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*Michigan* **COMMENTARY**

# Senate Minority Leader Art Miller, Jr.: A Profile

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"Sometimes I think I was born in a voting machine," jokes Senate Minority Leader Arthur J. Miller, Jr., 43, about a childhood spent watching local politics in Macomb County. The four-term Warren Democrat began attending political events as a toddler with his father, who was the city's first mayor. When his father died in 1964, Art Jr. was still in high school and helped his mother campaign for her late husband's county clerk seat. Edna Miller won that contest, as she has every subsequent one for the past 26 years.

The oldest of six children, Miller carries on his parents' political tradition with the help of a low-key, good-listener style he learned at his father's knee and has put to use since 1977 in southwestern Macomb County's 27th Senate District.

"I'm not a headline grabber—never have been," Miller acknowledges. "Maybe some of the people back home say: 'We don't see a lot of press releases about you in the local paper.' But I think I'd rather hang my hat on accomplishments and forget the headlines. My father always used to tell me: 'People don't elect you to build a scrapbook; they elect you to find solutions for their problems.' In my four-and-a-half years as Senate minority leader, I'd like to think that quietly, but effectively, I've helped forge some good solutions that have moved Michigan in the right direction."

Now among the fastest-growing cities in the state, Warren was a rural township when Miller was growing up there. He cannot remember a time when his father was not involved in politics—first as a justice of the peace, then township supervisor and mayor, and, when failing health forced him to curtail his schedule, county clerk. Arthur Miller, Sr., was a very popular and well-regarded local figure; the goodwill attached to his name would be a continuing benefit to his son's political career. Ironically, however, the elder Miller never favored a government career for his son. "He always said he didn't want me to go into politics," Miller recalls. "He felt that the demands on your time and the lack of privacy were too great. And I can see that now," he muses, as he stares across his Senate office toward a photograph of his children.

Politics was not a childhood aspiration for Miller, but he took very seriously his father's admonition: "Be sure you help your mother." Assisting Edna Miller in her first campaign gave young Art firsthand experience in what would become his own livelihood, and it also gave him some firsthand distaste for the gender-based prejudices of that time. "During her first campaign, some of the comments I used to hear were: 'She should be home where she belongs'; ever since then I've felt strongly about providing opportunity for women. She would talk a lot about not running for reelection, out of frustration at the obstacles she had to overcome because people challenged her capabilities."

Acutely conscious of his role as eldest son, Miller stayed close to his mother and five younger siblings by attending Macomb Community College; he later received a B.A. in speech and political science from

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Eastern Michigan University. In 1970, he married Marsha Ann Holly, and the newlyweds settled into a condominium complex that presented Miller with his first election opportunity. The complex was selecting its first board of directors, and Miller, then 24, won a seat as chairman of the board. "I said to myself: 'Well, your techniques worked, your approach worked, let's try them on a citywide level next year.' "

Try them he did, and in 1971, as the top vote-getter in the race, he began the first of three terms on the Warren City Council. Known in political circles throughout Michigan for the fractiousness and intensity of its politics, the Warren City Council proved to be an invaluable apprenticeship in the arts of compromise and consensus.

Recalling his neophyte days 19 years ago, Miller laughs and says: "You know, we should have gotten combat pay for some of those hearings. I remember some of the last talks I had with my father; he always stressed to me: 'Take time to listen to people's problems, no matter who they are, give them respect and listen to their concerns, be patient, don't always want to jump out there with your point of view.' "

Miller tried to apply that advice to council hearings that often ran through the evening and into the early morning. "I think that's where I probably gained a whole lot of maturity that I need now in dealing with such a diverse caucus as we have. I respect people's point of view; it might be different from mine, but I'll listen to theirs."

By 1977, Miller was serving his third city council term and also was working as a manager for a large highway construction firm. He was not sure where he wanted to direct his full-time energy—politics or construction. A special election that year for an unexpected vacancy in the Senate was the opportunity that nudged Miller into the next phase of his career.

It was a hotly contested three-way primary with a longtime incumbent state representative heavily favored to win the nomination. Miller was advised against running, given his relative youth, inexperience, and lack of endorsements. Thirteen years later, the excitement of that contest is still evident in Miller's grin as he leans forward in his chair to describe his victory.

"As I look back, the two highlights of my career were winning that first council seat and then winning the Senate seat. We had tough opposition; my opponent was endorsed by both major Detroit newspapers. The opposition pulled every stop they could, and we overcame all those odds. That will go down as one of the bright moments of my political career."

The freshman senator from Warren brought to Lansing a good listener's charm, a young man's enthusiasm, and a family name that inspired considerable confidence and affection. "I had some really good old-timers take me under their wing and show me the ropes," Miller recalls. "I was assigned office space on the first floor, and to get there you had to walk through (Senator) Bill Huffman's office. When you're a rookie coming on board, you don't know a lot of people. Prior to his election to the Senate, Bill Huffman was mayor of Madison Heights—a neighboring city to Warren—and he told me: 'We've never met, but I knew your dad twenty years ago.' So because of this friendship from someone who knew my father, I got to meet a lot of people. Bill was vice-chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and he would take me to lunch and dinner with some of the most powerful leaders in the state. Right across the

hall from Bill was Dominic Jacobetti's office. Between Jake and Bill, this freshman legislator was dining with two of the most powerful guys in the Michigan legislature."

"There were nights when Bill would have dinner with (Speaker of the House) Bobby Crim and (Senate Majority Leader) Bill Faust, and he would say: 'Come on, kid, I'm taking you to dinner with me.' If I protested, he would say: 'Come on, you need to learn how we put these budgets together.' I had great mentors." Miller continued to make important friendships in the legislature and the executive branch.

After seven years of legislative experience—including major responsibility as chair of the Commerce Committee and vice chair of the Corporations and Economic Development Committee—Miller saw Michigan's financial crisis spawn a daring tax increase and subsequent recall of two Democratic senators, which left his party in the minority.

"I don't really think that the voters trusted that the problems were as severe as they turned out to be, and unfortunately, that distrust ended the legislative careers of two people," Miller muses. "It was a thankless job pulling Michigan from the doldrums of insolvency. Like everyone else, I had problems going home and explaining things to my constituents. This state had more people unemployed than some states had people."

The change in partisan control of the Senate necessitated a new emphasis on teamwork—never the strongest suit of this Democratic caucus. "When you're in the majority you get to play offense: you direct the agenda, you decide what bills are going to pass, you have so much more involvement," Miller says, with more than a trace of wistfulness. "When you're in the minority, you don't get to call the signals anymore or score touchdowns; you have to play defense. And believe me, offense is more fun."

When Faust stepped down as Senate Democratic leader in 1985, Art Miller asked for, and received, caucus support as minority leader, and he was reelected to the post in 1986. To what does he ascribe his success in holding together an often uneasy coalition of rural, suburban, and inner city interests with their sharply differing interpretations of Democratic Party political philosphy? "What I've tried to instill in my membership is that defense can be just as important—and in some ways more critical—than offense if we stick together as a team," Miller says. His primary tool in forging consensus remains being a good listener.

"I say: 'Look, my door is always open, no matter what your problem is. We'll sit down and find out what your position is and what your colleague's position is, and we'll work it out. I don't care what your position is, and I don't care what the problem is, we can always find middle ground somewhere between the caucus room and the Senate floor.' If we take the time, we can always find a solution. That's primarily what my job is: bringing both sides to the table." His behind-the-scenes stage management rarely makes headlines, but it has, in Miller's view, helped solve some serious problems. "I think that I've been a good mediator. It's sometimes hard for the people in my district to understand why I voted a certain way on an issue, but as a mediator you have to try to bring both sides into the issue. I think our caucus is one of the most diverse in history; we've accomplished some good things and enlightened some people; we've helped them understand the ways that urban blight is similar to farm drought, and we've brought people together as a team."

Miller speaks with conviction about the usefulness of his leadership role to the legislative process, but he has no illusions about its relative influence. Having served as a committee chair, he does not hesitate to observe that such a post is, in general, "a more satisfying role; you get the opportunity to shape legislation, introduce new ideas, and schedule the timetable. You get to shape policy, and you get to smile at your successes." He points to the example of former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, who relinquished that role in favor of chairing a committee.

Miller acknowledges that leading his party in the Senate through an election year is not likely to yield many new public policy initiatives. "As we get closer to the election, polarization increases; a lot of public business is going to get put off until after November. To tell you the truth, I don't see a great deal being accomplished until after the elections. Then we can get back down to policy and forget the politics—but for the next 6–7 months, politics is going to be the key issue, not policy. If we spent more time working on legislation and less time reading pollsters' results, we'd get much more done. I hate election years. If you look at past history, we really don't accomplish a whole lot."

Miller is uncomfortable with strident campaign rhetoric. "Election years are difficult for me because I'm not a basher. I hate the idea that you have to go out there with an attitude that because candidates are Republicans, you're going to say bad things about them. I wasn't brought up to be a basher. But we've run into some problems on the Senate floor because it's that time of year when people feel they're supposed to say unpleasant things. When I've worked with someone for 10 or 12 years, I find it difficult to say those things. I respect people for who they are and what they've accomplished, not for what party label they wear. I think that's one reason I've been successful."

When asked to speculate on where the future may take him, Miller speaks loyally about legislative service at the same time he acknowledges the possibility of burnout. "Despite all the emphasis placed on the office, the governor is not the only driving force for public policy; the initiative of the legislature is very important for the success of the state," he contends. "I think that the press overemphasizes the governor's role (in public policy) and focuses on the legislature only when its members have personal problems. The legislature plays a key role as a source of public policy initiatives, and I enjoy it. But the demands are tremendous on your family...there are times when I feel neglectful as a father." The Millers have four children: Holly,16; Nicole, 14; Arthur III, 9; and Derek, 6.

Miller vividly recalls asking John Bowman, his predecessor from the 27th District, why he decided to leave the Senate after 15 years; his party was in power, and he was serving as president pro tem and chairing the Taxation Committee. Why leave when things appeared to be going so well? Miller quotes the elder legislator as saying: "Arthur, once you get there, believe me, you'll know when it's time to hang it up. When you get tired enough of all those spaghetti dinners, of the long commute every weekend, you will know when it's time to quit."

Without ambivalence, Miller states he is not at that point: "I still enjoy coming to Lansing after every weekend, and going to all the community events. I'm still young enough to start another career. I don't want to stay so long that I'm no longer contributing to the team, but I hope that I have lots of contributions left in me." And, given the potential for a Democratic majority in the Senate after next fall's election, Miller acknowledges: "I'd love to play on offense one more time."