

Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., pillar of Maryland's state capital for decades, dies at 78

By **Paul Schwartzman**

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For decades, he was the man to see in Maryland's state capital, a country-boy Democrat who rose to the heights of power in the General Assembly and used his commanding influence to direct politics and policy across the state.

Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., the nation's longest-serving president of a state Senate and a pillar of Maryland government for nearly a half-century, died Jan. 15 at his home in Chesapeake Beach, Md. He was 78. The cause was complications from prostate cancer, said family spokesman Jake Weissmann.

A thick-shouldered pragmatist who had no use for ideologues, Mr. Miller led the campaign to legalize casino gambling in Maryland and, despite his centrist views, facilitated the passage of progressive laws including legalization of same-sex marriage and the repeal of the death penalty.

Nearly two years after he announced his cancer diagnosis, Mr. Miller's passing unleashed a wave of grief in Annapolis and further sealed a complete leadership transformation at the State House he presided over for 33 years. Because of his illness, Mr. Miller relinquished the Senate presidency in October 2019 but retained his seat as a rank-and-file member until Dec. 23, when he resigned.

A shrewd tactician, Mr. Miller controlled the Senate under six governors and endured as opponents derided him as an autocrat, as demographics in his home base of Prince George's County shifted, and as Maryland's political culture drifted left.

"Mike Miller was the cornerstone for all the progress that has occurred in the state over the past three decades," said Timothy F. Maloney, a prominent trial lawyer and former Democratic state delegate representing Prince George's. "There has been no major initiative that has occurred without Mike's leadership. He saw everything from a historical context and tried to get ahead of history to see where things were going."

A backslapping raconteur, Mr. Miller was a singular presence as he ruled the Senate. His mane of white hair and chiseled features invited reminders of the Founding Fathers, at least in appearance — comparisons that Mr. Miller rarely discouraged.

Mr. Miller sometimes got himself into trouble for his freewheeling banter. In 1989, as he was emerging as a statewide political force, he used a profanity to describe Baltimore, a blunder that quashed whatever hope had to run for governor.

As the Senate's leader, Mr. Miller was unafraid to lacerate rivals, accusing Gov. William Donald Schaefer (D) of hiring "eunuchs and sycophants" and comparing Parris N. Glendening (D), then Prince George's County executive, to a

“baboon.” In the heat of one election season, he promised Democrats would “bury” Republicans “six feet deep, faces up.”

Mr. Miller clung to his grudges as if they were prized treasures. Those who “crossed the boss,” as one colleague described betraying Mr. Miller, could find their legislative proposals — and their political careers — extinguished. After then-Del. Patricia H. Billings (D-Montgomery) opposed legislation he supported, Mr. Miller sent her a Christmas card. “I haven’t forgotten your vote,” he wrote.

“Working for Mike was like working in the Mafia — you go out feet first,” said Gerard Evans, a lobbyist and longtime friend. “You’re either in the organization or — if you p---d him off — you were dead politically and functionally.”

Mr. Miller could offer foes a second chance, but only if it served a larger political purpose. “If he needed you, he brought you back,” said former state senator Gloria G. Lawlah (D-Prince George’s), who mended fences with Mr. Miller after a falling-out. “He was the master of power and control.”

Mr. Miller waved off suggestions he commanded the Senate with a heavy hand, saying he sought to delegate power and promote fellow senators.

Grudges? Not him, he insisted.

“I forgive and forget,” he said during an interview for this obituary. “Honestly and truly.”

Asked who, if anyone, intimidated him over the years in Annapolis, Mr. Miller, without hesitation, said, “I was never afraid of anyone.”

Prince George's Democratic Party boss

Thomas Vincent Mike Miller Jr. was born Dec. 3, 1942, in Clinton, Md., where his grandfather founded B.K. Miller’s, a general store that Mr. Miller’s father eventually took over. At the intersection of Old Branch Avenue and Woodyard Road, the store was a center of Prince George’s life, a few yards from the church where the Miller family attended services and down the street from the modest brick building where Mr. Miller eventually opened a law office.

As the oldest of 10 children, Mr. Miller navigated family squabbles — often instigated by his volatile father — and developed skills that helped him later maneuver in Annapolis. From boyhood through early adulthood, Mr. Miller worked at his family’s store and learned lessons that would stay with him as a politician.

“You were taught the customer was always right. And so when I ran, I treated my constituents like they were my customers,” Mr. Miller said in the interview. “It gave me huge exposure to people, their issues and their problems.”

His parents’ politics spanned the Democratic spectrum, with his father a conservative and his mother a New Dealer who encouraged her son to go to law school. “She was determined that I was not going to work in the store,” he once told The Washington Post.

He got his introduction to politics in 1962 as a driver for Frank Small Jr., a Republican gubernatorial candidate who lived next door to the Millers. Mr. Miller befriended Small's press consultant, Lawrence J. Hogan Sr., who would become a U.S. congressman and Prince George's County executive. Hogan's son, Larry, for whom Mr. Miller babysat, became Maryland governor during the last years of Mr. Miller's reign in Annapolis.

"He had more political contacts at 18 years old than I've ever had any time I've been alive," Thomas Farrington, who worked alongside Mr. Miller in the Young Democrats in the 1970s, once told The Washington Post.

Mr. Miller graduated from the University of Maryland in 1964 with a bachelor's degree in business administration and a law degree in 1967. In 1965, he married Patricia Given, a college classmate. In addition to his wife, survivors include five children — Melissa Miller of Chesapeake Beach, Michelle Miller Fink and Melanie Miller, both of Annapolis, Tommy Miller Jr. of West River, Md., and Amanda Miller Stokely of Sunderland, Md. — as well as three brothers, five sisters and 15 grandchildren.

In 1970, with the backing of the Prince George's Democratic machine, Mr. Miller won his first political race, capturing a House of Delegates seat. Four years later, he was elected to the state Senate as a conservative Democrat.

As an intern in Mr. Miller's office in 1977, Evans learned that his boss could be "unreasonably" demanding. At Mr. Miller's urging, Evans suggested legislative ideas, including a bill allowing victims of domestic abuse to seek compensation.

"Don't ever suggest another bill!" Mr. Miller yelled, according to Evans. Mr. Miller, he said, was afraid of seeming too liberal in a conservative district. "It was nothing more basic than getting reelected," Evans said. "His core was delivering as a retail politician."

Mr. Miller's early years in the state legislature and his reign as a boss of the Prince George's Democratic organization coincided with the county's transition from majority White to majority Black. Mr. Miller adapted by forging alliances with a number of rising Black leaders.

Nonetheless, some African Americans chafed at what they regarded as Mr. Miller's dictatorial control over local politics. "He appears to be with you," former state senator Tommie Broadwater Jr. (D-Prince George's) once told The Post. "If you don't know him, you'll think he's the best of buddies. But he will stab you in the back."

Mr. Miller, when asked about Broadwater's description, replied: "That's not a bad analysis."

In Annapolis, Mr. Miller's influence was growing. Melvin Steinberg, then the Senate's leader, described Mr. Miller as his "enforcer" and appointed him chairman of the powerful Judiciary Committee.

Blair Lee IV, then Montgomery County's chief lobbyist, learned the consequence of opposing legislation Mr. Miller supported one day as he walked along a State House corridor. "All of a sudden I saw this curly-haired guy coming around the corner. He sees me and puts both hands on my lapels and backed me against the wall," Lee once told The Post. "He has got an Irish temper and an Irish humor, but you never know which one he'll be in at that minute."

In 1986, as Schaefer became governor, the state's 47 senators elected Mr. Miller Steinberg's successor. At 44, Mr. Miller assumed the Senate's throne, fueling chatter that he was on a glide path to becoming governor. Three years later, Mr. Miller hosted a swanky fundraiser in Baltimore, an event that many regarded as his statewide coming-out party.

A few hours before the fundraiser, Mr. Miller agreed to an interview with a local television reporter, who asked why he was hosting the affair far from his legislative district. "It helps educate my constituents as to why Baltimore needs the

was losing the urban bid from his legislative district. “It helps educate my constituents as to why Baltimore needs the economic help,” Mr. Miller said. “I mean Baltimore is a goddamn ghetto. It’s worse than inner-city Washington, D.C. It is shit.”

“I hope you’re not going to play this on tape,” Mr. Miller said, laughing nervously before adding that Baltimore “is a war zone. I mean, it’s crack. I mean, it’s these dime bags of PCP. . . . Fifty percent of the kids that start out in school don’t graduate. So looking at things from a statewide perspective, we really have to do things to help.”

The station aired Mr. Miller’s comments, causing a furor that dogged him for decades. Mr. Miller cited the incident as his sole political regret.

But Mr. Miller also said he did not regret that the incident may have ended his statewide potential. As it turned out, he served another three decades as Senate president, his influence uninterrupted at the State House while moving trucks pulled up to the governor’s mansion across the way every four or eight years.

Dealmaker and consensus-builder

Of all the governors who presided during his reign, Mr. Miller said his favorite was Marvin Mandel (D) because he knew how to build support for legislation “and would reward you for working with him.” The worst governor, he said, was Schaefer, because “he didn’t understand governance. He wanted to spend money that we didn’t have to spend. He thought he could print money in the basement of the State House.”

By his own account, Mr. Miller’s crowning achievement was the legalization of casino gambling and the subsequent launch of gaming in Prince George’s, despite fierce opposition from church leaders and civic groups. In a show of political gamesmanship, Mr. Miller forced two special sessions of the Assembly, after which the fate of what became the MGM Casino at National Harbor was left to voters to decide in a 2012 referendum. It passed by 100,000 votes.

“Everybody wants to take credit for MGM,” Lawlah said. “It was Mike Miller’s baby. He never took his eye off of it.”

Mr. Miller survived various threats to his power, including a failed attempt to oust him in 2000 led by state Sen. Thomas L. Bromwell (D-Baltimore). Two years later, the legislature’s ethics panel rebuked Mr. Miller for yelling at two appeals court judges about a pending dispute over redistricting maps. He also faced scrutiny from federal prosecutors investigating contributions to a campaign fund he oversaw. No charges were filed.

Mr. Miller often attributed his political endurance to his ability to “see what’s going to happen before it happens.” Despite his own reservations, he facilitated the abolition of the death penalty in Maryland in 2013 after polls showed the public supported the ban. Even as he voted no, he allowed a bill legalizing same-sex marriage to move forward in 2012, a shift he attributed not only to political pragmatism but to his friendships with people who were gay.

“He didn’t live in a world where he would substitute his core beliefs for what he saw as the larger consensus,” said Todd Eberly, a St. Mary’s College of Maryland political scientist. “He’s a good representative of what it used to be like when two sides were able to compromise.”

For all his adaptability, Mr. Miller was stubborn when it came to history. In 2017, he was widely criticized for opposing the removal from the state capitol grounds of a statue of Roger Taney, the Maryland-born Supreme Court chief justice who supported the 1857 Dred Scott decision that Blacks in free or slave states could not be citizens.

Mr. Miller, who regarded himself as the curator of State House history, hung portraits on his office walls of past Maryland governors, including segregationists. He also had a rendering of the trial of Mary Surratt, a Clinton native and a co-conspirator in President Abraham Lincoln's assassination.

"Somebody could walk into my office and say, 'Why is that picture on your wall?' " Mr. Miller said in the interview for this obituary. "Because of my love of history, I'm not politically correct. But, you know, they were products of their times. They're products of history."

As 2019 began, Mr. Miller divulged that he had cancer but kept showing up in Annapolis, eager to demonstrate his vigor even as he was undergoing chemotherapy. "I'm in the game, I'm on top of it, I'm right there," he told reporters one afternoon before unleashing a string of invectives, as if to prove his point.

Ever the pragmatist, he had reached out months before to four newly elected senators, progressives who had defeated his more moderate lieutenants in the 2018 Democratic primary. He understood that his style of politics — dealmaking and consensus-building — had become an antiquated art form in an era dominated by President Trump and extreme rhetoric.

As much as anything, he yearned for a return to the political center.

"It's really time for me to get out of politics," he said in the interview. "Our democracy is the oldest in the history of the world, but it's on very shaky legs. I see the Democrats going further to the left, and the Republicans going further to the right, until something absolutely horrible happens and people realize they've made a terrible mistake."

Whatever happens, Mr. Miller said, it would no longer be his problem.

His time, he said, had come and gone.

Staff writer Erin Cox contributed to this report.
