through hardship. A few have even died, but B.D.'s injury marked a change in direction and a change in tone for the strip. His struggle to return to a normal life has become a recurring theme. Trudeau honours what he calls the "agreement" he has to entertain readers by lacing the B.D. strips with *MASH*-like black humour, but the storyline has been developed and portrayed with a realism that is rare in the fantasy world of comic strips.

In doing so, Trudeau has been aided by an unlikely ally. *Doonesbury* has always been popular with US troops serving overseas, but, because of his anti-war beliefs, it has never been particularly popular with the military brass. But after B.D.'s injury, military bosses gave Trudeau unfettered access to wounded veterans, army doctors and psychologists so he could accurately portray what injured veterans go through.

Among those moved by the new storyline has been Republican presidential candidate John McCain, a former prisoner of war in Vietnam. Thirteen years ago he told the US senate that Trudeau was a man he held in "utter contempt". Two years ago he wrote the foreword for *The Long Road Home*, a book of strips about B.D.'s injury and recovery.

But McCain's endorsement is unlikely to secure him Trudeau's vote in the upcoming presidential elections. The cartoonist, as befits an idealist who grew up in the 1960s, is rooting for Barack Obama, one of the two contenders still in the race for the Democratic nomination.

McCain is, however, unlikely to experience any lasting regret about missing out on Trudeau's support. In addition to his early infatuation with Clinton, Trudeau was also a fan of Jimmy Carter.

But his early admiration for both men spared neither his ridicule. Nothing appears to have changed. Already he has lampooned Obama's lofty rhetoric by creating a course on the "poetry of Barack Obama" at the fictional college, Walden, that links many of his characters.

"It's no good for me to fall in love with someone who might become the president," he says. "It's not useful."

'Dreams are extremely important. You can't do it unless you imagine it.'

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