

# Secretive 'Machine' a political tradition on Alabama's campus

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Staff Reporter

Tradition at the University of Alabama is rich, and not just in football. Since 1914, a secret fraternal organiza-

tion known as the Machine has guided campus politics and controlled who gets elected Student Government Association president.

In 80 years, only seven independent

candidates, who did not receive the group's support, have been elected student president at the Capstone. Some describe it as a well-organized political party, much like the Republicans and

Democrats.

"We have an agenda and we want to get it done," said one fraternity member close to the Machine, who asked for anonymity.

For the past 20 years, elections have

been marred by sporadic acts of violence against non-Machine candidates ranging from phone tapings and cross burnings

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## Machine

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to bomb threats and slashed tires.

While there has been no proof the Machine was involved, independents have cast stones. Indications of a direct link appeared last week when Minda Riley, 21, a Phi Mu from Ashland and independent candidate for president, was assaulted in her off-campus home Jan. 31.

She was not backed by the Machine — although her sorority is a Machine member.

Miss Riley's supporters accused the Machine of being involved in the assault, but fraternity members close to the Machine denied involvement. In November, a cross was burned in her front yard.

In light of the attack, the university has temporarily disbanded the SGA and canceled elections scheduled for this week.

Why has the Machine been allowed to exist? Dr. Harry Knopke, vice president of Student Affairs, said there are several reasons. One is "ostensibly it's a secret society."

He also said there is no proof the Machine is behind the scare tactics.

"When allegations of violence or intimidation are made, it's very difficult to substantiate," Knopke said. "People are unwilling to come forward and provide the basis for what has to be due process."

"It's easy to say, 'Well, you need to do something,' but it's very difficult to say this happened and this is the reason why."

Some on campus say the latest incident will not lead to the demise of the Machine. As one put it: "This just wounded them."

But one independent is optimistic. "It could be the beginning of the end, if reforms are as sweeping as the administration says they will be," said Addrian Brooks, president of the Alabama Student Association.

"After the wiretapping incident (involving an independent SGA candidate in 1983), I thought that would nail them, but it didn't."

Knopke predicts in time the Machine will "self-destruct because it hasn't kept with the times."

Knopke said he would like to see the Machine reveal itself and attract independents. But tradition and some alumni won't allow that to happen, he said.

"There are still alumni involved in campus politics, directly or indirectly. We have reports of alumni involved in intimidation exercises," he said, without getting into specifics.

David Mathews, president of the university from 1969 to 1980, said the Machine has been a "continuing tension" on campus.

"We didn't have an incident of the kind we have here (with Miss Riley) but there was always friction," Mathews said of his tenure as president. "When the symptoms of the problem occur is just a matter of chance."

In recent years the group has been called the Machine, an organization comprised of 27 of the 48 white fraternities and sororities on campus. Its real name is Theta Nu Epsilon, which stands for One.

Theta Nu Epsilon was founded at Wesleyan University on Dec. 5, 1870, as an all-male secret society. The Wesleyan chapter issued charters until 1907, including a charter in 1905 to the University of Alabama.

Alabama's original charter, which displays the seal of the group — a skull and crosskeys and devils dancing around fire, is housed in the Hoole Special Collections Library section of the university's library.

There is no symbolism to the skulls and crosskeys, according to Dr. Jerry C. Oldshue, university archivist and historian.

"As far as I can tell, the skull and crosskeys were a pretty common thing at that time. It was a pirate sign. Secret clubs had skulls and crosskeys," Oldshue said.

In 1909, the university's Theta

chapter formed a subsidiary called the Skulls. "It was kind of a stair step thing. You went into a group called the Skulls, and then the next step up was to Theta Nu Epsilon," said Oldshue.

Although it was supposed to be a secret society, Oldshue recalls members of Theta Nu Epsilon were pictured in the school's yearbooks until the 1920s.

He said when he was a student in the 1950s, the Machine would meet in the basements of fraternity houses to pick a candidate. "They called it 'going downstairs.'"

He said the only major change that has occurred came in 1977 when Cleo Thomas, the first black SGA president, was elected. Thomas won the election because he received the sorority vote.

Sororities were not allowed in the Machine, but that changed after Thomas was elected.

A fact sheet about the organization published in 1989 by the Alabama chapter, says Theta Nu Epsilon "has grown into a service organization whose influence extends throughout Alabama and the U.S."

The sheet notes the group has been responsible for getting SGA presidents elected at the university.

"This is because the SGA is ours," the fact sheet boasts. It also points out the first SGA president at the university was the late U.S. Sen. Lister Hill, who was a Theta Nu Epsilon member.

"The SGA is a training ground for us. From the university, we go on to become lawyers, attorney generals, governors and senators."

Fraternities and sororities contribute \$600 annually to be members of the organization, according to the published material. "Endorsement of a candidate by Theta Nu Epsilon guarantees a campaign war chest of \$13,000 for SGA presidential candidates and a bloc of at least 3,000 votes."

Edward Mullins, dean of the College of Communication, said news stories about the Machine get "discovered and rediscovered" every couple of years.

The Crimson White, the university student newspaper, has traditionally endorsed non-Machine candidates and in 1991 published the names and photographs of Machine members.

"The biggest evil of the Machine is they do things that reinforce the stereotype of Alabama — elitist, white, very political, but not meritorious. It's not what you know, but who you know. And success is based on currying favor absent to merit," said Mullins.

He said the Machine's "chief characteristic, and the main reason it has lasted, is that it is both mysterious and secretive."

The organization's numbers are not very impressive, but they are powerful enough to get the vote. Only 2,000 of the almost 20,000 students at the university are in sororities and fraternities.

"I've always been amazed and astounded that so few have controlled so many," said Jim Oakley Jr., field services director for the university's College of Communication.

But Oakley and Mullins say the Machine's power stems from voter apathy among independents.

"Most of the students don't care and most couldn't tell you who their SGA president is," said Oakley.

"The independent sector allows it to exist for a lack of interest," said Mullins.

One fraternity member who has close ties to the Machine agrees.

"The machine could be outvoted every year, but no one gets out to vote. All people have to do to end this thing is go out to vote," said the student, who asked that his identity and fraternity not be mentioned for fear of reprisal.

He denies the Machine was behind the attack on Miss Riley.

"It would be political suicide if they were," he said. "The Machine wants no publicity. The more publicity the Machine gets, the more people are going to vote against it."