

Senate President Mike Miller stands above the Maryland Senate chamber, where he has presided since 1987 and worked since 1975. Observers say he plays the political game better than anyone.

The man in charge

It's no accident Mike Miller has led his state's Senate longer than any politician in the land

BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL

Daily Record Business Writer

When Maryland's longest serving Senate president is absent from the chamber's rostrum, it's noticeable.

One Friday morning at the start of this year's General Assembly session, in the absence of Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., Senate President Pro Tem Ida G. Ruben, D-Montgomery, had to run Senate proceedings.

Confusion set in. The chatter among senators, sounding more like adolescents on the first day of school than state lawmakers, made it difficult to hear the goings-on. Their wide-eyed gazes darted around the room, making them look like they'd been left with a substitute teacher.

"They really do take his lead on things," said Miller's administrative as-

sistant, Joy R. Walker, who has worked for Miller for 17 years. "And the energy is there when he's presiding."

He was first elected to the Senate 30 years ago, and has held his leadership post since 1987, longer than any other lawmaker in the country. The 62-year-old Miller is known for being the best player of the political game.

"He knows how to play his hand a lot better than the governor does," says Sen. Brian E. Frosh, when asked if Miller is more influential than Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. "And knowing how to play your hand is knowing when to not play your hand. And he does not use his full influence all the time."

One of Frosh's first encounters with Miller came when he was a young delegate with a then-controversial bill to adopt California's vehicle-emissions standards. Upon

Miller

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advice from another lawmaker, he went to see Miller to ask that his bill not be referred to the Senate Judiciary Proceedings Committee, known as the place where unwanted bills go to die.

"I explained to him how it was really important. It was going to clean up the air. It's going to do this, it's going to do that," recalled the Montgomery County Democrat. "He puts his arm around me and says, 'I'm sorry, Brian, but I already referred it to Judicial Proceedings. Good luck.'"

"I walked out of the office thinking, 'He was a nice guy, but he just killed my bill.' I knew I was being manipulated, but it was so skillful," Frosh says with an almost inaudible laugh. "He makes me think of what someone like Huey Long must have been like. He's a larger-than-life character. ... He's a phenomenon based on his personality."

Long, Louisiana's governor from 1928 to 1932, was known as the smooth-talking boss of Louisiana politics after gaining almost complete control of all government branches.

Miller, a distinguished-looking man who wears double-breasted suits and typically walks around with his left hand in his pant pocket, is not only highly influential but also intimidating to many.

"Oh, he is intimidating," says Senate Minority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus, R-Lower Shore. "Honestly, though, I've never felt intimidated by him. When I was a young freshman I did. But now I don't."

Miller can be a force to be reckoned with when he feels strongly about an issue.

"He can be very volatile, and he's extremely dedicated to Democrat politics," Stoltzfus adds. "But I think his intentions are that — most times — of a statesman."

Miller, born in Clinton, is the oldest of 10 children. He has five children and 10 grandchildren, whom he lately has been schooling on shark teeth.



Senate President Mike Miller speaks from the bench in the Maryland Senate chamber.

"He takes them all along the beach," said Vicki Fretwell, Senate public information officer. "He collects sharks' teeth, some Civil War memorabilia."

Inside Miller's State House office are various books on American political history. At his home he has thousands, say Fretwell and Walker.

"I have no doubt that he's read them all," Fretwell said. "He's an incredibly avid reader and will have three or four books going at the same time."

In line with his love of American political history, Miller often quotes U.S. presidents and other historically significant figures, now dead, when talking to reporters. He also has taken to pinching his eyes shut for minutes at a time when talking about more

contentious topics, such as medical malpractice reform, slot-machine gambling and the direction of the Democratic Party.

In 1962, the party used to be for civil rights — now it's not, Miller says. The party used to be one of the most vocal proponents of the Environmental Protection Agency — now anything related to the environment must be socialism, he added.

Miller said he considers himself progressive, "a moderate."

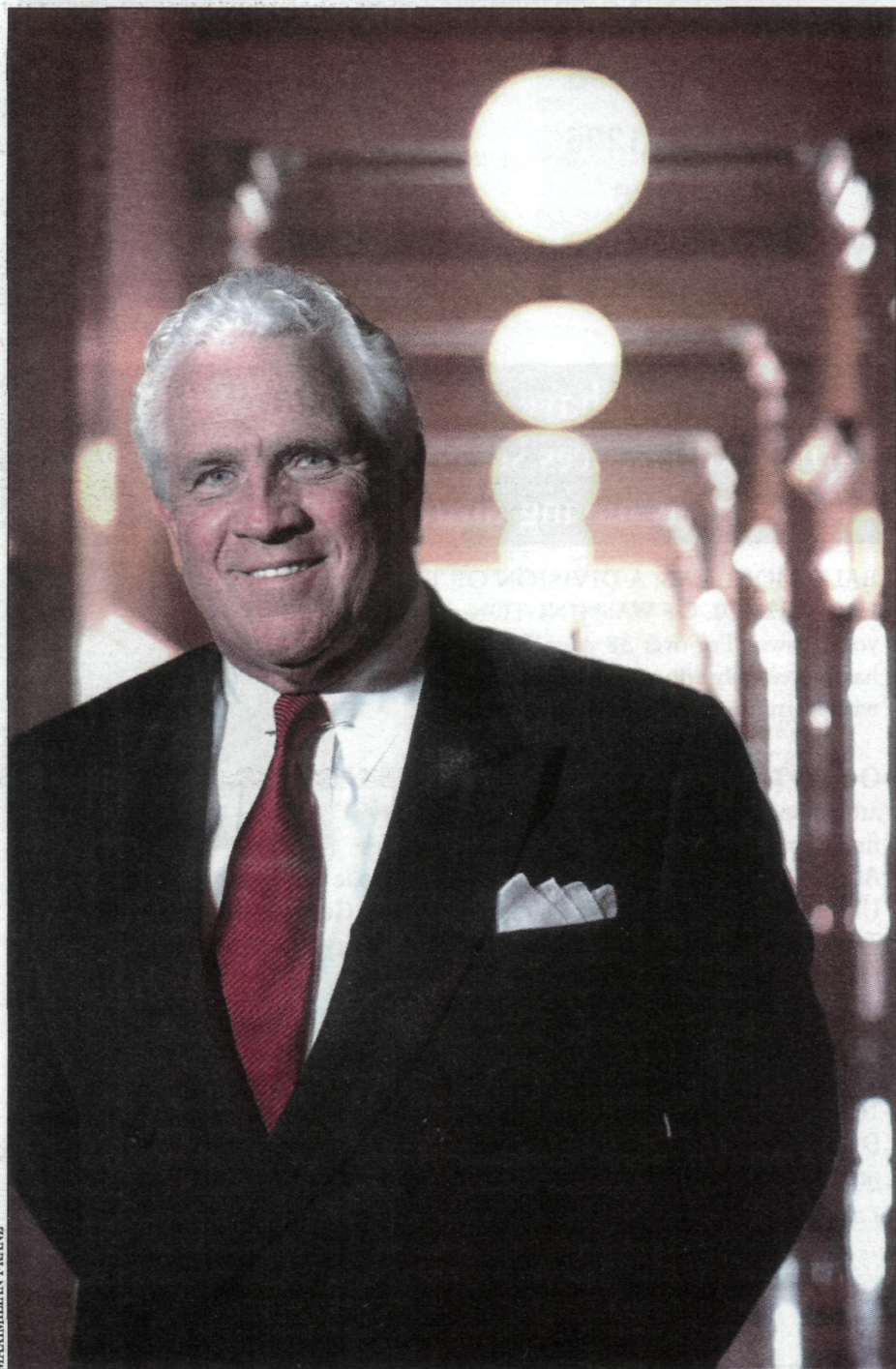
"There are very few things that I draw a line in the sand on," said the Clint Eastwood fan. Slot machines are one. If legislation allowing them isn't passed during this session, he said, there will be "huge consequences directed at Democrats."

Despite often being at odds with Miller, Frosh says he has "enormous" respect for his leader.

"He's very comfortable in his own skin," Frosh explains. "He can think about nice stuff to say about just about anybody and it always rings true. Somebody will say something silly and he'll find an eloquent way to say it. It's not an accident that he's the longest serving Senate president in Maryland or in the country."

Those who work for him and with him say he'll remain in his current role until his final days.

"I get elected every year," Miller says. "So every year they have an opportunity to kick me out."

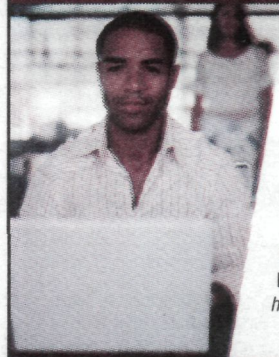


Political allies and opponents say Miller can be intimidating, volatile and savvy. And while he's held his leadership post longer than anyone else in the country, Miller said, 'Every year they have an opportunity to kick me out.'

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