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Pay for pardons? CIA Whistleblower Kiriakou on Trump's final flop & Biden CIA

Anya Parampil (AP): Hi, everyone. I'm Anya Parampil, and this is Red Lines. My guest today is CIA whistleblower John Kiriakou, who recently saw a pardon from the Trump administration on charges he violated, the Intelligence Identities Protection Act. Kiriakou is the only individual who ever served time for charges related to the U.S. waterboarding program, but that was for revealing its existence rather than participating in it. John, welcome to Red Lines.

John Kiriakou (JK): Thanks for having me, Anya.

AP: Let's get right into it. The New York Times recently reported that, quote a one time top adviser to the Trump campaign was paid 50,000 dollars to help seek a pardon for John Kiriakou, a former CIA officer convicted of illegally disclosing classified information. And Mr. Kiriakou was separately told that Mr. Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, would help him secure a pardon for two million dollars. Kiriakou rejected the offer, but an associate fearing that Mr. Giuliani was illegally selling pardons alerted the FBI. Giuliani denies these characterizations, of course. But John, is the Times reporting here true?

JK: I hate to say that it is true, yes. All of it's true, and, you know, to his credit, Mike Schmidt, the primary author of that report, interviewed more than 30 people for the article. It wasn't just John who decided to take a cheap shot at Rudy Giuliani. He interviewed a lot of people for that article.

AP: That means there were at least two Trump allies attempting to sell pardons just based on your story alone.

JK: Yeah. They made a differentiation between selling pardons and lobbying for pardons. Clearly, this was pay for play. Where do you even start with this story? You know what? I'll start at the beginning. I have an attorney, who has been helping me try to get a pardon for many years. He didn't really have very good contacts in the Trump administration. I had no contacts in the Trump administration. So we decided to hire a woman by the name of Karen

Giorno who ran the Trump campaign in Florida in 2016. She doesn't like to call herself a lobbyist, but she's a political strategist, for what that's worth. We met with her at my attorney's office here in Washington in 2018, and she told me that she was very close to the president, she showed me the president's personal cell phone number that she had saved in her phone. At least that's what she said it was. She claimed that the president called her in the middle of the night on a regular basis to talk about policy and politics and that she was still very close to him. And for 50,000 dollars, she would lobby the White House on my behalf. And if I got a pardon, she would want another 50,000 dollars. I borrowed 50,000. I didn't have it, so I borrowed it. I gave it to her and then essentially never heard from her again. And so every four or five, six months I would call and say, hey, I haven't heard from you in four or five or six months. What's up? And she would tell me the same story. Oh, Kellyanne Conway is on your side and she's aware of your story. And Sarah Huckabee Sanders is always on your side and aware of your story. And I talked to the White House political director and he's on your side. It got to the point, where I said to her, so help me God, if you tell me one more time that you spoke to the White House political director, I'm going to flip out because I don't even know who the White House political director is. But whoever he is, he clearly does not have regular access to the president. I said, dammit, Karen, I want you to go to the president and ask him to pardon me. And if you can't go to him, I want you to go to Kushner because she had been bragging about her access to Jared Kushner. What she didn't know Jared Kushner. Jared Kushner wouldn't know her if she had walked up to him on the street and when push came to shove. She didn't help me get a pardon. I knew that this was happening and I knew that time was growing short. So last summer on the first of July, two business associates of mine and I had a meeting with Rudy Giuliani and an assistant of his or an associate of his at the Trump Hotel here in Washington. This was to sell a very large number of KN95 masks to the Pentagon. During a lull in the conversation, I said to Rudy, hey, you know, why don't we talk about a pardon? And as soon as I said the word pardon, he stood up and said, I have to hit the head. And he walked away to the bathroom. His associate said to me, Rudy doesn't talk about pardons. You want to talk about a pardon? You talk to me. But Rudy is going to want two million dollars. And I laughed at him and I actually laughed at his face and I said, two million dollars? I said, listen, first of all, I don't have two million dollars. Secondly, why in the world would I spend two million dollars to recover a 700,000 dollar pension? I said, that's outrageous. And I ended the conversation. Now, I related this to Karen Giorno, and she told me, oh, well, that's the going rate I gave you a deal. Dinesh D'Souza paid a million for his and Conrad Black paid a million for his, and she just went on and on. I related the story later on to a friend of mine, another whistleblower, Robert MacLean, the TSA whistleblower. And he said to me, you know, this sounds like pardons are for sale, and I said, that's a crude way of saying it, but yeah, I think that's really what is going on here. They call it lobbying, but it's not really lobbying. I think pardons are for sale. And even if Donald Trump isn't getting the money at the end of the day, it's people like Rudy Giuliani enriching themselves. That's really what this comes down to.

AP: Even if people don't have the connections to actually follow through as was the case with Miss Giorno?

JK: Yes, exactly. It was a money grab, is what it was. Whether it was Karen Giorno or any of the other dozen people purporting to have had close contacts with the White House or close enough contacts with the White House to get a pardon. That's what it was. It was a money

grab. So I mentioned this to Robert MacLean. He was appalled to his credit. And he called the FBI and he reported it. He reported that Rudy Giuliani was essentially selling pardons, and the FBI was not interested, and Robert was so disappointed that the FBI didn't care that this was happening, that he called The New York Times and that's how they got started on this story.

AP: And then, as you say, spoke with dozens around 30 sources in order to corroborate this dealing regarding the pardons. John, is this kind of corrupt management of the pardon process unique to the Trump administration?

JK: No, this happened during the Clinton administration as well, although it wasn't the lobbyists and lawyers who were making the money. They were passing the money on in the form of donations to the Clinton Foundation. So this isn't specifically a partisan thing. It's not specifically a Trump thing. It just points to the corruption of the entire system. Let me add something about that that I think is very important. The system that we have that allows convicted felons to apply for pardons is utterly broken. The way it's supposed to work is you go online to the website of the office of the US pardon attorney and you fill out a form, and you say, I'm rehabilitated, I'm sorry for my crime and I'm on the straight and narrow and this is what I'm doing with my life. And then they turn all of that over to the FBI. The FBI does a background investigation and then when the FBI's done with their investigation, they pass the file back to the pardon attorney. And the pardon attorney determines if, yes, you deserve a pardon or no, you do not deserve a pardon. So in a perfect world, that's how it's supposed to work. The way it really works is 10,000 people apply for a pardon every year, and they recommend five or six people. So out of 10,000 people, only five or six have really rehabilitated themselves, and so at the end of the day, nobody gets a pardon? Well, if nobody gets a pardon and if everybody knows that the formal process doesn't work, then what are they going to do? Well, if you're poor, you're not going to do anything because you're out of luck. If you have money or you have friends in high political places, then you go the lobbyist route and that just shows you how perverted this entire system has become.

AP: How are you now advocating for reform of the pardon system based on your experience?

JK: I've always maintained that the original authorizing legislation back in the early 19th century that authorized the creation of the office of the US pardon attorney meant or intended for the pardon attorney to be independent of the attorney general. We know that from contemporaneous accounts of the debate around the legislation. But it's never been independent. It's always been seconded to the office of the attorney general, and that's just wrong. So instead of the pardon attorney being housed at DOJ, it should be housed at the White House. It should not report to the attorney general. It should report to the executive office of the president. And they should be able to make their own determinations as to who deserves forgiveness and who doesn't deserve forgiveness absent political pressures. Because as things stand now, almost nobody apparently deserves a pardon. At the very end of the Obama administration, Obama fired the pardon attorney for that very reason because the pardon attorney would go years at a time without recommending anybody for a pardon. And that just defeats the whole purpose of the office.

AP: I wanted to ask you about some of the intelligence priorities of the new Biden administration. On January 20th, Avril Haines became the first Biden pick to be approved by the Senate. She will serve as Biden's director of national intelligence. We've been hearing a lot about her role in the CIA's drone program, as well as whitewashing US torture. How will she influence President Biden?

JK: That's a very important question and a very important issue. Avril Haines is very, very much in the mold of John Brennan and Gina Haspel. She was Brennan's deputy at the National Security Council. She was Brennan's deputy at the CIA. And remember Avril Haines, who was confirmed by the Senate yesterday by a vote of 82 to 10, which just made my hair stand up. Avril Haines was the one who was responsible for creating the legal arguments in support of John Brennan's kill list at the NSC. It's Avril who would take the call from the field saying we have the terrorists' jeep in our sights, request permission to launch and she would give permission to launch. Invariably, we killed innocent civilians, women, children, elderly. And she never answered questions, at least not in my mind. She never answered questions related to her role in the drone program, at least as important as that. It was Avril Haines who was John Brennan's deputy at the CIA, when Brennan ordered CIA operatives to hack into the computer system of the Senate Intelligence Committee, the Democratic staff, because they were writing the Senate torture report and Brennan wanted to know what they knew. And so he ordered this hack of the system. Avril Haines was up to her neck in the hacking of the system. So that's two little things. Little in terms of global politics that bother me. Another thing that bothers me is, we really don't know where Avril Haines stands on issues like China, Russia, Iran, counterproliferation, counterterrorism. She never had to answer any of those questions, at least not in a public venue. Yet she was approved by a vote of 82 to 10 and is today the director of National Intelligence.

AP: For some reason, many of these intelligence picks are questions that seem to have bipartisan support, John. What do you make of Biden's decision to nominate William Burns, a career diplomat, to lead the CIA?

JK: Now that I was very happy about it. I've known Bill Burns for the last 30 years. He has served presidents of both parties. He was the point man for the Obama administration during the negotiations with Iran for the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal. He devoted his professional career to supporting human rights and the Arab-Israeli peace process. He's the real deal and he is apolitical to a fault. There's not a political bone in the man's body. He's had essentially every high level position at the State Department. From deputy secretary, he was ambassador to Russia, he was ambassador to Jordan, he was the special peace envoy. So if you're looking for someone who's not afflicted with the stink of torture or Guantanamo or secret prisons around the world, he's your guy. If you're looking for somebody with the political juice in the bureaucracy to actually reform the CIA, if that's what you want to do, and I think it's in dire need of reform, then Bill Burns is the guy to do it. What was a mystery to me is that Joe Biden could pick somebody as able as Bill Burns and somebody as disastrous as Avril Haines in the same week. I just don't understand it.

AP: Suggests a bit of schizophrenia within the administration, perhaps. Some have said that the selection of Burns and you alluded to this, suggests that negotiating with Iran, restarting talks with Iran will be a major priority of the Biden administration. Along with friend of the show, Gareth Porter, you actually wrote a book, *The CIA Insider's Guide to the Iran Crisis*. From your perspective, why is the United States so fixated on branding Iran as a top enemy? And how will the Biden administration approach the country?

JK: That's a great question. Historically, the problem that we had vis a vis Iran was the specter of communism as quaint as that may sound now. The CIA and the State Department were absolutely obsessed with the notion that Iran could go communist. And, of course, in typical American fashion, we overreacted by installing brutal dictators like the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and his father, Reza Pahlavi. In order to crush whatever left wing dissent there might be in the country, well, of course they went overboard as dictators are wont to do, and they ended up oppressing their own people and killing many thousands of people. That led to the Iranian revolution of 1978 and 1979. We've never gotten over the Iran hostage crisis as a country, as a government. We've just never gotten over it. And we don't trust the Iranians because of it. Well, the Iranians don't trust us because of our interference in their country spanning so many decades. At the same time, we always seem to need an ism to oppose, whether it's communism, anarchism, socialism, as the decades roll by Islamic fundamentalism. It's like we seek an ideology to rally against because it helps us politically. And I think that's the rut that we've been in with Iran, the JCPOA the successful negotiation for the JCPOA was a giant leap forward in American diplomacy. The shame of it is twofold. One, that it came so late in the Obama administration, and two, that it was not ratified as a treaty by the US Senate. So it could just be canceled by Donald Trump as it was. Well, now Joe Biden wants to reinvigorate, reestablish the JCPOA and the Iranians are reluctant, and I think deservedly so, because their view is that's fine. We agree to go back into the JCPOA and then what? What's to keep you from pulling out of it again, imposing crippling sanctions on us again? Don't forget these sanctions, these aren't just paragraphs in the official Gazette. These sanctions have real impact. People die because of sanctions. Whether they can't get food or medications or fuel or spare parts. People die. There's a squeeze and it's not just on the government, it's on the citizenry. And so the Iranians just simply don't trust us.

AP: Especially now we're hearing that the Biden administration, according to Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken, won't necessarily return to negotiations without asking for even more from Iran, even though it was the United States which broke the deal to begin with.

JK: Tony Blinken is another person that I've known for a long time. I actually took his desk, when I went up to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He left the Senate Foreign Relations Committee the week that I arrived. And Tony, very much, is a creature of Washington. He owes his entire career to Joe Biden. He has spent his entire career as an aide to Joe Biden in different capacities. He was a staff assistant at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and then he worked his way up to be the staff director of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when Biden became its chairman. He followed Biden to the White House 12 years ago and became the deputy national security adviser, then the vice president's national security adviser, then deputy secretary of state. And he spent the four years working

with Madeleine Albright and other heavy hitters from the Democratic Parties. Diplomatic grouping of people, and now he finds himself secretary of state and he owes it all to Joe Biden.

AP: And finally, John, I just wanted to ask you, we know, according to US defense documents, that since early 2018, the US has placed a great power competition concerning Russia and China at the center of its strategy. Why are our military and intelligence agencies so focused on this fight and how might it manifest under Biden and his cabinet?

JK: This is a dangerous policy development, I think. Instead of engaging Russia and China, instead of trying to figure out where, for example, in intelligence, we can cooperate with them, for example, on counterterrorism, counterproliferation, counternarcotics, we challenge them and we just make a policy assumption that we're on the verge of a hot war. And so we have to prepare for that hot war. This is a policy decision that was made many, many years ago. It's bipartisan in nature. And we're in the minority in that people like you and I want to see cooperation and negotiations, but I don't think it matters really who is in the White House. I don't think it matters who the secretary of defense is, who the national security adviser is, or who the secretary of state is. We're going to be challenging Russia and China in perpetuity. That's the lobbying that we see done on the part of the defense contractors. What else can you say? Eisenhower warned us about the military industrial complex and he was exactly right. Here we are now three generations later and we're still having the same conversation. Nothing is going to change. And I don't care how liberal people want to believe Joe Biden is. Our relations with Russia and China won't change.

AP: During Blinken Senate confirmation hearings, a major theme was especially China and even from someone such as Blinken, who's not considered as hawkish as some of the other individuals Biden may have chosen for that position, then the major threat Blinken saw, as well as most of the senators on the Foreign Relations Committee, was that China is going to replace us as the number one power in the world and I think that will just be a huge theme throughout the Biden presidency.

JK: I agree. The Chinese will replace us as the largest economy in the next 10 years. Tony Blinken is a neo liberal, just like, you know, Hillary Clinton was, when she was the secretary of state. And don't forget that it was Barack Obama who talked about the pivot to Asia turning away from Russia as our greatest threat and looking at the Chinese as our greatest threat. That was a Democratic strategy. And I think that strategy is still in play during a Biden administration.

AP: It certainly will be. John Kiriakou, CIA whistleblower. Thanks so much for your time. We were really rooting for your pardon, and I'm sorry about how it all worked out, but I appreciate you sharing this story and discussing some of the issues with this system now, just as you did after your time in prison. I know you talked a lot about the experience of prisoners after you served.

JK: You have to keep up the fight.

AP: Thank you so much, John.

JK: Thank you. Take care.

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