New Ford In Congress

By John W. Lewis Jr.

Newly-elected Congressman Harold Ford, of Memphis, is a Taurus, the astrological sign known for concentration and tenacity.

Those are the qualities it took to win a closely-fought election against Republican Dan H. Kuykendall that many hard-nosed political observers in Memphis and across the country were certain he could not win.

Ford, at 29, the youngest black elected to Congress in the 20th century, had to overcome continual financial problems, a racist campaign by his conservative white opponent, and the withholding of needed support by organized labor and the Congressional Black Caucus, to beat Kuykendall by a slim margin of less than 600 votes.

The handsome, plain-speaking Democrat also had to beat back on election night what he called "attempts by the election commission to steal the election for Kuykendall by not counting 5 ballot boxes from heavily-black precincts."

Ford called singer Isaac Hayes, a resident of Memphis, the "financial backbone" of his low-budget campaign. Hayes, a personal friend of the Ford family, raised $21,000 in 2 benefit shows and contributed $5,000 in cash.

"He couldn't have been a nicer guy in the campaign," said Ford. "He stuck with us when the going got tough."

"He was the cause of our getting Tom Bradley, the black mayor of Los Angeles, here this past April to speak at the kick-off banquet before 2,500 people. He knocked on doors with us and no matter where he was in the country, he would fly back to Memphis for important receptions."

The $5,000 cash contribution rescued the hard-pressed Ford campaign which "ran out of money" three weeks before the general election, the congressman-elect said. "There were no funds, not even a nickel.

"We couldn't go any further. We needed everything and couldn't do anything. Then Hayes came through with the cash that got us rolling again.

Congressman Harold Ford with his wife, Dorothy, and two children, Harold, 4, and Jake, 2.

"On election day, Hayes was up at 6 o'clock with a bullhorn, riding around in a sound truck to get the voters out. Whatever you say, please mention this man."

"It seems like all the black people in Memphis are happy," said Ford, following his victory in Tennessee's 8th Congressional District. "They're calling it a 'New Memphis.'

"Victory signs are hung from the windows of all the black businesses. I went to seven churches on the Sunday after the elections. Although I would try to come in as quietly as possible, people would spot me and stand up clapping, going wild.

"Sometimes, they would interrupt the minister in the middle of the sermon, and he would have to stop preaching. It was like that all over the city."

Ford's biggest political obstacle in beating Kuykendall was "slicing into the white Memphis vote," a necessity since blacks represent only 47 per cent of the approximately 623,000 population. This he did, capturing an estimated 15 per cent of the white vote from Kuykendall, while holding 95 per cent of the black vote.

The hard-driving, aggressive Ford is supremely confident. "I never doubted we would win," said Ford. He walked out of a meeting this past summer with Governor Jimmy Carter, of Georgia, the chairman of the Democratic Party's campaign committee because Carter and his staff insisted he couldn't win the campaign with the tactics he was using. "I told them I didn't even want to meet with them anymore," said Ford.

One of Carter's white staff members, Hamilton Carter, recalled that they felt Ford was "relying too much on getting out the black vote, and not enough on winning white votes."

"Isaac Hayes stuck with us when the going got rough"

"How would they know," said Ford, "after spending an hour and one half in Memphis."

Ford comes from a political family that includes his brother, John, 32, a newly-elected state senator who now serves on the Memphis city council and another brother, Emmitt, who successfully ran for Harold's old statehouse seat. For 8 years, he managed the family funeral home, N. J. Ford. "I began managing the funeral home while I was in college at Tennessee State College," said Ford, who also holds a graduate degree in business administration from same school. We built the business up from 75 services a year to the present 800, the largest black funeral home in Memphis."

Ford's political baptism came as an undergraduate when he worked in his father Newton Ford's unsuccessful campaign for the state legislature. At 25, he became the first freshman state representative in Tennessee history to become the majority whip.

As a legislator he chaired a committee investigating utility companies and "took on the largest corporations in the state." Ford, as a result, sponsored legislation which reformed the utility companies' arbitrary method of assessing late charges and insured that black neighborhoods would not be overcharged for utilities.

Ford's wife Dorothy has been pregnant for each of his political campaigns. "We laugh and call it a good luck sign," he said. They have two children, Harold, 4, and Jake, 2.

The family suffered some "hard times" during Ford's year-long campaign. "Two months ago I borrowed every penny I had in the bank," Ford said. "I hadn't worked since October of 1973.

"There were many, many days we didn't have much food to eat, and sometimes I would have to borrow $5 from a neighbor to pay for gasoline. I sold my government bonds and borrowed all I could on my insurance."

During the campaign, Ford labeled Kuykendall "the worst Congressman to ever serve in the U.S. Congress." He called the two debates with Kuykendall "the greatest assets of the campaign."

"They never dreamed I would show up at the Henry Loeb Dutch Treat Lunch," said Ford of the first debate. "Henry Loeb doesn't like Democrats let alone blacks. He's supposed to control the city.

"No one had ever spoken there except Kuykendall, although all of the candidates are invited. I showed up and debated him. Kuykendall was all smiles before the debate, but after that you could look in his face and see something was wrong.

"He never could get used to the idea of a black man debating him. I talked about his record and used quotes from his articles and from the Congressional Record."

Ford's $44,000 meager budget in the general election did not allow money for television or bill board advertising. Instead, the campaign concentrated on person-to-person contract, "placing a leaflet in every hand and a sticker on every car."

HAROLD E. FORD
Congressman at 29

Five weeks away from the November 5th election, Ford's campaign was almost struck a mortal blow. "My brother John told a white lady on television to 'go to hell.'

"There were newspaper headlines for 5 days. I finally got my brother to apologize, but they put his apology on the back page."

17th Black Caucus member hopes to help check inflation

Kuykendall, who employs no professional blacks in his Capitol Hill offices, inflamed the incident by printing racist leaflets. Other leaflets warned that if elected, Ford, with the help of his political brothers, would become "political boss of the city."

On election night, Ford discovered, he said, 5 ballot boxes that had not been counted in the basement of the Shelby County Election Commission.

Ford went to the Commission to ask its director, Jack Perry, why the television commentators were projecting a Kuykendall victory by several thousand votes when Ford's tabulations placed him ahead.

"A black woman whispered in my ear and said, 'Harold, if you want some more votes, you look in those containers over there,'" Ford said. "I called Jack Perry a liar and told him to come over here.

"We went over to the containers and one by one we started pulling out the ballot boxes," he said. When the votes from the containers were tabulated, the new total, Ford said, showed him winning by 67,715 to 67,141.

Ford intends to work closely with the "new representatives elected in the House. I'm interested in seeing what can be done to control the huge profits of big business and control inflation.

Ford, who will be the 17th member of the Congressional Black Caucus, is interested in a seat on the House Ways and Means Committee, a hard-to-obtain assignment for a freshman legislator. Nothing seems unobtainable, however, to the irrepressible Tennesseean.

When told during the campaign that he should expect to lose in 1974, but would be in an excellent position for the 1976 elections, he scoffed, saying, "I'm going to win this year. In 1976 I might be running for Senator."

Forget partridges.
Forget pear trees.

Give Old Grand-Dad

Head of the Bourbon Family.

Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskeys. 86 proof and 100 proof Bottled in Bond. Old Grand-Dad Distillery Co., Frankfort, Ky. 40601.