

Taking on 'Machine' a battle on UA campus

▶ Local attorney, other former students recall their sometimes stormy encounters

By KATHY DEAN
Staff Reporter

Students at the University of Alabama take their politics seriously.

Mobile attorney Jim Zeigler found out just how serious the game was in 1970, when he became the first candidate to win the Student Government Association presidency without the backing of a secret organization of fraternities — the Machine.

Although he won the election, the battle continued — a Machine-dominated student legislature tried to impeach him and, the night that attempt failed, Zeigler's dormitory room burned.

He said the fire was investigated, but no one was charged and the university eventually issued a statement claiming lightning had struck his room.

Zeigler's account of his experience with the Machine was one of many student-life vignettes — some negative, some positive — that surfaced Thursday during interviews with former students in the aftermath of the turmoil that swept the Tuscaloosa campus when a student candidate was beaten and the Student Government Association abolished.

Following is five individuals' accounts of their dealings with the Machine:

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Zeigler, who later served a four-year term on the state Public Service Commission, said it was "awfully, awfully coincidental" that lightning would strike his and no other room in the dorm, particularly on the day he had defeated Machine attempts to impeach him.

"People who didn't go to the University



MIKE KITTRELL/Staff Photo

Addrian Brooks, president of the Alabama Student Association, holds the charter THETA NU EPSILON which is the founding organization of the Machine.

Machine

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of Alabama find it hard to believe that student politics is taken this seriously, that in elections thousands of dollars are spent, people are bullied around," he said.

Zeigler said from 1966 to 1970 the Machine was composed of 13 of the largest and most influential fraternities on campus, including the Dekes, or Delta Kappa Epsilons, who were dominated by Spring Hill elites from Mobile. The Dekes were "one of the mainstays of the Machine," he said.

"The Machine leaders took their authority and power very seriously. They were very secretive about who they were. Each fraternity had two representatives in the Machine. Nobody knew who they were; they met in secret," Zeigler said.

The fraternities that belonged to the Machine controlled about 2,000 student votes, Zeigler said. That left 11,000 students who weren't members of those fraternities — but they weren't organized and didn't have a political party.

"The organized and well-funded minority controlled virtually all student activities — influencing who was going to be cheerleader, majorettes, all the who's who. Student activities were very much dominated by Machine fraternities," he said.

Zeigler, who worked his way through college playing trumpet in a rock 'n' roll band, came from a blue-collar paper mill family. When he went to the university in 1966, he didn't join a fraternity.

"When I first got to campus, I didn't know there was such a thing as a Machine. I didn't know you had

to be a member of a fraternity to be elected to a student government office — or homecoming queen or editor of the Crimson-White" student newspaper, he said.

As an independent, he ran for the lowly office of men's dormitory representative to the student legislature. He was elected — the office wasn't important enough for the Machine to run a candidate.

"By this time I had found out about the Machine," he said. "I was informed you could not be elected to any higher office than men's dorm representative if you didn't belong to a Machine fraternity."

Zeigler ran as an independent for student senate representative from the arts and sciences department and was elected over strong opposition from a Machine candidate.

He won by getting the votes of students in the men's dorms, the Afro-American Association, international students and women's dorms. He also had backing from some sororities, which at that time weren't members of the Machine.

In 1970 he ran for SGA president.

He had a rare advantage — the Machine was split between two candidates. Zeigler made it to the runoff, and he had another bit of luck — the election was held the day before spring break when many students left campus, and the fraternities couldn't get out their vote.

He won by 108 ballots.

But breaking the political stranglehold the Machine had held since 1915 didn't mean Zeigler was home free. Two-thirds of the way through his term, the Machine-dominated legislature tried to impeach Zeigler for running up \$700 in calls on the SGA telephone and opening a bank account he wasn't

authorized to open.

A student court threw out the charges.

Zeigler still remembers that day. "The day the student court threw out the bill of impeachment and cleared the way for me to finish out my term, I got a couple of threatening telephone calls. I didn't pay much attention to it.

"That night, while I and my friends were out celebrating, somebody torched my dormitory room. Burned it completely up, everything I had in it — clothes, books, the works," he said.

Asked to characterize the Machine, Zeigler replied, "Organizing a political party and getting your votes out isn't evil. That's an American right. Meeting in secret, not involving other students in student activities, hogging the leadership positions — all those things are bad.

"If the Machine is guilty of assaulting people or having people assaulted and having crosses burned and burning down my dorm room, those things are obviously evil and illegal."

Zeigler said he gets a call every three or four years from an independent student thinking about running for an SGA office. The students want to know how Zeigler beat the machine, "and I tell them how to do it. By and large, things haven't changed much," he said.

"To this day, some of my best friends in the world were made in SGA politics at the University of Alabama," he said. "Also, to this day, some of my bitterest critics came from student politics at the University of Alabama."

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Spring Hill College alumni director Monde Donaldson was editor of the Crimson-White student news-

paper in 1974-75. She said the Machine "controlled everything."

It was "a big stepping stone for people who wanted to go into politics. Young people (with) political aspirations got into a fraternity and aligned themselves and made sure they were well-connected from then on," she said.

She dated, and later married, fellow student Bill Donaldson. Now a Mobile attorney, Donaldson was nominated by the Machine to run for the SGA vice presidency.

"It is simply an organization that organizes the Greek vote," he said. "I think you could equate the Machine to a political party that holds a convention. When the political convention is held, everybody makes their presentation and everybody votes and everybody sticks with the decision that is made."

He said the secrecy allowed the Machine to fight its political battles out of public view and emerge as a solid force behind its candidates.

That force wasn't strong enough to get Donaldson elected, though.

He lost to independent Sylvester Jones, now dean of institutional advancement at Jefferson State Community College in Birmingham.

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Sylvester Jones was the first black candidate to win an executive-level office in the SGA. He succeeded by getting the sorority vote — an avenue the Machine later blocked when it admitted sororities as members.

Jones said the Machine always has been powerful, and its reach extended beyond SGA.

As a member of Jasons, a men's honorary organization, Jones said

politics kept some deserving people out of the honorary.

"During the latter part of my years in Tuscaloosa, there were several people who should have been in Jasons that did not because of the black-balling system...."

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Preston Bolt, a Mobile attorney, was a byproduct of the Machine in the mid-1970s and says it wasn't nearly the monolith as portrayed.

He said 12 to 13 fraternities cooperated and endorsed candidates. The secrecy, he said, had more to do with the mystic tradition of fraternities — and it wasn't that secretive.

For example, he said, the student newspaper would list Machine-endorsed candidates the day after they were secretly selected and it didn't take a rocket scientist to identify Machine members.

"It was not a very efficient or malicious organization when I knew about it," he said.

He said student politics "has a serious side and a ridiculous side. The amazing thing to me is we spent much more time per vote and money per vote at the University of Alabama, voting on an organization (the SGA) that had a budget of \$300,000, than would be spent on the average candidate at that time for the (Alabama) Legislature.

"The problem I have had with it, in thinking about it since then, is the institutionalization of it, the fact that it exists year after year after year for no particular reason except to continue itself," he added.

When asked what the meetings of the Machine were like, Bolt said, "That's something I'd rather not discuss."