



UNC Board of Governors meets with HEW officials. April 20, 1979. Photo by Karen Tam.

The HEW-UNC Dispute

Its Roots Are Here at Home by Ned Cline

The way some politicians tell it, the only bad guy in the current desegregation battle between the University of North Carolina and the federal government is Joe Califano, head of the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). But that's not the way it is.

The court suit, in something of a roundabout way, has its origins in North Carolina, not in Washington or in the bowels of HEW bureaucracy. The battle actually began many years ago in the maneuvering of the North Carolina General Assembly where deals have always been cut as much on political expediency as on educational soundness. Racism may have also been a factor, but it was subtle and secondary.

If politicians in the General Assembly had done as much through the years for the traditionally black schools as they did for their white counterparts, chances are the case would never have gone to court. Until recent years, it had always been customary for each of the university campuses, through its own trustees or other persons of influence, to go directly to the lawmakers for money or other services. The schools with the most effective lobbyists ended up with the most help. But black schools had little clout, and those campuses often came up with the crumbs from the legislative budget pie.

Geography as well as skin color and political muscle played a part. Usually it was the east and west against the Piedmont or, depending on particular needs, some other political alignment.

That's how the many branches of the state's university system got their names. One wanted to be called a university, then another. If one couldn't succeed alone, two or

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more would team up to get what they wanted. During the 1960s things became so bad that even then Gov. Robert Scott, himself known to wheel and deal at times, decided that enough was enough and something had to be done. He proposed dismantling the then consolidated university and creating a central administrative unit to stop, as he put it, the political end runs to the General Assembly from every part of the state.

But that was no easy task, Scott quickly found. Nobody had taken on the politically powerful university group and won in a long time. Political groups formed at various corners of the state and, it appeared for a time that opponents of Scott's plan would win the legislative battle over the university's structure. But Scott had some political "green stamps" (patronage appointments) of his own and he resorted to some extraordinary steps.

One lawmaker was named a Superior Court judge after he voted Scott's way. A state senator was forced by a few of the governor's friends to rise from bed, drunk, to cast a critical vote. Scott said at the time it was all essential to get politics out of higher education. But the current dispute with HEW shows it wasn't entirely successful in that regard.

The restructuring established a single Board of Governors to sort out educational priorities and present a single budget request to the legislature. But it clearly has not removed the system from politics as Scott had said he wanted to do. Among the stiffest political battles in the General Assembly today is the contest to be picked for membership on the UNC governing board. That contest, in fact, is the only balloting which is still done in secret in the House and Senate. Not only that, but ballots are destroyed as soon as they're counted. One man who was running for a seat on the board this year said lawmakers had promised him more than enough votes to win, but they reneged once they marked their ballots. "That's the one thing they'll still lie to you on and you can't prove who lied," the losing candidate said.

The governing board is also a reflection of the political power base of the state: white male, above average income and influence, and representing, with few exceptions, the big business, anti-union approach to doing things.

If it were not for continuing political influence in higher education decisions, some people believe, there probably wouldn't be a battle with HEW at all.

One factor in the dispute is HEW's contention that not enough has been done to improve the five traditionally black campuses within the system—North Carolina Central University in Durham, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, Winston-Salem State University, Fayetteville State University, and Elizabeth City State University. Federal officials, under court order to seek more integration of the university system, point to the shortcomings at the black campuses as evidence the state is maintaining a segregated system in violation of federal civil rights law. They also contend physical improvements and stronger academic programs at those campuses would lure more white students to enroll there.

University officials and state lawmakers contend—correctly—that since the university system was restructured in 1972, more has been done for the black campuses than ever before in such a short time. But it's not so much what hasn't been done at black campuses under the new structure as what has been done at white campuses. That's where politics has played a major role.

Three major decisions by the Board of Governors in the last five years, all deeply rooted in politics, have soaked up almost \$100 million in state money—almost all of it going to predominantly white campuses. The board has approved a medical school at predominantly white East Carolina University in Greenville and already provided \$51 million for it. That was done despite widespread opinions among educators and physicians that the school wasn't needed.

The board has approved a veterinary school at predominantly white North Carolina State University in Raleigh and already has asked for \$9.2 million for buildings and programs. The board has helped distribute some \$40 million in state aid to North Carolina students attending private colleges in the state—money that otherwise could have been used to improve the black campuses.

"We inherited some very difficult political problems," university system President William Friday said recently. "I hope all the old (political) debts are

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now paid off. Given the circumstances, I think we've been able to have some enormous successes. The medical school was never anything but a political decision. The vet school had a political base when we got it."

Lawmakers and university officials agree both decisions were ordained by the General Assembly, primarily because of political commitments among legislators. Friday agreed that if either the medical school or the vet school hadn't been approved, or had been approved for a traditionally black campus, there wouldn't be as much of a problem with HEW.

"If I understand their (HEW) representatives, approval by the state of a professional program of any kind at a black campus would have had a substantial impact at settling the matter," Friday said. "We're trying to meet the needs with a master's in engineering, landscape architecture and computer science at A & T University in Greensboro."

The university also is willing to start an animal science research facility at N. C. A & T to coordinate with the vet school at N. C. State. But so far, N. C. A & T is scheduled to receive \$40,000 for that, compared to \$460,000 for programs and another \$9.2 million for capital improvements at N. C. State.

Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. calls the Board of Governors' political decisions "headline grabbers" that have overshadowed the admirable restraint of the board in resisting other political pressures. Friday agrees.

Among the more important decisions of the board cited by Friday and Hunt that might have gone the other way under the old system are:

- Stopping development of proposed law school programs at UNC-Charlotte, Appalachian State University and East Carolina.

- Overhauling teacher training courses by cutting at least 75 that were unproductive, unneeded or of low quality, arranging an agreement with the State Board of Education to monitor teacher training needs, and upgrading faculties that direct such programs.

- Holding back on the proliferation of nursing programs to make sure those in operation are needed and improved before others are started, and setting up strict guidelines to upgrade academic standards.

Dr. Donald Stedman, Friday's staff assistant, said it would have been unlikely any of those moves could have been made without the existence of the Board of Governors. Another staff assistant, Jay Jenkins, said what the Board of Governors has "kept from happening is almost as important as what it has allowed to happen."

Hunt said, "By and large the new system has been the best educational way and the right decisions have been made." Hunt wouldn't deny politics played a major role in the medical school and vet school decisions, but he insisted they were beneficial.

Some others aren't so kind in their descriptions of those two programs. Referring to the current court actions involving HEW, one university official, who didn't want his name used, said: "The price paid for the med and vet school locations will cost the state millions in money and time just in defending the actions. They've had a major detrimental impact on faculty and students at other schools as well as creating problems with HEW."

Dr. Leo Jenkins, retired chancellor at East Carolina, who is generally considered one of the all-time champions of political maneuvering during his tenure (the East Carolina medical school is a monument to his political effectiveness), said it was never practical for anybody to believe politics could be removed from the system. "That sounded good and was a good gimmick at the time," Jenkins said, "but I don't think anybody ever believed it."

"I never thought it'd be possible to get politics out of the university system," George Watts Hill of Chapel Hill said. "Much of what the board has done has been political, but much of it has also been in spite of what the board wanted. The legislature didn't give us any choice." Hill cited the medical and vet school decisions as well as state aid to private schools as examples of the political decisions forced on the board by the General Assembly. Regional political coalitions and anti-Chapel Hill sentiment among boosters of other state campuses were mostly responsible for the medical and vet school decisions, Hill said. And he said lawmakers' political ties to private colleges and private college officials' political clout led to state aid for those institutions over the objections of the Board of Governors. □