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THE BLACK BOSTON 411... 24-7



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Wednesday, October 27, 2010

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By Richard Weir | Wednesday, October 27, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Local Politics



MORE HARM THAN GOOD? Chuck Turner took the stand in his own defense yesterday, denying he accepted a bribe from FBI informant Ronald Wilburn. Legal experts agree he may have been better off not testifying.
Photo by Mark Garfinkel

Chuck Turner's decision yesterday to take the witness stand in his corruption trial — only to suffer complete memory loss regarding an alleged bribe in 2007 — was a bold but risky gambit that could sabotage his case, legal experts told the Herald.

"In my opinion, it was a damaging move," said defense attorney and former prosecutor William Kickham. "There is nothing to explain why he would not

remember such a memorable event.”

Longtime defense lawyer William Gens said Turner would have been more shrewd simply attacking the prosecution’s case, rather than asking jurors to find him believable.

“Once you put your client on the stand, you take the presumption of innocence and the burden of proof and throw it out the window because the jury is now thinking ... who has the better case,” he said. “If I was his counsel, I would not be too pleased.”

Turner was the first witness called in his defense after the prosecution rested. He is on trial in federal court for allegedly taking a \$1,000 bribe from Ronald Wilburn in exchange for helping the Roxbury nightclub operator try to score a coveted liquor license for a planned superclub.

Wilburn, a reluctant government witness paid nearly \$30,000 by FBI agents for his role in the same sting that brought down state Sen. Dianne Wilkerson, testified last week how he secretly videotaped slipping Turner the wad of cash in the councilor’s district office Aug. 3, 2007.

Asked by one of his lawyers, John Pavlos, if he took the bribe, Turner said, “Not at all,” adding, “Why would somebody give me that kind of money? It would make such a strange occurrence. It would create a memory.”

Under a withering cross-examination by Assistant U.S. Attorney John McNeil, an unflappable Turner repeated over and over that he had no memory of sitting down with Wilburn.

“You’ve seen the videotape three times. Are you denying today meeting Mr. Wilburn on Aug. 3, 2007?” McNeil asked.

“I have no memory of meeting with him,” Turner said, prompting McNeil to fire back, “Do you have a special blank for Ron Wilburn?”

“No,” Turner said.

McNeil then grilled Turner about what appears to be the large bills being slipped into his palm.

“But something changed hands, Mr. Turner,” McNeil said.

“It looks like that. I don’t know. I couldn’t see it,” Turner replied. “I don’t remember what happened that day.”

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