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Former Illinois Gov. George Ryan Heading to Prison

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 DAVID SCHAPER



Former Illinois Gov. George Ryan arrives at a federal building in Chicago. Ryan is due to report to a federal correctional center in Oxford, Wis., no later than Wednesday.

Scott Olson/Getty Images

U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens on Tuesday rejected an appeal by former Illinois Gov. George Ryan to remain free on bail while he

appeals his corruption conviction. The 73-year-old Republican is due to report to a federal correctional center in Oxford, Wis., no later than Wednesday.

A federal jury convicted Ryan in April 2006 on fraud and racketeering charges. Federal prosecutors had alleged that under Ryan, the state of Illinois was basically for sale. They accused Ryan of presiding over state government offices that were thoroughly corrupt for at least a decade.

Ryan steered lucrative state government contracts and leases to friends and government insiders who gave him and his family vacations, gifts and cash.

"It was cronyism, where contracts were awarded to people. People were given inside information, they were acting upon it. And at times, George Ryan stepped into the process to make sure that those interests were taken care of," said Chicago U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald at the time of Ryan's indictment. Fitzgerald later called Ryan's conviction "a low-water mark for public service, to have a governor, a secretary of state, to abuse his office in that fashion."

Probe Sparked by Tragedy

The investigation into corruption in Ryan's office began with a horrendous tragedy, while Ryan was still Illinois' secretary of state. On Election Day 1994, a piece of a tail-light assembly fell off a semi-trailer on a Milwaukee expressway and bounced beneath a minivan, rupturing its gas tank and exploding the van into flames. Six children from the Willis family of Chicago, en route to a little getaway, were killed; their parents were severely burned.

Other motorists told police they tried to warn the driver of the truck that the piece was dangling dangerously, but he didn't understand English. Federal law requires truckers to know and read English to get a license,

and investigators were alarmed that this driver — who was from Chicago — didn't. Wisconsin authorities notified the Illinois secretary of state's office, which licenses drivers and was then headed by the freshly re-elected Ryan.

An internal investigation found the driver may have paid a bribe to get his license. Ryan's response was to squash the probe and fire the investigators. Four years later, with Ryan campaigning for governor, federal prosecutors picked up the case. They began indicting employees in Ryan's office for selling licenses for bribes and then funneling the cash into Ryan's campaign fund. Ryan repeatedly denied he knew anything about the corruption. The U.S. attorney at the time, Scott Lassar, said in October 1998 that Ryan was not a target of the investigation at the time. So Illinois voters elected Ryan governor by a narrow margin over a squeaky-clean Democrat, then-Rep. Glenn Poshard.

The win capped a political career that began in the early 1970s, when Ryan, a pharmacist from Kankakee, Ill., won a seat on the Kankakee County Board. He went on to serve in the Illinois General Assembly, including one term as House speaker, and as the state's lieutenant governor, before being elected secretary of state in 1990.

An Old-Fashioned Politician

Though Ryan began his one term as governor triumphantly, with Ray Charles playing at his inaugural bash, he remained under a cloud of suspicion. The federal probe into Ryan's former office widened, with investigators finding a wide-ranging scheme to use employees of the secretary of state's office to raise cash for his campaign coffers. The probe culminated with Ryan's indictment in 2004. In all, 79 people have been indicted in what the U. S. attorney's office dubbed "Operation Safe Roads." At least 75 people have been convicted, with no acquittals.

Still, many observers say Ryan used his time in the governor's office effectively. Known as an old-style, back-slapping politician, Ryan forged effective relationships with both sides of the aisle. He initiated a long-overdue investment in the state's aging infrastructure, repairing and replacing crumbling roads and bridges, investing in mass transit, and building new state buildings and schools.

His wheeling and dealing in smoke-filled backrooms led to legislative deals pumping new funding into the state's schools. Ryan also worked with Chicago's Democratic mayor, Richard M. Daley, to pass a ban on assault weapons — to the chagrin of many of his friends in his own party.

"Why would anybody take any great satisfaction that this man is going to prison?" longtime GOP state Rep. Bill Black told the Associated Press. "He had decades of, I think, noble service."

An Ironic, Noble Legacy

To many, there is even a certain irony to seeing George Ryan in prison, because of his most notable work as governor: overhauling Illinois' problem-plagued criminal justice system.

Ryan won international acclaim in 1999 for declaring a moratorium on executions in Illinois after seeing more than a dozen death-row inmates have their convictions overturned. He appointed a blue-ribbon commission to study ways to revamp the state's capital punishment system. But with state lawmakers failing to enact some of those proposals, Ryan wasn't convinced that the problems were completely fixed. In January 2003, he stunned the world by clearing out Illinois' death row, commuting the death sentences of more than 160 inmates to life sentences.

"He recognized the entire criminal justice system is in serious need of reform and he's made a most significant contribution to that effort not only in Illinois, but nationally," Rob Warden, director of the Center for Wrongful

Convictions at Northwestern University, said at the time of Ryan's sentencing. "He's done a great deal of good in life, and for it to end like this is tragic. It's beyond tragic."

Warden says Ryan will leave a noble legacy of reforming what he believes was a corrupt system that trampled the rights of some of the most vulnerable criminal defendants; many had served years in prison or on death row for crimes they did not commit.

"What George Ryan did in Illinois is going to have a tremendous impact on criminal justice reform throughout the United States in the next couple of decades," Warden says.

Ryan's efforts to reform capital punishment got him nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. To many death penalty opponents, he is a man of honor and integrity. To the federal correctional system, he is a new inmate about to begin a 6 and 1/2 year sentence Wednesday at the federal prison in Oxford.

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