**Last meal as Obama shoots messenger**

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Morality tale ... John Kiriakou faces a 30-month jail term. *Photo: AP*

Free valet parking? An open bar - good wines and spirits? Food's free too? Yup, yup and yup. Count me in. Where is it? And so we drop into the lap of luxury - an elegant banquet room atop the charming Hay-Adams Hotel in Washington DC, just across from the White House.

In fact, the evening view looking down on Casa Obama and across to the Washington Monument is spectacular. Difficult to believe it's a protest - but it's hard to believe a lot of what goes down in Washington these days. Except for the price tag - it always costs money.

But as my old man used to say, ''money's no object!'' Our hostess rolls in it. Naomi Pitcairn, a fourth-generation heir to the Pittsburgh Plate Glass fortune, likes to throw it around to make a political point.

When she thought Obama was the answer back in 2008, Pitcairn stumped up more than $28,000 for his Victory Fund. Starting to wonder in 2011 if he was the problem, she dropped $76,000 for two tables at a fund-raiser in San Francisco - so that she and her gang could ambush Obama. Midway through his speech, they rose to their feet, singing a song of protest against the harsh treatment of Bradley Manning, the young soldier accused of the ginormous WikiLeaks leak.

On Thursday at the Hay-Adams, the guest of honour is John Kiriakou, an ex-CIA agent who this weekend says goodbye to his wife and kids and life as he knows it, because next Thursday he reports to a Pennsylvania prison, for a 30-month sentence, because he talked about American torture and named two of his former colleagues to reporters.

The conviction, a plea-deal after the weight of $600,000-plus in legal fees crushed Kiriakou's will to fight, makes him the first serving or former agent in CIA history to be convicted of disclosing classified information to a reporter - which is a travesty, given the reliance by successive administrations on the selective leaking of information.

The charge Kiriakou went down on was for leaking those names, but he tells the crowd of about 100: ''I've believed from the first day that this was never about leaking, but because I talked about torture. If it was just about leaking, the jails of the US would be filled with CIA agents and White House officials.''

The irony is that Obama decided not to go after the authors of a torture program that he put on hold on day two of his presidency. But the man who exposed the existence of so-called enhanced interrogation techniques has been hounded and now is off to the slammer.

 

Pitcairn picks up the $20,000 tab because she concludes that Obama is the problem. ''I'm as mad as hell,'' she snorts. ''And we picked this venue so that we can look down on the barbarians,'' she adds, jabbing an accusing finger at the White House.

Interesting looking crowd - many in orange jumpsuits or black-and-white prison stripes; a few with handcuffs; others blasting on police whistles, as they tuck into fine pasta and salad at tables festooned with the yellow tape used by police to cordon off crime scenes.

There are faces you might know, like Ray McGovern. In his days at the CIA, McGovern briefed presidents, now he protests against them.

At the microphone, McGovern crafts a morality tale. He contrasts the agency's pursuit of Kiriakou, for telling the truth, against a wildly enthusiastic welcome back to headquarters, which he witnessed in 1977, for the former CIA director Richard Helms - after his court conviction for misleading Congress on the role of the US in overthrowing Chile's Allende government.

Now McGovern wonders about today's CIA establishment and how they interpret the biblical verse etched in marble in what was the main CIA entrance lobby - ''And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.''

And there's Morris ''Moe'' Davis - he's the former chief prosecutor at Guantanamo Bay who in 2007 resigned because he objected to using evidence obtained by torture.

Lamenting a shrivelling of liberal thinking in the aftermath of 9/11, Davis worries about the narrow thinking of his students at Howard University in DC. ''They are in their mid-20s, so all they really know about is the torture, warrantless wiretaps and indefinite detention of the post-9/11 world,'' he says. ''It's the new normal - that's why a majority of Americans now approve of torture.''

That's the odd thing about the Obama administration. He huffs and puffs about how unconscionable torture is, but the Greek-American Kiriakou who denounces torture is the only bloke who gets booked; he offers transparency, but an investigation by *The Washington Post* shows that the freedom of information spigot is being turned off; he comes over all progressive, but he presides over twice as many prosecutions over leaks to journalists than those under all his White House predecessors combined.

Contemplating how queer it all has become, John Farmer, who served as senior counsel for the bipartisan 9/11 Commission, writes in the aftermath of Kiriakou's conviction: ''Vital primary evidence of inestimable historic value can be destroyed with little or no consequences. Congress can be misled with little or no consequence. Disclose the existence of programs of debatable legality and dubious morality, however, and you will be placed in great peril.''

A beaming Kiriakou works the room on Thursday evening.

''We'll not slip into the night, because we have something to be proud of,'' he says as Pitcairn presents him with a ''NOT Guilty'' T-shirt. ''If we have to fight the guy in the White House, we will ... the truth will prove us right.

''I'll wear this conviction as a badge of honour. I told my wife, if they think this will shut me

up, then they don't know me.'' Yes, of course there is a song of protest - a rewrite of Anne Feeney's civil rights anthem *Have*

*You Been to Jail for Justice*: ''Do you know John Kiriakou? Well he's a friend of mine. Blew the whistle on the CIA. And now he's doing time. He said no to torture, Said he couldn't cross that line. Do you know John John Kiriakou? Well he's a friend of mine.''

Read more: http://www.theage.com.au/world/last-meal-as-obama-shoots- messenger-20130223-2exyk.html#ixzz2LlN5r4K0

     