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Ex-Legislator's Corruption Case Goes to Trial in Tennessee

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By Theo Emery
April 10, 2007

MEMPHIS, April 9 — E-Cycle Management could have been any Tennessee company, in this case a business with an environmentally sound mission of recycling used computers. The company gave out campaign contributions in cash, and its lobbyists knew which politicians to talk to at the Legislature to get favorable legislation passed.

But the enterprise that was so generous with its contributions proved not to be a business at all. Rather, it was a shell company set up by the F.B.I. to ensnare unscrupulous Tennessee politicians. And now one of the best-known politicians in Memphis, John Ford, a longtime state senator, faces trial as a result of that sting.

Mr. Ford, the brother of a former United States representative, Harold E. Ford Sr., and the uncle of Harold E. Ford Jr., a Democratic congressman who lost a race for Senate last fall, is on trial this week in Federal District Court on charges of bribery, extortion and threatening a government witness. Jury selection began Monday and was to continue Tuesday.



John Ford, longtime state senator from Tennessee.
John Russell/Associated Press

The arrest of Mr. Ford in 2005 in the F.B.I. operation known as Tennessee Waltz, along with three other lawmakers and a former legislator, shocked Tennessee's political establishment, prompting an ethics and lobbying reform measure.

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Mr. Ford, 64, who has resigned his Senate position after eight terms, has declared his innocence. Federal prosecutors say they will use as evidence videotapes showing Mr. Ford taking and counting thousands of dollars in cash. He is accused of taking \$55,000.

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It is not Mr. Ford's only brush with the legal system. He was once charged with shooting out of his car at a truck driver, but was acquitted. More recently, he was charged with wire fraud and concealment of material facts related to what federal prosecutors say was \$800,000 in unreported pay he received from state Medicaid contractors. He has pleaded not guilty.

He is also not the first member of the family to be accused of wrongdoing. His brother Harold Ford Sr. was acquitted of bank fraud in 1993 after 22 years in Congress. Emmitt Ford, another brother who served in the State Legislature, was convicted of insurance fraud and resigned in 1981.



John Ford's brother, former Representative Harold E. Ford Sr., left, and nephew Harold E. Ford Jr., right, a congressman who ran for United States Senate last fall.

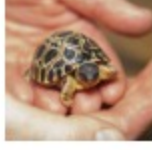
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Still another brother, Edmund Ford, a Memphis City Council member, was indicted on federal bribery charges last December and is caught up along with other city officials in an unrelated controversy over electricity bills.

Tennessee Waltz became public in the spring of 2005, when federal agents arrested Mr. Ford and Senator Kathryn Bowers, a fellow Democrat from Memphis, former Senator Roscoe Dixon, Senator Ward Crutchfield, a Democrat from Chattanooga, and Representative Chris Newton, a Republican from Cleveland. Two other people described as “bagmen” were also arrested.

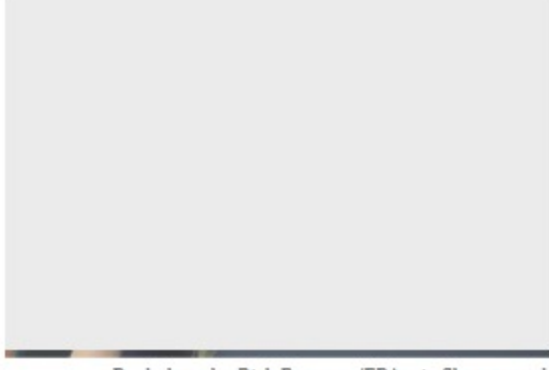
In the aftermath of the sting, the Tennessee General Assembly pushed through a comprehensive ethics reform package that Gov. Phil Bredesen, a Democrat, signed into law.

The operation also cast a shadow on Harold E. Ford Jr.'s efforts to claim the United States Senate seat vacated by Bill Frist, the former majority leader.

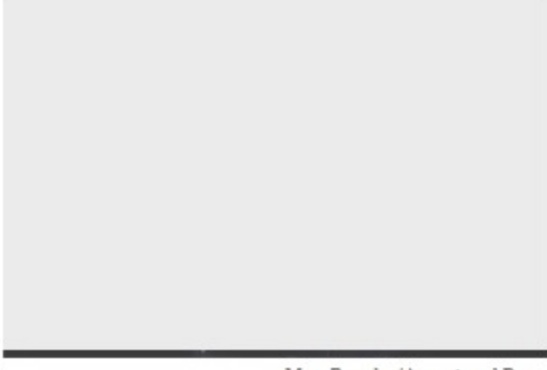
Though the younger Mr. Ford carefully distanced himself from his relatives, saying that he loved them but that he did not take after them, some suggested in the election's aftermath that his family's shadow probably affected the outcome.

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