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HOME	NEWS	OPINION	ARTS & CULTURE	EVENTS	FOOD & DINING
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[home](#) > [Talk](#) > Politics > books

[Dish] God's Secret Club +



Former U.S. Rep. Chip Pickering is the latest conservative politician accused of adultery who is also connected with the cultish C Street House in Washington, D.C.

by Adam Lynch
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The shocking details of Leisha Pickering's suit against the alleged mistress of former U.S. Rep. Chip Pickering is only the latest scandal connected with C Street House, a Washington, D.C.-based political fraternity and Christian fellowship home. The Capitol institution hosted the likes of South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford (who secretly ran off to Argentina for some serious south-of-the-border frolicking) and Republican Nevada Sen. John Ensign (who recently admitted to an eight-month affair with former campaign aide Cindy Hampton).

Pickering's long-time wife claims he has been using the C Street house as a place to conduct trysts since he reconnected with his college girlfriend, Elizabeth Creekmore-Byrd. Author Jeff Sharlet's book "The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power" (Harper, 2008, \$24.95) might support that theory, and is causing more people to question the establishment and its ties to adulterous politicians.

The Jackson Free Press spoke to Sharlet last month just after Pickering's wife filed a civil suit against Creekmore-Byrd.

The book makes C Street look like National Lampoon's "Animal House."

There is a fundamental frat-house vibe. These guys see themselves as a kind of brotherhood that vows to keep each other's secrets. That's literally in the documents of the core group. They've got this macho rhetoric; it's like the Marines. We give veto rights to one another over our lives, and we set up a publicly invisible, but privately identifiable, group of companions. I went through this phase, too—when I was 11. I had a secret club.

But these guys are doing that now and what's really interesting about it ... is that they completely surrender their personal responsibility. Everyone admires humility, but when you have these very powerful men, and they get in this club, and they say: "Man, you know what? I'm just nothing. I didn't do anything to get myself into this place. This is all Jesus' doing." Well, that sounds great for a second until you think: "No, you did do something to get yourself into this place. You asked us, the voters, to vote for you, and we did and now you have a responsibility, so don't go telling me ... you're off the hook, and it's all in Jesus' hands."

Is that the way they put it?

Look at Gov. Sanford's editorial that he published in a South Carolina newspaper, The State. He said: "I've learned from all this. I'm going to be a better governor, a better husband, and you all are lucky to have me as a governor because I know I'm not in control of anything. God's in control of everything."

You've got to understand that The Family really does believe in an extremely interventionist God, on a level that has not been familiar to most conservative Christians. They filter everything through what Jesus wants. The problem is, though, that none of them know what Jesus wants from reading the Bible. None of these guys know much about the Bible, to be frank. They really don't. You hardly ever see a Bible over there.

So how do they know what Jesus wants, then?

How do you learn what Jesus wants? You talk with your buddies, of course.

You mean C Street buddies who don't read the Bible?

That goes back to the beginning of the group, in Seattle in 1935, when this began as an anti-New Deal coalition. The founder (Abraham Vereide) got together 19 affluent businessmen in Seattle, and he felt that organized labor was satanic, and he was going to fight back against that. He noticed none of (the businessmen) were churchgoers. As far as they were concerned, church was for women. These guys didn't need to bother opening their Bibles before one guy named Arthur Langley stands up and says, "I got a message from God saying I've got to run for office." Langley became one of the longest-serving governors in the state of Washington. He tried to pass a law that would allow him to abolish any state law he didn't like.

What is so satanic about the New Deal?

They have this idea called biblical capitalism. A friend of mine at the Cato Institute—a very conservative

think tank (I thought he was going to skewer my book)—they talk about the free market, but this is self interest by proxy. Its crony capitalism is what it is. They believe that any attempt to regulate the market, like the New Deal, is an attempt to overturn God's order. Basically, if you're rich, and I'm poor, that's the way God wants it. God is all-powerful, and your role is not to complain, but to accept it.

What's their response when you hit them with Jesus' allegory of camels, rich people and needle eyes?

There's a real cognitive dissonance going on there. They would say, "That was so deep. Thank you for sharing that word with me, Adam," but at the same time they would say "God has chosen some of us to be powerful."

You're personally selected by God to get through that proverbial eye of the needle?

Here's the thing. If you were a rich man, and you're proud of your wealth and you say you earned all this money, well, you're not getting into heaven. But if you're like, say Dennis Bakke, (former CEO) of AES (Corp.), one of the big energy corporations, or Tom Phillips, (retired) CEO of Raytheon—who helped them buy their headquarters—and you're of the mind that you didn't do anything to deserve this wealth, then you've cleared a path around the needle. If you say, "I had nothing to do with it. This is all God's grace, and I'm lucky to be in this wealth, and I'm nothing, I'm a worthless person," you're saved.

But, you see, that's a problem. When powerful people declare themselves nothing, they're letting themselves off the hook. When the (retired) CEO of Raytheon says he's done nothing to get that wealth, he's not mentioning all those lobbyists who helped make him wealthy.

Sounds like your greater message in the book wasn't loose underwear.

Not really. Take Chip Pickering: ... Keep in mind that it's always a "threesome" over there at the C Street House. Steven Largent—remember him? Largent left Congress to become the head of the industry association that represents cellular issues and, of course, Cellular South is on their board of directors, and in that capacity he paid for travel for Pickering. The question that no one is talking about is one of the C Street brothers paying for his other C Street brother to go see his (alleged) mistress, a lobbyist with Cellular South. (Creekmore-Byrd works with the Cellular South Foundation.)

Why don't people—er—why don't reporters watch the people of C Street?

This comes from a good place and a bad place. The good place is the First Amendment, the freedom of religion. The press really believes in freedom of religion in the United States. We don't always practice it—that's why (Republican presidential hopeful) Mitt Romney had to make his Mormon speech, because of all the people who do not believe in the freedom in religion in this country. But the problem is that most reporters don't understand the First Amendment. They think they're being respectful of someone's religion if they don't ask any questions about it.

You can see this example over time. I remember when Sen. (John) Ashcroft became Attorney General Ashcroft, and The New Yorker did a big profile on him and they noticed that he had a weekly prayer meeting that influenced policy-making in his office. At that point, if this was any other source of influence, if he said, "I have a weekly group of advisers," any reporter would've asked: "Who are they? What are their ideas?" But reporters hear the words "prayer meeting," and they don't think, "Well, what kind of prayer? What do you pray for?" Those questions are respectful. You can ask them and still be respectful of religion. We have an absolutely illiterate press corps when it comes to religion.

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