



## *Harold Ford, Jr.*

1970–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1997–2007  
DEMOCRAT FROM TENNESSEE

Elected in 1996, Harold Ford, Jr., established a reputation as a moderate who took an interest in the social and economic issues that affected his constituents. Ford's mother recalled that, as a four-year-old attending his father's swearing-in as a freshman House Member, Harold, Jr., raised his hand and declared, "This is what I want to be when I grow up."<sup>1</sup> In contrast to an earlier generation of African Americans in Congress (including Harold Ford, Sr.) who maintained the legislative legacies of the civil rights movement, Ford, Jr., developed economic and technological solutions for a broader constituency.

The eldest son of Harold Eugene and Dorothy Bowles Ford, Harold Eugene Ford, Jr., was born on May 11, 1970, in Memphis, Tennessee. His father was a member of the Tennessee state house of representatives and was elected in 1974 to the U.S. House, where he served 22 years. His mother was a longtime employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.<sup>2</sup> The Ford family moved to Washington, DC, in the late 1970s, and Harold attended the elite St. Albans School for Boys. Ford acknowledged that his studies at the school shaped his political philosophy: "For me, and for the other kids who were not white, it was a very heterogeneous place . . . I had to get along with everybody. That helped me later on when I was in situations where you had to say, 'Hey, let's all get together and try to figure this out.'"<sup>3</sup> In 1992, he graduated with a B.A. in history from the University of Pennsylvania and worked on William J. (Bill) Clinton's presidential campaign. Four years later, Ford earned a J.D. from the University of Michigan School of Law. He served briefly as a staff aide for the U.S. Senate Committee on the Budget and as a special assistant at the U.S. Department of Commerce. In addition, Ford worked on his father's congressional campaigns in 1992 and 1994.

After his father announced his retirement from the House in 1996, Ford ran to succeed him in the district

encompassing the bulk of Memphis, Tennessee. The predominantly African-American district (60 percent) was one of the most liberal in the state and included more blacks than any southern city outside Texas.<sup>4</sup> Ford's father served as his chief campaign strategist. Using the Ford name to full effect among Memphis-area constituents, Harold Ford, Jr., distributed campaign buttons and T-shirts that read "Jr." Asked what being a Representative required, Ford said a "willingness to work hard, a willingness to listen and having the courage to stand up for what you believe in and having the courage to stand up for those that you represent." Ford ran on three platforms: increased federal funding for education and job training, opposition to Medicare price hikes, and crime prevention.<sup>5</sup> Contending against Steve Cohen, a state senator, and Rufus Jones, a state representative, Ford won the primary with 61 percent of the vote. His opponent in the general election was Rod DeBerry, a local politician who ran against Harold Ford, Sr., for the seat in 1992 and 1994.<sup>6</sup> The candidates both advocated economic empowerment, but proposed different strategies for achieving it. Ford stressed educational opportunities in a city with a high dropout rate, whereas DeBerry promoted a broader package that emphasized education, job opportunities, and economic development for the Memphis area.<sup>7</sup> Both candidates staked their positions on familiar party policies: Ford advocated government solutions to local problems, whereas DeBerry promoted local solutions and less government involvement. In the general election, Ford prevailed with 61 percent of the vote, making him the first African American to succeed a parent in Congress. In his subsequent four re-election campaigns, Ford won with 79 percent or more. He ran unopposed in 2000.<sup>8</sup>

Ford clarified from the beginning that his legislative style would be distinct from his father's, which was liberal



and minority-focused. “I represent this entire district . . . I respect my dad and . . . admire him a great deal,” Ford noted. “But I don’t think he would respect me if I didn’t have the fortitude to disagree with him if I felt he was wrong.” Ford remained dedicated to directing government resources toward the poor, but he emphasized expanding educational opportunities. Ford also reached out to some of his father’s political rivals, such as Willie Herenton, the mayor of Memphis, with whom he had a good relationship. Ford stressed pragmatism. Memphis City Hall, he observed, is “the principal contracting agency with the federal government. I have a responsibility to secure what funds and resources I can for my state and city.”<sup>9</sup>

Ford’s determination and leadership skills laid the groundwork for his quick rise in the Democratic Party. Shortly after he entered Congress in January 1997, Ford was chosen by his Democratic colleagues as freshman class president, providing him added influence as a spokesperson for the newly elected Members and as an intermediary with House leaders. The progression of Ford’s committee assignments also reflected his resolve to play a significant role in the House. He initially received assignments on Education and the Workforce and Government Reform and Oversight. He left the latter committee in the 107th Congress (2001–2003) to accept a seat on the Financial Services Committee (his father had served on the predecessor to that committee). In the following Congress, Ford won a seat on the influential Budget Committee. Pegged as one of the Democratic Party’s bright young stars, Ford received widespread media attention when he delivered the keynote address at the 2000 Democratic National Convention.

Unlike the previous generation of black lawmakers, who advocated federal solutions to counteract racial and economic discrimination, Ford proposed legislation aimed at enhancing the assets of working-class Americans through savings programs and tax incentives.<sup>10</sup> Although Ford supported Democratic causes such as environmental protection and affirmative action, he also backed measures that were opposed by many in his party, like private school

vouchers and federal funding for faith-based charities. Additionally, Ford supported Republican initiatives such as a federal amendment banning gay marriage; the USA PATRIOT Act, which was designed to deter terrorism by strengthening law enforcement; and the authorization to use military force in Iraq.<sup>11</sup> Among the bills sponsored by Ford were measures that would reform campaign finance, make college affordable, and hold the gun industry accountable to local authorities for gun violence.<sup>12</sup>

Though his approach was moderate overall, Ford maintained a comparatively liberal voting record relative to those of the other Representatives from his state.<sup>13</sup> He stressed his pragmatism and his ability to work with Republican colleagues across the aisle.<sup>14</sup> As a member of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), he maintained his independence by choosing his battles. On issues such as affirmative action and tax cuts, the Tennessee Representative voted with his colleagues. However, Ford’s support for a balanced budget, prayer in schools, and the establishment of private accounts to bolster Social Security contrasted with the position of many of his CBC colleagues. Ford contended that the “old labels have lost a lot of their meaning . . . ideology makes it easier to resist good ideas.”<sup>15</sup>

Ford established himself as a centrist in the House. He joined several organizations, such as the New Democrat and Blue Dog coalitions, that included a range of social moderates and fiscal conservatives. In 2002 Ford orchestrated what he described as an “underdog campaign” against Nancy Pelosi of California for the position of Democratic Leader that was vacated by Richard Gephardt of Missouri.<sup>16</sup> As a late entrant, Ford publicized his candidacy through media outlets rather than using the traditional and more successful method of intense behind-the-scenes campaigning. The main issue separating the two contenders was the Iraq War Resolution that Ford had backed (the war began in March 2003).<sup>17</sup> The Iraq issue divided Ford from many rank-and-file Democrats who believed the party’s base demanded a more aggressive opposition to the administration’s stance on Iraq.<sup>18</sup> Ulti-

mately, Pelosi prevailed, 177 to 29, in her historic run to become the first woman to lead a party in Congress.<sup>19</sup>

In May 2005, Ford, who had twice considered running for the U.S. Senate, announced his candidacy for the seat that was being vacated by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist in 2007. “[W]ith five good terms in the House behind me . . . I believe I’m ready to meet the challenges ahead of us in a way that will make Tennesseans as proud of me as I am of Tennessee,” Ford said. He also believed that serving in the Senate would enhance his ability to direct federal and fiscal resources to his state; he argued, “The U.S. Senate is where all the decisions are going to be made over the next 10 to 20 years—from Social Security to Medicare to how we create better jobs in this country, and national security issues.”<sup>20</sup>

During his senatorial campaign, Ford ran as a centrist “who appealed to moderate Republican and independent voters . . . by focusing on . . . health care, education, and economic development.”<sup>21</sup> Throughout the campaign, Ford emphasized that his political stance derived from his personal beliefs rather than from liberal Democratic orthodoxy. “If I was doing the textbook thing that Democrats do . . . I’d say ‘Republicans want to short Social Security, they want to rob poor children of their college education, they want to deny families the education system.’ Don’t get me wrong, there’s some truth to that. But that’s not me. Just let me be myself.”<sup>22</sup> Ford’s election strategy was to maintain his name recognition and base

in western Tennessee while building support in central and eastern Tennessee.<sup>23</sup> Analysts predicted that Ford had a good chance of winning the seat in light of widespread voter dissatisfaction with the Bush administration and minimal opposition from Democrats in the primary.<sup>24</sup> However, when Bob Corker, a former mayor of Chattanooga, won the Republican nomination in August 2006, the Senate race became hotly contested due to a controversial ad campaign and national media attention.<sup>25</sup> Ford’s election strategy yielded mixed results: Although he performed well in urban areas such as Memphis, Nashville, and Chattanooga, Corker received support in suburban counties around Nashville and the eastern part of the state.<sup>26</sup> Corker prevailed in a narrow election with 51 percent to Ford’s 48 percent.<sup>27</sup>

After leaving the U.S. House in January 2007, Ford served as a visiting professor at Vanderbilt University and the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas–Austin. He also succeeded Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack as chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), an organization that fosters a moderate approach to economic development, welfare reform, and international business.<sup>28</sup> Ford served as a vice chairman and senior policy advisor to a major investment company and appeared as a political commentator on network television.<sup>29</sup> In 2007 he became engaged to Emily Threlkeld, a business manager for a fashion designer in New York City.<sup>30</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

“Ford, Harold E., Jr.,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=F000262>.

## MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

**University of Tennessee**, Modern Political Archives, Howard H. Baker, Jr., Center for Public Policy (Knoxville, TN). *Papers*: The Harold Ford, Jr., Collection is not yet available for research.

## NOTES

- 1 *Current Biography, 1999* (New York: H. W. Wilson & Company, 1999): 204.
- 2 *Almanac of American Politics, 1996* (Washington, DC: National Journal Press, 1995): 1252.
- 3 Jonathan Darman, “The Path to Power,” 30 October 2006, *Newsweek*: 4.
- 4 *Politics in America, 2006* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2005): 963.
- 5 Nate Hobbs, “Eager Ford Embraces His Father’s Legacy,” 9 June 1996, *The Commercial Appeal*: 1B.
- 6 Terry Keeter, “Ford Jr. Wins in Landslide Despite Record Crossover,” 2 August 1996, *The Commercial Appeal*: 1A; “DeBerry, Ford Jr. Pull No Punches at Forum, Schools, Experience Emerge as Main Issues,” 9 October 1996, *The Commercial Appeal*: 1B.
- 7 Nate Hobbs, “DeBerry’s Solution Is Business; Ford’s Is Education,” 19 September 1996, *The Commercial Appeal*: 1B.
- 8 Nate Hobbs, “Ford, DeBerry Want Balanced Budget Law,” 20 September 1996, *The Commercial Appeal*: 2B; “DeBerry and Ford Draw Clear Differences Down Party Lines,” 29 October 1996, *The Commercial Appeal*: 1A; *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, DC, Congressional Quarterly Press, 2001): 948; *Almanac of American Politics, 2006*: 1566; “Ford Sworn-In as Youngest Member of 105th Congress,” 27 January 1997, *Jet*: 4.
- 9 James W. Brosnan, “He Won’t Be ‘Puppet,’ Ford Jr. Vows, Backs Dad’s Urban Agenda But Plans Education Push,” 7 November 1996, *The Commercial Appeal*: 7B.
- 10 *Politics in America, 2006*: 962; “Official Biography of Harold Ford,” at <http://www.house.gov/ford/about/index.shtml> (accessed 16 May 2006).
- 11 “Harold Ford, Jr.,” *Contemporary Black Biography* 16 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1997); “Ford, Harold E. Jr.,” *Current Biography, 1999*: 205–206; *Politics in America, 2006*: 962.
- 12 Ford sponsored H.R. 2051 (Public Voice Campaign Finance Reform Act of 1997) in the 105th Congress (1997–1999), H.R. 1086 (Gun Industry Responsibility Act) in the 106th Congress (1999–2001), and H.R. 1631 (Make College Affordable Act of 1999) in the 106th Congress (1999–2001).
- 13 Darman, “The Path to Power”: 5. Darman noted that Ford was “one of only three African-American members” of the Blue Dog Coalition.
- 14 “Official Biography of Harold Ford.”
- 15 *Almanac of American Politics, 2006*: 1568; Lynette Clemetson, “Losing the Old Labels,” 28 January 2002, *Newsweek*: 50.
- 16 Carl Hulse, “The Challenger,” 10 November 2002, *New York Times*: 30.
- 17 Rob Johnson, “Ford Impresses With Ambition, Moxie Despite Loss,” 18 November 2002, *The Tennessean*: 1A. For a detailed critique, see Harold Ford, Jr., “Why I Should Be Minority Leader,” 13 November 2002, *Washington Post*: A27.
- 18 Michael Crowley, “Ford’s Theater,” July/August 2006, *Atlantic Monthly*: 44; Darman, “The Path to Power”: 6; *Politics in America, 2006*: 963.
- 19 Marc Sandalow, “Savvy, Cash Clinched Job for Pelosi; Tightly Orchestrated Campaign Followed Lucrative Fund Raising,” 17 November 2002, *San Francisco Chronicle*: A3.
- 20 Lauren Whittington, “Ford Officially Enters Tenn. Senate Contest,” 26 May 2005, *Roll Call*; “Ford Drives Home His Strategy,” at <http://haroldfordjr2006.blogspot.com/2005/07/ford-drives-home-his-strategy.html> (accessed 1 January 2007).



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- 21 Ashley Rowland, "Impact of Race on Ford's Defeat Debated," 12 November 2006, *Chattanooga Times*: 3.
- 22 Darman, "The Path to Power": 2.
- 23 V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984): 75–81. East Tennessee has been a reliable base of GOP support since the Civil War, whereas central Tennessee contains a mixture of Democrats and Republicans.
- 24 Crowley, "Ford's Theater": 44. For a more comprehensive analysis, see Corey Dade and Nikhil Deogun, "Republicans' Hold on the South Gets Test in Tennessee," 26 October 2006, *The Wall Street Journal*: A1.
- 25 Crowley, "Ford's Theater": 45–46; Karen Tumulty and Perry Bacon, Jr., "Why Harold Ford Has a Shot," 14 August 2006, *Time*: 44.
- 26 Beth Rucker, "After Senate Defeat, What's Harold Ford Jr.'s Next Move?" 10 November 2006, Associated Press.
- 27 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," available at [http://clerk.house.gov/member\\_info/electionInfo/index.html](http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html).
- 28 "Harold Ford Jr. to Be Visiting Professor at Vanderbilt," at <http://www.memphisflyer.com/memphis/Content?old=23532> (accessed 29 January 2007); "New DLC Chair: Harold Ford, Jr.": <http://www.ndol.org/print.cfm?contentid=254178> (accessed 12 February 2007); "Vanderbilt Class Maps Strategies for 2008 Presidential Campaign; Former Congressman Harold Ford Jr. and John Geer to Co-Teach," 20 July 2007, *Ascribe Newswire*; "Harold Ford Jr. to Teach at University of Texas," 15 October 2007, Associated Press.
- 29 "Former Congressman Harold Ford Joins Merrill Lynch as Vice Chairman," 14 February 2007, Associated Press; "Harold Ford Jr. Joins Fox News as Political Contributor to Network's News Programming," 14 March 2007, *Business Wire*.
- 30 Amy Argetsinger and Roxanne Roberts, "Harold Ford Jr.'s Next Election: To Tie the Knot," 10 October 2007, *Washington Post*: C03.