

A LETTER TO SEN. MILLER: GIVE 'EM HELL, ZELL

Dear Senator Miller:

As you wind down an illustrious political career that spans almost a half-century, I want you to know how much I appreciate all the great things you have done for Georgia. In this day of sound bites and polling data and political consultants, you tell it like it is. Good for you.

It might surprise you to know how many people ask me about you. I get questions because folks know that I had the opportunity to work with you and your chief aide, Steve Wrigley, during the planning phase of the Centennial Olympic Games in Georgia when you were governor and I was representing the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games. I saw you up close and personal. It wasn't always fun. You got on my case pretty good a couple of times, but I deserved it.

Some people say to me, "What in the world has happened to Zell Miller?" I reply, "Nothing. The governor who bailed out Bill Clinton's floundering campaign for president and made the keynote address at the 1992 Democratic convention is no different than the senator who is pushing for the reelection of Republican President George W. Bush. He is acting on his convictions." When asked how many other politicians act solely on their convictions no matter how the professional tut-tutters may disapprove, I can name them on one hand and still have a majority of fingers left over.

As for the "Zigzag Zell" charge, I don't see it. I always found you to be direct and unvarnished in your opinions. Maybe the dig is intended to imply that you have changed your stance on political positions in the past. What politician hasn't? Before throwing that term around so loosely, my media brethren should go back and look at Jimmy Carter's 1972 gubernatorial campaign. He sounded like a bigger segregationist than George Wallace, until he was elected. Either he didn't mean what he said when he was running, or he didn't have the courage of his convictions when elected. Either way, Jimmy Carter couldn't carry your cowboy boots.

At a banquet honoring you at the end of your term as governor, I told you that our mutual friend, the late Jasper Dorsey said we all should leave the world better than we found it and that you had done that with the HOPE scholarship. I can think of nothing that will have a more positive impact on Georgia's future than HOPE and it happened because of you. That was no zigzagging on that issue. You said you were going to support a lottery that would benefit education and you did. HOPE has been a huge success. I just hope our current politicians don't screw it up.

Speaking of screwups, the embarrassing mess at the University of Georgia would never have happened had you been governor. You certainly would not have allowed it to get this far. The fact that it has is a result of no leadership on anybody's part – the governor, the Board of Regents, the chancellor, the president of UGA or the UGA Foundation.

On the night that the Board of Regents "fired" the UGA Foundation in an unprecedented move, Governor Sonny Perdue was sitting in front of a television set drumming up votes for a teeny bopper from Snellville who was appearing on a TV show called "American Idol." He said he would let the Regents handle the matter. Call me naïve, but I thought governors were supposed to handle critical issues like anarchy at our flagship university, not shill votes for some kid on a doofus television show.

I don't know who will replace you in the U.S. Senate this fall, but I do know this: We are not likely to see your equal again. You were a lot of things --cranky, opinionated, passionate, outspoken, impatient, honest and independent. But you were never misunderstood.

I consider it one of the highlights of my career that I had the opportunity to know you and to work with you. I wish you the best. Give 'em hell, Zell. You are a great American.

Your friend,
Dick