

POLITICS

Thomas V. Mike Miller, longtime president of Maryland Senate, dies

By PAMELA WOOD and JEFF BARKER
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Retired Maryland state Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, a pragmatic, tough-minded leader who presided over a progressive agenda in the chamber for a record 33 years, died Friday, his family announced in a statement. He was 78.

Miller's death from cancer marked the end of an era for the General Assembly. The imposing, white-haired Democrat, who represented parts of Calvert, Charles and Prince George's counties, was a member of the legislature from 1971 until his retirement last month. He was the longest-serving state Senate leader in Maryland history when he stepped down from that post in January 2020.

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In an interview last year, Miller said he hoped his legacy would be that he worked to make Maryland a better place.

“He did the very best he could. He had a reputation for honesty. He had a reputation for candor and a reputation for hard work,” Miller said, sitting in a wing chair in the Senate lounge in the State House. “And he made the state a better place for having been there.”

Miller had battled prostate cancer since 2018. **He made his diagnosis public** in early 2019 and **later that year announced he would step down as Senate president**, returning to being a rank-and-file senator from Southern Maryland. His colleagues gave him the title “Senate president emeritus.”

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The cancer, which spread to his bones, eventually caused Miller so much pain that **he resigned from the Senate in December.**

Miller was a master of political strategy. Though he was passionate about tradition, he was adept at changing with the times, cultivating new allies when his lieutenants lost elections and keeping command over the chamber.

As Senate president, he held one of the three most powerful positions in Maryland government, alongside the governor and the speaker of the House of Delegates.

Miller’s successor as president, Sen. Bill Ferguson of Baltimore, recalled how Miller forged relationships with each member of the Senate, consoling them through grief, mentoring them and hearing out their concerns.

“Each member of the Senate has his or her own Mike story ... I expect we’ll hear many of them in the days and weeks ahead, and I hope the public will listen and get a glimpse of the impact Mike made,” Ferguson wrote in a statement.

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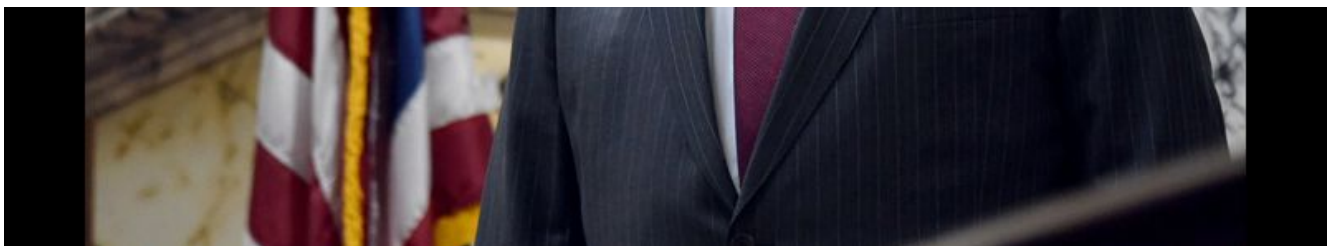
Sen. Cory McCray, a Baltimore Democrat, said Miller often shared his passion for Maryland history, including giving him a rare, signed copy of the memoir of the late Sen. Verda Welcome, Maryland’s first Black woman state senator.

McCray sat next to Miller during Miller’s final session last year. “A lot of times when I was with him, I’d just sit back and listen,” he said.



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Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr.

Maryland state Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller announced in the Senate Chamber that he has prostate cancer on January 10, 2019. (Joshua McKerrow / Baltimore Sun)

A famous saying around Annapolis was that Miller had such control that he could get enough votes to burn down the State House if he had wanted. Miller saw things differently. He made time to learn about his members and sought to make sure Republican voices were heard.

Republican Sen. Mike Hough, who represents parts of Carroll and Frederick counties, often found himself stymied when he was in the House of Delegates. When he moved to the Senate in 2015, he said, it “was completely different.” Republicans didn’t often win, but they could influence bills.

“Mike and I had a real mutual respect for each other,” said Hough, now the second-ranking Senate Republican. “I was a policy guy, and Mike really cared about policy. In that way, we bonded.”

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Miller typically avoided the role of champion on issues that would pit him against his members. “Few individual bills bear his singular imprint, but nothing passes without his touch,” The Baltimore Sun wrote of him in 1997.

In a state where Democrats have won the majority in both chambers of the General Assembly since World War I, Miller oversaw an agenda of significant Chesapeake Bay cleanup, [increased funding for public schools](#), [casino gambling](#), [some of the nation’s toughest gun controls](#) and [the end of the death penalty in Maryland](#).

Miller’s most difficult time in politics was an abortion debate in 1990. Liberals wanted to protect abortion rights, but conservatives mounted a filibuster that lasted for eight days.

“I would pray. I would cry. You know, my father would say: ‘Boy, get that bill off the floor of the Senate. Get that bill off the floor of the Senate,’” Miller recalled.

The bill eventually passed the Senate and moved to the House, where it was ignored. Another bill passed the next year and voters approved it at the polls.

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It’s been widely said that any ambitions Miller had of running for governor were derailed with a hot-mic moment with a local news station in 1989 when he gave a profane view of Baltimore, calling it a ghetto. At the time, Miller apologized and said he was “from the country” and spoke too bluntly about his desire to help the city with jobs and economic development.

“If ever I wanted to be a statewide office, there’s no question that would have derailed me,” Miller said.

While Miller drew attention for his work at the front of the chamber, he said he enjoyed visiting community events and helping people with problems. He believed his personal touch with constituents gave him political capital that served as cover for controversial votes.

“I was able to make tough decisions, to vote for gas taxes, to put roads where roads needed to be but where people didn’t want them to be,” he said.

He maintained a private law practice, handling matters ranging from criminal cases to malpractice lawsuits.

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Miller was passionate about Prince George’s County, where he was born, and Southern Maryland. He pushed for [a new regional hospital in Prince George’s](#) and to ensure that the state’s sixth casino would be located at National Harbor, on the Maryland bank of the Potomac River.

Miller even allowed legislation to succeed despite personally opposing it. In 2012, when the Senate voted to legalize same-sex marriage, the Catholic Miller never supported the bill. But he allowed it to come to the floor and worked to ensure that a filibuster could be cut off, if needed. He explained his vote from the rostrum.

“I don’t think this is civil rights, but this is history,” [he said at the time](#). “Am I on the wrong side of history? As a historian, there is no doubt about it.”

He also went against the grain in 2017, when he objected to — but did not block — [the removal of a statue of former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney](#) from the State House grounds. Taney was the author of the 1857 Dred Scott opinion that found that Black Americans could not be citizens, and his statue was removed after deadly white supremacist violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. Miller had maintained that the Taney statue could be put into historical context with proper interpretation.

For a time, Miller had a hand in national politics. From 1994 until 2000, Miller headed the national Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, charged with raising money and helping Democrats get elected in state legislatures across the nation.

Miller was a lawyer by training, a politician by trade and a historian at heart.

At his waterfront home in Chesapeake Beach, Miller amassed a collection of thousands of books, many of them biographies and historical texts. He enjoyed studying political leaders and was never shy about giving history lectures to visitors.

Miller traced his ability to stay atop the Senate to his family background as the oldest child of 10.

“I’ve always had to lead by serving,” he once said. “My job was to babysit the younger kids.”

He also was shaped by working at his family’s supermarket, BK Miller’s, opened by his German immigrant grandfather in 1913. Miller said he learned the importance of

taking care of people at the store.

He grew interested in politics as a youngster. His grandfather, as a prominent local businessman, was involved in politics and hosted an annual community get-together the weekend before the election that the Democratic ticket would visit to shake hands and drum up votes.

“As a young person — you know, 10, 12, 14 years old — I was just amazed by that. And just fascinated by it,” Miller said. He met politicians like [the late Louis Goldstein](#), then a state senator and later a longtime state comptroller.

As a college student in 1962, Miller was the driver for Frank Small Jr., a friend of the family who was running for governor as a Republican. Sometimes in the car with Miller and the candidate was Larry Hogan Sr., the campaign spokesman and later congressman, and young Larry Hogan Jr., now in his second term as the state’s Republican governor.

Hogan praised Miller’s “unrelenting passion and courage” in public service, and ordered state flags to be lowered to half-staff.

Miller graduated from the University of Maryland in 1964 and the University of Maryland School of Law in 1967. While in law school in 1965, Miller married his wife, Patti. The Millers had five children: Melissa, Michelle, Melanie, Amanda and Tommy.

Miller worked as a law clerk and then got a job as a bill drafter and “gopher” in Annapolis for lawmakers from Prince George’s County.

In 1970, Miller door-knocked his way to a victory in the House. He was elected to the state Senate in 1974.

By 1983, Miller helped put together a coalition to elect Melvin “Mickey” Steinberg as Senate president, and Miller was awarded a committee chairmanship. When Steinberg was elected lieutenant governor with Gov. William Donald Schaefer in the 1986 election, Miller ran unopposed to become Senate president.

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When he relinquished his gavel, Miller was the longest-serving state Senate leader in the country. His successor, Ferguson, [moved a portrait of Miller into the chamber](#). It hangs on a back wall behind Miller's desk for his final session.

Miller said he loved every day he came to work in the Senate: "I love the state of Maryland. I love the Senate of Maryland and I'm very content. ... I am very happy. I couldn't have asked for a better life."

House of Delegates Speaker Adrienne A. Jones said she relied on Miller's advice when she became speaker in 2019. "He was as kind and generous as he was powerful: a combination that leads to a once-in-a-generation leader and statesman who we can all emulate," she said.

Outside of politics, Miller was a voracious reader, a fan of the University of Maryland Terrapins and worshiper at St. Anthony's Catholic Church in North Beach. He planned to be buried at Resurrection Cemetery in Clinton.

In addition to his wife and children, Miller is survived by 15 grandchildren.

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