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**Governor, say you’re sorry; Ex-investigator speaks out**

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SPRINGFIELD-If Gov. Ryan is sincere about accepting responsibility for corruption in his former office, he should immediately issue a direct, public apology to the Willis family, a star government witness in the licenses-for-bribes scandal said.

Former Secretary of State investigator Russell Sonneveld also hinted that Ryan might have played a role in covering up wrongdoing with his 1995 decision to abolish the inspector general's office at a time when productive corruption investigations had been ordered closed by his inner circle.

"Ask George Ryan what really motivated his disbanding the inspector general's office in June 1995," Sonneveld wrote in an exclusive letter to the Chicago Sun-Times. "Was the real purpose to promote the 'culture of cover-up' and protect George Ryan from embarrassment?"

Sonneveld has provided some of the most potent ammunition for federal prosecutors as they investigate the corruption scandal.

"George Ryan would like you to believe that a 'culture of corruption' existed in the secretary of state's office prior to his term in the office. If this is true, specifically what did he do to root out the corruption?" Sonneveld writes. "The contradiction here is that George Ryan claims he was unaware of wrongdoing, but then says corruption always existed. Which is it, corruption or no corruption?"

Ryan's office Sunday denied that the governor had any involvement in a cover-up but refused to respond directly to what it characterized as "name-calling and conjecture" in Sonneveld's letter.

Sonneveld, a respected investigator whose career began with the Illinois State Police in the late 1970s, discovered that trucker Ricardo Guzman had paid a bribe for his Illinois license before the 1994 crash that killed six children of the Rev. Duane "Scott" Willis and his wife, Janet. The Willis van burst into flame after striking a piece of metal from Guzman's rig on a Wisconsin expressway. Their six children were killed.

But as an investigator in Ryan's inspector general's office, Sonneveld was ordered to sit on that information by the now disgraced head of that unit, Ryan pal Dean Bauer, prosecutors contended.

And in another 1994 case, Sonneveld spoke to the governor about strong suspicions that a clout-wielding, secretary of state office manager stole $ 2,683 from the office till to buy Ryan fund-raising tickets -- a story the Sun-Times broke last January. Ryan never punished the manager, but wound up firing Sonneveld the following year.

Until now, Sonneveld has been reluctant to speak publicly about the scandal. He still declines to do interviews, citing the possibility that he will be a witness in further prosecutions. But his eight-paragraph letter offers a revealing look at the severe skepticism Sonneveld holds toward Ryan's explanations of the scandal and is the second major hit Ryan has taken in the past week.

Last Thursday, the Willis family called on Ryan to resign as governor because of their belief that he knew and failed to act on wrongdoing in the secretary of state's office. The Sun-Times received Sonneveld's letter the day before the Willis pronouncement.

"George Ryan said he is 'responsible' for incidents of wrongdoing that occurred on his watch," " Sonneveld writes. "The horrific accident that killed the six Willis children occurred on his 'watch.' The cover-up into how the driver Ricardo Guzman obtained his license occurred on George Ryan's 'watch.' Now would be a good time for George Ryan to take 'responsibility' for the irresponsible actions that thwarted any investigation. Now would be a good time for George Ryan to be 'responsible' and publicly apologize to the Reverend and Mrs. Willis."

Ryan spokesman Dennis Culloton said the governor was personally "heartsick" over the Willis' plight but stopped short of publicly apologizing to them.

"No one can fathom such a tragedy, and words cannot express his sadness and sorrow," he said.

Culloton also reiterated the administration's longstanding contention that Ryan personally did not know about the scope of wrongdoing in his former office and that he "had nothing whatsoever to do with a cover-up."

"It bears repeating that while the governor has accepted responsibility for what happened on his watch, he had no involvement with the criminals who betrayed the public trust and took bribes," he said.

In his letter, Sonneveld goes on to write that Ryan should take back the negative statements he and his staff made against those who came forward from within the office he once led with allegations of corruption. Sonneveld said Ryan should be offering praise to those same people -- which, like the Willis apology, he has yet to do.

Publicly, Ryan has apologized for the driver's license scandal that has overshadowed his administration and threatens to make him a one-term governor. But his apology was directed broadly toward the people of Illinois, not the family that was hurt the most by scandal in the secretary of state's office.

After being read the investigator's letter, Duane Willis said he was not interested in any personal words of contrition from the governor. "I don't want an apology. I want the truth. That's as simple and straightforward as I can give it to you," Willis said.