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Durbin To Ask Bush To Commute Ryan Sentence

AP

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CHICAGO — Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin asked President Bush on Monday to consider commuting former Gov. George Ryan's 6 1/2-year racketeering sentence to time served, standing firm on his appeal for mercy despite an outpouring of criticism.

"This action would not pardon him of his crimes or remove the record of his conviction, but it would allow him to return to his wife and family for their remaining years," the Democratic senator said in a letter asking Bush to free the former Republican governor from prison.

Durbin told reporters he was moved by the plight of Ryan's wife, Lura Lynn, who is in ill health and needs her husband by her side.

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"I am asking for mercy for the husband of a woman I admire very much," he said.

Ryan, 74, a one-term governor, was convicted in 2006 of racketeering, fraud and other offenses, and has served one year of his federal prison sentence. It is customary for an outgoing president to issue pardons and commute sentences before leaving office, and Ryan is pinning his hopes for early release on Bush.

Durbin is adding his voice to others who have called for Ryan's freedom, including Gov. Rod Blagojevich. In his letter, Durbin described Ryan's circumstances in dismal terms.

"He has lost his state pension benefits and a commutation will not restore them," Durbin said. "He would emerge from prison facing economic uncertainty at an advanced stage of his life."

Durbin said last week that he was considering such an appeal to Bush, triggering criticism in editorial pages and elsewhere around the state.

Patrick M. Collins, who was chief prosecutor at the Ryan trial, said commuting a sentence should be reserved for extraordinary cases.

"My question is, what is the extraordinary circumstance we have here?" Collins said. "Yes, we have an elderly defendant, but that doesn't distinguish Mr. Ryan from many other people in the federal prison population."

Ryan was convicted of taking part in a coverup of bribes paid in return for truck drivers licenses when he was Illinois secretary of state in the 1990s, using state employees to run his campaigns and steering contracts to lobbyist and cronies.

The investigation began in large part because of a November 1994 expressway tragedy outside Milwaukee in which a heavy mudguard-tailight assembly fell off a truck and ended up under a van driven by the Rev. Scott Willis of Chicago. It ignited the van's gas tank, which exploded and killed six Willis children.

The truck driver took the Fifth Amendment against self-incrimination when asked how he got his license. But his boss testified that he bought licenses wholesale from a woman who admitted donating bribe money to the Citizens for Ryan campaign fund.

The investigation found that such bribery was widespread and applicants were able to get licenses without passing the road safety test.

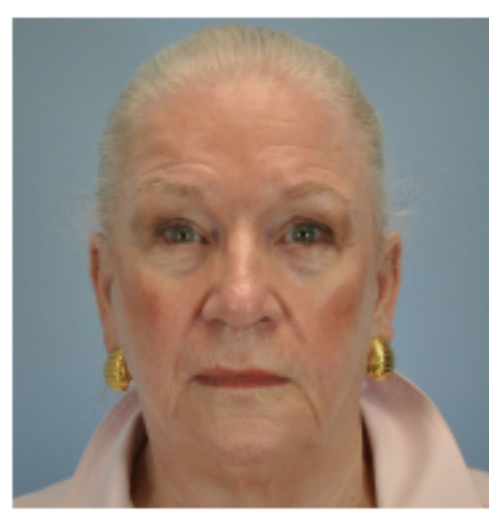
Ryan disbanded the secretary of state's unit that was investigating driver license bribery in the wake of the Willis tragedy after his top aide, Scott Fawell, urged him to get rid of agents who asked questions about political fundraising.

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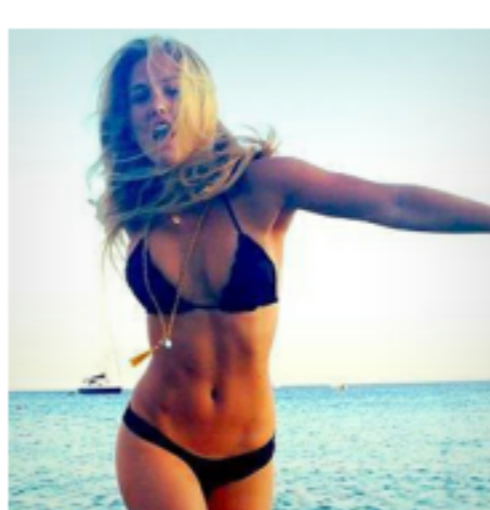
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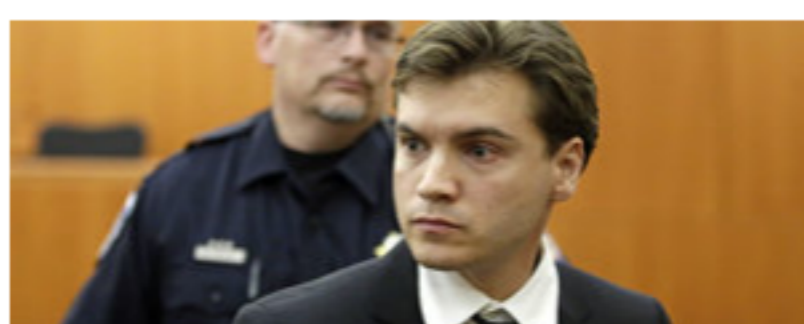
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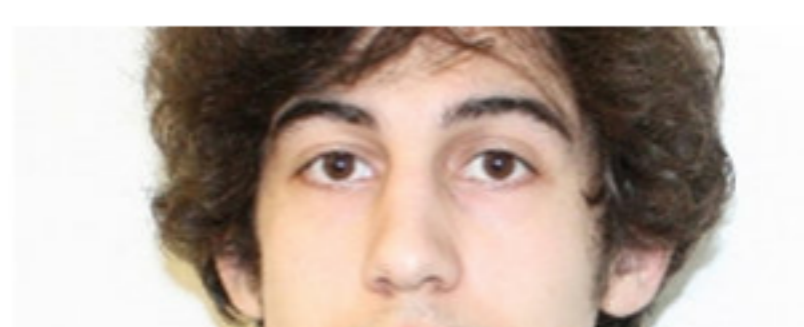
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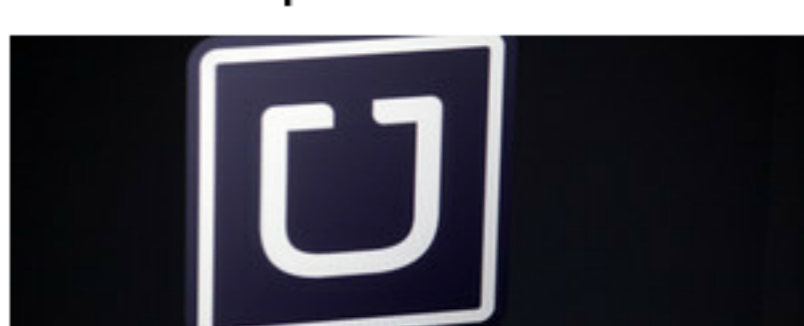
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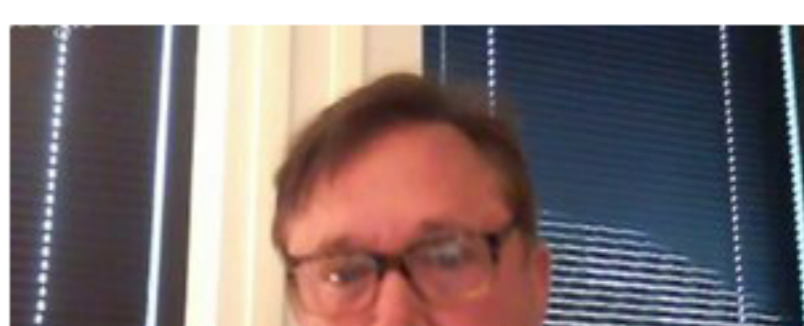
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