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# President of contradictions

Mike Miller, state's longest-serving Senate president, is an old-time politician in a modern Annapolis

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*The Enterprise* 6/15/01

It's Carter Day at Mattaponi Elementary School in Upper Marlboro, and Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., the longest serving president in the history of the Maryland Senate, is pacing around a sixth-grade classroom like a caged wild cat.

On this muggy May afternoon, Miller is giving a rambling dissertation on his life.

"Understanding Mike Miller," Gov. Parris N. Glendening observes, "is understanding his three great passions: the state of Maryland, the Democratic Party and the Maryland Senate."

Glendening (D) quickly adds a fourth to the list: the University of Maryland at College Park.

Miller (D-Dist. 27) of Clinton talks about all of these during his half-hour presentation:

- How the Mattaponi Indians got along so well with Maryland's first settlers (he shows the students some arrowheads he found on the beach near his Calvert County property).

- How he got admitted to College Park: "Back then, the public colleges had to take everybody."

- The war within his household — and his soul — between his mother's New Deal liberalism and his father's Dixiecrat conservatism.

- His reverence growing up for the local state senator, Lansdale Sasser.

Several days later, in his burundy-colored State House office, Miller takes a visitor on a similar tour. One minute, he's describing a meeting he just had with the Prince George's County Senate delegation, planning for the 2002 elections.

The next minute, he's closing his eyes reverentially, conjuring up the image of one of his heroes, Benjamin Disraeli, the legendary 19th-century British prime minister.

"If you read history and read about heroic events, it makes you a hero," he says, eyes still shut.

Gary Alexander, an Annapolis lobbyist who represented the same district as Miller in the House for 12 years, says Miller embodies many of the qualities of historic figures.

"He's the greatest political general that I've ever known," Alexander says. "Stonewall Jackson, George S. Patton, Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant — he's got it all wrapped up in himself."

## 'Bundle of contradictions'

Mike Miller is one of the most enduring men in state politics — and one of the most powerful. His fingerprints can be found all over the state. But he will never be governor.

Any hopes he had of running for statewide office probably ended in 1989 when — just before his first major fundraiser in Baltimore — he told a Washington TV reporter that Baltimore was a "[expletive deleted] ghetto" and a "war zone." He meant it to sound sympathetic, an acknowledgment that the city needed extra state help, but Baltimore took it the wrong way.

Without Baltimore, no governor's mansion.

Instead, Miller must content himself with being one of the state's major power brokers not unlike the statesmen whose biographies he devours.

He has a passion for history and can recite the stories of Maryland's founding families. He is also, in an increasingly sanitized and suburbanized State House, one of the few practitioners of old-school, bare-knuckle politics, unafraid to use incendiary language to scorch an opponent.

"He's this bundle of contradictions," says political commentator

Blair Lee, Montgomery County's former State House lobbyist. "He's almost an intellectual, and the next minute, he's a thug."

Miller has been in public office for 31 years, the past 27 in the state Senate. His district, as he likes to put it, "begins at Mount Vernon" (because Maryland owns the Potomac River). He represents the slice of old agricultural southern Prince George's County that his family has called home for generations. He also represents part of Calvert County, where he has recently moved, and a sliver of Anne Arundel County. In the past, his district has included portions of Charles County, and may again after Glendening and the legislature draw new legislative boundaries next year.

Miller has been president of the Senate for 15 years. He is becoming increasingly visible in national Democratic politics. He was close to Bill Clinton, and serves on the executive board of the Democratic National Committee.

Miller is also a lawyer, with a thriving personal injury and defense practice in Clinton and Dunkirk.

Miller uses all of these positions and all of these associations to gather and radiate power statewide and in the jurisdictions he represents.

This past year has been particularly eventful for Miller. He moved from his brick home in Clinton into palatial new digs reminiscent of Monticello ("I have a big house," Miller confesses when one of the sixth-graders asks him if he lives in a mansion). The Senate this year christened its new \$22 million Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. Senate Office Building ("the Taj Mikhail"). And Miller has proudly seen one daughter, Melanie, gain political prominence as head of the Maryland Young Democrats, and another, Melissa, join his law firm after eight years as a prosecutor in the Prince George's County State's Attorney's Office.

But there have been setbacks as well: Late last year, Miller beat back an attempted coup by Senate Finance Committee Chairman Thomas L. Bromwell (D-Dist. 8) of Perry Hall, an effort that continues to leave the Senate jittery. And he saw an old friend and former top aide, Gerard E. Evans, sent to prison on federal corruption charges.

For all the difficulties, Miller is poised to exert even greater influence than usual in the months ahead, as the governor and legislative leaders redraw congressional and legislative district lines. It is a ready-made task for the hyper-political Senate president.

"He has extraordinary political antennas," says Bruce C. Bereano, a veteran State House lobbyist and former aide to two of Miller's predecessors.

Yet for all his seniority and acumen, for all of his talent — which even his harshest critics will acknowledge — Miller does not have a long list of legislative accomplishments.

"Other than his own tenure, what does Mike stand for?" Lee asks. "I can't think of anything."

## Rooted in Clinton

He was born Dec. 3, 1942, in Clinton, the oldest of 10 children. The Millers and their kin have long been prominent in Southern Maryland. The focal point of their small-town empire was B.K. Miller's, a grocery and liquor store that opened in 1913 and stands today at the corner of Old Branch Avenue and Woodyard Road in Clinton.

Politics was always a hot topic in the Miller household. His grandfather's barn was the town polling place.

It was so southern that Miller decided to model himself after Atticus Finch, the lawyer hero of the novel "To Kill a Mockingbird."

"I just came back to my hometown and hung up a shingle," he tells the Mattaponi sixth-graders. "I did everything, took on all kinds of clients. I would try my very best to help them, you see, because they were my friends, they were my neighbors, they were people I knew from the community."

But politics were never far from his mind. In 1962, Miller volunteered as a driver for Frank Small, the Republican candidate for governor. The sacrilege of working for a Republican was excused by the fact that Small was a Clinton guy who had known Miller's family for years.

After College Park and law school, Miller worked in Annapolis as a bill drafter for the Prince George's County House delegation. When a House of Delegates seat became available in 1970, the warring factions of the Prince George's Democratic establishment agreed that Miller should be the candidate. Then-state Sen. Steny H. Hoyer helped him. When new district lines were drawn before the 1974 election and no other elected official represented the southern Prince George's area carved into a new Senate district, Miller ran and won easily.

"Timing is everything in politics," he says.

Miller rose steadily into Senate leadership. After Melvin A. "Mickey" Steinberg became lieutenant governor in 1987, Miller was the consensus choice to succeed him as Senate president.

## The Schaefer years

In the 1986 gubernatorial election, Miller was a strong supporter of Baltimore Mayor William Donald Schaefer.

"I thought I was going to have an in," he says.

But when Schaefer took office in early 1987, the new Senate president gave him a framed copy of the Maryland Constitution, as if to warn Schaefer that he should not plan to roll over the legislature.

The relationship went downhill from there, and reached its nadir when Miller, at a Legislative Follies performance, made ribald jokes about the governor's sex life — while Schaefer and his companion, Hilda Mae Snoops, sat aghast in the front row.

Schaefer and Miller feuded over matters large and small. Miller soon found himself isolated as Schaefer became close to the two Speakers of the House he served with — first R. Clayton Mitchell of the Eastern Shore, and then Casper R. Taylor Jr. (D-Dist. 1C) of Cumberland.

"He was an enemy of the governor," Schaefer says of Miller today.

Miller counters that as an only child who never married and never had children of his own, Schaefer was unable to compromise.

But Miller was determined not to let the same thing happen with the next governor.

## Working with the governor

Parris Glendening and Mike Miller were products of different parts of the Prince George's Democratic machine, predisposed not to get along. During Glendening's early years as Prince George's executive, Miller said, "The higher a baboon climbs up a tree, the more of his butt he shows."

Today, Glendening attributes their early difficulties to institutional, rather than personal, tensions. Miller insists that Glendening has changed.

Although Miller supported Steinberg in the 1994 Democratic primary for governor, he and Glendening have become the closest of allies.

Glendening calls Miller a reliable compass of where the legislature is heading on an issue.

"He is not as progressive as I," the governor says. "He will routinely recommend that I have to moderate myself a little more."

Miller contrasts working with Glendening to working with Schaefer: "The difference is like the difference between heaven and hell."

Certainly, Miller has played a pivotal role in Glendening's recent successes.

Although he sided with his tobacco-growing constituents and opposed Glendening's attempts to raise the cigarette tax by \$1 a pack in 1999, Miller helped broker a compromise that led to a 30 cents-a-pack increase. He quietly aided a filibuster by tobacco tax opponents for a time, but also let Glendening set up a command post in his office just off the Senate chamber to woo wavering senators.

"It's kind of like the invisible hand," says Sen. Christopher Van Hollen Jr. (D-Dist. 18) of Kensington, a leader in the fight to pass the tobacco bill. "You know he's driving toward a certain end game, but you don't see any brickbats."

In 2000, Miller endorsed a plan to use a rare parliamentary ma-

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neuver to circumvent the Judicial Proceedings Committee and bring Glendening's controversial gun control bill directly to the Senate floor — despite the fact that Beretta has a gun manufacturing plant in his district. And this year, despite his own ambivalence toward gay rights legislation, Miller smoothed the way for the governor's bill to pass in Judicial Proceedings.

Miller's alliance with Glendening has caused sharp criticism by Senate Republicans.

"They are bills that I think the Mike Miller of 10 years ago would have opposed," says Senate Minority Leader Martin G. Madden (R-Dist. 13) of Clarksville. "But Mike has seen a lot of pressure from the left wing of his party, and party loyalty now plays a bigger role in his agenda."

The alliance with Glendening has had its rewards. In 1996, Glendening appointed Miller's son, Thomas V. Miller III, to the state parole board. Glendening has appointed one of Miller's law partners to the state workers compensation board. Melanie Miller recently got a job as a spokeswoman for state-run Baltimore-Washington International Airport. Glendening has also committed millions of dollars to one of Miller's pet projects, a new arena for the College Park campus. And, according to several State House and Prince George's County sources, Glendening has given Miller plenty of say in the appointment of judges and state patronage jobs for Prince George's Democrats.

## Weighing in locally

Things are often less harmonious for Miller on the home front, thanks to his penchant for injecting himself into local controversies.

He fought throughout this year's General Assembly session against a proposal to build a Safeway supermarket in the small town of Deale, earning the enmity of Anne Arundel County Executive Janet S. Owens (D) and other county powerhouses. The supermarket chain canceled the development.

Miller has been highly critical of Calvert County commissioners for their unwillingness to raise

hotel and motel tax to pay for services needed by the growing county. And he seems to be feuding at one time or another with half the local officials in Southern Maryland.

Owens recently said that she wishes Miller's Senate district would be redrawn so that it no longer includes Anne Arundel County. And sources say that Miller — who recruited a Republican County Council member to run in the Democratic primary against Owens in 1998 — has approached at least four prominent county Democrats about the possibility of running against her in 2002.

Sen. Thomas M. Middleton (D-Charles) of Waldorf and Chesapeake Beach Mayor Gerald W. Donovan both call Miller an asset to Southern Maryland.

"Mike is really well-respected in the three Southern Maryland counties," Middleton says. "They like Mike — he's gutsy."

Says Donovan: "He knows everybody in the state of Maryland you need to know to get things done."

## Out of Annapolis

In addition to all the politicking, Mike Miller has a healthy law practice — primarily in Prince George's, Charles, Calvert and St. Mary's counties.

But sometimes the job of lawmaker and the job of lawyer may cause conflicts of interest.

As one of the top officials in state government, and a close ally of Glendening's, Miller is consulted by the governor before he appoints judges to the circuit and district courts. Miller and his partners may appear before these same judges.

It is illegal for legislators to lobby state agencies on behalf of paying clients. But no such restriction exists for lawyer-legislators appearing in state courts. In fact, legislators who are lawyers are routinely granted "legislative continuances" — meaning cases are delayed during the three-month General Assembly session in Annapolis, and for a short period before or after. This can work to a client's benefit, and can help the lawyer-legislator shop for a friendly judge.

In 1997, the Maryland Independent reported that Miller and powerful House Judiciary Committee Chairman Joseph F. Val-

lario Jr. (D-Dist. 27) of Upper Marlboro pushed through a law that would make it tougher for Charles County prosecutors to convict people accused of drug possession. State's Attorney Leonard Collins complained at the time that Miller and Vallario's bill would benefit their defense clients. Miller vigorously denied the charges.

Gerard F. Devlin, a Prince George's County District Court judge, says he has never known Miller to take advantage of his position when he tries a case.

"He's just Mr. Miller in the courtroom," Devlin says.

## Focusing forward

He may be just Mr. Miller in a courtroom, but when it comes to politics, Miller will have tremendous influence over the redistricting process, where his goals include adding one and possibly two Democrats to the state's eight-member congressional delegation, and supplementing the Democrats' robust majorities in the legislature.

Miller will also work to ensure that the Democrats run their strongest possible ticket for statewide offices in 2002. While some political observers are spoiling for a fight, hoping someone challenges the frontrunner in the Democratic race for governor, Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Miller wants potential challengers to fall in line.

"In Mike's view, he'd like everybody to be happy," says John P. McDonough, a Prince George's lawyer and a longtime political operative. "He'd like to see [Montgomery County Executive Douglas M.] Duncan happy. He'd like to see Dutch [Ruppersberger, Baltimore county executive] happy. He'd like to see Kathleen happy. Mike counsels consensus."

Miller says, "The Democratic Party is blessed with many fine potential candidates for governor."

But the list doesn't include Mike Miller. If it bothers him, he isn't letting on. Politics is a tough game, and you need a thick skin.

"There's an old Jewish expression," the devout Catholic says. "If you can't smile, you shouldn't go into the retail business."