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GOP's Ford photo likely not altered, but use still questioned

By BETH RUCKER Associated Press Writer

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - The use of a black-and-white, grainy or darkened photograph of an opponent is nothing new in political advertising.

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But when an opponent is black, darkened photos often raise the suspicion that the candidate or group using them may be trying to make an issue of the opponent's race.

"It's no surprise that candidates want to find pictures of the opposition that makes them look bad," said Vanderbilt University political science professor John Geer, who studies negative advertising. "When you deal now with an African-American candidate, it raises an additional problem. No one wants to be accused of being a racist, so

today people use race implicitly."

Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Harold Ford Jr. recently raised such an issue in response to a fundraising letter from the Tennessee Republican Party that included what he said was a darkened image of him. He also accused the Republican National Committee of using a "dark, shadowy figure" to represent him in a negative advertisement about national security issues.

The campaign of Ford's Republican opponent, Bob Corker, has denied that the campaign had any input on the letter.

Voters, candidates and pundits who view such advertisements and mailers are going to have different opinions about the motivations behind altered or darkened photographs.

But simply by making accusations that Republicans are using darkened photos to represent him, Ford is forcing the implicit handling of race out into the open, Geer said.

"If he raises that, it makes voters more sensitive to it," he said. "He's letting the Republicans know he's watching."

The Ford campaign did not immediately comment for this story.

The state GOP Party provided to The Associated Press a copy of the printing proof sheets of the letter that Ford questioned.

The photo used for the letter shows Ford speaking at a nursing staff meeting at Memphis' Baptist Hospital in July 2004. It appears in color on Ford's congressional Web site.

Chris Devaney, executive director of the state Republican Party said the photo was not intentionally darkened. He said photos are often used on letters to grab people's attention and the use of a black-and-white photo is a cost-saving measure. The party also provided a copy of an envelope with a black-and-white photo of President Bush.

"It was not an unflattering picture of U.S. Rep. Ford. It was not intentionally altered at all," Devaney said. "The fact that Harold Ford Jr. is even bringing it up is reckless, baseless and irresponsible."

Mark Sincevich, executive director of the Digital Photography Institute in Bethesda, Md., viewed electronic copies of both the original photo and the Republican Party letter, and said the image on the letter appeared to be slightly darkened through adjustment to the contrast between black and white.

But the alteration likely occurred during the printing process to make for a better quality photo, he said.

"If someone wanted to intentionally darken any photograph, you'd see a lot more darkening of the entire image," Sincevich said.

Photos taken directly from a Web site often need a bit of tweaking to make them suitable for print because of their low-resolution quality, he said. That can be done by altering the contrast or brightness and emphasizing some colors more than others in printing.

Digital photos are created using three different colors - red, green and blue - which are layered to create a full variety of color. But because printing is done only in the colors cyan, magenta, yellow and black, the basic colors of the photo must be converted, which is another process that may affect the appearance of the photo, Sincevich said.

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, said in an editorial posted on the center's Web site http://www.ethicsdaily.com the use of a black-and-white picture - darkened or not - by the Republican party is wrong.

"The only plausible reason is to use such a picture is to play the race card - in an effort to frighten and fire up white voters in a key senatorial race," he wrote. "Whether they acted with malice or moral callousness doesn't really matter. The end result is race as a wedge issue."

Geer said that Ford also must be careful when suggesting his opposition may be making an issue of his race.

"U.S. Rep. Ford has to be careful, as well, because reading into people's intentions is generally impossible," he said.

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