

40-year alliance between Reed, Hubbert transformed AEA into a political powerhouse

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By Markeshia Ricks • December 20, 2009

In 1969, Alabama was in the thick of the civil rights movement and racial tensions were high. Four years prior, activists were brutally attacked by law enforcement officers as they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery, and just a year before the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn.

Under those conditions, two groups -- one black and one white -- joined forces to form one of the most formidable and influential interracial organizations that Alabama has ever seen. Forty years ago this month, that organization became what most people recognize today as the Alabama Education Association.

Still led by the two men who oversaw the successful merger of the then-all-white Alabama Education Association and the black Alabama Teachers Association, the AEA is the powerhouse that Paul Hubbert and Joe Reed built.

"I think combining the Alabama Education Association with the Alabama State Teachers Association had an extremely important impact on Alabama politics," said Bill Stewart, University of Alabama professor emeritus. "It not only meant that both races were represented, but more occupations in the area of education. That merger made AEA what it is today -- a tremendously important force that has to be reckoned with."

With its 104,000 members, the AEA no longer rallies its members to march in the street to protect education employees' pay and benefits. It doesn't have to.

Lawmakers, state agencies and even the governor have to factor the AEA into their plans when it comes to education policy and education dollars.

AEA's power earns it plenty of derision from its detractors, but also a grudging admiration for how the organization gets things done.

But with Reed and Hubbert both in their early 70s, the question of how the AEA will fare once they and their ties are gone looms large. Most predict that the power of AEA will be diminished, but nobody discounts the idea that Hubbert and Reed have prepared for the transfer of that power.

The beginning

It was the mid-1960s, and at the behest of the National Education Association, which was merging with the black affiliates of the American Teachers Association, segregated associations were told that they had to integrate.

Hubbert said with the exception of Mississippi, associations around the South began working on their mergers immediately. But Alabama's merger was by far one of the most successful and it's reflected in the size of its membership today. Aside from Florida, Alabama has the largest membership in the Southeast.

And those who know the merger well say it was because of the leadership of Reed, who was executive secretary of ASTA from 1964 until the merger, and Hubbert, who became the executive secretary of AEA in March 1969.

State Rep. Alvin Holmes, D-Montgomery, worked for the ASTA as an administrative assistant to Reed. Holmes said Reed deserves special credit for ensuring that what was happening in other states didn't happen in Alabama.

"Alabama got the best deal of any state in the nation," he said. "(Reed) was smart enough and had the experience to know that no matter what happened, it had to be fair to the white teachers and fair to the black teachers. Alabama was the only state where blacks and whites came out equal."

Because Reed had been working with black educators to file lawsuits over hiring practices, he had extensive experience with the legal system, which he would bring to the unified AEA that was about to form.

Shared power

Reed, who was out of the country and could not be reached for an interview, wrote in November that people like S.J. Whisenhunt, the former president of ASTA, and the leaders of AEA deserve all the credit. He wrote that members of both associations forged ahead with the merger despite opposition from the state's political leaders, who did not believe that the two organizations should merge.

"Our merger succeeded greatly because the leaders of ASTA and the leaders of AEA were committed to making it work," Reed wrote.

Not only had those leaders committed to an integrated association, they also committed to having an executive staff that would share power. Holmes said even though other Southern states had a white executive secretary and a black associate secretary like Alabama, the white secretary was the association's leader.

Although Hubbert is recognized by many in the state as the more powerful of the two leaders, he said the two men have always played to their strengths.

"Dr. Reed had a lot of experience working in the legal area and I've primarily worked with the political area," he said. Both men are prominent members of the Alabama Democratic Party. Reed is the chairman of the Alabama Democratic Conference, which has helped elect many black Democrats to public office.

The merger took the two organizations from separate entities with about 8,000 (ASTA) and 22,000 (AEA) members to one unified organization with 30,000 members, Hubbert said. As part of the merger, ASTA sold its building and moved into the AEA building. The money from the sale of the ASTA building, plus additional funds from AEA, was used to start a legal defense fund for educators. Under Reed and Hubbert, the unified organization was run by a blended staff and governing board.

Hubbert said both he and Reed were committed to a unified association and with schools integrating, the time was right for a unified organization.

"People on both sides had strong feelings about it because they had to give up their identity to merge," Hubbert said. "But it was like a marriage. You had to work at it to make it successful."

A defining moment

Hubbert said the newly merged AEA had its power as an organization tested early in its history. It was 1971, and then-Gov. George Wallace wanted to divert money from the Education Trust Fund to pay for the state's mental health services in Tuscaloosa.

Thousands of AEA members took to the streets and marched to the Capitol demanding that legislators preserve the Education Trust Fund for teacher's benefits and salaries.

"At that point is when you see us come together with unity of purpose behind common goals," Hubbert said. "White men and women, black men and women all came together and lobbied the Legislature. And we won that battle."

Holmes said AEA's defeat of Wallace let it be known across the state that AEA was more than a teachers association, but was an organization with the power to defeat the will of the governor.

"Every governor -- Democrat or Republican -- has had a problem with Paul Hubbert," Holmes said. "He wouldn't let none of them have their way when it comes to teachers' issues in the state."

The 1971 showdown with Wallace would be one of many battles that AEA would win in the following years. AEA would take on other governors and fight for issues such as allowing pregnant women to teach.

"Until AEA took it on, there was a time when a woman teacher had to resign if she became pregnant," Hubbert said. And Hubbert's not talking about unmarried women. Married women had to inform their principal if they became pregnant and resign, he said.

"We thought that was ridiculous," Hubbert said. "The father didn't have to do this and give up his income, and childbirth is something that everybody had to experience. We thought, 'How foolish.' And we got it changed."

More inclusive

The AEA opened its membership and went from having a membership of mostly superintendents and teachers to add school support staff such as lunchroom workers, maintenance and janitorial staff. The change allowed it to grow exponentially.

Hubbert said extending membership to support personnel was important because the workers had no job protection.

"They were at-will employees," he said. "If the principal had a cousin that he wanted to give a job, he could terminate you. It didn't matter how long you worked there. They had no health insurance and no retirement benefits."

Stewart said throwing open its membership to school support staff and having the muscle to take on employment issues transformed AEA into more than an association, but a quasi-teachers union. That makes AEA unique among other state associations because it made it more powerful, he added.

Hubbert said he and Reed take their direction from the organization's members, who meet and vote on what AEA should or shouldn't support. That's what led AEA to fight for other things such as changes to the way funding was allocated to schools, money for textbooks and classroom supplies and state support for programs for at-risk students, Hubbert said.

Shall the mighty fall?

AEA has fought and won many battles, but in recent years it's taken some losses, too. And as Alabama has become more of a two-party state, Republicans have delighted in delivering the blows that have led to those losses.

"They are our No. 1 adversary," said state Rep. Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn. "They are a worthy adversary, but I can see their influence has eroded away slowly in the last seven or eight years."

Most recently, AEA has used its legal might to fight a state Board of Education policy that will require legislators who also work for the state's two-year college system to choose between their jobs and their elected positions when their terms end in 2010.

The implementation of the policy came on the heels of an attempt to clean up the two-year system after a federal investigation that is still ongoing unearthed corruption involving Democratic legislators. The Alabama Supreme Court has upheld the policy.

Former two-year college chancellor turned Republican candidate for governor Bradley Byrne locked horns with the AEA over the policy and several others that he implemented during his tenure and he is going head-to-head with them in his gubernatorial campaign. He says AEA has strayed away from its roots as a professional association because of its interests as a union.

"It no longer represents the interests of career educators," he said. "It represents only education employees who are the worst of the education profession. People like the teacher in Washington County who is still drawing her paycheck though she was convicted of having sexual contact with a child is a poster child for this.

"I would welcome leadership at AEA that wants to focus on the real needs of the teaching profession in Alabama. There is a vital role for that type of AEA."

Hubbard, who is not only the House minority leader but also the chairman of the state GOP, said AEA is losing more battles, and in the past that just didn't happen.

Hubbard estimates that as many as half of the teachers in the state are Republicans and don't support many of the positions that AEA has taken in recent years, particularly against double-dipping and the use of the state's Fair Dismissal and Teacher Tenure laws.

He said many of them stay for the liability insurance that the association provides, although Republicans attempted to pass legislation that would have required the state to pay the insurance. AEA blocked that legislation, he said.

But even Hubbard has a grudging respect for AEA and the two men who have led it all these years, even if he disagrees with their tactics and whether what they do benefits education. He counts it a coup that he is a favorite target of the AEA's newspaper *Alabama School Journal*. Byrne also has been lambasted in the publication.

"Obviously you have to compliment them because they have built a powerful and very successful organization," he said. "But I believe that it is the worst thing that ever happened for education. They have education in their name, but their mission is not to educate, but to take care of their union members and they've done a good job of that."

Hubbert takes criticism of AEA in stride.

"When you do nothing, you bother no one," he said. "The fact that AEA is in the news regularly is because we are dealing with the issues of the day. That's what our members expect of us."

Hubbert said education in Alabama is facing some of the toughest times financially that it's seen since the Great Depression. But whether he and Reed will be around to help work out a new solution for education funding remains to be seen. He said that he and Reed won't be at the helm forever and they have talked about retirement, but haven't announced a date.

"I suspect we'll both leave about the same time," he said with a smile.

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