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Everyone is Corrupt, I Have Come to Learn

By: Thomas Hedges

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John Kiriakou, the former CIA officer who blew the whistle on Bush's torture program and is now in prison, sent an open letter to Edward Snowden last week warning him not to trust the FBI.

“DO NOT,” Kiriakou wrote, “under any circumstances, cooperate with the FBI. FBI agents will lie, trick, and deceive you. They will twist your words and play on your patriotism to entrap you. They will pretend to be people they are not – supporters, well-wishers, and friends – all the while wearing wires to record your out-of-context statements to use against you. The FBI is the enemy; it's part of the problem, not the solution.”

These are the words of a registered Republican who voted for Gary Johnson, whom the Rosenberg Fund for Children denied a grant, informing him that he wasn't “liberal enough,” Kiriakou says, for the award — and who last year received a birthday card from Jerry Falwell Jr.

Kiriakou is the first CIA veteran to be imprisoned. It was after he blew the whistle on Bush's torture program that the CIA, FBI and Justice Department came down on him, at first charging him with aiding the enemy and later convicting him of disclosing the identities of undercover colleagues at the CIA.

The FBI raided his house in the process. They took his computers. They also took his family photos because, they said, he could have embedded secret messages in them.

“I did not start this thing with the idea that I was going to be a whistle-blower,” Kiriakou told Salon in December, two months before being sent off to a low-security prison in Loretto, Pa., with a 30-month sentence.

I interviewed Kiriakou for about an hour and half at that time, a couple of months before he went to prison, waiting to publish it until he was well into serving his sentence. The idea was to outline the slope of his descent – his journey from the powerful to the powerless.

“In this weird, roundabout way,” he told me then, “the Justice Department, the FBI and the CIA made me the anti-torture guy, which I never set out to be ... But over the years,” despite the initial intentions, “my feelings have grown stronger and stronger” against torture, “that torture is not right under any circumstances.”

Recruited by the CIA while in graduate school, Kiriakou spent most of his life on the side of the establishment, leading raids against top al-Qaida officials in Pakistan as the chief of counterterrorism operations, including the one in which Abu Zubaydah was captured.

He had said in an ABC interview with Brian Ross that al-Qaida members “hate us more than they love life,” that they wanted to kill every American and every Jew because, he said, it’s just who they are.

That was also the interview in which Kiriakou pissed off the power establishment, becoming the whistle-blower he had never set out to be. He was on Ross’ show defending himself against allegations that he, personally, had tortured Zubaydah. But what he didn’t know was that torture as a state policy had never been confirmed in any official capacity, even though everyone in Washington knew about it.

Five years before, in 2002, Kiriakou had never heard of “enhanced interrogation techniques.” He’d just left Greece where he was doing counterterrorism work when the CIA decided to move him to a different office in Pakistan. In the interim, a fellow CIA officer approached Kiriakou and said that they were going to use some of these interrogation techniques on Zubaydah.

“I had never heard of waterboarding,” Kiriakou said. “So [the CIA officer] explained to me that it simulates drowning and that we’re gonna keep him up for nine, 10 days at a time, and we’re gonna put him in a dog cage, and – [Zubaydah] had this fear of bugs – we’re gonna put cockroaches in the cage. I said that wasn’t something I wanted to be involved in.”

Kiriakou was alarmed by the proposal. He consulted a senior agency officer who called it “torture,” Kiriakou said, and then told him ““that this was a slippery slope, that someone would die and there would be a congressional investigation. Do you want that?”” the officer asked. “I said ‘no.’”

The officer would later deny that this conversation took place.

Kiriakou and other officers were told that the CIA rarely used these interrogation techniques. Internally, it was reported that Zubaydah had been waterboarded one time. It wasn't until spring of 2009, five years after leaving the agency, that Kiriakou found out that was a lie. Zubaydah, in fact, had been waterboarded 83 times according to the inspector general's report. They had tortured him before getting legal approval, "in anticipation of getting permission," Kiriakou said.

"It was a coverup," Kiriakou said. "Everyone is corrupt I've come to learn."

The incident, coupled with all the travel, rubbed Kiriakou the wrong way and in 2004 he stepped down from his position.

"I resigned to spend more time with my kids," he said. "I was tired of going off to Baghdad and Kabul and Yemen."

Kiriakou worked as a consultant for the Big Four accounting firm Deloitte in the years following, before moving on to ABC News as a terrorism expert. With his security clearance gone, he fell out of the loop — until he got the phone call from Brian Ross.

"I had been out four, almost four years at that point," Kiriakou said. "I had stopped paying attention to this kind of stuff. I was vaguely aware that Human Rights Watch had reported that prisoners had been waterboarded and Amnesty was talking about it."

It was true that the public knew. But Kiriakou went too far when he detailed the approval process. Bush had been defending the administration by saying that any cases of torture were because of rogue officers.

"I said no, no, no. This had the signature of the president on it," he said. "And not just the president but Condi Rice as national security advisor, John Ashcroft as the attorney general, George Tenet as director of the CIA and about a dozen lawyers from the National Security Council.

"And it wasn't just that one day Tenet signed this paper and then they started torturing people," Kiriakou said. "It was every single time they wanted to torture someone, they had to get the [Director of Central Intelligence] signature."

"And so I confirmed it," he told me, "confirmed that torture was a state policy and when I confirmed it, my whole life changed."

The CIA quickly filed a crimes report with the Justice Department against Kiriakou for leaking top-secret information in the interview with ABC. "I read about it on CNN," he said.

The Justice Department ended up dismissing the charges because the information, it declared, was already public knowledge. Kiriakou was relieved.

“We learned later,” Kiriakou told me, “that every time I gave a speech, every time I went on a TV show, every time I wrote an Op-Ed” – including one that appeared in the L.A. Times in 2008, for which his wife was called in and interrogated (it turns out the “top-secret” information the CIA accused Kiriakou’s wife of giving her husband was made available on Bolivia’s foreign ministry website) – the agency “would file another crimes report against me, even though I was getting this stuff cleared.”

The CIA was never concerned with protecting classified information. Had it been, the agency would have notified Kiriakou each time a crimes report was filed against him for talking about the torture program as a way of preventing him from continuing to do so. Instead it was encouraging him to keep talking until, during one interview or Op-Ed, he slipped up and said something they could use against him. They weren’t targeting classified information. They were targeting him.

In 2009, Kiriakou took the position of senior investigator on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee under John Kerry. His job was to investigate waste, fraud, abuse and illegality and he turned his attention to the 2001 **Dasht-i-Leili massacre**, in which an American-backed warlord had been responsible for the deaths of hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Taliban soldiers when he ordered them to be crammed into metal containers and then loaded onto trucks bound for a prison in Shibarghan, Afghanistan.

A source had told Kiriakou that Americans wearing T-shirts and blue jeans oversaw the box-up of the prisoners.

“I wanted to know,” Kiriakou said, “were these guys CIA officers? If they weren’t, who were they? Were they Defense Department? Were they contractors? Who were these guys? And why didn’t they stop this from happening?”

“I interviewed everybody,” Kiriakou said. “I interviewed Larry Wilkerson, Colin Powell’s chief of staff and Karl Ford, the assistant secretary, Pierre Prosper, the special rapporteur for human rights. I called Colin Powell.”

Six weeks later, Kiriakou got a phone call from John Kerry asking if he was investigating the CIA.

“I said, ‘Yes, I am.’ [He said,] ‘I want you to stop right now.’ I said ‘but we’ve got a story here. This is a serious situation.’ ‘I want you to stop right now,’” Kerry repeated. “So I stopped.”

Perturbed, Kiriakou moved on to another investigation dealing with a violation of the cover agreement between the CIA and State Department. He wrote a letter to the CIA asking why a woman included on the list of newly hired State Department officers was going undercover for the first time when she had been with the CIA for 25 years.

“Some time passed,” Kiriakou said, “and then a colleague comes into my office and he says, ‘You got a letter of response from the agency.’ I said, ‘I haven’t seen any letter.’ He said, ‘They

classified it top-secret' and I wasn't cleared for top-secret. I said, 'What's it say?' It says, 'Go fuck yourself.'"

The harassment continued. In the summer of 2010, Kiriakou was having lunch with a foreign diplomat who proposed hiring him as a spy. The diplomat offered to pay him in cash if he could provide information on U.S. trade strategies.

Kiriakou refused the deal and reported the incident to the Senate Security Office. The FBI advised him to keep in touch with the diplomat and let him know that he would think about the offer. Kiriakou met with the diplomat five or six times, he says, before finding out that he was an FBI agent and had been trying to get incriminating statements from Kiriakou.

"He was trying to get me to say something to trap myself," he said. "I didn't bite."

Eventually, the CIA and FBI gave up, not on Kiriakou but on charging him solely under the Espionage Act. In the two years that followed the incident with the foreign diplomat, the agencies put together a case against Kiriakou that accused him of violating the Intelligence Identities Protection Act, a law that hadn't sent anyone to prison in 27 years.

In January 2012, Kiriakou was charged and then, in April, finally indicted, losing his position on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee along with the pension that came with it. In September, the District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia closed its doors to the public because many of the testimonies, it said, contained classified information.

Kiriakou eventually pleaded guilty to one count of violating the IIPA. In its **criminal complaint**, the Justice Department suggested that Kiriakou had put CIA agents in danger when he disclosed their names to the New York Times, for which he was a source.

"I thought for the whole duration" of the trial, Kiriakou said, "that I was gonna win this thing and then I didn't.

"I had to come up with something for my kids," he said. "I said, 'You know I've been in this fight with the FBI for a year. Well, I lost. And so my punishment is I have to go to Pennsylvania and teach bad guys how to get their high school diplomas.' My 8-year-old started crying. I said, 'You can come visit me any time you want. I'll call every single day.'

"But an 8-year-old needs his father. This is the age where he wants to camp out in the backyard and go fishing."

Kiriakou has published three letters since arriving at the prison in Loretto, including the one to Edward Snowden. The others chronicle life during his first few months there.

Already, he says, a corrections officer (or CO) has tried to pit him against a Muslim prisoner who, Kiriakou was told, is the uncle of the Times Square bomber. The Muslim prisoner was told

separately that Kiriakou had gotten off the phone with Washington recently, with an order to kill him as the relative of a terrorist.

“It turns out that he’s an Iraqi Kurd from Buffalo, NY,” Kiriakou writes. “He was the imam of a mosque there” and was in prison for refusing to testify against his parishioners – the Lackawana 7. “He had nothing to do with terrorism,” he says. “Instead, we’re friendly, we exchange greetings in Arabic and English, and we chat.”

Now, Kiriakou faces regular abuse. He’s been introduced to the “shake-down,” whereby officers “trash all of our worldly possessions ... COs can treat us like subhumans” here, he writes.

“At the beginning I thought it was personal,” Kiriakou said about his fight against the CIA, FBI and Justice Department, that “I had angered someone, that there was some personal vendetta against me. But as time has passed, I’ve come to the conclusion that this is institutional – there’s been so many personnel changes. There’s almost nobody left at the agency who was in a leadership position when I was there ...

“The agency hates two things,” he finally told me. One “is if you resign.” And “the other if you talk to the press.

“I did both. So I wasn’t really one of them.”