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**Sent:** Wednesday, March 3, 2010 5:43 PM  
**To:** H

Possibility of Senate Run, Nurtured and Abandoned By MICHAEL BARBARO March 03, 2010 New York Times

A few weeks ago, Harold E. Ford Jr. had a telephone conversation with his friend Doug Band, the powerful counselor to former President Bill Clinton.

Mr. Ford, the former Tennessee congressman who now works on Wall Street, wanted to discuss a potential challenge to Senator Kirsten E. Gillibrand in New York's Democratic primary, a possibility he had flirted with for weeks.

But Mr. Band was not encouraging. He told Mr. Ford that with Democrats reeling from political setbacks across the country, it would be bad for the party and his career if he entered the race. "It's not the right thing to do," he said, according to a person with direct knowledge of the conversation.

A Ford spokesman confirmed the call but denied that Mr. Ford had been discouraged from running or that he had been told that doing so would hurt the party. The spokesman said Mr. Band told him the White House had pressured Mr. Clinton into supporting Ms. Gillibrand.

Mr. Ford's decision not to run for the Senate, which he disclosed on Tuesday, came after he reached out to dozens of donors, advocates and political leaders. In private conversations, the same worries emerged: that a race against Ms. Gillibrand would be a brutal fight, dominated by endless debates about when he began paying taxes as a New York resident and the sincerity of his support for gay marriage and abortion rights.

A campaign that he had hoped would focus on tax cuts and job growth would instead, he feared, become mired in discussions of "who got there first, and who meant it the most," on social issues, he told an associate. That might allow a Republican opponent to swoop in and take the seat from the bloodied Democratic nominee.

What seemed to weigh on him, interviews with dozens of people who have met and spoken to his advisers revealed, was not his status as a carpetbagger who had moved to New York from Tennessee, but rather the reality that there were few easy constituencies for him to grab on to, outside of Wall Street, where he has worked since moving here in 2006. Many spoke on the condition of anonymity because they did not want to be seen as disclosing private conversations.

As he hopscothed from city to city, charming crowds with bits of his Southern biography, signs of trouble for Mr. Ford emerged. His voting record in Congress put him on the right fringes of state Democrats, and his \$2 million-a-year job at Merrill Lynch made it hard to run as a Scott Brown-style populist.

What seemed like an improbable, even impossible campaign had its roots in conversations, many dating back a year, among Mr. Ford, 39, and a coterie of powerful friends from New York City, Washington and Los Angeles.

Over dinner last July at the Post House, a clubby steakhouse on the Upper East Side, Richard Plepler, a co-president of HBO, urged Mr. Ford to restart his political career in New York. "I think you should give this serious thought," he said, of the Senate race. Mr. Ford replied that he would.

After the dinner, Mr. Plepler sent an e-mail message to Douglas E. Schoen, a top Democratic pollster, to bounce the idea off him. Mr. Schoen was intrigued, and as he studied public polls, became convinced that Mr. Ford's best shot at reaching the Senate was to wage a campaign against Ms. Gillibrand.

Over the next few months, Mr. Ford sounded out many of New York's wealthiest and most politically connected executives, frequently over breakfast at the Regency Hotel on Park Avenue: Robert Wolf, the head of the United States investment banking division at UBS; Ronald Perelman, the billionaire chairman of Revlon; and Steven Rattner, the founder of Quadrangle, the private equity firm, all of whom are big Democratic donors.

Mr. Rattner told Mr. Ford, who is also a political analyst on NBC, that money would not be a problem. "You can raise the money," he told him in December.

Yet several big-name donors warned him that Ms. Gillibrand, a relentless campaigner, had beaten him to the punch. "She has already locked a lot of Wall Street up" was the message that Marc Lasry, a billionaire hedge fund manager, conveyed to Mr. Ford in a telephone conversation.

As Mr. Ford traveled outside New York City, especially upstate, he found political support for Ms. Gillibrand to be shallow, and the hunger for change palpable. The mayor of Syracuse, Stephanie Miner, told him that residents there were "scared and desperate" about the economy, and she told Mr. Ford that Ms. Gillibrand was a rare presence in her city.

But Ms. Gillibrand's strategy of portraying Mr. Ford as a showboating out-of-towner was starting to stick. In late January, the head of the Brooklyn Democratic Party, Assemblyman Vito J. Lopez, held a luncheon for Mr. Ford, and invited local lawmakers. During a two-hour question-and-answer session, Marty Markowitz, the borough president, pointed to several up-and-coming state senators around the room and observed that all of them had greater experience in New York politics than Mr. Ford.

"With all due respect," he asked Mr. Ford, "why do you think you have what it takes to be New York's senator?"

Even lawmakers who seemed open to a Ford candidacy warned him that peeling away support from Ms. Gillibrand would be harder than it seemed.

Rubén Díaz Jr., the Bronx borough president, told Mr. Ford between bites of an omelet at a diner near his office, "It's difficult to make a strong case against her here." Ms. Gillibrand, he explained, had just secured \$4 million worth of federal stimulus money to train his constituents for green jobs. Mr. Ford knew that some liberals would attack his relatively conservative voting record but, those he spoke with said, he was taken aback by the depth of the anger he encountered from advocates for abortion rights and gay marriage.

After reporters found examples of Mr. Ford calling himself pro-life during his time in Congress, Mr. Ford vehemently pushed back, saying he had always supported a woman's right to choose. He assumed that would put the matter to rest. It did not. "He was dumbfounded that it kept tripping him up," a friend said.

One of Mr. Ford's top advisers, Bradley Tusk, the campaign manager for Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's 2009 re-election, arranged a meeting for Mr. Ford with a close Bloomberg ally, Kelli Conlin, the head of Nara-Pro Choice of New York. Mr. Ford expected a polite conversation that would help neutralize a foe. Ms. Conlin, however, started the meeting by quizzing Mr. Ford on his voting record and public statements.

Did he realize, she asked, that he had backed legislation that would outlaw late-term abortions even when a woman's health is in danger?

Far from conciliatory, Mr. Ford wanted to know why Nara allowed Ms. Gillibrand to vote for a health care bill that cut off financing for abortions. "You gave her a pass," he said. Before leaving, Mr. Ford told Ms. Conlin that if he chose to run he hoped to return to ask for the group's support. Ms. Conlin responded: "We can never support you if you take these positions." Mr. Ford "looked shocked," a person in the room said.

His meeting with gay rights advocates on Feb. 24 was rockier still. When he walked into the headquarters of the Stonewall Democrats in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, he was greeted by signs that read "Liar!" and "Go home snake oil Harry," a reference to his recent support for gay marriage after having twice voted to outlaw it in Congress.

A few days later, the results of a poll that Mr. Ford had paid for out of his own pocket began to trickle in, giving his advisers pause. His negative ratings had increased slightly. A liberal primary electorate seemed wary about portions of his record. Ms. Gillibrand remained vulnerable, the data showed, but Mr. Ford's chance seemed to be 50-50. "It was not a slam dunk, at all," said a person who spoke with him and was briefed on the data.

Mr. Tusk had told associates that to win, Mr. Ford needed 80 percent of the state's black vote, a tall order, but not inconceivable for an African-American in a Democratic primary. But by the end of the week, Gov. David A. Paterson and Representative Charles B. Rangel had become embroiled in ethics scandals. New York's black political elite was in seeming disarray, just when he needed them to be organized and unified.

By Sunday, he had made up his mind not to run. He told his wife, Emily, and his father, former Representative Harold Ford Sr. He began to call friends the next evening, leaving many of them brief messages.

"I'm not going to run this time," he said in one message. "Thank you for your support."