



## *Harold Eugene Ford, Sr.*

1945–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1975–1997  
DEMOCRAT FROM TENNESSEE

The first African American to represent Tennessee in the U.S. Congress, Harold E. Ford transformed his family's entrepreneurial success into a political dynasty that shaped state and national politics. Ford's membership on the influential House Ways and Means Committee enabled him to build support among his constituents by directing ample federal funding to his district. Elected at age 29, Ford was one of the youngest Members ever to chair a subcommittee on Ways and Means. During his more-than-two-decade career in the House, Ford strongly advocated government assistance for the poor and set out to reform welfare in the United States. "Harold Ford has been a staunch defender of justice and equality," acknowledged William (Bill) Clay, Sr., of Missouri upon his colleague's retirement at the end of the 104th Congress (1995–1997). "He has shown a special dedication to representing the needs of the underprivileged and has left his signature on our Nation's welfare and employment programs."<sup>1</sup>

The eighth of 15 children, Harold Eugene Ford was born on May 20, 1945, in Memphis, Tennessee. Ford's father, Newton, worked as an undertaker; his mother, Vera, was a housewife. Ford earned a bachelor of science degree from Tennessee State University in 1967 and an associate of arts degree in mortuary science from John Gupton College in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1969. On February 10, 1969, he married Dorothy Bowles. The couple had three children—Harold, Newton Jake, and Sir Isaac—before divorcing in 1999.<sup>2</sup> Ford later earned a master's degree in business administration from Howard University in 1982. After entering the family mortuary business, he ran for a seat in the Tennessee state house of representatives. "This fellow came in looking for a campaign contribution for his race for the state legislature," Ford later recalled. "When he stepped out the door, I decided to run." Ford lobbied support from "the silent majority—through

churches, civic clubs, PTAs" and other groups of affluent blacks in Memphis. His well-organized campaign also tapped into his father's mortuary business—an invaluable community network that laid the groundwork for his victorious bid for the state legislature in 1972. Ford made his mark early in the Tennessee house of representatives. Named majority whip in his first term, he also chaired a legislative committee that investigated utility rates and practices. During his political career, Ford used his family's deep roots in the community to assemble a formidable machine in Memphis politics. Raised with respect for public service—his great-grandfather held a county office, and his father (unsuccessfully) campaigned for a seat in the Tennessee house—Ford also benefited from changes in the political landscape. With a spike in the number of African-American voters in the Memphis area, Ford and his family were able to solidify a power base that included representation at the federal, state, and local levels.<sup>3</sup>

At the urging of local black politicians, Ford ran for a seat in the U.S. House in 1974 after two terms as a state legislator.<sup>4</sup> He easily defeated his three opponents—Mary A. Guthrie, a Catholic nun; Joan Best, a schoolteacher; and Lee Whitman, a lawyer—in the Democratic primary, with 63 percent of the vote.<sup>5</sup> Ford faced Dan Kuykendall, a four-term incumbent Republican Member, in the general election. The southwestern Tennessee congressional district boasted a diverse constituency; although redistricting increased the number of African-American voters, Ford faced an uphill battle in the majority-white district. To strengthen his standing with black voters and the liberal whites in the district, Ford ran on a bipartisan platform that emphasized economic development for the community. "Inflation knows no color . . . that's what the people will vote on," Ford remarked.<sup>6</sup> His campaign enlisted an army of paid workers and volunteers that





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included blacks and whites and received financial support from black churches and luminaries such as Isaac Hayes, an African-American singer. An energetic campaigner, Ford “organized the headquarters and phone banks . . . put together caravans that . . . would wind slowly through residential neighborhoods carrying campaign workers who would put up yard signs and hand out candy to kids.”<sup>7</sup> With the Watergate scandal as a backdrop to the early part of the campaign, Ford called for the immediate impeachment of President Richard M. Nixon. Kuykendall, who had faced little previous opposition, had difficulty separating himself from the embattled President.<sup>8</sup> After contesting the initial results, Ford narrowly won the general election by 744 votes, becoming the first black Representative to represent Tennessee.<sup>9</sup> He joined an influx of freshman Members of the House elected to the 94th Congress (1975–1977). Dubbed the “Watergate Babies,” the 75 new Democratic Representatives capitalized on an anti-Republican sentiment in the wake of the scandal.<sup>10</sup>

In his subsequent re-election campaigns, Ford typically won by comfortable margins. He locked in the black vote and a larger number of white voters in his district to win 61 percent of the vote in 1976.<sup>11</sup> Before the 1976 election, redistricting eliminated 12,000 white suburban voters, increasing the black constituency to more than 45 percent. During the 1980s, Ford increased his margins of victory, typically garnering more than 70 percent of the vote. In his latter terms on the Hill, he failed to secure as many dominant victories, partially because of a series of legal problems; however, his constituents remained loyal, consistently electing him with more than 50 percent of the vote.<sup>12</sup>

During his first term, Ford was assigned to the Committee on Banking, Currency, and Housing, the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, the Select Committee on Aging, and the Select Committee on Assassinations. In September 1975, the Tennessee Representative became the second African American selected to serve on the prestigious House Ways and Means Committee, which set federal tax and revenue policy.<sup>13</sup> In 1987, Speaker of

the House Jim Wright of Texas appointed Ford to the powerful Democratic Steering and Policy Committee, which makes committee assignments for Democratic Members of the House.

Ford focused on helping lower-income constituents with government-sponsored aid such as job training and maintaining a social safety net through programs such as welfare. He also sought opportunities for economic development to assist both rich and poor constituents through his representation and grass-roots efforts. During the 95th Congress (1977–1979), Ford attempted to cultivate public support for President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter’s comprehensive urban policy plan—an initiative to rebuild American cities that had suffered economic setbacks. Ford informed his constituents that they were “in a position to impact directly upon the 5–10 pieces of legislation which are required to implement these proposals . . . Only through such actions can we as black people ever make the ‘system’ work as it should.”<sup>14</sup> As a member of the Ways and Means Committee’s Subcommittee on Health, Ford tried to assist senior citizens who needed health care in his district. He cosponsored the extension of the Older Americans Health Services Act, which was due to expire in 1978. To draw constituent support for the measure, Ford scheduled hearings in his district. “The response . . . has been overwhelming with ‘aging’ enthusiasts in my district who are anxious to have their voices heard,” Ford said.<sup>15</sup>

In the 97th Congress (1981–1983), Ford became chairman of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Public Assistance and Unemployment Compensation. In his new leadership role, he attacked President Ronald W. Reagan’s efforts to curtail government-sponsored programs aimed at assisting the poor. He fought against administration initiatives to reduce Medicare funding and to force the poor to pay for food stamps. The Tennessee Representative also attempted to block a measure by the Ways and Means Committee to cut more than \$1.7 billion from Medicare.<sup>16</sup>

Ford used his Ways and Means subcommittee chairmanship to secure federal government aid for unemployed workers who had exhausted state benefits.



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Through his efforts, a supplemental benefits program was added to existing tax legislation.<sup>17</sup> During the 99th Congress (1985–1987), Ford led an unsuccessful battle to extend the life of the supplemental benefits.<sup>18</sup> Ford proposed a welfare overhaul plan that linked benefits to work. Called the Family Support Program, it was an alternative to Aid to Families With Dependent Children. The work component, called the National Education, Training, and Work program (NETWork), would require the participation of parents whose children were age six or older and would outline “specific education, employment, and counseling services” for the states. Although the initial cost was high, Ford pointed out, “We will save revenue for the federal government three to four years down the road.”<sup>19</sup>

Ford’s ambition to reform welfare hit a major roadblock when the veteran lawmaker was indicted in 1987 on 19 federal counts that included charges of obstruction against the Internal Revenue Service, mail and bank fraud, and embezzlement.<sup>20</sup> The Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) publicly backed Ford, pledging to raise \$250,000 to help pay his legal bills. Like Ford, the CBC questioned the legitimacy of the investigation, arguing that it was racially or politically motivated.<sup>21</sup> Ford fought to remain effective on Capitol Hill despite having to resign his subcommittee chairmanship.<sup>22</sup> He supported a bill to raise the ceiling on the number of immigrants admitted to the United States, and introduced legislation that would provide college scholarships and job training for the poor. In tune with his legislative focus on local issues, Ford helped attain a multimillion-dollar development project for downtown Memphis. During his congressional tenure he also obtained federal funding for public housing improvements and upgrades for Memphis International Airport, as well as increased opportunities for minority businesses in his Tennessee district.<sup>23</sup>

After a mistrial was declared in April 1990, a federal judge ruled that Ford’s second trial would take place in Memphis, but that jurors would be selected from several outlying counties due to the publicity from the first

proceeding. House leaders filed an *amicus curiae* brief on Ford’s behalf arguing that the Representative’s right to a fair trial had been violated by the decision to bus jurors in from rural western Tennessee.<sup>24</sup> Ford’s defense team and the CBC made an unsuccessful request for a review by the Justice Department.<sup>25</sup> In April 1993, the predominantly white jury acquitted Ford of all charges.<sup>26</sup>

After his acquittal, Ford’s seniority privileges were restored, and he reclaimed his position as chair of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources following a six-year absence.<sup>27</sup> “I don’t think I can walk in on Day One and be fully alert . . . In ample time, four to six weeks, I think I should be back in the swing of things,” Ford admitted upon his return. The Tennessee Representative continued his dedication to welfare reform. He agreed with President William J. (Bill) Clinton’s proposal to change welfare, but opposed a finite limitation on benefits. “I don’t think welfare reform worked . . . I’m not going to wait to see [Clinton’s] package. We’re going to hit the road running.” Ford proposed a more gradual approach to getting people off of welfare that included standardizing and increasing benefits rather than abruptly ending services.<sup>28</sup> He also put forward a more ambitious welfare-to-work plan that would pay workers a minimum of \$9 to \$9.50 an hour. In return for receiving double the minimum wage, workers would relinquish welfare benefits such as food stamps and housing subsidies. “What I’m looking at, on a national level, is replacing welfare with a jobs program,” Ford noted.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the 1995 welfare reform bill signed into law by President Clinton failed to include Ford’s comprehensive initiatives.

For several years, speculation swirled around Ford’s possible retirement from the House. “I didn’t want history to show I was on my way down,” Ford revealed when asked if he had thought of stepping down after his legal vindication in 1993.<sup>30</sup> Three years later, Ford announced his decision to leave Congress. “I’m going to leave while I’m on top,” he remarked. “I’ve been there (in Congress) a long time. I’ve seen how members of Congress stayed beyond the level of capacity where they can really be

effective.”<sup>31</sup> Ford’s son, Harold, Jr., won his father’s House seat for the 105th Congress (1997–1999), making Harold Ford the first African-American Representative whose son succeeded him in Congress. After his career in the House, Ford managed a political consulting firm in Tennessee.

### FOR FURTHER READING

“Ford, Harold Eugene,” *Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=F000261>.

### NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 104th Cong., 2nd sess. (30 September 1996): E1889.
- 2 “Ford, Harold Eugene,” *The Complete Marquis Who’s Who Biographies*, 11 February 2003; James W. Brosnan, “Harold, Dorothy Ford Avoid Divorce Trial With Agreement,” 31 March 1999, *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN): B2.
- 3 Dorothy Gilliam, “Harold Ford,” 23 February 1975, *Washington Post*: H1; Charles Bernsen, “Political Machine of Ford Clan Took a Century to Build,” *Commercial Appeal*, 1 July 1990: A1; Charles Bernsen, “Ford Team Scored Big in 1974,” 2 July 1990, *Commercial Appeal*: A1; *Almanac of American Politics, 1996* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1995): 1253.
- 4 Bernsen, “Ford Team Scored Big in 1974.”
- 5 *Almanac of American Politics, 1976* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1975): 809–810; Bill Terry, “Nun, Mortician Vie in Tenn. Hill Race,” 1 August 1974, *New York Times*: A12.
- 6 Terry, “Nun, Mortician Vie in Tenn. Hill Race.” A contemporary noted that Ford “was liberated from the notion that he had to be in an all black area in order to win an election”; see Gilliam, “Harold Ford.”
- 7 Bernsen, “Ford Team Scored Big in 1974.”
- 8 Terry, “Nun, Mortician Vie in Tenn. Hill Race”; Haynes Johnson, “Nixon’s the One Hurting the GOP,” 27 October 1974, *Washington Post*: C1.
- 9 Bernsen, “Ford Team Scored Big in 1974;” *Politics in America, 1982* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1981): 1140–1141; “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); Mildred L. Amer, “Black Members of the United States Congress: 1870–2007,” 27 September 2007, Report RL30378, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, Washington, DC; Gilliam, “Harold Ford.”
- 10 “Freshmen Have Never Been Treated So Well,” 15 January 1975, *Washington Post*: B1. While entertaining Memphis constituents, Ford “couldn’t get tickets for them for the swearing-in ceremony itself, so he borrowed a large committee room and restaged the oath-taking for their benefit.” Ford’s congressional style resembles one of the archetypes outlined by Richard Fenno, Jr., *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*, (New York: Longman, 2003): 114–124.
- 11 Henry Mitchell, “A Symbolic Gathering,” 6 January 1977, *Washington Post*: D9; *Politics in America, 1982*: 1141.
- 12 “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). For example, Ford won 82 percent of the vote in 1988. Two years later he garnered 58 percent in the general election.
- 13 Charles Rangel of New York was the first black member of the panel when he joined the committee at the beginning of the 94th Congress.
- 14 Harold Ford, “Carter’s Urban Policy: A Workable Mish-Mash?” 20 April 1978, *Atlanta Daily World*: 4.
- 15 *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (4 November 1977): 37420.
- 16 Ford “tried to persuade the committee to restore \$71 million in Medicare cuts, but failed. In the past, he has backed legislation to expand Medicare payments to cover dentistry, chiropractic treatment, eyeglasses, and hearing aids.” Quoted in *Politics in America, 1982*: 1140. See also *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 97th Congress, 1st Session, 1981: Volume 38* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1982): 479.
- 17 *Congressional Directory, 98th Congress* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983): 356; *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989): 1416.
- 18 *Politics in America, 1990*: 1416.
- 19 “Top House Democrats Back ‘Workfare,’” 20 March 1987, Associated Press. The plan would incorporate “a system requiring education, training, or work for many recipients. States would have to provide a minimum level of cash assistance, and child support collections would be strengthened.” Ford figured the program “would cost the federal government roughly \$600 to \$850 million in fiscal 1988 and about \$2.5 billion when phased in fully.”



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- 20 Howard Kurtz, "Tennessee Rep. Ford Indicted on Tax, Bank Fraud Charges," 25 April 1987, *Washington Post*: A1. The most controversial aspects of the case stemmed from the establishment of a "sham corporation" that processed a \$350,000 loan from the financiers to Ford's funeral home business. The indictment alleged that instead of using the money for those purposes, Ford used the loan for personal reasons. C. H. Butcher, a bank financier, pleaded guilty to conspiracy and bankruptcy fraud charges and agreed to cooperate with prosecutors. Another member of the Butcher family was serving a 20-year prison term for defrauding depositors.
- 21 Woody Baird, "Congressman Says His Indictment Racially Motivated," 28 April 1987, Associated Press; Kenneth B. Noble, "Blacks in Congress Join to Help Indicted Colleague," 28 May 1987, *New York Times*: A20. With legal costs then estimated at \$750,000, Ford raised \$500,000 from two sources, the CBC and 200 black ministers from Memphis, in a successful grass-roots effort. For more on Ford's legal problems, see William L. Clay, *Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress, 1870–1991* (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1992): 332–334.
- 22 "Ford's Defense," 24 July 1987, *New York Times*: 14. "All contributions to his political committee, the Harold Ford Committee for Better Government, in the first six months of the year have been used for his defense . . . taking in just over \$75,000 and spending just over \$75,000 on attorney fees." According to the *1987 Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, a Democratic Caucus rule required Members indicted for "serious felonies" to resign their chairmanships until they were acquitted. *Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 100th Congress, 1st Session, 1987: Volume 43* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1988): 479.
- 23 James W. Brosnan, "Tennessee Congressmen Line Up Solidly Against Immigration Bill, But Still Lose," 5 October 1990, *Commercial Appeal*: A5; "Ford Offers Two Measures to Aid Poor," 19 October 1990, *Commercial Appeal*: A13. "Sundquist, Ford Will Try to Revive Peabody Place Bill," 29 October 1990, *Commercial Appeal*: B1; James W. Brosnan, "No Apologies, Ford Is Proud of Liberal Legacy," 21 April 1996, *Commercial Appeal*: 5B.
- 24 Susan B. Glasser, "Hill Leadership Intervenes in Rep. Ford's Fraud Case," 2 May 1991, *Roll Call*.
- 25 Susan Glasser, "Six Years After Indictment, Rep. Ford's Second Trial on Fraud Charges Begins," 4 February 1993, *Roll Call*; Chris Conley and James W. Brosnan, "Justice to Join Ford, Seek New Jury; U.S. Atty. Bryant Resigns; Prosecutors Leave Case," 20 February 1993, *Commercial Appeal*: A1; Chris Conley, "Ford Case Returns to Court Amid Questions Over Jury, Prosecutors," 21 February 1993, *Commercial Appeal*: A1; "Turner Cited 'Tactics,' Coverage in Decision on Jury in Ford Trial," 23 February 1993: A8; Chris Conley, "Appeals Court Affirms Ford Jury," 27 February 1993, *Commercial Appeal*: A8; Susan Glasser, "GOP Asks Probe of Justice Dept. Over Ford Trial," 1 March 1993, *Roll Call*; "Clinton Says No Improprieties Intruded on Rep. Ford's Case," 7 March 1993, Reuters.
- 26 *Almanac of American Politics, 1994* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1993): 1196–1197; Alan Fram, "Exonerated Congressman Wants Government to Pay His Legal Costs," 14 April 1993, Associated Press; Susan Glasser, "Acquitted, Rep. Ford Moves to Settle Some Scores, Wants the US to Pay His Legal Bills," 15 April 1993, *Roll Call*.
- 27 Previously named the Subcommittee on Public Assistance and Unemployment Compensation, it had been renamed the Subcommittee on Human Resources by the time Ford resumed his chairmanship.
- 28 Leslie Phillips, "For Congressman, Reputation Retrieval," 21 April 1993, *USA Today*: 8A; Kenneth J. Cooper, "Rep. Ford Finds New Faces, Old Issues; Long-Absent Subcommittee Chairman Retakes Helm and Tackles Welfare Overhaul," 22 April 1993, *Washington Post*: A21.
- 29 William M. Welch, "Ford 'Ready' to Redo Welfare," 27 January 1994, *USA Today*: 5A.
- 30 Brosnan, "No Apologies, Ford Is Proud of Liberal Legacy."
- 31 James W. Brosnan, "Harold Ford Will Announce Today Decision to Retire From Congress," 11 April 1996, *Commercial Appeal*: 1A.