

"The Most Powerful Fraternity in America"

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It controls life at the University of Alabama, but nobody can see it. Its influence extends to the statehouse, but nobody can touch it. It stinks of corruption, but nobody can smell it. It is, simply, the Machine.

In the dining room of the Delta Tau Delta house, Chad Green stops and stares hard at the picture of the bearded soldier. Chad is tall and dark with an occasional fierce glare in his eyes, and right now he looks vexed. Abruptly he turns toward the opposite wall. There are another three portraits of soldiers there, six in all.

"No, I think that's A. P. Hill," he says with sudden conviction, pointing to the far wall. "This one I don't know. But of course that's Jeff Davis. And that is definitely Stonewall Jackson. And that one's got to be A. P. Hill."

Chad pauses again. He's stumped on the names of the other three Confederate generals. It seems to bother him. But giving me a wink, he approaches Jeff Davis and lifts the portrait from the wall. On the back he can still find the number that he penciled there as a freshman fraternity pledge three years before, matching the number he put on the picture hook. He did it so he could put the portraits back in the right places after a party.

"You'd get in trouble if you put them back wrong," he says.

My tour of the Delt house at the University of Alabama is a rich schooling in Southern tradition. Chad shows me the picture of Miss Ruby, the housemother who taught several generations of Delts etiquette. I see the hunting prints and the teak parquet floors of the living room — "It looks like home," says Chad. And there's the pocked, cinder-block wall on the basement landing, where boys throw champagne bottles as hard as they can on the night they're initiated.

"It's the best night of their life," Chad says, vigorously miming the way he threw his bottle.

Only when we're talking politics does Chad lose his cool. We've come outside, onto the semicircular porch of the brick Georgian mansion Chad has said is valued at \$2.5 million. It's a beautiful late fall day on fraternity row in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. In the light breeze a pine bough grazes the round portico of the house. Two houses away, at Sigma Chi, pledges are bagging pine needles from the front yard of their brick mansion. In the other direction, at Sigma Alpha Epsilon, pledges are readying a red carpet for the Stockholders' Ball. They're putting up twenty gaslight torches.

Chad's just mentioned all the Delts who've gone into politics when I ask him about the Machine.

He gets that cross expression. "I'd rather not comment on that," he says. "I just won't comment."

I press him and he looks away. Ruddy color rises in his cheeks.

"There are a lot of secrets to people outside but there are not a lot of secrets inside," he says.

The organization Chad won't talk about is a secret society that for eighty years has controlled student politics at the University of Alabama: the Machine. Its real name is Theta Nu Epsilon, whose Greek letters spell ΘNE, and it acts as the political arm of twenty-seven leading fraternities and sororities at the school. Machine representatives meet secretly once a week. There are thirty or so members — Chad is said to be one — but most Greeks on campus don't know who their rep is.

On election day in February, the Machine buses its voters to the polls and penalizes people who don't vote. Almost all the time, it wins. On election night it spends a chunk of its \$27,000 secret budget on a blowout party at the Jaycee fairgrounds for the fraternities and sororities. The Machine reps can be seen there, ducking in and out of a tent with a private bar. Some of them wear a lapel pin with the Theta Nu Epsilon logo, a skull and crossed keys.

The Machine is said to share roots with Skull & Bones of Yale, but it has more of an impact on its campus than its northern cousin. Greeks make up only 20 percent of the nineteen-thousand-member student body, but they manage to control almost all student government offices and along with that a student

activity fee budget of more than \$300,000. Honorary organizations like Mortar Board also seem to be under Machine sway.

But what's most striking about the Machine is the extent of its influence. U. S. Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama is said to be a former Machine president (his office denies that he was a member of ΘNE), and many of the leading politicians in the state have been products of this organization. The Machine's power lies not only in the people it turns out but in the lessons it offers on how power is won and wielded. Indeed, it has helped remake state politics in its own shadowy image.

The Machine today faces a crisis involving race. Though they lease university land, the Greek organizations are segregated. The blacks I saw inside the white Greek houses over ten days at Alabama were blowing on horns in the band at a fraternity party or carrying boxes of frozen vegetables to the kitchen. It's an embarrassing situation in a state that is more than 25 percent black. The university is trying to force integration, but it has met enormous resistance from Chad and others who justify their segregation by invoking the great traditions of Greek life at Alabama.

If you follow the national discourse, the only issues in higher education today are political correctness and multiculturalism. But in Tuscaloosa those arguments seem like the noodlings of a bunch of parochial intellectuals. Here far more is at stake than the power to change reading lists. To a lesser extent, the same holds true at dozens of other leading state schools and institutions that play an important role in the political lives of their states. The elites that govern local society often take form and groom members on campus.

Nowhere is this more starkly the case than with the Alabama Machine. "There was never any kind of phone call. I was never personally told; there just came to be an understanding that they were going to endorse me," says Trey Boston, the outgoing Student Government Association president, of the way the secret organization brought him along. "But if you look at the list of men and now a woman who have been endorsed by the Machine and elected SGA president at the University of Alabama, you see U. S. senators, you see congressmen, you see doctors, you see lawyers, you see businessmen. You see people that, when I consider that my name is going to be thrown on the bottom of that list, it's like, 'What am I doing here?'" No wonder he spent \$8,000 on his campaign.

It's not hard to spot the Machine representatives at a meeting of the student senate. Forty of the fifty senators are Machine. They're good-looking kids, and a lot of them have on the same sort of clothes — Duck Head pants and party T-shirts: Deke Undertakers' Ball; Kappa Kappa Gamma's Eleventh Annual Black Widow Blast. When I asked one sorority alumna whether you paid a social price for dressing differently, she explained my error : "No, because nobody would want to dress differently. We wanted that form of identity and connection."

Up for consideration today is a bill to fund the Fantasy Games Club, an offbeat independent group. The club's leader makes the mistake of passing out its tasteless Dungeons & Dragons-style literature. It includes anti-Greek jokes: "Do not molest the sorority girls. They have sharp nails." The senators respond in an orgy of disgust.

"Smut. I wouldn't show this to a good woman."

"I'm offended, too. It seems like you've offended everyone in the room."

"I'm scared of what fantasy games y'all are playing."

The reaction goes on and on. It seems mean. There isn't much thought for whether anyone else on campus might enjoy the club. It's obvious that these senators are used to getting their way, and just as obvious that their air of entitlement intimidates other students on campus. And anyway, when all is said and done, this public debate is meaningless: The Machine senators reportedly meet secretly the night before each open session to discuss important issues. Over the years the secret meetings have taken on a sinister air. Rumors have the Machine meeting at the old gravel pit or in the woods near the old Confederate train tunnel.

One of the only senators to speak up for the club is a skinny guy in goggling glasses with a receding chin. He stands out among all the T-shirts in his red tie and dark blue suit. Chuck Hess is the leading opponent of the Machine. A third-year law student, he's a little rustic. He speaks in a honeyed drawl and has a folksy wit. His suit hangs loosely off his narrow shoulders.

Chuck's political intelligence is well-known. A veteran university administrator named Melford Espey says Chuck's ability to simplify a complicated issue reminds him of the young Huey Long. Later I meet up with Chuck at his little room with a bunk bed in a non-Machine fraternity, and I can see that gift. I'm

struggling to express what was obnoxious about the treatment of the Fantasy Games Club, when Chuck breaks in.

"There's a saying: Why do dogs lick themselves? Because they can," he says. "Well, there are some things they do that are stupid, politically stupid. They have to know before they vote the way they do that it will be unpopular, but they do it anyway. Because they can."

The Chi Omega house on sorority row feels like the home of a rich and elegant couple. Out back there are topiary bushes, in the window a fresh flower arrangement. The living room has a grand piano and a bronze bust of a girl. Miss Margaret, the housemother, is from Tupelo, Mississippi, but she smiles stiffly when you mention that that's Elvis's hometown. "He was a nice boy. But he was country," she says.

I'm the guest of Stephanie Miller, a pretty and delicate senior with shoulder-length blond hair. She's an appointee of Machine backed president Boston. I saw her frowning during the debate over the Fantasy Games Club. She shows me the composites, the poster size photo rosters of sorority members, and points out the small-town girls with "big hair," girls whose fathers might own half of towns like Jasper or Opp but who developed unfortunate habits growing up where they did. Their sorority sisters gently break them into more sophisticated ways.

"You pack your hot curlers when you come to school. But by sophomore year you pack them away," Stephanie says. "You don't have time to roll your hair every morning and do your makeup."

Stephanie is still upset about something that happened nearly a month before. There was a silent, candle-lit march by a thousand people down sorority row, past the wrought-iron balconies and fountains, past the Tri-Delt house, which is shaped like a wedding cake. When some sorority girls came out of the houses to show their sympathy with the marchers, they were mocked, in one case spat on.

The marchers were protesting an incident last October in which two white pledges of Kappa Delta, the oldest sorority on campus, went to a "swap" party at a fraternity costumed as pregnant black women. The two pledges had on blackface, wigs with curlers, and house slippers. They'd stuffed basketballs under their T-shirts. The theme of the party perfectly expressed the snobbery you encounter among some Greeks: "Who Rides the Bus?" Not Greeks. BMW's and Jeep Cherokees are everywhere on fraternity row.

When word of the swap became public, angry blacks pointed out that a local photo agency had several photographs of other Greeks in blackface. Indeed, I had heard about fraternity members dressed as Flavor Flav of Public Enemy and as Amos 'n Andy, and saw pictures of students in minstrel-show makeup, including two half-naked guys at a 1988 Halloween party done in black from the waist up, one wearing a bear-tooth necklace.

At a little after 5:00 p.m., someone in the Chi Omega dining room rings the dinner bell, and I follow Stephanie to the head table. Behind us, nearly two hundred young women stream across the marble floor. St. Jon Green, a dark-haired pledge from Mobile, stands to ask her sisters to bring back their worn teddy bears after the holiday so that they can be given to the underprivileged for Christmas.

The meal is served and then the room hushes. Three dark-suited boys have appeared in the doorway. One bears an armful of long-stemmed roses. They're Sigma Alpha Epsilon pledges, here to deliver invitations to the SAE Stockholders' Ball.

Sorority women get seminars on how to dress for a job interview — Stephanie will be interviewing for sales jobs next week in Birmingham — but most of their energy seems to be devoted to manners. Stephanie is well connected in student government, but when controversial subjects come up she gets a strained look. She even holds up a hand to hush further discussion.

The Machine took root at Alabama a hundred years ago with something of the same idea about politics: Disputes should take place behind closed doors.

The boys who started the fraternity nationally thought it unseemly that fraternity men would fight openly for campus leadership positions. And yet fraternities regularly got into terrible squabbles, often of a snobbish variety, as an early ΘNE yearbook complained. ΘNE was to be a suprafraternity. The men of ΘNE would quietly seek out future leaders when they were sophomores and then sort out campus honors among them. The fraternity urged its chapters to start student governments as a proving ground.

The organization was never supposed to take credit for its good works. From its origins in 1870 at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Theta Nu Epsilon believed that secrecy guaranteed selfless leadership. Logos showed a group of

devils in hell, with flames licking around them. The fraternity's rites instilled secrecy with medieval earnestness.

"All Malachiks [candidates] should be brought into an outer or ante room as they arrive at the place of initiation," the group's official ritual reads. "As they enter, they should thrust their left hand into a bucket of blood (Mercurochrome)." The Nuktelius, or president, warned that if they ever violated the oath of secrecy, blood would reappear on their hands, "never to be removed."

Over the years, ΘNE had varying degrees of success at keeping itself secret. But with the onset of the Sixties, ΘNE had petered out. Except at Alabama, where ΘNE had grown into the Machine.

The day I visit Kappa Alpha [Order], someone has a Confederate flag hanging in a back window, and there's a nervous feeling in the air. That's because fraternity leaders are holding strategy meetings to plan their defiance of the school administration. The university is trying to force integration and other reforms on the fraternities and sororities through a self-evaluation procedure called the accreditation plan. The university has no timetable; but the threat is that stubborn fraternities will lose official recognition — and be forced, some say, to rebuild their mansions off campus.

Christopher "Boo" Haughton, the Kappa Alpha president, can't really talk for a couple of days, not till the fraternity has figured out its plan of action. He has tousled reddish-brown hair and big, heavy-lidded eyes. He wears boots and jeans and a T-shirt.

He does tell me a little about tradition. Greek life goes back to the time after the Civil War, he says, when the plantation owners sought a place closer than Europe for their boys to learn how to conduct themselves. Boo grew up in Haleyville, a town of five thousand. He's from old money and says so openly.

"Southerners are a very proud people," Boo says. "My grandmother tells stories of her mother being a child and throwing day-old biscuits at Union soldiers walking by their house in Pine Apple, Alabama." He shakes his head. "That sends chills up my spine to think of that. Any association with that war — with what they wanted and what they went through."

I get up to go, and on the way back to the center of campus I stop at the north entrance of Foster Auditorium, a Georgian building with six big pillars. The

silent march over the blackface incident ended here in October. It's the spot famous for then-governor George C. Wallace's stand in the schoolhouse door. On June 11, 1963, Wallace briefly defied the federal government's efforts to force the enrollment of the first two black students at the school.

Foster is also known as the place where Squeal Day takes place every September. That's when a thousand young women, all white (a handful are Asian Americans), all having passed through a week of high highly ritualized rush events, pick up numbered envelopes from the seats and at a signal rip them open — then squeal or cry with the news of the sorority that has chosen them.

A year or so later, some of those girls will be secretly tapped to "go downstairs for the house," or "go underground." They will become Machine reps.

The Machine has struggled with the role of these women. Traditionally it was able to take for granted the sororities' docility. But in the mid-Seventies women began to clamor for power, and in 1976 sororities helped elect as president a black independent.

The Machine wised up. By the early Eighties Theta Nu Epsilon had made room for the sororities. And the next time a sorority woman dared support an independent candidate, her sorority tried to pull her pin. Even so, the Machine has since only once nominated a woman for president — by a reported 14 - 13 vote.

That was in 1988, and the Machine was, arguably, under added pressure. It had not been able to reliably deliver to sorority girls a position they had taken for granted in the past : homecoming queen. In 1986 and 1987, black women won the campuswide elections for homecoming queen by riding a bloc vote of their own.

The Student Government Association introduced legislation in the student senate to change that. Bill 25 was a clever means of breaking up bloc votes. It polarized the campus, and the student paper, The Crimson White, gave the bill a Wallace-era name: The Negro Queen Exclusion Act. Bill 25 didn't make it in the end, but the SGA ultimately did succeed in changing the rules to put the queen back in Greek hands.

Ray Cole was part of the SGA administration that wrote Bill 25. He's since moved into a wider world, working on statewide campaigns, trying to get black votes. Now he's a lobbyist in Huntsville. When I ask Ray about the homecoming-

queen mess, I can hear him taking a deep breath at the other end of the line. "I made a mistake when I authored Bill 25," he says. "But I wasn't alone. My name may be on the front, I may take the fall."

"Where did the bill come from?"

"People were scared. They felt threatened," he says. "It didn't come out of feelings of confidence."

"Did it originate from the Machine?"

There's a long pause. "Yes."

On several occasions, I had heard polished Machine types making fun of Chuck Hess, the independent senator. And you can see why. He seems very alone. During our conversation he prompts himself by saying, "No, Chuck" (or "No, Charles," if it's a serious error). Friends say that sometimes he studies on a couch in Ferguson Center, hoping people will come along and talk.

Chuck tells a painful story about fraternity rush in his freshman year, seven years ago. At one house the men asked what his father did and when Chuck said he was an Army aviator, a position deemed a bit lowly, they seemed to lose interest.

"At another house, I went back because I liked the fraternity," he says. "I was asked to go into a separate room with about fifteen actives seated around a table. They commenced to ask me questions that I was very uncomfortable answering. I got out of there."

"What questions?"

He pauses. "They intimated that they wanted me to pull down my pants. Their intention was to humiliate me."

Probably it's insensitive, but I say, "It doesn't seem like a big humiliation."

Chuck stares at me. "I took it as an indication that this is not a group that I wanted to belong to," he says solemnly.

Social isolation is the lot of the independent politician. Machine tactics are overwhelming. Some fraternity houses fine members who don't vote — \$25 or

\$50, by one report. After vans hired by the Machine take voters to the polls, "someone sticks a beer in your hand and says, 'These are the people you're supposed to vote for,'" Chuck says. "At least we have gotten them to remove the kegs from the vans."

Independent candidates for president do best when they call on students' hatred of the Machine. John Merrill, a natural politician with a religiously forthright manner, was the last man to beat the Greeks, in 1986. He put his anti-Machine slogan up on billboards "Let's draw the line" — and made an issue of ΘNE's exclusivity.

Merrill was so threatening that Machine members broke into his office and were caught (just as Machine minions had bugged the phone of the last successful independent before him). "I got statewide coverage," Merrill says. "My folks back in Heflin saw that I won on the ten o'clock news."

The next independent with a following was Joey Viselli, in 1989. Viselli had moved to Tuscaloosa from Buffalo when he was eight. His father, Fran, was a community favorite. He owned Bama-Bino Pizza. Every time there was a blood drive, the big, bearded, pizza man gave out pies. His hugely likable son was defeated in a close vote. Nearly everyone says there was corruption. Tuscaloosa County election supervisors attested to irregularities, but the administration ruled against a new election.

A lot of bitterness remained, and the big loser was Bama-Bino's. Some Greeks organized a boycott against Viselli's dad after the election. In the past, Bama-Bino's had gotten large orders from the SGA and for Greek parties. Those ended. Some fraternities reportedly fined their members for ordering Bama-Bino's pizza. Business dropped sharply and, after a couple of pizza chains began giving Viselli stiff competition, Bama-Bino's went under.

When I asked one Old Row fraternity member what to make of the boycott stories, he shrugged. It was "just dumb business" for Viselli not to understand that Bama-Bino's was at risk if his son attacked the Machine. "His daddy must have been dumb not to realize, 'Hey son, don't be stirring the waters up,'" the fellow said.

Fran Viselli sighs as he drives past the shuttered Bama-Bino's on Hackberry Lane. "I was being targeted by a group of students who I really liked and still do,

and I lost my desire to continue to serve," he says. "I was attacked. For what? Because I raised a child who has ideas?"

Chad Green tells me to meet him at the Delt house so we can go to lunch. It's a day when defiance of the school's accreditation plan is at a fever pitch. The opponents have called a press conference to denounce the plan. Meanwhile, the university has hosted a forum on the blackface incident at which a lot of independent students vented their anger toward the Greeks.

I find Chad on the porch. He walks me out to a ten-year-old Impala and clears the seat of videotapes so I can get in. There are golf clubs in back. But the chivalry ideas Chad says he's proud to have absorbed in the Greek system stop at the back fender. A bumper sticker says: "Boycott Jane Fonda. American traitor bitch."

We go to a sandwich place on the strip a block from campus and talk about the blackface incident. Chad had publicly condemned the girls' costumes, but between bites, he says, "Not that they did anything wrong." Many Greeks share that feeling. Privately, they say the Kappa Delta pledges were just trying to be creative — maybe they weren't the prettiest girls, so they found a different way of getting attention. One Sigma Chi said, "It's not like they woke up that morning and thought, 'How'm I going to insult niggers today?'"

Chad is upset that the university didn't deal with the K.D.'s privately. That's the way the Machine likes to treat disputes. "I would have handled it very discreetly," he says. "Bring in the parties involved." Instead, it went public and everything got blown out of proportion. The Associated Press put it on the national wire. The Greek system was embarrassed.

Later I head over to Kappa Alpha, home of Boo Houghton. It's about 5:00 p.m., and the guys seem to have made a halfhearted effort to clean up after a party. On the shelf under the portrait of Robert E. Lee, empty Bud bottles are jammed into used plastic cups.

Boo comes out and we sit in two armchairs under the portrait of the K. A. Rose, the fraternity's co-ed of the year. A tall guy in a red baseball cap sits on the couch across from us. He's dark-haired and movie-actor good-looking. Boo introduces him as Billy Ray Casteel, a K. A. from Florence, Alabama. (K. A. has one "foreigner," I had heard — a boy from Florida).

It doesn't take long for Boo to warm up. He talks about the small-town Alabama way of life. "You can have anything you want here with a certain amount of money," Boo says. "Land. All the adult toys you could want. A big house. I've been to California and I've been up north. If I can't walk out my back porch and shoot a gun without someone calling the police — drink a beer and use the bathroom if I want . . . I don't like being closed in."

Boo believes it will be awhile before blacks are included. "I'd love to be president when there's one who's right," he says. He seems sincere. "But I don't see it in the next five years. I'd love to give him a break. Someone who really, really wants to be a K. A."

Billy Ray says, "Someone who's not a racist," and his statement reminds me of the fears on all sides among kids that age, the white kids who scare when they see a black guy wearing an 'X' hat.

"Someone who appreciates southern heritage," Boo goes on. "Someone with the same view I have, that there's niggers and there's blacks and there's rednecks and white people."

Billy Ray agrees. "Of course, we can all be rednecks when we want to be," he says.

Boo nods. "Walk out and pee on the dirt," he says. "Cuss."

They both say integration has to be voluntary. "Otherwise, there would be so many hazing violations out of hatred," Boo says. "Trying to run them off."

I'm on my way out when I mention a story I've heard about someone who wore blackface to portray Rosa Parks. They haven't heard of it, but it reminds Billy Ray of something. He turns to Boo.

"Hey, did you know that Rosa Parks was Claude's daddy's maid?" he says.

Everyone at Alabama says the fiercest opponents of integration are alumni, especially the men from small towns who are most involved, who come to homecoming games and jam their fraternity houses, the ones who say that after family, fraternity played the biggest part in their success. Alabama vice-president Harry Knopke says it was alumni who blocked one fraternity — he won't say which — from accepting an Asian American. Last October, one alum who was enraged by accreditation arranged for an old Cadillac hearse to be driven in the

homecoming parade, with white, press-apply letters on the fenders and door panels spelling out the death of the Greek system.

The hearse owner, Charles McPherson, is a blunt, friendly man with shaggy gray hair. He runs a hugely successful petroleum company in the small town of Oneonta. His dad was a school principal so McPherson was on New Row — the locale of the less-established fraternities. Now that he's got money, both his sons are on Old Row : Kappa Alpha. McPherson's ideas of Greek diversity seem to reflect that range. "We could deal with a guy from Baltimore," he says, "a guy from Maine, or a guy who was super rich, a guy on a scholarship."

More diversity than that makes him uncomfortable. Black fraternities, he points out, have very different traditions. They don't allow alcohol at their parties. They place a greater emphasis on achievement and service than do white fraternities. McPherson tells an anecdote he heard from someone involved with the accreditation process. "A guy said to me, 'The only reason [the black fraternities] want to swap with white fraternities is so they could see if they could get some of that pussy.'"

McPherson gets an exasperated look when I bring up the Machine. "I'm real disappointed that the Machine has not taken an aggressive, active stand," he says. Others say the same thing. In the old days, the accreditation plan never would have broken the surface; Theta Nu Epsilon should have seen the threat early on and dealt with the problem privately before anything got in the papers. The Machine should have made sure no Greeks went along with it. As Chad Green said to me, if he as a Greek supported accreditation, "I would have blood on my hands." It sounds like the old Machine curse.

The problem is that several Greeks have aided the administration. The university's most impressive recruit is Joe Strength, a Sigma Chi who helped write the accreditation plan. He's short, boyish looking, and has scrub-brush-short hair — and is probably the most thoughtful student I met on campus. Joe used an Army ROTC scholarship to attend Alabama. "I've grown up in a black-and-white world, and the experience through the ROTC was almost a liberating one," he says, choosing his words carefully. "You begin to appreciate someone more on their actions. You learn to depend on each other. You are thrown into a situation — the common bond, your uniform, means more than skin. You might say everyone is green."

When I asked Joe whether blacks and whites can share in the tradition of the Southern gentleman, he didn't have to ponder the question.

"Certainly," he said.

Even some old-line Greeks on Alabama's board of trustees are said to have agreed it's time. The injustices of the Greek system as it stands today are too obvious and painful. I met several middle-class black kids at the university who measure themselves by mainstream benchmarks — white benchmarks, if you will. Kids for whom the Montgomery bus boycott is fuzzy history, who have a lot of white friends, who want to be included in the social elite represented by the line of red-brick mansions.

I could see the damage to their self-esteem when they spoke about being turned away from Greek parties by pledges guarding the door, or about high school friendships with white girls ending freshman year because their friends' "big sisters" said it would be uncomfortable for everyone if the black girl came to lunch at the sorority. It's not the same as Bull Connor, but it's a real inequity. It might even have been a factor in the recent federal case against Alabama's university system, which charged that the unequal funding of historically white and historically black schools violates blacks' civil rights.

The Machine has always, if grudgingly, accommodated large social forces. It made way for urbanized, New South whites (and in doing so lost control of The Crimson White). Someday it will make way for "glass-ceiling" blacks. As this article was going to press, the defiant fraternities and the administration seemed to have hammered out a compromise on accreditation. Maybe someday black kids will be in the Machine. Stranger things have happened. In 1970, Bear Bryant integrated the football team.

As I finish my conversation with Charles McPherson, I ask him about Lamonde Russell, a black student from Oneonta who is an Alabama football star. McPherson's face lights up.

"Number 81!" he says. "He worked for me two summers. I took him down there when he got his scholarship. Me and another guy recruited him away from Auburn. We did everything we could to help him on."

McPherson's dog walks over. She's named Daisy (from the movie Driving Miss Daisy). I feed her a peanut.

"He's a hero here," McPherson goes on. "Not because he played ball but because of the kind of person he is. Intelligent. First class as far as right and wrong. He doesn't just preach it. He lives it. He's shy and quiet."

A student politician who's trying to explain Chuck Hess's oddness tells me about the choir incident. The Afro-American Gospel Choir came to the Senate last year to ask for \$2,500 to attend a Houston retreat. The Senate cut the grant to \$1,000. As the choir leaders started out of the room, a top Machine senator asked amiably if they couldn't bring the whole group back sometime to perform for the Senate.

Chuck Hess exploded.

"Y'all make me sick," he cried. "You sit here and cut the bill and then have the gall to ask them to come back and sing! I feel something moving inside me, and it isn't the spirit of Jesus."

The Machine senator was deeply embarrassed. He hadn't meant to be demeaning. But a lot of Greeks were angry at Chuck for the personal attack.

I'm impressed by Chuck's political awareness, and before I leave Tuscaloosa I stop in on him again. I go to the night desk of the law school, where he works as a security guard. As no one else does, Chuck gasps the dangers of Machine power. I sense I'm in the presence of someone as compelling as the young Ralph Nader.

"I had a landlady who told me about a man who swindled her out of money, 'He's not a bad man, he wouldn't jump into hell for a nickel. But he sure would dance around the edges trying so hard to get it he would fall in,'" Chuck says. "[Machine loyals] are not bad people. They don't want to be labeled as elitist or racist or even undemocratic. But it doesn't matter whether they dislike independents or blacks or international students, the actions they're taking have that effect. And I'm tired of seeing them try and walk that line. I want them to take a couple of steps away from the fire, away from the heat. Or jump in."

Behind him a black-and-white security monitor is flickering with a long shot of a distant hallway, but Chuck is focused on politics. He takes his argument further, to the problems of the state.

"We need people graduating from this university with a belief in the values of human beings as individuals, in the ability of a democratic system to work, with

a belief that the people of Alabama can solve their own problems," he says. "The people that are graduating from the political system here don't see any problems. There are none to solve. But the problems in our state are so basic that it shouldn't take a Rhodes scholar to explain to people that we need educational reform."

He gets his slow smile. "Of course, it might take a Rhodes scholar to figure out how to do it."

Just about everyone with a college degree in Alabama today will tell you that the state faces great difficulties involving poverty and education. The state has by far the lowest property taxes in the country. It is doing such a bad job of educating its young that you often hear leading officials, such as university president Roger Sayers, liken the state to a Third World country. This system of haves and have-nots may have worked for centuries for the well-off, but even Boo Haughton concedes that his children may not be able to live off the fat of the land in rural Alabama the way he has.

Still, fundamental change is unlikely. The legislature is in gridlock. The governor is a Baptist minister and former Amway salesman without a good idea of how to change things, and the Democrats who've run against him are progressives who've been out of touch. They weren't able to stir enough of a public outcry. And without an outcry the politicians are going to be like that dog Chuck told me about — doing what they can get away with.

The Machine is the academy for people going into state politics, so it's part of the problem. First off; Greeks leave Tuscaloosa with too many of the wrong friends to ever be effective reformers. They aren't going to campaign against the network they raise money from.

For another thing, the Machine — an unaccountable group meeting in a back room as kingmakers — offers outmoded political lessons. The people who are brought up in this fashion are good organization men, and very polished to boot; but they aren't necessarily good politicians. They tend to feel entitled. No wonder Alabama is alone among the Deep South states in never having elected a New South governor.

There is no better example of the flaws in Machine training than the 1986 state gubernatorial primary, in which Charlie Graddick, a former member of a strong Machine fraternity, and Bill Baxley, who in his undergraduate days had been

closely identified with the Machine, got in a pissing match over who had won, and the state Democratic party ended up picking Bailey as its man in the general election. Picking candidates is a Machine tradition, but it didn't go down well with the people. Bailey was roundly defeated.

Alabama's problems need more than a kingmaker. They need a populist who is in touch with the people and can explain things in such a way so as to create a ground swell.

The University of Alabama has turned out two politicians who could do just that. They're the most legendary politicians to graduate from Tuscaloosa. The late Claude Pepper came to the university from backwoods Alabama seventy years ago and shoveled coal to meet his bills. For years to come he would tell people of "the humiliations" he had felt from fraternity boys. Fifty years back, George C. Wallace was too poor for fraternity life and spent his college years waiting tables. In the summers, he inoculated dogs back in Barbour County.

Both boys had political aspirations. Pepper wanted to be president of the SGA. Wallace wanted to be Cotillion Chairman (a now extinct job booking concerts; "You not only made money and tons of money but you appointed other people to jobs that made good money," Bill Bailey says). The Machine beat both of them handily, Wallace twice.

And almost as soon as they left, both men became unstoppable politicians, men who had the great power of convincing the mass of voters that they really cared about them. The Machine has never valued such leadership ability.

Wallace employed his talent to become a demagogue. But Claude Pepper! The century has not produced a more devoted public servant. He was one of those rare politicians who destroy people's cynicism and their passivity.

On my last visit Chuck Hess seems lonelier than ever. As we talk, a group of people who've been cramming for exams in the law library walk out to get a drink. Chuck makes a halfhearted effort to be included — he's getting off in another fifteen minutes — but they smile and say goodnight. The TV shows ghostly images of students playing football in that far corridor, but soon they're gone, too.

And Chuck's comments about student politics have an especially bitter edge. The Machine has no understanding of how common students feel. He has had to be

polite too long, just so he could get some of his own bills passed. But his reforms have lost again and again. And Machine people never have to campaign, while independents have to hunt for votes "over God's green earth."

I don't say so, but I have the feeling that all the rejection is going to come in useful to Chuck. You can see that he lives for politics. It's so important to him that sometimes when he rises to speak in the Senate his voice trembles, his hands shake. When he graduates this summer Chuck isn't headed for any of the big-time places his classmates are going — Birmingham, Atlanta, Washington. He is going back to Dale County. His mother is getting his room ready. He'll practice law in Ozark.

And before long Chuck Hess will do, in the real world, that thing he's always dreamed of — run for public office.

On account of his many humiliations, Chuck will leave Tuscaloosa with some sore lessons few of our leaders get. Politics isn't just a game or a smoking circle, it can be deadly serious. It has tremendous power to hurt people or help them. Chuck couldn't have gotten a better political education anywhere on God's green earth. For that, someday, he will thank the Machine.

Note: The following year, Minda Riley, daughter of current Governor Bob Riley, was assaulted in her home by representatives of Theta Nu Epsilon. Miss Riley, a member of Phi Mu sorority, had decided to run for the office of SGA President, against the wishes of The Machine. The resulting fallout and national attention caused the University of Alabama administration to abolish the SGA until 1996. Miss Riley has publicly stated that she has no intention of ever returning to Tuscaloosa.