Violence is nothing new in SGA elections

By Sean Kelley
Staff Reporter

A phone tapping, cross burnings, an FBI investigation, fights, and a bombing - these are the hallmarks of University of Michigan SGA elections in the last 20 years. The list is longer than the one that appeared in The Ann Arbor News last year, showing a surprising trend of violence and mischievous activity.

In 1976 students elected their only black SGA president to date, Cleo Thomas. Popular belief was that Thomas received many votes because sorority women were not in the Machine and rebelled against the fraternity system. Two crosses were burned after Thomas' election, one in front of the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority house. University police officials reported that 15 individuals dressed in white hoods came out of the Kappa Sigma fraternity house at midnight after the election, burned crosses, threw bottles and chanted revolutionary tunes.

Some of the individuals, police reported, showed up in front of the Kappa Kappa Gamma house singing "We Shall Overcome." "Sororities were not in the Machine, so to be a woman was to be an independent," Thomas, now a University trustee, said last semester. "I would, of course, accept my vote no matter what the reason for it. I do think my election had to be caused by the Machine to realize they could not forever take sorority row for granted, so for me that's quite plausible."

The FBI investigated the 1983 SGA election after newly-elected independent SGA President John Bolus found someone was tapping his phone. Bolus said his roommate discovered a phone cord coming from the outside box. The cord ran across the yard of his house on Backer Lane to an alley.

"At the end of the wire was a peep that could be plugged into a tape recorder," he said. "There were beer cans all around."

The FBI and University police told Bolus they had two students who confessed, but did not prosecute them. Bolus said FBI officials told him "they were put on a probationary status."

Three years later John Merrill, an independent who had been backed by the Machine for SGA vice president, ran against the incumbent and won by a wide margin. During the election Merrill's vice presidential office was broken into by two members of the Machine fraternity. Bob Schrender, the chairman of the Alabama Student Party, reported that he was beaten outside of a dormitory and checked into a hospital with rib injuries. Another campaign worker, Bertram Fairies, said he was run off the road returning to campus from home. Merrill's wife was allegedly threatened with rape.

Merrill, however, said he never felt the Machine would really try anything. "I'm kind of a conservative, an optimist," he said Monday. "I didn't think the Machine would really try to whip me. They'd leave messages on my answering machine and say 'We're gonna rape your wife or whip you up on your probationary status.'"

They burst on our car, but not much else," Merrill said.

Penn State University President Joob Thomas, who served as University of Alabama president at the time, said the administration toyed with the idea of taking over the election process, but in the end decided to let student voting take its course.

Rob Riley, who also served as one of Merrill's executive assistants and SGA president in 1987, said past University presidents never saw a reason to take control. But, Riley, who is SGA presidential candidate Minda Riley's brother, added things had never been as "out of hand" as this year, when his sister was assaulted in her house.

In the 1989 SGA elections, Joey Viselli lost a close race to Lynn Yeldell, the only woman ever to be backed by the Machine for SGA president. Yeldell, who won by 200 votes, was granted the victory in a legal battle.

After a contest was filed by Viselli's camp, then-Vice President for Student Affairs Jack Bailer upheld the results of the election but removed elections from student control. They have since been controlled by the Office of Student Life.

Several incidents occurred that year, including the beating of a campaign worker, Viselli said.

"The administration knew all about it," he said. "A couple of people jumped off of my campaign workers at his apartment. My mother was threatened in an extreme amount. We had bomb threats."

"You can go back and track the history of violence," he said. "But when the administration tracks it, they never feel the need to interfere until this point."

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