

Violence is nothing new in SGA elections

By Sean Kelley
Staff Reporter

A phone tapping, cross burnings, an FBI investigation, fights, cars run off the road, threatened rape, slashed tires, bomb threats, assailants in the night.

The list is longer, but a look at just four University SGA elections in the last 20 years show 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 sorority votes because sororities were not in the Machine and rebelled against the fraternity system.

Two crosses were burned after Thomas' election, one in the lawn 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 elections, "burned crosses, threw bottles and chanted revolutionary tunes."

Some of those 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 any vote no matter what the reason for it. I do think my election had to cause 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 Hackberry Lane to an alley.

"At the end of the wire was a jack that could be plugged into a tape recorder," he said. "There were

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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 Machine and won by a wide margin. During the election Merrill's vice presidential office was broken into by two members of Machine fraternities. Bob Schraeder, 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 conservative, an optimist," he said Monday. "I didn't think the Machine would try to whup me. They'd leave messages on my answering machine and say 'We're gonna rape your wife or whup up on you.'"

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

Penn State University President Joab Thomas, who served as the University of Alabama president at the time, said the administration toyed with the idea of taking over the elections 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 gotten 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. Massive voter fraud was alleged by both sides. Yeldell, who won by about 400 votes, was granted the victory even though nearly 20 adult, staff and student observers reported illegal activities.

After a contest was filed by Viselli's camp, then-Vice President for Student Affairs Jack Baier 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 one 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 felt the need to interfere until this point."