

POLITICS

Former Maryland Senate President Miller resigns, citing his health

By PAMELA WOOD
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After nearly 50 years in public service, former Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. announced Wednesday he is retiring from politics.



After nearly 50 years in public service and a yearslong battle with cancer, former Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. announced Wednesday he is retiring from politics.

The formidable, white-haired Democrat represented Prince George's County and Southern Maryland in the Maryland General Assembly for longer than several state lawmakers have been alive. He presided over the state Senate for a record 33 years before stepping down from his leadership position a year ago.

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“My heart and my mind remain strong, but my body has grown too weak to meet the demands of another legislative session,” Miller, 78, wrote in a [resignation letter](#) to state Senate President Bill Ferguson.

Miller wrote that he made the decision “with tremendous sadness.”

He wrote that he treasured the Maryland Senate's ability to work together despite partisan differences, in contrast to partisan divisions that define Congress and national politics.

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"During my tenure in the Senate of Maryland and my time serving as president, it was the greatest honor of my life, in large part because I have seen the Senate rise above partisan and other differences time and again," Miller wrote.

Miller discussed his retirement Wednesday during a Facebook broadcast from his home in Chesapeake Beach in Calvert County. Wearing a red sweater and looking frail, Miller said he hoped he would be remembered as a diligent lawmaker who strove to improve life for Marylanders.

"That he was a hard worker, that he was ethical, that he brought his attributes ... hard work, love of the bay, love of education, to the Senate," Miller said. "And as a result, a lot of positive legislation flowed into the floor, across the floor and to the House and to the governor's signature."

When Miller stepped down from the position of Senate president, his colleagues created the title of Senate president emeritus for him as a sign of respect. They also

honored him by hanging his portrait in the Senate chamber in the historic State House in Annapolis.

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Miller has a large personality that can veer from fiery to thoughtful. He was often open about his beliefs, to the point of acknowledging when he disagreed with others in his party or in his chamber — including in 2012, when he did not support the legalization of same-sex marriage. He noted even then that he was likely “on the wrong side of history.”



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)

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“His example of leadership and statesmanship has and will continue to serve as a model for public servants in Maryland for years to come,” said Ferguson, a Baltimore Democrat, in a statement.

House of Delegates Speaker Adrienne A. Jones said Miller became a friend and adviser when she was elected speaker in 2019.

“The legislature won’t be the same without his wisdom and larger-than-life presence, but his legacy will impact generations to come,” said Jones, a Baltimore County Democrat, in a statement.

Senators have said Miller fostered an atmosphere of respect in the chamber. Even though Republicans are vastly outnumbered by Democrats and lose political battles more often than they win them, Miller ensured they had a voice in the legislative process.

“We did not always agree — even with members of our own party — but we disagreed with congeniality and that is what made me so proud to be a part of the Senate of Maryland,” Miller wrote in his resignation letter.

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When Sen. J.B. Jennings was the Republican minority leader alongside Miller from 2014 through 2019, the two met daily to go over legislation and upcoming legislative debates.

Though Miller was fiercely partisan during elections, he worked with each senator to understand their political positions and needs in their districts, said Jennings, who represents Harford and Baltimore counties.

Miller’s only rule was that senators not embarrass each other in floor debates.

“We’re going to fight on these issues and go to war, but the minute the battle is over, you shake hands, and Mike Miller made sure that’s how it worked,” Jennings said.

He said Miller is often mischaracterized as an intimidating and powerful political boss, when he’s really a thoughtful student of history who cares deeply about the state and the Senate.

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Sen. Bryan Simonaire, an Anne Arundel County Republican who recently became Senate minority leader, said Miller “could be one of the most intimidating senators on the floor.”

“But he also could be one of the kindest senators,” Simonaire said.

Miller counted among his legislative victories the reform of divorce laws, funding for a new regional hospital in Prince George’s County and ensuring the state’s sixth casino would be located at National Harbor in that county.

Through his tenure as Senate president, 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](#).

After graduating from the University of Maryland’s law school in 1967, Miller worked as a law clerk and then as a bill drafter and assistant for Prince George’s lawmakers in Annapolis.

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In 1970, he won election to the House of Delegates, then was elected to the state Senate in 1974. By 1986, he became Senate president.

He also maintained a law practice, which grew over the years to two offices with half a dozen attorneys.

Miller announced in January 2019 that he had been undergoing treatment for several months for prostate cancer that had spread. [He choked back tears](#) as he made the announcement from the dais at the front of the Senate chamber.



President of the Senate Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. speaks in 2019 to the Senate, referencing his announcement that he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer. (Joshua McKerrow / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

By October of that year, Miller realized the physical toll of the cancer and its treatment was too much to carry out the responsibilities of the president. Senators **selected Ferguson as Miller's successor.**

When he relinquished his gavel in the beginning of 2020, Miller was the nation's longest-serving state Senate leader.

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Miller served through the pandemic-shortened 2020 General Assembly session, serving on the Executive Nominations and Budget and Taxation committees. He co-sponsored a first-in-the-nation bill to **tax digital advertising services.** (A version of the bill passed, but was **vetoed by the governor.** Lawmakers will consider overriding the veto in 2021.)

Miller was absent **during the final days of the session in March,** hospitalized with back pain and a mouth infection. In the ensuing months, he participated in video meetings of committees from his Chesapeake Beach home.



After nearly 50 years in public service and a yearslong battle with cancer, former Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. announced Wednesday he is retiring from politics. (Video image)

He said Wednesday that cancer has spread throughout his bones, causing him significant pain and weakness in his right side. A good senator, he said, needs to be available “24 hours a day” — something he can no longer do.

Miller, who constantly read history books and political biographies, resigned from the Senate on the anniversary of Gen. George Washington resigning his military commission in 1783 to the Continental Congress, which was

meeting at the Maryland State House. That act established the foundation of civilian rule in the fledgling nation.

Miller quoted Washington’s resignation speech in his letter, which read in part: “I consider it an indispensable duty to close this last solemn act of my Official life, by commending the Interests of our dearest Country to the protection of Almighty God, and those who have the superintendence of them, to his holy keeping.”

Miller closed his letter writing that he, too, is now about to “take my leave of public life.”

The Maryland Democratic Party called Miller “a titan of Maryland.”

“He fought for everyday Marylanders, improving the lives of so many through progressive, yet always pragmatic, policies,” the party’s statement read.

Republican Gov. Larry Hogan, a fellow native of Prince George’s County, thanked Miller for his “incredible” service to the state.

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While the two men often differed politically, they shared a love for the University of Maryland Terrapins, with Miller occasionally hosting the governor at men's basketball games.

"He's been a tremendous leader of the state for 50 years," Hogan said Wednesday at an event in Baltimore County. "He's been a friend since I was a kid, and I think he's making the right decision for himself and his family."

Miller's retirement leaves one seat open in the 47-member of Senate. He represents the 27th District, which cuts across parts of Prince George's, Charles and Calvert counties.

The Democratic State Central Committees in those counties will be charged with recommending a replacement for Miller. Hogan will have the final say over the appointment.

The timing of the replacement process means that when the General Assembly convenes Jan. 13, not only will Miller not be there, but the desk for the 27th District senator will be empty.

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Baltimore Sun reporter Hallie Miller contributed to this article.

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Pamela Wood covers Maryland politics from The Baltimore Sun's State House bureau in Annapolis. She's been with The Baltimore Sun since 2013, and previously wrote for The Capital, the Maryland Gazette, the Daily Times (Salisbury) and Gannett News Service. She grew up in Howard County and graduated from the University of Maryland.

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