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Ad Seen as Playing to Racial Fears

By [ROBIN TONER](#)

KNOXVILLE, [Tenn.](#), Oct. 25 — The Tennessee Senate race, one of the most competitive and potentially decisive battles of the midterm election, became even more unpredictable this week after a furor over [a Republican](#) television commercial that stood out even in a year of negative advertising.

The commercial, financed by the [Republican National Committee](#), was aimed at Representative Harold E. Ford Jr., the black Democrat from Memphis whose campaign for the Senate this year has kept the Republicans on the defensive in a state where they never expected to have trouble holding the seat.

The spot, which was first broadcast last week and was disappearing from the air on Wednesday, featured a series of people in mock man-on-the-street interviews talking sarcastically about Mr. Ford and his stands on issues including the estate tax and national security.

The controversy erupted over one of the people featured: an attractive white woman, bare-shouldered, who declares that she met Mr. Ford at a “Playboy party,” and closes the commercial by looking into the camera and saying, with a wink, “Harold, call me.”

A spokeswoman for Mr. Ford, who is single, said he was one of 3,000 people who attended a Playboy party at the Super Bowl last year in Jacksonville, Fla.

Critics asserted that the advertisement was a clear effort to play to racial stereotypes and fears, essentially, playing the race card in an election where Mr. Ford is trying to break a century of history and become the first black senator from the South since Reconstruction.

Hilary Shelton, director of the [N.A.A.C.P.](#)'s Washington bureau, said the spot took aim at the sensitivities many Americans still have about interracial dating.

John Geer, a professor at [Vanderbilt University](#) and a specialist in political advertising, said that it “is playing to a lot of fears” and “frankly makes the Willie Horton ad look like child’s play.”

Professor Geer was alluding to the case of a convicted black murderer used in Republican commercials

contending that the 1988 Democratic nominee for president, Michael S. Dukakis, was soft on crime.

Mr. Ford has been campaigning as an independent, new generation Democrat dedicated to changing the atmosphere in Washington; to putting more attention on the needs of the middle class and on bread and butter issues like health care and to bringing a fresh approach to the war in Iraq. He has strongly resisted Republican efforts to pigeonhole him as a liberal.

Bob Corker, the Republican candidate, offers himself as committed to Tennessee values, with a track record in business and public life of solving problems, in contrast to what he asserts is Mr. Ford's "total life experience" in Washington politics and serving the Ford political dynasty in Memphis.

The debate over the spot was more impassioned on the campaign trail Wednesday, when Mr. Ford and his allies took their bus across a wide swath of eastern and middle Tennessee, campaigning in small towns and courthouse squares.

Representative Lincoln Davis, the conservative Democrat from the heavily rural district in the state's midsection, introduced Mr. Ford at a rally in Crossville with a fierce attack on the advertisement.

"I'm ashamed at what I see Republicans putting out today," Mr. Davis declared, as an overwhelmingly white audience of more than a hundred cheered on the small town square. "You tell [Karl Rove](#) that we don't want this stuff on TV in Tennessee. We don't want our kids seeing that."

Mr. Ford told his audience here, and elsewhere in recent days, that the attacks were simply a sign of desperation, a sign the Republicans have nothing else to say. He added, "You know your opponent is scared when his main opposition against you is, 'My opponent likes girls.'" The audience erupted in laughter.

"You know it's a big problem if at the end of a race, if the best they can come up with is this sleaze they're putting up," he said.

In an interview, Mr. Ford demurred when asked if he thought the advertisement was injecting race into the campaign. "You need to ask those people over there what they tried to do with that ad," he said. "It's tasteless, but I've come to expect that from my opponent."

Mr. Corker, a former mayor of Chattanooga, quickly tried to distance his campaign from the advertisement. The Corker campaign had been claiming momentum in recent days, citing a flurry of recent polls indicating the Republican had regained a slight lead after steadying its message and its campaign organization.

A spokesman for the Corker campaign, Todd Womack, said the campaign was pleased that the spot had been taken off the air. "It was tacky, over the top," Mr. Womack said. "Tennesseans deserve better."

The spot was paid for by the Republican National Committee but was produced by an independent expenditure group that is supposed to have an arm's length relationship with the actual campaigns. As a result, Ken Mehlman, chairman of the Republican National Committee, said he did not see the spot before it was broadcast and did not have the power to order it removed.

Even so, Mr. Mehlman said he did not see a racial subtext to the ad. "I will tell you that when I looked at the ad, that was not my reaction," he said. "I hear and respect people who had a different reaction, and I hope they respect me, too."

Moreover, Republican spokesmen said they did not believe the advertisement had been taken off the air in response to the controversy, but had simply, in the words of one, "run its course."

The furor puts Mr. Mehlman in a difficult position. He has spent considerable time as the national chairman preaching the inclusiveness of the Republican Party and its openness to black candidates and black voters. He said in an interview Wednesday night that he did not believe that this would damage his Republican outreach efforts.

Officials with the Republican independent expenditure committee, who include longtime allies of the Bush political circle, did not respond to requests for comment.

The Senate race here is one of three, along with Missouri and Virginia, that are pivotal to control of the Senate, and all three are considered neck-and-neck. Mr. Ford and Mr. Corker are seeking the seat left vacant by the Senate majority leader, [Bill Frist](#), who is retiring.

A Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg poll published this week showed Mr. Corker leading Mr. Ford, 49 percent to 44 percent. The poll was conducted last Friday through Monday, and had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus four percentage points.

If he wins, the campaign Mr. Ford has been running here will be considered a roadmap for [Democrats](#) in conservative and rural areas. Mr. Davis invariably introduced him this week as a man who would never "take away your Bible or your gun," but would raise the minimum wage so people could afford them.

With just 13 days to go, Mr. Ford is generating an intense response on the campaign trail as elderly white women reach for his hand and tell him they are praying for him, and he is swamped by autograph hunters and picture takers.

At one point, Mr. Davis's eyes welled up as Mr. Ford worked his way through a crowd — largely friendly, although not entirely so — at a heavily Republican barbecue. "You're watching history," Mr. Davis said.

Mr. Ford said later that he was not thinking history. "I'm trying to win a race," he said, before he

jumped into his bus, whose destination sign read, “success express.”

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