

Political Insider (<http://blogs.ajc.com/political-insider-jim-galloway>)

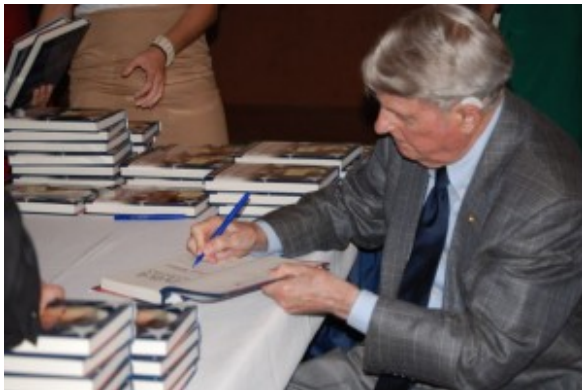
A rare word from Zell Miller: 'I had a late life conversion'

10:57 am July 21, 2012, by jgalloway

Buford, Ga. – There was no mistaking the man who walked through the glass doors of the hotel complex on the shores of Lake Lanier.

The trademark shock of white hair remains neatly groomed. The hawk-like nose still juts out over a tight jaw. The eyes are clear and bright. But the stride is gone. Zell Miller walks gingerly now, always with a cane.

The former governor and U.S. senator describes himself as an 80-year-old man with 100-year-old legs. “I very, very seldom go anywhere,” Miller said in an interview.



Former governor and U.S. senator Zell Miller autographs copies of his 2005 book "A Deficit of Decency" at a Buford fundraiser for 9th District congressional candidate Doug Collins on Friday/SPECIAL

In fact, Miller's appearance on Friday was a rare return to a world he once commanded. He'd come down from the hills of Young Harris as the featured attraction at a fundraiser for state Rep. Doug Collins of Gainesville, now a Republican candidate in the 9th District congressional race.

His grandson, Bryan Miller, is Collins' campaign manager. “Of course, he brought his grandfather with him, but I would have been there anyway,” the former governor said. “My grandmother was a Collins out of Union County. And I was impressed by what a good legislator [Doug Collins] made. “I felt I had a mountain relationship with him.”

Miller's abrupt disappearance from the scene has been one of the greatest vanishing acts in Georgia political history. At the tail end of his U.S. Senate years, still in the shadows of 9/11, Miller broke lifelong ties with many of his Democratic friends and endorsed the re-election of President George W. Bush.

Miller, who had given the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 1992, played the same role for Republicans in 2004 – damning Democrat John Kerry for his alleged plans to fight world terrorism

with “spitballs.”

The last glimpse that most Georgians had of Miller was his vein-popping, post-speech interview with MSNBC’s Chris Matthews. “I wished we lived in the day when you could challenge a person to a duel,” Miller snapped that day.

Visit NBCNews.com for [breaking news](#), [world news](#), and [news about the economy](#)

The combative Miller left Washington without regret only a few months later. Since then, he’s made a few brief appearances here and there. A handful of candidates like Collins, mostly Republicans, have captured his still highly valued endorsement. Miller recently lent his name to Newt Gingrich’s presidential run.

But the interviews and public speeches became part of a life left behind.

“I don’t hear from anybody much,” Miller said. “I stay away from the limelight and politics and all that.”

One reason has been his health. “About three years ago, I got shingles. I broke out from my toes – big blisters all the way up to my hip. And it left me somewhat disabled, and I had two big falls. I fell down a flight of 13 stairs, all the way down them. Broke five ribs, two of them very badly, collapsed a lung, and pushed my heart over to the middle of my body more,” the former governor said.

“That really crippled me up. And then about two months later, I fell again and broke my back. And so I have really been stove up, as we say in the mountains.”

Until now, he has kept his constant pain a private matter. He’s had a small electronic device implanted in his back. “When the pain gets so bad I just can’t stand it, I’ve got a little remote – like a TV remote. I can mash that, and it kind of blurs the pain some,” he said.

The former governor credits his wife Shirley for keeping him on track.

He reads the Journal-Constitution every day, delivered via his Kindle. He keeps a sharper eye on Atlanta than Washington. “I love state government. I pay close attention to how Nathan [Deal] is doing. And I’m thinking he’s making an excellent governor. I knew he would,” he said.

Miller, who served as governor when a Democratic City Hall and a Democratic state Capitol operated in utterly separate worlds, is fascinated by the working relationship between Deal, a Republican, and Mayor Kasim Reed, a Democrat.

As governor, Miller’s greatest achievement was the creation of a state lottery and the HOPE scholarship that

it funds. But he has no problem with the Republican Legislature's recent decision to "de-couple" HOPE scholarship payments from college tuition rates. No longer does one fully cover the other.

"I don't think they had any other choice. We knew back in the '90s that there would be adjustments. This came as no surprise," Miller said. Nor did he blink at the decision by state lottery officials to approve the sale of tickets through the Internet.

"I'm okay with that. In fact, we wrote the lottery law so you could do that," he said. But as for that plan to create a casino with machines operated by the Georgia Lottery Corporation, Miller said he'll let others decide that.

It is tempting to write that Miller, one of the most confrontational politicians ever to haunt the Capitol, has mellowed. And it is true that Miller is interested in rebuilding some of those bridges that have been burned over the years.

But it would be more accurate to say that Miller has turned inward. At times, he is his own harshest critic. Take that 2004 televised confrontation with Matthews.

"That was terrible. I embarrassed myself. I'd rather it had not happened," Miller said. "But Chris Matthews is not one of my favorite people."

For those who have tracked Miller's career, one of the greatest unanswered questions has been the source of his last rightward turn. What sparked not only his admiration for President Bush, but turned him into a strict opponent of abortion and a harsh critic of this nation's social mores?

Religion, Miller said. "I had a conversion. I had a late life conversion. I changed my views on several things. This had to do with my son going blind, and me having to carry him to the doctor with his hand on my shoulder," Miller said. This was in the early 2000s. His son, Matt, had been a lifelong diabetic.


"I prayed and prayed that they could do something about his sight," Miller said. The prayers seemed to work. "He can see pretty good out of one eye right now."

But a bargain struck with God often transforms the petitioner more than the object of any plea. "I changed on a lot of things. Not just abortion, but my whole life in general. I was a pretty rough character in my younger days. I needed to change," Miller said.

- By Jim Galloway, Political Insider

For instant updates, follow me on Twitter, or connect with me on Facebook.

1 [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [Next »](#) [Show All](#)

© 2014 [Cox Media Group](#). By using this website, you accept the terms of our [Visitor Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#), and understand your options regarding [Ad Choices](#) .