

# In Control

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**Y**ou build up the courage to ask the question: "It's been said that you're the most powerful man in Maryland politics. What do you think of that?" Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller fixes you with piercing blue eyes in a face framed by a shock of snow-white hair. He looks away. Then he flicks away the question with an elegant wave of the hand, a slight shrug of his shoulders, clad in an exquisitely tailored suit.

Those blue eyes fix yours again.

"I think it's perception, not reality," he says.

Many would disagree. It's something to have held the chains of power for as long as Mr. Miller has. Nineteen years he has been Senate president in a forum where the simple truth is that perception is reality. He's been in the Maryland General Assembly since 1971, when he was elected to the House of Delegates.

Mr. Miller, D-Calvert, is the longest-serving Senate leader in Maryland history. He has a \$24 million, four floor, marble-lined building named after him, complete with a Tiffany-style dome. As it was being built it was nicknamed by newsroom wags the "Taj Mikhael."

Longtime observers recall the years before when, under two previous presidents, the Senate was a free-for-all. Mr. Miller pulled the body together and brought order.

## A LIGHT REIN

He talks quietly in the confines of his office, packed with an accumulation of nearly 19 years as the Senate pit boss.

"I preside with a very light rein, like a horse-man is very light on the reins," Mr. Miller says. "I appoint the very best and brightest persons to positions. I assign the bills and I delegate. I very rarely interfere with the decisions of a committee chairman or a committee, and then only when someone comes and says we're not given a level playing field."

Some might disagree. Take conservative Sen. Alex Mooney, R-Frederick, for example, whose relationship with the Senate president has been antagonistic at the best of times. Mr. Miller once yanked Mr. Mooney from the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee for a year, ostensibly for offending the chairman.

But even Mr. Mooney, who is about as far across the spectrum from Mr. Miller as a politician can be, professes a grudging respect.

"No doubt he's successful," Mr. Mooney said. "I can't argue with his formula."

## AN ENIGMA

Mike Miller looks intimidating. He is intimidating.

But he's charming too, a collegial, backslapping patrician. One minute he can grab you around the shoulders and burst into a historical joke, laughing heartily at the punch line. The next he can be serious, distant, with a look making you feel like the stupidest person in the world.

"He is something of an enigma; the definition of the word for him is puzzling, ambiguous, inexplicable," said Minority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus, R-Eastern Shore, a 15-year Senate veteran. "And I find him to be that."

On the podium, presiding over the 47 Senators in front of him, Mr. Miller is all business. But once he bangs the gavel to adjourn the session and saunters onto the Senate floor, he smiles heartily, putting his arm around senators, grabbing elbows, leaning in close to talk or leverage a vote.

He has a sensitivity to which way the political wind is blowing, Senate President Pro Tem Ida Ruben, D-Montgomery, says, and he knows when to turn with the breeze.

Last year he was on one side of a particularly nasty debate on changing Senate rules that govern the day-to-day debate in the chamber.

Over the objections of the Republican minority, Mr. Miller decreased the number of votes it takes to close a filibuster. Republicans argued that being the minority party — only 14 among 47 — it only makes it harder for them to have any influence on state politics.

Mr. Stoltzfus said he went to see Mr. Miller several times but faced a stone wall. The GOP caucus voted unanimously against reelecting Mr. Miller to the Senate presidency.

"He shoved it down our throats to change the filibuster rule, which we're still distressed about, which we think is totally unfair," Mr. Stoltzfus says.

This year, with a growing partisan debate over rules in the House solidifying both sides, Mr. Miller allowed that the minority leader could recommend appointments to conference committees that combine disparate versions of House and Senate bills. Mr. Miller consulted Mr. Stoltzfus on the rules changes.

Mr. Stoltzfus says, "One time it seems like he's more sensitive, and other times, less sensitive."

Ms. Ruben has known Mr. Miller for 20 years. "Depending on the issue," she says, "he moves from side to side."

## THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY ...

"He's the ultimate Democrat," says Donna Horgan, chief page in the Senate. "He works both sides of the aisle to get things done."

On this day, only a few minutes before the governor's slot machine legislation was expected to go to hearing for a second year in front of the Senate Budget and Tax Committee, Mr. Miller offers his philosophy on political matchmaking.

"Your ally one day is going to be your enemy on the next, and is going to be your ally, just on a different issue," Mr. Miller says.

He cites the governor as an example. Only a few weeks ago Mr. Miller carved Mr. Ehrlich out the state's medical malpractice laws during a special session. Mr. Ehrlich accused him of deal-breaking. Mr. Miller chided the governor for his poor negotiating skills.

In about 10 minutes, Mr. Ehrlich and Mr. Miller will sit down together in front of the Budget committee in support of expanding Maryland's gambling. Mr. Ehrlich says he is there only because the Senate president asked him.

"Today we're friends on slots, but a month ago we were enemies on the tort reform aspect of the medical malpractice issue," Mr. Miller says.

Mr. Miller also presides effectively in the realm of national politics. Thursday night he was to meet with former President Clinton at a Washington event. He's

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ambivalent about Howard Dean's candidacy for Democratic National Committee chairman, saying he's too left-leaning, even though he plans to vote for him. Mr. Dean has called him several times, Mr. Miller says that morning. Mr. Dean phoned Mr. Miller at home, even talked to his wife, "very warmly," he says.

He hasn't gotten around to returning the calls yet.

## SOUNDBITES

When he talks to the press he's polite, accommodating, incredibly accessible. He talks at length, but he doesn't smile. It's clear that when he's done, it's over. He ends questioning with an "OK, guys?" and turns away.

Sometimes, he closes his eyes as he talks, seemingly searching for the perfect soundbite. Occasionally he will go through several versions before finding the perfect line. Once he's got it, he repeats it, often.

A favorite is, "You have to have a burial ground in your mind for the faults of your friends." He used it during the special session when discussing the mistakes made by the governor in negotiations over medical malpractice reform.

More often than not these days his soundbites are tinged with partisanship. He talked with the news media about an Ehrlich staffer who was fired the day before for spreading rumors on the Internet that the Baltimore mayor had an illegitimate child and was separated from his wife. Mr. Miller decries "the politics of destruction," and "the politics of divide and conquer."

Last year he began to bemoan the Capitol Hill style politicking that was ruining the Maryland General Assembly.

If anyone should know, it's Mr. Miller. His capacity for political thought, for seeing the future of any political maneuvering, is unmatched. And he'll tell you so. It's not grandstanding, there's no ego when he says it. It's just a matter of fact.

Ultimately, the master political strategist is looking at the endgame, staying five moves ahead, he says.

"I can anticipate what people are going to do before they do it," Mr. Miller says.

Mr. Stoltzfus agrees. "He has a broader view than the rest of us — probably most of us — can comprehend. He has a sense of history unlike any other here in Senate."

## HISTORY LESSON

Sometimes he closes his eyes as he remembers, as he does now in the privacy of his office, a nearby bookshelf and coffee table close by filled with volumes of history and the lives of men and women who act as his guides.

He name-drops like a Las Vegas showman, but not the fad celebrities of the 21st century. He prefers people like British Prime Ministers William Pitt and Benjamin Disraeli, and Queen Victoria.

"You look at what Winston Churchill would do, or what Douglas MacArthur would do, or what Robert E. Lee would do or what Ulysses S. Grant would do, or how Julius Caesar handled something, or Alexander Hamilton.

"If you read biographies, people change, times change, but the one thing that's constant is that the people make the same mistakes over and over again. If you learn about your heroes and you study them, you can emulate the good things about them and try to avoid their failings."

Mr. Miller was brought up steeped in history, even more so than politics.

During the Civil War, his father's family fought for the South, his mother's for the North. His mother, a teacher, and his six sisters and four brothers would jump into a station wagon and tour battlefields: Harpers Ferry, Bull Run, Gettysburg. His aunts would buy him

historical books and biographies for birthdays and Christmas.

During lunch breaks from his father's Southern Maryland store, Mr. Miller was sent over to the Mary Surratt House in Clinton for lunch with his great aunt; the same place where John Wilkes Booth went after assassinating Lincoln. Mrs. Surratt was executed for helping him.

"They would send me over to have lunch with my great aunt at this historic home, so this great aunt and I would sit there and she would tell me these stories."

The historical habit is still there, he says. "I study history every night and I enjoy it immensely."

## POLITICAL HISTORY

Mr. Miller is a product of his mother's New Deal liberal ideals. His father was conservative, a southern Democrat, his grandfather a wealthy grocery-store owner.

That's where he learned about politics. It's like Richard Henry Dana wrote in "Two Years Before the Mast," when he said, "My Harvard was a whaling ship."

"Mine was a grocery store," Mr. Miller says.

The store stocked building supplies, shirts, shoes, produce, dried goods and alcohol. The elder Miller would offer tobacco farmers credit until the crops came in. Delivery was free and the future Senate president was a delivery driver. He learned that the customer is always right, and he learned an old Yiddish expression: If you can't smile, you shouldn't be in business.

His grandfather's hay barn was the town's polling place. On the night before an election, his grandfather would invite everyone in town to a meet-the-candidates dinner — at least the candidates he had endorsed.

But two formative political surprises in his life came from his father, the conservative southern Democrat.

On election day, Mr. Miller was working the polls for Jimmy Carter when his father, who was a wealthy man, arrived to vote.

"This president will tax the rich, I can tell you that now," his father told *his* father.

"I know that, son," the elder Mr. Miller replied. "But we made ours, and now we're going to help other people make their way too."

Sitting in his Senate office, Mr. Miller recalls, "I was shocked, it was like I was crying. It was an eye-opening experience between a father and a son to hear him say that."

The other surprise, regarding abortion, still bothers the Catholic Senate president today. He had expected his father's conservatism and staunch Catholicism to give him a different position from his pro-women's rights mother. The young legislator needed advice.

But his father said, "Son, the matter doesn't belong in the General Assembly. You need to let women do what they need to do."

The Senate president has been troubled by what his father told him ever since.

"Here's my own father and mother repudiating this doctrine that I've been taught to observe ever since I was a child," Mr. Miller says. "It continues to make things very difficult for me. I feel very uncomfortable in mass."

He is for choice in the early stages of pregnancy, he says, but against partial birth abortion.

"I come from a very liberal mother who formed all of my politics and I have six sisters and four daughters, and I believe strongly, strongly, in equal rights for women," he says.

## INTENSITY

Part of what makes the Senate president intimidating is his intensity. It's a focus that has helped him pass significant legislation in favor of victims' rights and equality for women. He was one of the original 1972

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House of Delegates sponsors of women's equal rights legislation.

Later, he changed an area of law that directed divorce cases to follow title when dividing property. In other words, if the husband had a house in his name, he would win it in a divorce settlement.

"It recognized the value of a spouse who was a homemaker ... recognizing that that was as valuable, or more valuable than a woman who had worked in the workplace," he says. "I can't tell you how many hundreds of thousands of cases have been affected by that law."

He lived his legislation, fought for his bills.

"I would get very emotional about them," he says. "Sometimes, not now, but I wouldn't be able to sleep. I would wait for senators to arrive in the parking lot and I would lobby them on behalf of issues. I would call senators in the middle of the night and say, 'Look this is a very important issue, you're holding up my bill.' I was very, very tense about things."

Now that energy is applied to leading the Senate.

"That's a gift," Mr. Stoltzfus says. "To control this group without a lot of acrimony here is a pretty difficult job ... and he does it with ease."

## **ENDGAME**

This is the last year Mr. Miller says he's giving the governor a free ride. A few weeks ago, just after Mr. Ehrlich delivered his State of the State speech, the Senate president reiterated something he told the freshman governor when he was elected in 2002: three years of harmony, three years of passing his bills.

Then, Mr. Miller said "we're going to take out the machine guns and he's going to come after me and I'm going to come after him, and I'm going to try and elect a Democrat."

This is year No. 3. Mr. Miller says he will help the governor with parts of his legislative agenda, lead paint and victim's rights. All the time, though, he's planning ahead to the "endgame," five steps ahead; 18 years behind him, who knows how many years ahead. There's no doubt he can deliver the votes to move legislation through the House.

When someone asked powerful House Ways and Means Committee Chairwoman Sheila Hixon if, across in the Senate, Mr. Miller could deliver 24 votes to pass legislation, she is said to have quipped: "Mike could find 24 votes to burn down the General Assembly."

He's a powerful roadblock for a new governor. And he can afford to be philosophical about that.

"You have your ups and downs in politics," Mr. Miller says. "You just have to adjust."