

# MILLER'S CROSSING

*Will Next Year's Gubernatorial Race Derail Maryland's Old Political Engine?*

By Michael Abramowitz  
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**I**n Annapolis, he's the man to see, the power broker who kills legislation with the wave of a hand. But here, near the Patuxent River in Baden, where St. Michael's Catholic Church is holding its fall turkey dinner, Maryland Senate President Mike Miller is reprising a different role: the Godfather of Southern Maryland.

Faces light up as Miller navigates his way through this Prince George's County volunteer fire hall, brushing past dozens of old friends, neighbors and constituents. For every woman, Miller offers a kiss; for every man, a hug or a squeeze of the shoulder just hard enough to make it clear who's boss.

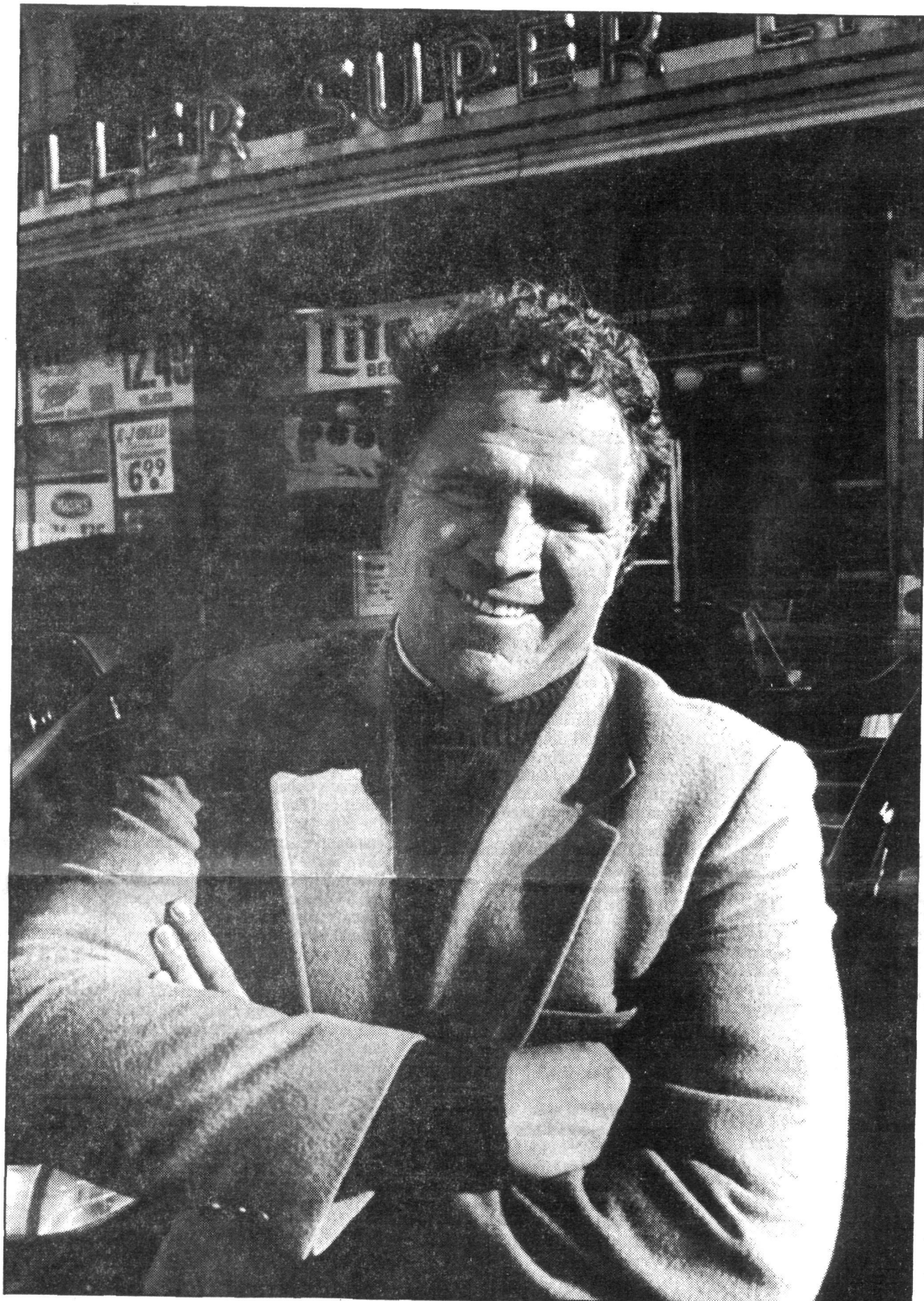
"How are you doing? . . . Great to see you. . . . Let me know if I can help in any way." Miller keeps up a nonstop patter. "Keep voting Democrat, and the jobs will come." His blue eyes shine in childlike glee. His laugh is hard and long enough so everyone else knows to smile or laugh too.

As soon as he sits, the old church ladies descend with heaping plates of turkey, ham, dressing, sweet potatoes and green beans. Miller can barely manage a bite. A girl wants his help obtaining a picture of her high school class's visit to the State House. A middle-aged woman thanks Miller for helping her son out of a legal scrape. There's a nod of recognition to an elderly couple; the man's grandfather, it turns out, once worked in the Miller family store in Clinton.

"It is almost like you're in Kansas or Iowa," Miller exults of this community 20 miles from Washington. "It is a real small-town feel. That's what these people are trying to preserve, and they're fighting a losing battle."

So may be Thomas Vincent Mike Miller Jr. He is their champion. His family roots here go back generations. He's represented them in the General Assembly since 1970. He hangs out in their bars and American Legion posts. His law firm handles their drunk-driving cases and divorces. In Mike Miller's world, as in Richard Daley's Chicago, the rules of engagement are time-honored: All politics is local. Don't trust anyone you didn't go to high school with.

See MILLER, C2, Col. 1



Maryland Senate President Mike Miller, whose style is a blend of glad-handing and arm-twisting, faces his biggest challenge as his nemesis, Prince George's County Executive Parris Glendening, makes a run for the governorship that could threaten Miller's power base.

BY JAMES A. PARCELL—THE WASHINGTON POST



**Mike Miller, doing what he loves, talks to Clinton residents Julie Morris and Sam Blouir about a local problem.**

BY JAMES A. PARCELL—THE WASHINGTON POST



# Md.'s Mike Miller

MILLER, From C1

Never explain or complain—just get even.

But Mike Miller's comfortable political existence is fast evaporating. Prince George's County Executive Parris N. Glendening, the university professor who is his longtime nemesis politically and stylistically, has mounted a campaign for governor that could threaten Miller's power base in the state Senate. At the same time his electoral base is being challenged by the coming of middle-class black power in the suburbs. And while Miller has perfected the art of the back-room deal, his old machine style seems an anachronism in an era when politicians reach voters through television sound bites, radio call-in shows and even computer networks.

"Mike is organizationally minded," said Del. Timothy F. Maloney (D-Prince George's). "But he's trying to hold on to the organization in a day and age when the politics of the county are changing. That's his challenge."

## The Charm or the Hammer

Miller's is a colorful world of intrigue and salty put-downs. (Miller once likened County Executive Glendening to a baboon on a tree.) He can be both disarmingly charming and brutally confrontational, like the time he thrust then-Montgomery County lobbyist Blair Lee IV up against the wall and told him to lay off a bill.

Miller is a keen student of power. At his home in Clinton, his bookshelves are lined with biographies of the likes of Lyndon Johnson, Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy. While he insists otherwise—"I eschew the word 'power,'" he says—it's clear that Miller is a gifted practitioner of power as well.

Politically, Miller watchers say, his first instinct is to tap his considerable fount of Southern flattery and solicitude. "He could charm the Eskimos out of an igloo," says Gov. William Donald Schaefer, with whom Miller, in the name of a more aggressive voice for the legislature, has mostly feuded over Schaefer's seven years in office.

If charm doesn't work, Miller won't hesitate to bring down the hammer. When Sen. Leo Green (D) annoyed him several years ago, Miller stripped him of his chairmanship of the Prince George's County Senate delegation. When legislators challenged his effort to ram through a state law limiting developer contributions to Prince George's County politicians, he twisted more than a few arms, associates say.

After the late Montgomery County delegate Patricia Billings helped kill the bill one year, Miller sent her a Christmas card saying, "I haven't forgotten your vote," according to her widower, Del. Leon Billings (D-Montgomery). He then issued a "death sentence" on all her legislation for the following session, Billings said.

"This is a little man with a lot of power who is not unwilling to use it for purely selfish objectives, against the public interest," Billings said. "I'm saying it on the record. Most people won't, because they are afraid of him."

Del. Joanne C. Benson (D-Prince George's), a frequent Miller critic, said there are bills she won't put her name on because she knows they will be automatically killed once they go over to the Senate. "If people go along to get along with him, that's the people he wants," she said. "He has a

problem with persons that are considered strong, independent thinkers."

Miller seems a jumble of emotions when confronted with such criticism. One instinct is to deny—he says the charges about arm-twisting are nonsense—though the very need to deny frustrates him. "This is the reason I hate these [expletive] stories," he complains at one point. "Because you're denying. And when you're denying, you're losing."

At the same time, Miller doesn't seem to mind the aura of fear and intimidation that he leaves in his wake. "I do remember slights," he says. "I do remember people who are discourteous to the Senate. I do remember people that I think are unreasonable."

But, he adds calmly, "I don't go out of my way to be vindictive or punitive."

## Roots and History

The church supper is over, and the president of the Maryland Senate is back behind the wheel of his black Cadillac Seville STS, heading out of Baden and south toward St. Mary's County for a Democratic club function. It is a sunny day. As Miller negotiates the back roads, a rich tapestry of old plantation houses and rolling farmland whizzes by on either side.

"All right, this song will knock your socks off," he comments, slipping an old R&B tune from the Dells into the CD player and lip-syncing along with gusto. Miller smiles broadly and pumps his fist as the song reaches its peak, almost like an overgrown frat boy. Having just celebrated his 51st birthday, he maintains a full head of curly brown hair flecked with gray and a slight paunch from a few too many turkey dinners.

Miller openly advertises his passions, of which rhythm and blues is only one. His self-taught knowledge of Maryland and Civil War history is encyclopedic. He points out sites like Benedict, where the British landed in 1814, or Bryantown, where John Wilkes Booth stopped off after murdering Lincoln. He intersperses his rambling commentary with insults aimed at real estate developers, who in Miller's view are threatening the very soul of his region with ill-advised building plans.

"These areas are unbelievable," Miller says. "Can you imagine if they took those sites looking down the Patuxent River, and you had gravel pits or trailer parks or garden-style apartments or sludge dumps?"

The geographic heart of Mike Miller's universe is the intersection of Woodyard Road and Old Branch Avenue in Clinton, where Miller's grandfather founded B.K. Miller's, a busy general store that still functions as a center for this old town of Confederate sympathies.

A half-mile away is the unprepossessing Miller Building, where Miller and a partner practice law. It's next door to St. John's Catholic Church, where the Millers have been communicants for decades. A mile or so in the opposite direction is the modest red-brick rambler where Miller lives with his wife, Patti, and the youngest of his five children. Dozens of Miller aunts and uncles and cousins reside nearby.

As a boy Miller bagged and carried groceries for his father, a hard-driving, deeply conservative businessman who believed that people didn't work hard unless you yelled at them, according to Miller's mother, Esther. All the children worked "like lunatics" at

the store, says Miller's sister Nancy. "It's like a crazy place where no one ever walks—people are always running and hurrying."

The eldest of 10 children, Miller became captivated by politics after spending the summer of 1962 as a driver and aide for Republican gubernatorial candidate Frank Small Jr. Although the Millers were loyal Democrats, Small happened to be a next-door neighbor. Young Mike's horizons were lifted during that summer crisscrossing the state, having his picture taken with the likes of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Charles McC. Mathias, the future Republican senator.

Despite his fling with the Republicans, Miller was brought up an emphatically loyal Democrat. One of his grandfather's tasks was to help get the vote out for former Rep. Lansdale Sasscer, who for years was the undisputed political boss of Prince George's County. In those days, it was almost impossible to get elected to anything unless you were on the official party slate; Miller first won election to the General Assembly in 1970 on a ticket organized by Steny Hoyer and Peter O'Malley, who were just putting together the organization that dominated county politics for years.

Loyalty, party discipline, organization—the old rules served Miller nicely as he ascended the ladder of state power and built a formidable network of political allies throughout the county and state.

"It's worked pretty well," Miller agrees, a touch of nostalgia evident in his voice.

## Threats From Two Sides

With the opening last month of his eighth legislative session as Senate president, Miller is girding for the political free-for-all of his life. As Schaefer is barred by law from seeking a third term, an odd assortment of Democrats and Republicans is lining up to take a run at the governorship, including Glendening. Most Maryland politicians expect Miller to do everything in his power to try to frustrate Glendening—and then try to cut a deal if he believes he cannot.

But the most interesting struggle for Miller is right in his home base of Prince George's County, where a newly ascendant black bourgeoisie is transforming an area historically seen as a regional backwater into the most ethnically diverse affluent jurisdiction in America, challenging the District of Columbia for primacy as an incubator of black political talent. In many respects, Miller's political maneuvering can be seen as a metaphor for the white Establishment's response to the dramatic demographic changes in the Washington suburbs.

Miller has both cut deals and cut and run. As Senate president, he helped broker a controversial redrawing of Senate districts that resulted in his own district being moved partially out of Prince George's County, and away from precincts where an influx of affluent new black residents posed a threat to his historically easy reelection campaigns. But Miller has also shrewdly developed alliances with some of the county's leading African American politicians, most notably the new U.S. congressman, Albert R. Wynn. He is now throwing his considerable political heft behind one of his black colleagues in the Senate, Bea Tignor, in her quest to succeed Glendening as county executive.

The way Miller tells it, he is simply trying to "draw the circle wider" to reflect the growing multicultural composition of the county. But some black politicians seethe at what they see as Miller's penchant for dealing only with

those black elected officials who go along with his agenda.

"He's very reluctant to give up power unless he's in absolute control of whatever position he's being asked to give up," says state Sen. Decatur W. Trotter (D-Prince George's), a leading African American official in the county. "In the African American community, there's been resentment to that kind of thought process, putting people into lock step with what's going on."

"I like Mike. We get along," adds the Rev. C. Anthony Muse, the politically ambitious pastor of Gibbons United Methodist Church, a predominantly black church in Miller's district. "But I disagree with his strong-arm tactics. If he's going to continue to be successful, he's going to have to change his style. Maybe the Godfather doesn't work anymore."

But Wynn says Miller is a convenient scapegoat for ambitious black politicians. By contrast, he says, he has been able to work well with Miller, who he says relishes the normal political process of give and take. "The facts," Wynn said, "really belie the rap people put on him. You have people who want to play racial politics, and in order to play race politics, you have to have a villain. . . . Mike's tough, he's stubborn and he's done some things I violently disagree with. But he's one of the best politicians I've ever worked with."

## Showdown

If one power center in Prince George's County is Mike Miller's law office in Clinton, the other is surely the fifth floor of the County Administration Building in Upper Marlboro. Here is the office of Parris N. Glendening, three-term county executive, candidate for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination and the leading man in Mike Miller's recurring political nightmares.

No two politicians could be more different. Glendening is the nerdy professor from College Park who likes to talk about environmental impact statements. Miller is the crude-talking extrovert who prefers whipping legislators in line for a tough vote.

Today, Glendening is leaning back in his chair, flashing a broad, knowing smile. At the mention of Miller's name, he invokes the "11th Commandment" borrowed from Ronald Reagan, namely, "Thou shalt speak no evil of fellow Democrats." Glendening is all polish and gloss, as he tries to explain the source of his feud with Miller. "Mike loves the game. He loves a good political conspiracy, a political deal, a political slate," Glendening says. "You can tell it. His eyes light up, his voice gets more enthusiastic. Where he tends to have differences and perhaps even conflicts tends to focus on people like myself, who love policy."

"It is no mystery," Glendening adds. "He believes I'm a policy wonk out of the university, and I think he's a traditional politician. Sometimes we just see the world differently."

Miller doesn't subscribe to the 11th Commandment. "You can't trust him. His word is no good," Miller says flatly, as he launches into a lengthy diatribe against Glendening. "What's important to know—whether you're landing on Normandy Beach or whether you're standing up and debating the merits of a bill—you don't have to worry about your back."

With Glendening, the implication goes, you're always worried about being shot in the back by somebody who's supposed to be in your army.

The feuding goes back so far no one knows really when or how it began. Miller complains that Glendening regularly used to leak confidential discussions between elected officials to the press in the early '70s, when the two were young, up-and-coming county pols. Unlike previous county executives, he says, Glendening wouldn't consult with the senators about appointments. "The next thing you know," Miller adds, "he's building up his own campaign organization by appointing people that have run against us."

For Miller and Glendening, 1994 will likely mark the close of the feud in one way or the other. Miller seems to have shelved his own gubernatorial ambitions following an embarrassing television interview several years ago, in which he termed Baltimore a "ghetto" and used unprintable epithets. He says he wants to serve one more term as Senate president. But the one person who could torpedo that scenario is Glendening, who many observers believe would not hesitate to lead a dump-Miller movement if elected governor.

"Mike can afford to have Parris as

county executive," says former lobbyist Blair Lee IV, now a columnist and Maryland political observer. "He can't afford to have Parris as governor. He will lose his Senate presidency. . . . The two guys are fighting for their political lives. One guy will live—one guy will die."

Other political insiders speak in less apocalyptic terms. They know Miller is a pragmatist who has shifted left on issues such as abortion and gun control as the times have changed. For all their feuding, they point out, Miller and Glendening have always been able to reach an accommodation in elections past. It's in their mutual interest to be together, they say. Already, intermediaries are trying to broker a peace settlement. Only minutes after bashing Glendening, Miller is sounding more pragmatic.

"People can grow into a job," Miller explains. "If you've read history, you know that ordinary people like Ulysses S. Grant are capable of inordinate ability at certain times in their life. I'm willing to give Parris Glendening . . . the benefit of the doubt."