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Senate president cements role as a political survivor

State names building for Miller as he starts record 15th year in job

By Thomas W. Waldron
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Many Marylanders have never heard of him. Even State House insiders can't list more than a handful of his legislative accomplishments.

But Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller continues to secure his place in Annapolis history - as a master of political survival.

This week, the voluble 58-year-old lawmaker from Southern Maryland reaches back-to-back milestones.

Today, hundreds of dignitaries will gather as the new \$24 million Senate office building is dedicated in his honor.

Tomorrow, for the 15th January in a row, Miller will step up to preside over the Maryland Senate - as he continues to break his record for holding the presidency, one of the three most powerful jobs in state government.

For a man who once daydreamed about becoming governor or going to Congress, Miller professes to have found his perfect political job. "I could never have envisioned a better role for me in life," he says.

Thoughtful but volcanic, courtly but crude, Miller carefully picks the issues that he will champion.

His alma mater, the University of Maryland, College Park, has won hundreds of millions of dollars in new state funding and gained power in large part because of Miller's support. His backing was crucial to winning state aid for new stadiums in Baltimore and his Prince George's County. Maryland deregulated its electric utility industry largely because Miller insisted.

But Miller's more important legacy may well be the many times he set aside his conservative leanings to vote for landmark changes in the law - increases in the income and cigarette taxes, one of the nation's most liberal abortion-rights measures and first-of-its-kind legislation to require trigger locks on handguns.

For a once anti-abortion lawmaker whose district includes tobacco farms and the headquarters of Maryland's only gun manufacturer, those votes were surely difficult. "If you're a leader, it means constantly making sacrifices," Miller says.

But those votes also meshed with the wishes of the often left-leaning Democratic majority in the Senate. And a leader of the Senate can't vote against the wishes of the majority very often and expect to stay in power 15 years.



Legacy: Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller is known for putting aside his views to push difficult yet key laws.

"He's not driven ideologically, which is probably a good thing," says Baltimore City and County's Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman, chairman of the budget committee. "He doesn't have a particular ax to grind.

"His ax" on any given issue "is what does this do to Democrats?" says Hoffman.

'Hey, I'm trying'

Miller works tirelessly at remaining Senate president. If one of his members is getting married, having a birthday party or burying a parent, Miller is there. More important, he has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for his Democratic colleagues.

On the floor of the high-ceilinged Senate chamber, he is a frenetic arm-squeezer and back-patter. He also slips easily into frat-boy banter, telling off-color jokes and needling anyone in sight - legislators, lobbyists and reporters - often over a pair of shoes or a tie that he considers insufficiently stylish. Compliment Miller on his impeccable dress and he invariably responds, "Hey, I'm trying."

Until last month, when Sen. Thomas L. Bromwell of Baltimore County started a quickly aborted coup attempt, there had been little if any talk of replacing Miller.

Critics say Miller can be vindictive and insensitive, but supporters say he is a superb leader who manages with a light touch that allows others to take the spotlight. One longtime associate says he is the best political mind in Annapolis, able to anticipate early on the messy endgames that decide many legislative issues.

"The guy's a master at knowing which buttons to push," adds Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden, an East Baltimore Democrat.

Miller, who is prone to self-deprecating humor, matter-of-factly acknowledges the special talent that he brings to the job of Senate president. "I often know what people are going to do before it occurs to them," he says.

But he says he was caught off-guard by Bromwell's challenge - a move some say was the natural result of having a president in place for 15 years, blocking the ambitions of many lawmakers below.

When word leaked, Miller got on the phone and quickly concluded that Bromwell's allies had miscalculated their support. Bromwell also counted and quickly backed down.

Miller may yet find a way to punish Bromwell - perhaps by weakening the power of the committee he heads - but says he and Bromwell have gone through far too much in their 18 years in the Senate together to become enemies. "You have to have a burying ground in your mind for the faults of your friends," Miller says. "I expect him to do the same with me."

Small-town boy

Miller, the oldest of 10 children of a successful grocery-store owner, grew up in the crossroads town of Clinton in southern Prince George's County, tobacco country.

His first political job came during college, in 1962, when he was the driver for gubernatorial candidate Frank Small Jr. - a local banker and a Republican, of all things. But Miller, the son of Democrats, kept his priorities in order by putting up posters for then-Comptroller Louis L. Goldstein, a Democrat, when he wasn't driving the GOP candidate.

After graduating from College Park and earning a law degree, Miller opened a law office in Clinton and took a part-time job drafting bills in Annapolis.

In 1970, only four years out of college, Miller won a seat in the House of Delegates. Four years later, he moved across the hall to the Senate. His standing soared in 1982, when he was a top lieutenant in the successful effort by former Sen. Melvin A. "Mickey" Steinberg to oust then-Senate President James Clark. For his help in the coup, Steinberg rewarded Miller with the chairmanship of the Judicial Proceedings Committee.

In 1987, Miller took the presidency when Steinberg became lieutenant governor. He reassured many left-leaning Democrats from Baltimore and elsewhere when he included a Jew, a woman and an African-American in the four committee chairmanships he filled.

"In my mind, it couldn't have been a more perfect representation of what the state looks like," said Sen. Paula C. Hollinger, a Baltimore County Democrat. "I gained a lot of respect for Mike just seeing that was his team."

Miller's early years as president were an unpredictable mix.

One day he would give the Senate a well informed, five-minute lecture about an early legislator. The next moment, he would accuse then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer of spending state money like "a drunken sailor" or make fun of the governor's sex life.

In recent years, Miller has generally kept such comments out of earshot of reporters.

Seldom an agenda

Unlike his counterpart in the House of Delegates, Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. of Allegany County, Miller has never crafted his own legislative agenda. And rarely does he impose his will on other senators.

"You get the feeling Mike cares about a few things, but for the most part, it's unscripted," says Sen. Brian E. Frosh, a liberal Democrat from Montgomery County who often disagrees with Miller on issues but admires his style. "It's a jump ball and the better person has the opportunity to win."

Miller agrees. He says he keeps track of what other states are doing and pushes to keep Maryland at the forefront of national issues. He was the first ranking lawmaker to suggest that Maryland deregulate its electric utility industry.

But the fact that Miller rarely sponsors major legislation obscures his crucial role on a number of issues in the past 15 years.

A sports nut who once boasted that he learned next to nothing during his four years at College Park, Miller today is the flagship campus' most fervent supporter.

Under Miller's leadership of the Senate, the university has seen funding soar, with the state paying for projects such as a performing arts complex and basketball arena.

"You can't underestimate what he's done for College Park," says former Del. Timothy F. Maloney, a member of the university's advisory board. "It's hard to think of many Marylanders in the past century who have had as much impact on the university as Mike."

Without Miller's support, it's unlikely that the state would have built a football stadium in Baltimore and helped build one for the Washington Redskins in Landover. And then there were the votes he cast for liberal bills he once might have rejected.

Probably the lowest point of his presidency came during an eight-day filibuster in 1990, as abortion opponents tried to derail a measure to guarantee sweeping abortion rights in Maryland.

For one of the few times in his career, Miller lost control of the chamber, unable to find the 32 votes needed to stop the debate.

Despite his anti-abortion leanings and a lecture from his parish priest, Miller made clear he supported the bill. But he was unable to pass it. "Not only did I not have control, I had my best friends on the other side," he says. He tried to pass the bill - which later became law in a statewide referendum - because he knew most Marylanders supported it.

Such votes, he says, send a message to other legislators. "If they see I'm making a sacrifice for the good of the body, it encourages them to do the same thing."

Chances for governor vanish

A decade ago, Miller was considered a possible candidate for governor or perhaps Congress.

Then came the night in November 1989 when, just before his first major fund-raiser in Baltimore, Miller unleashed a harsh description of the city during a television interview, calling it "a goddamn ghetto" and worse.

Miller, who thought his comments were off the record, apologized. But he knew intuitively that his chances of running for governor had vanished.

Instead, he settled into running the Senate and raising money to help Democrats, both in Maryland and around the country. In recognition of those efforts, he was given a speaking role at last summer's Democratic national convention.

Over the years, he has secured a job for his only son on the Maryland Parole Commission and watched one of his daughters become head of the state's Young Democrats.

Although Miller will forever be associated with the small town of Clinton, he has in recent months become a waterfront baron, living in a spacious house set on 40 acres in Calvert County overlooking the Chesapeake Bay.


He describes with unrestrained pride the house's twin colonnades, its 1,000 feet of waterfront and its two-story library with features modeled on Monticello's. The library, he notes, has the same red velvet drapes that can be found in the Senate lounge in Annapolis.


The longest-serving Senate president says he has given up the thought of any other political post and will end his career in the Senate. The challenge from Bromwell was a reminder that nothing in politics lasts forever. Miller says he will be quick to recognize when it's time to leave.

"If it ever comes to a request - 'We're tired of you, we're not moving forward,' - I'd certainly understand and step down," he says.

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