THE PRESIDENT'S CHOICE · THE FIRST TERM · BOOK TWO

Kayleigh McEnany

The Voice from the Podium

Kayleigh McEnany, the President's Choice, and the Year She Brought the Briefing Room Back to Life

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Author's Preface, Prologue, and Chapter One

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Author's Preface

The President's Choice is a series of books about the men and women President Donald J. Trump chose to serve in his administration, and about what they achieved. Each volume asks two questions. Why did the president choose this person? And what did that choice produce for the country?

Few appointments answer those questions as clearly as the appointment of Kayleigh McEnany as White House Press Secretary in April 2020. The president made the choice at the most difficult moment of his first term. The country was in the grip of a pandemic, the economy was in freefall, and the formal White House briefing had been silent for more than a year. He needed a voice that was loyal, prepared, poised, and persuasive, and he needed it immediately. He chose a thirty-one-year-old Harvard-trained lawyer from a farming town in Florida, a young mother whose daughter was five months old.

She delivered. Within weeks she had brought the briefing room back to life. Over the following nine months she explained the largest relief program in the nation's history, a record economic recovery, the development of vaccines in less than a year, the first Arab-Israeli peace agreements in a quarter century, and the confirmation of a Supreme Court justice. She carried the administration's message through a summer of unrest, the president's hospitalization, her own illness, and a hard-fought election. Then she went on to build one of the most successful post-White House careers of any press secretary in modern history.

This book tells that story. It begins in Plant City, Florida, and follows Kayleigh McEnany through her education at Georgetown, Oxford, and Harvard Law School; her apprenticeship in television at Fox News; her years as a commentator on CNN; her service as spokesperson for the Republican National Committee and the Trump campaign; her courageous decision to undergo preventive surgery in 2018; her

tenure at the White House podium; and her life since, as an author, a mother of three, a co-host of Outnumbered, and the host of her own program, Saturday in America.

My aim has been to write an appreciation, grounded in the public record. The dates, figures, and events described in these pages are drawn from official records, contemporary reporting, Fox News announcements, and Kayleigh McEnany's own published words. Quotations attributed to her are limited to statements she made publicly. Where I describe her views, I do so in paraphrase. Her career, like that of every press secretary, unfolded amid fierce debate, and readers who wish to examine those debates will find the briefing transcripts and the contemporary record readily available. This book's purpose is different. It is to set down, in one place, what she accomplished and why the president's confidence in her was justified.

I have spent much of my life in service of one kind or another: in the United States Army, in law enforcement, in legal advocacy, and in leading an organization devoted to veterans. I have a deep respect for people who answer the call to serve when the call is hardest. Kayleigh McEnany answered that call in 2020. This book is my tribute to her service.

Robert Miller
Washington, D.C.
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Prologue

The Room Comes Back to Life

At a little after two o'clock on the afternoon of Friday, May 1, 2020, a young woman from Plant City, Florida, walked to the most famous lectern in the world and opened a binder.

The James S. Brady Press Briefing Room had been quiet for a very long time. For more than a year, there had been no formal briefing by a White House press secretary. The last one had been held by Sarah Huckabee Sanders on March 11, 2019. The cameras were still there, the cramped rows of blue seats were still there, the nameplates of the great news organizations were still bolted to the chairs, but the ritual itself had gone dormant. Reporters had counted the days. When Kayleigh McEnany stepped forward that Friday, the count stood at 417.

The country she faced was frightened. The coronavirus had swept across the United States in March and April. Schools were closed. Churches had moved their services online. Restaurants were dark, factories were idle, and millions of Americans had lost their jobs in a matter of weeks. Hospitals in New York, New Jersey, and other hard-hit areas had been stretched to their limits. Every evening, families gathered in front of their televisions looking for one thing above all else: a clear, steady voice telling them what their government was doing to help.

McEnany had been on the job for a little more than three weeks. She had been named Press Secretary on April 7, 2020, as part of a fresh start in the West Wing under the new chief of staff, Mark Meadows. She was thirty-one years old, one of the youngest people ever to hold the position. She was also the mother of a five-month-old baby girl. Those facts alone would have made the moment remarkable. But what made it historic was what she chose to do with it.

She did not begin with a quarrel. She began with help. She announced that the administration would be distributing $12 billion in relief funds to 395 hospitals across the country, hospitals that together had cared for more than seventy percent of the Americans who had required hospital treatment for COVID-19. She spoke about the Paycheck Protection Program, which was sending lifelines to small businesses that were fighting to keep their workers on the payroll. She spoke in numbers and specifics, the way a lawyer lays out a case, and she spoke with the calm confidence of someone who had prepared for this moment her entire life.

Then she opened the floor to questions. And before the first exchange was finished, she made a promise that would become the most quoted sentence of her tenure.

"I will never lie to you. You have my word on that."

It was a simple sentence, and it was a bold one. It set a standard, and she chose to set it herself, on the first day, in front of every camera in the room. It told the press corps that the briefing was back, that it would be regular, and that the new press secretary intended to meet them face to face rather than hide behind written statements. It told the American people that the White House was going to talk to them again, directly, from the podium where generations of spokesmen and spokeswomen had stood before her.

The performance drew immediate praise from conservatives, including from Sarah Sanders, the last press secretary to have stood at that podium. It also drew the attention of the president who had chosen her. Donald Trump had watched Kayleigh McEnany defend him on television for years. He had seen her hold her ground on CNN panels where she was outnumbered four or five to one. He had seen her as the voice of the Republican National Committee and as the national press secretary of his re-election campaign. He believed that she was the right person to bring the briefing room back to life at the

moment when the country needed it most. On May 1, 2020, she proved him right.

This book is the story of how she got to that podium, why President Trump chose her, and what she accomplished once she was there. It is the story of a strawberry-country girl who listened to talk radio in her father's truck and dreamed of politics; of a Georgetown student who stood in the back of the briefing room as an intern and watched Dana Perino at work; of a Harvard-trained lawyer who chose television and public argument over a quiet career in a law firm; of a young woman who faced down a frightening genetic diagnosis with courage and faith; and of a press secretary who carried the message of an administration through a pandemic, a summer of unrest, a historic peace agreement in the Middle East, a hard-fought election, and a difficult transition of power.

It is also the story of what came after: a triumphant return to Fox News, the network where she began as an intern; a seat at the table of one of the most-watched daytime programs in cable news; a New York Times bestselling memoir and a Wall Street Journal bestselling sequel; three children; and, in September 2025, a two-hour Saturday program of her own, carrying her name.

Kayleigh McEnany was the President's choice. This is the record of why that choice was a good one.

Part One

Formation

Chapter One

The Strawberry Capital of the World

Every great American story has a hometown, and Kayleigh McEnany's hometown smells of strawberries.

Plant City sits in eastern Hillsborough County, Florida, about twenty-five miles east of downtown Tampa. It is a place of flat green fields, citrus groves, old brick storefronts, and Baptist and Methodist steeples. Each winter and early spring, the fields around the town turn red with ripe berries, and Plant City proudly calls itself the Winter Strawberry Capital of the World. The Florida Strawberry Festival, held there every year since the 1930s, draws hundreds of thousands of visitors to eat strawberry shortcake, listen to country music, and celebrate the farm families who make the harvest possible. McEnany has often described her hometown in exactly those terms, as the strawberry capital of the world, and she says it with the pride of someone who has never forgotten where she came from.

She was born on April 18, 1988, in Tampa, the first child of Michael and Leanne McEnany. A younger sister, Ryann, would follow. Michael McEnany built and ran a commercial roofing business, the kind of hard, practical enterprise that depends on long hours, hot sun, a reliable crew, and a good name in the community. A roofing contractor in Florida learns quickly that weather does not negotiate, that a promise to a customer must be kept, and that the margin

between success and failure can be a single hurricane season. Those lessons would shape his daughter as surely as any classroom.

The McEnany household was a conservative one, and it was a household where politics was discussed openly at the kitchen table. Kayleigh has spoken about how early her interest in public affairs began. It was not something she discovered in college or stumbled into after law school. It was there from the beginning, nurtured by her parents and by the voices she heard on the radio.

Chief among those voices was Rush Limbaugh. For millions of American families in the 1990s and 2000s, the midday hours belonged to Limbaugh's program, and the McEnanys were no exception. Young Kayleigh absorbed the rhythm of his arguments, the confidence of his delivery, and the way he broke down the news of the day into clear, memorable points. Limbaugh taught a generation of conservatives that their views were worth defending and that they could be defended with wit, energy, and conviction. Kayleigh McEnany was one of the students of that unofficial school, and years later, when she stood at the White House podium and turned a hostile question into an opportunity to make her case, the echo of those afternoons could still be heard.

What she learned at home was not only political. It was moral and spiritual. The McEnanys were people of faith, and their faith was not a Sunday accessory but a framework for living. Kayleigh grew up understanding that her life had a purpose, that God had a plan for her, and that the trials she encountered could be met with prayer and trust. That conviction would become one of the defining features of her public life. Her later books would carry titles drawn directly from Scripture and from the language of Christian devotion. But the roots of that faith were planted in Plant City, in a family that prayed together and believed together.

There was another inheritance from her family, one that she would not fully understand until she was an adult. Breast cancer had struck

women in her family again and again across the generations, some of them while still young. That shadow would one day lead her to one of the bravest decisions of her life. As a child, she knew only that her family was close, that her parents loved her and her sister fiercely, and that they expected great things from both of them.

Small-town Florida in the 1990s offered a particular kind of upbringing. It was a place where neighbors knew each other, where high school football mattered, where church potlucks and county fairs marked the calendar, and where the values of hard work and self-reliance were not abstractions but daily facts. Children learned to address adults with respect. They learned that you finish what you start. They learned that America, for all its imperfections, was a country worth loving. Kayleigh McEnany has carried that upbringing with her into every room she has entered, from the halls of Georgetown and Oxford to the classrooms of Harvard Law School to the West Wing itself.

It is worth pausing on how unusual her eventual path would be. Plant City is not a feeder town for the national political class. It is not a suburb of Washington or a neighborhood of Manhattan. Most of the young people who grow up there go on to build good lives in Florida, in agriculture, business, medicine, teaching, and the trades. Very few of them end up at the center of national politics. That Kayleigh McEnany did is a testament not to privilege but to ambition, discipline, and an early sense of calling.

Her parents encouraged that calling at every turn. They made sacrifices to ensure that she received a first-class education. They supported her when she wanted to volunteer for campaigns. They celebrated when she was admitted to one of the most competitive universities in the country. And they would stand beside her, literally, on the day of her surgery in 2018, a moment she has described as one in which her mother, her father, her husband, and her faith in Jesus Christ were all at her side.

There is a phrase that her father once said to her, one that she has shared in her own writing. When she was facing the news of her genetic risk, he told her that she knew her weakness, that everyone has one in life, but that she knew hers and could attack it head on. It is a roofer's philosophy, in a way: find the weak point before the storm finds it, and fix it while you still can. It is also a philosophy that describes her entire career. Kayleigh McEnany has never been the kind of person who waits for trouble to arrive. She prepares. She anticipates. She studies the questions before they are asked. She builds her binder before she walks into the room.

That habit began in Plant City, in a home where her parents taught her that preparation is a form of respect: respect for the task, respect for the people you serve, and respect for the gifts God has given you.

In later years, when critics in Washington and New York tried to caricature her, they rarely understood this part of her story. They saw the polished television presence and the confident delivery, and they assumed that she had been born into the political world. In truth, she had been born into a working family in a farming town, and she had earned every step of the journey that followed. When she spoke from the podium about the forgotten men and women of America, the people who build and grow and fix things, she was not speaking about strangers. She was speaking about her neighbors, her father's crews, the farm families of eastern Hillsborough County, and the people who filled the pews of her childhood churches.

That connection would become one of the reasons President Trump trusted her. He had built his political movement on the belief that ordinary Americans had been ignored by the elites of both parties. In Kayleigh McEnany, he found a spokeswoman who combined the credentials of the elite, Georgetown, Oxford, and Harvard, with the heart and the memory of a small town. She could talk to the press corps in their own language, and she could talk to the country in its language too.

The strawberry fields of Plant City are a long way from Pennsylvania Avenue. But the road between them runs straight through the character of the woman who traveled it.

A Childhood Steeped in Argument

Children who grow up in political households learn to argue early, and Kayleigh McEnany was no exception. Friends and family have described a young girl who loved a good debate, who wanted to know why things were the way they were, and who was not satisfied with easy answers. She read the newspaper. She watched the evening news. She listened to talk radio and then wanted to talk about what she had heard.

That instinct for argument is sometimes misunderstood as mere combativeness. In fact, it is something more valuable: a desire to test ideas against one another and to find out which ones hold up. Good lawyers have it. Good journalists have it. Good press secretaries must have it, because every day at the podium is a test of whether the administration's case can survive the questions of the most skeptical audience in the country.

McEnany's later training, in debate-heavy classrooms at Georgetown and in the Socratic method of Harvard Law School, would refine that instinct into a professional skill. But the raw material was there from childhood. She was the kind of student who raised her hand, who stayed after class to ask follow-up questions, and who was not intimidated by adults who disagreed with her.

She was also, by every account, a kind and generous friend and a devoted older sister. The combination of toughness in argument and warmth in personal relationships is rarer than it should be, and it would serve her well. In the White House, she was known for her courtesy toward staff and for her loyalty to the people she worked with. On television, colleagues who disagreed with her sharply on the

air often spoke warmly of her off the air. That balance, firm in principle and gracious in person, began at home.

The Values She Carried

If one were to list the values that Kayleigh McEnany carried out of Plant City, the list would be short and strong. Faith in God. Love of country. Loyalty to family. Respect for hard work. Confidence that ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things. Preparation as a habit and a duty.

Each of these values would be tested in the years ahead. Her faith would be tested by a frightening medical diagnosis and later by the struggle to conceive her second child. Her love of country would be tested by the bitterness of national politics. Her loyalty would be tested by the pressures of serving a president whom much of the press corps opposed. Her confidence would be tested in front of cameras that never blinked. Her preparation would be tested every single day she walked into the briefing room.

She passed those tests not because she was perfect, but because the foundation laid in her childhood was sound. Like a well-built roof, it held when the storms came.

CONTINUE READING

The President’s Choice

Portraits of the people who served
President Donald J. Trump.

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