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Top Democrats' Strife Has Assembly Bracing

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As Maryland's legislature returns today to Annapolis, the best show to watch for political sport likely won't be the governor, or fights over taxes or gambling or education. Instead, watch for the latest twists in the personal feud between the General Assembly's top two Democrats.

At one end of the historic State House stands Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert), president of the Senate for 17 years, a tenure unsurpassed by any other state Senate leader in the country. Gruff and partisan to the core, he never backs down from a fight. "Somebody punches me," he said, "I punch back."

At the other end, about 50 feet down the hall on the second floor, stands Michael E. Busch (D-Anne Arundel), who just finished his rookie year as speaker of the House. A football star in high school and college, the easygoing delegate infuriated Miller with his refusal to cut a deal to legalize slot machines in Maryland, as well as his unwillingness to fall in line on other issues.

"An obstructionist," Miller called Busch in the waning days of last year's legislative session. "I am tired of dealing with timid, gutless people who don't do right by the people."

Busch has not yielded to the pressure. At one point last April, after absorbing another daily rhetorical pounding on slots from Miller, he sat in a leather armchair in his dark-paneled office, firmly crossed his arms around his midsection and clenched his jaw. "I've got the ball," the former running back said. "And I'm not giving it up."

He has also shown that he can give as good as he gets. While most lawmakers in Annapolis have politely declined to talk about an FBI probe into campaign donations Miller solicited, Busch has poured on the rhetoric.

"The idea that there's an active FBI investigation surrounding a volatile issue such as the expansion of gambling or slots is kind of like carrying around a bottle of nitroglycerine -- it can go off at any time," Busch said in October after acknowledging that he had willingly granted two interviews to federal agents scrutinizing Miller.

Other politicians have quickly learned that it can be volatile just to have Miller and Busch in the same room. Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) invited the pair over to the governor's mansion for regular breakfast meetings but called off the sessions because tensions ran too high, an administration official said.

"Miller came into the breakfasts, crossed his arms and wouldn't say a word," Busch recalled. "Then next thing I know, I get a call [from the governor's staff] saying, 'No more breakfasts.'"

But even on that, the two politicians can't agree. Miller said it was the governor who "came up with the idea of meeting with us individually. He didn't want us to gang up on him."

Regardless, leaders in the Democratic Party have grown increasingly worried about the public rift between Miller and Busch, fretting that squabbling between the party's top two leaders in the legislature is jeopardizing progress on important issues and working to the Republican governor's political benefit.

Isiah Leggett, the state party chairman, said he and other Democrats have sat down with the two adversaries and tried to convince them that they needed to put a better face on their relationship.

"I've been asked to take a much more visible role with the two of them because we're at a very critical point," Leggett said. "It's a real challenge to make certain we're on the same page. Clearly, there's some fundamental philosophical differences here. . . . It adversely affects all of us when you have these differences aired publicly."

Yesterday, Miller seemed to take the advice to heart. At a Democratic luncheon in Annapolis, he shocked many people when, in the middle of a rabble-rousing speech, he suddenly grabbed Busch's hand and raised it in the air in solidarity.

"I pledge one thing for the session: I'm going to do my damndest to work with Mike Busch," he shouted. "How close are we going to be? He's going to eat the watermelon, and I'm going to spit out the seeds!"

Was Busch surprised by the sudden gesture? "Totally," he said, widening his eyes for emphasis. "That's why [Miller's] the consummate politician."

No Apologies

Miller, 61, is certainly the senior politician. First elected to the General Assembly in 1970 -- the year Busch graduated from college -- he has become such an institution in Annapolis that the Senate named its new office building after him three years ago.

"I really think I know more about politics than he does," Miller said. "I've been involved since 1962. I also believe that I focus more on achieving goals. Maybe he's more of a competitor than myself. He's certainly a greater athlete."

Busch, 57, was elected to the House in 1986 and gradually worked his way up to become a committee chairman. His ascent to the position of speaker came as somewhat of a shock: He won the job after his predecessor, Casper R. Taylor Jr. (D-Allegany), lost his 2002 reelection bid by fewer than 100 votes in a political upset.

Nobody expected Busch to be a pushover in his new post. But his fierce opposition to a slot-machine bill that Miller and Ehrlich championed last year surprised both leaders, who mistakenly believed that he would agree to a compromise.

"Basically, I had a difference of opinion on slots," Busch said. "I'm a guy who doesn't change his political compass because of how the winds of the day are blowing."

Busch also doesn't apologize for not showing more deference to Miller. "I have a cordial relationship with the president of the Senate. We don't travel in the same social circles. When there's business to discuss, we discuss it, and that's about it."

Others in Annapolis said the feud has persisted not because Miller and Busch are polar opposites, but because they are so similar: strong-willed, independent, sometimes a little stubborn.

"They are so much alike, they're like two siblings, two brothers fighting," said Gerard E. Evans, a lobbyist and former staff member for Miller. "Mike Busch, like Mike Miller, is a super-competitive jock. When either one of them gets challenged, they don't back down."

Still, he predicted that they will mend their split. "There's too much at stake here," Evans said. "I think it's going to be temporary. It has to, because they both have to move the state's agenda together, and they can't do that now in the current climate."

Miller and Busch have butted heads over more than slot machines. Busch wants to raise the sales tax to solve the state's budget problems, an idea Miller has derided as politically unfeasible. They've also clashed over medical malpractice changes. Even when they agree on an issue, they can have a hard time cooperating; Miller, a longtime booster of the University of Maryland, declined to join Busch in creating a legislative task force on budget cuts and tuition increases

for the university system.

Personal rivalries between top politicians in Annapolis are hardly new.

Miller has picked his share of fights in the past, openly fussing with former governors Parris N. Glendening (D) and William Donald Schaefer (D). During his two terms as chief executive, Schaefer held much of the legislative leadership in open disdain.

Miller also had his run-ins with Taylor, the former House speaker, but they rarely spilled out in public. "I'm not sure there weren't major differences between Mike [Miller] and Cas, but because of Cas's personality, he just kind of sulked," Evans said.

Taylor acknowledged that he and Miller didn't always get along. We had "some very strong ups and downs in the beginning," he said. "Our personalities were such that perhaps we handled it differently in public."

An even bigger difference is that, for the first time since the 1960s, a Republican sits in the governor's chair in Maryland. With divided government, there's no single unquestioned Democratic leader in the State House, no one to step in and mediate the conflict.

Ehrlich said he has tried to bring the two Democrats together anyway to try to avoid legislative gridlock. But even he chooses his words carefully when describing the feud.

"There was not a longstanding personal relationship between the two," he said. "They have different interests; they have different personalities. It plays out, and sometimes it plays out in front of me."

Few Take Sides

Last October, at a Maryland Chamber of Commerce meeting on the Eastern Shore, Busch took part in a panel discussion on politics and joked that he had bought a hunting dog to impress Miller.

The dog was so talented, Busch said, that he could literally walk on water. Miller's reaction, according to Busch: "Mike, you bought yourself a dog that can't swim."

The audience chuckled, but Miller, who was present, didn't take kindly to the gibe. He responded with another story, about "that dog they used to call Delegate."

"Delegate Dog" was a good dog, Miller said. "But now they call him Mr. Speaker, and all he does is sit on his ass and bark."

The constant potshots have fueled plenty of chatter in the capital, generating private amusement but also genuine fear of getting caught in the middle of the feud. Few lawmakers were willing to be quoted.

"You ain't getting me in the middle of that one," said Del. George W. Owings III (D-Calvert), who serves under Busch as the House majority whip and is also a delegate in Miller's home district. "If you want a quote, say, 'I'm sure things will work out this session.'"

Sen. John C. Astle (D-Anne Arundel), a member of Miller's Senate leadership team but who is from the same legislative district as Busch, took a pass as well. "I've got to work with both of them," he protested with a grin.

In recent interviews, Busch and Miller said they would try to keep things civil over the next 90 days while the legislature meets, but both appeared to be gritting their teeth as the words came out.

"There's always been a competitive issue between the House and the Senate," Busch said. "But you certainly have to work with the president of the Senate, especially when you're both in the same party."

Miller said he would give it his best shot. "Let's say that my relations with Mike Busch could be better, and I'm going to have to work on it," he said. "I'm also a very flexible person. I try to see the other person's point of view. Meet the other person midway."

Does he expect Busch to do the same?

"We'll find out, won't we?" he said.

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