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

Kellyanne Conway

Counselor, Strategist, Trailblazer

The First Woman to Manage a Winning United States Presidential Campaign

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Author's Note, Introduction, and Chapter One

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Author's Note

This book is an appreciation. It is not a neutral encyclopedia entry, and it does not pretend to be one. It sets out, at book length, the case that Kellyanne Conway's admirers make for her: that she was one of the most consequential political professionals of her generation, that she made history in 2016 as the first woman to manage a winning campaign for President of the United States, and that she then served President Donald J. Trump as Counselor to the President for nearly four years with a durability, a loyalty, and a public stamina that few people in modern American politics have matched.

An appreciation, however, is only worth reading if it can be trusted. For that reason this book follows a simple rule that was laid down in the short appreciation from which it grew: nothing is advanced here that cannot be checked against the public record. Dates, titles, votes, statutes, and official findings are drawn from contemporaneous news reporting, official White House materials, the reports of the United States Office of Special Counsel, the published record of Congress, and Kellyanne Conway's own public statements and memoir. Where words are placed in quotation marks, they are words that were spoken or written in public and reported at the time. Where the author offers an interpretation, the text says so.

That rule cuts both ways. A book that only praised would not be believed, and it would not deserve to be. Kellyanne Conway's years in public life included real controversies: the phrase "alternative facts," two sets of Hatch Act findings by the Office of Special Counsel, an ethics rebuke over an on-air product endorsement, and a marriage whose disagreements played out before the entire country. Those matters are recorded in these pages plainly, together with her own explanations and the responses of the administration she served. Her supporters do not ask that the controversies be forgotten. They ask that they be weighed against the results.

Readers who come to this book already admiring Kellyanne Conway will find the record of why so many people do. Readers who come to it skeptical will find the same facts that her critics rely on, stated accurately, and they are invited to reach their own judgment. That is the respect owed to any reader, and it is the respect this book tries to show.

A Note on Method

This book grew from a shorter appreciation, a few thousand words in length, that set out the essential facts of Kellyanne Conway's career and the case her supporters make for it. In expanding that appreciation to book length, the author has followed three principles.

The first is that the factual backbone of the story comes from the public record. The dates of her appointments, the votes on the legislation she championed, the findings of the Office of Special Counsel, the provisions of the laws enacted during her service, and the statements she made in public are all drawn from contemporaneous reporting and official documents. A bibliography at the end of the book lists the principal sources. Readers who wish to verify any statement in these pages are encouraged to consult them.

The second is that context matters. A great deal of this book is devoted not to Kellyanne Conway herself but to the world around her: the history of women in presidential campaigns, the workings of the Electoral College, the origins and course of the opioid epidemic, the history of the office of Counselor to the President, the reckoning of the polling profession, and the policy record of the administration she served. That context is offered because her achievements can be properly appreciated only against it. A first means little unless one knows how long the barrier stood. A coordinator's work means little unless one understands the scale of the crisis she was coordinating.

The third is that interpretation should be labeled as such. Where the author or Kellyanne Conway's admirers draw conclusions from the

record, the text attempts to make clear that a conclusion is being drawn. Where her critics draw different conclusions, the text attempts to state them fairly. The reader should always be able to distinguish between what happened and what one side or another believes it means.

The author has drawn on Kellyanne Conway's memoir, Here's the Deal, for her own account of her upbringing and of certain experiences that only she can describe. Where the memoir is the source of a description, the text generally says so. The memoir is her perspective, and other participants in the events it describes may remember them differently.

Finally, a word about the President. This is a book about Kellyanne Conway, but it is impossible to tell her story without telling a great deal of the story of President Donald J. Trump, whose campaign she managed, whose White House she served, and whose record she defended. The President appears on nearly every page. His decision to entrust a woman with the leadership of his campaign in 2016 made her historic achievement possible, and his confidence in her sustained her through nearly four years of service. Whatever one's view of his presidency, the partnership between the President and his Counselor is one of the central threads of this book.

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Introduction

The Woman in the Room

On the night of November 8, 2016, in a ballroom at the New York Hilton Midtown, a crowd of campaign staff, donors, and supporters waited through the early hours of the morning for a result that most of the country's professional forecasters had told them would never come. When the Associated Press called Wisconsin, and with it the presidency, Donald J. Trump walked onto the stage to give a victory speech. In it, he singled out the woman who had run his campaign for its final eighty-three days. He called her up, praised her work, and in doing so marked a moment that American history had never seen before. For the first time, a woman had managed a winning campaign for the presidency of the United States.

Her name was Kellyanne Conway. She was forty-nine years old, a striking, poised, blonde woman whose quick smile and quicker mind had already made her one of the most recognizable faces on American television, and whose intellect had carried her from a working-class township to valedictorian, Phi Beta Kappa, and a law degree with honors. She had grown up in a small township in southern New Jersey, raised by her mother, her grandmother, and two aunts in a household that had little money and a great deal of conviction. She had worked eight summers on a blueberry farm. She had put herself through college and law school, built a polling firm from nothing, and spent two decades advising Republican candidates on the one subject on which so many of them seemed perpetually uncertain: how to speak to American women. She had come to the Trump campaign only that summer, after the candidate she first supported had left the race. Within weeks she was running it. Within three months she had helped deliver a result that astonished the political establishment of both parties.

What came next was, in its own way, just as remarkable. Kellyanne Conway did not take her historic achievement and return to private consulting, as she might easily have done. She accepted the President-elect's invitation to serve as Counselor to the President, one of the most senior positions on the White House staff, and she stayed. Through three chiefs of staff and an acting fourth, through a constant churn of press secretaries, communications directors, and national security advisers, through a special counsel investigation, an impeachment, and the first months of a global pandemic, she remained at her post. When she finally left, at the end of August 2020, she did so on her own terms and for her own reasons, citing the needs of her four children. She was, by then, one of the longest-serving senior advisers of the entire first Trump term.

This book tells that story. It is organized in four parts.

Part One, Formation, follows Kellyanne Fitzpatrick from the Atco section of Waterford Township, New Jersey, to the blueberry fields of Hammonton, to Trinity College and the George Washington University Law School in Washington, and into the profession of public-opinion research. It describes the founding and growth of her firm, The Polling Company, and its WomanTrend division; her collaboration with the Democratic pollster Celinda Lake on the book What Women Really Want; and the decades of television commentary that made her one of the most recognizable Republican voices in the country long before 2016.

Part Two, The Campaign, examines the 2016 race: her early role supporting Senator Ted Cruz, her move to the Trump effort in the summer of 2016, her promotion to campaign manager on August 17, and the strategic and communications choices of the final weeks. It places her achievement in the long history of women in presidential campaigns, from the pioneering work of Susan Estrich and Donna Brazile on the Democratic side to the women who would follow her.

Part Three, The West Wing, covers her service as Counselor to the President from January 20, 2017, to August 31, 2020. It addresses her role as the administration's most persistent public advocate; the policy agenda she defended on television and in the briefing room, from tax reform to judicial appointments to criminal justice reform; her leadership of the White House's coordination of the response to the opioid crisis, which culminated in the bipartisan SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act of 2018; and the controversies of those years, including the Hatch Act findings of the Office of Special Counsel. It also treats, with care, the extraordinary circumstance of her marriage to George Conway, one of the President's most prominent critics.

Part Four, Legacy, considers her life after the White House: her appointment to the Board of Visitors of the United States Air Force Academy and her refusal to resign when the next administration demanded it; her memoir, Here's the Deal, an instant number one New York Times bestseller; her return to television as a Fox News contributor and host; her role as a commentator and informal adviser during the 2024 campaign; and her analysis of politics in President Trump's second term. It closes with an honest accounting of the critics' case, the supporters' response, and the lessons her career offers to anyone, and especially to any woman, who hopes to lead in a field that was not built with her in mind.

A brief word about why this book exists. The author has spent most of his adult life in public service of one kind or another: in uniform as a soldier and military policeman, in law enforcement, in legal advocacy, and for many years in the leadership of a nonprofit organization that serves tens of thousands of American veterans. In all of those settings, the same lesson recurs. Results matter. Character under pressure matters. The ability to stay at one's post when it would be easier to leave matters. And the people who open doors for others deserve to be remembered for it. Whatever one's politics, Kellyanne Conway opened a door in 2016 that had been

closed for more than two centuries. This book is written in appreciation of that fact, and of the long, demanding service that followed.

There is also a reason this book appears now, in the late autumn of 2026. A decade has passed since the election of 2016. President Trump is in his second term, having won a victory in 2024 that confirmed, in the most decisive way, the coalition that Kellyanne Conway helped him build eight years earlier. The women who followed her into the leadership of presidential campaigns have taken their own places in history, including the first woman to serve as White House Chief of Staff. The opioid crisis that she worked to address has, at last, begun to recede, with overdose deaths falling in 2024 by the largest margin ever recorded. And Kellyanne Conway herself remains a prominent voice in American life, a commentator, strategist, and author whose analysis is still sought by millions of viewers and readers.

A decade is long enough to see a career in perspective. The heat of the original controversies has cooled. The long-term consequences of the decisions made in 2016 and the years that followed have become clearer. The judicial appointments she helped make a campaign issue have reshaped American law. The bipartisan laws she helped bring about have been implemented and, in several cases, built upon. And the barrier she broke has been broken again by others, which is the surest sign that it was a real barrier and that her breaking of it mattered.

This is therefore a fitting moment to look back on what she accomplished, to weigh it honestly, and to express the appreciation that so many Americans feel for a woman who rose from the blueberry fields of South Jersey to the side of the President of the United States.

It is also written in the conviction that appreciation and honesty are not enemies. The pages that follow celebrate a career. They do not

airbrush it. Kellyanne Conway, a professional who spent her life measuring what Americans actually think rather than what commentators assume they think, would probably have it no other way.

Part One

Formation

Chapter One

Atco and the House of Women

A Township in South Jersey

Kellyanne Elizabeth Fitzpatrick was born on January 20, 1967, in Camden, New Jersey. The date would later carry an irony that her admirers enjoy pointing out: January 20 is Inauguration Day, the day on which American presidents take the oath of office. Fifty years to the day after her birth, she would stand on the West Front of the United States Capitol as a member of the incoming White House staff of the forty-fifth President. Few people can say that their country's most solemn civic ceremony fell on their birthday in the very year they helped bring it about.

The world she was born into was a long way from the Capitol. Camden, across the Delaware River from Philadelphia, was an industrial city that had already begun the long decline that would define it for decades. Her family soon settled in the Atco section of Waterford Township, in Camden County, a quiet and largely working-class community of small houses, churches, and pinelands on the edge of the great stretch of forest and farmland that New Jerseyans call the Pine Barrens. It was the sort of place that national politicians rarely visited and national reporters rarely described, a place where people worked hard, attended Mass, paid their bills when they could, and expected little from the government in Washington.

Her parents, Diane (née DiNatale) and John Fitzpatrick, divorced when she was about three years old. Her father, whose family background was Irish, largely left the picture. In later years Kellyanne

Conway would write and speak about the absence of her father with a frankness that surprised some readers of her memoir. She has described holding on to a single early memory of time with him and not being entirely certain whether it was a memory or a wish. That honesty is characteristic. She has never presented her childhood as a fairy tale, and she has never presented it as a tragedy either. It was simply the life she was given, and she made the most of it.

Four Women and a Girl

What she was given, above all, was a household of women. After the divorce, she was raised by her mother; her mother's mother; and two of her mother's sisters, both unmarried. Her mother's family was Italian-American, and the household was Catholic in the full, practical sense of the word: faith was not an ornament but a structure, the frame on which ordinary days were built. The women of the family worked. Her mother held a job for many years at a casino in Atlantic City, a commute and a workplace that demanded long hours and a thick skin. Money was tight. Luxuries were few. Expectations were high.

Kellyanne Conway has described this arrangement as unconventional, and so it was. In the America of the early 1970s, the image of the ideal family still ran heavily toward the father who earned and the mother who stayed home. The Fitzpatrick household was nothing like that image. It was a small matriarchy, four adult women raising one girl, pooling their resources, sharing their duties, and modeling for her every day a kind of self-reliance that did not depend on a man to provide it.

Her supporters have long seen in this household the origin of much that later defined her. The women who raised her did not complain about their circumstances; they managed them. They did not wait for help; they helped one another. They held firm views about right and wrong and were not shy about expressing them. They expected the girl in their care to do well in school, to work, to go to church, and to

make something of herself. It is not difficult to see in that upbringing the roots of the professional who would later walk into rooms full of men, many of them older and more credentialed, and refuse to be talked over.

There is an important point here about the way Kellyanne Conway would later speak about women and politics. Throughout her career she has been skeptical of the idea that women are a single voting bloc whose interests can be read off a list of slogans. She has insisted, instead, that women voters are as varied as men, that they care about their families' finances and safety as much as about any one social issue, and that they resent being lectured to. That view did not come from a seminar. It came from a kitchen table in Atco, where four working women with strong opinions argued about prices, prayers, and the news of the day. Those women were exactly the kind of voters that political consultants in both parties often misunderstood. Kellyanne grew up among them. She would spend her career explaining them to people who had not.

Faith and Discipline

Catholic education and Catholic practice were central to her childhood. She attended parochial schools, and she has spoken often of her faith as the foundation of her life, a source of strength in difficult seasons and a guide in decisions large and small. In the political world, where faith is sometimes treated as a demographic category rather than a conviction, she has been unusually open about her religious commitments. She has described prayer and the sacraments as part of the rhythm of her days, including during her years in the White House.

That faith also supplied a moral vocabulary that would recur in her public life: an emphasis on the dignity of work, on family, on the protection of the vulnerable, and on personal responsibility. When she later took up the cause of Americans suffering from addiction, she would describe the opioid crisis not merely as a policy problem

but as a human one, a crisis that reached into every kind of family and that demanded compassion as well as enforcement. It is reasonable to see in that framing the influence of a childhood spent in a church that teaches both justice and mercy.

The Neighborhood and the Nation

Atco in the 1970s and early 1980s was not a political hothouse. But the national mood of those years reached even quiet South Jersey townships. The country lived through Watergate, the end of the Vietnam War, the energy crises, the inflation and unemployment of the late 1970s, and the hostage crisis in Iran. For working families, those were years of anxiety. The price of gasoline and groceries mattered more than the debates of Washington, but the two were connected, and people knew it.

Then came Ronald Reagan. Kellyanne Fitzpatrick was a teenager during his first term, and she has recalled the Reagan years as formative for her political outlook. Reagan's optimism, his emphasis on economic opportunity, his patriotism, and his ability to speak plainly to ordinary Americans, including many lifelong Democrats in places much like Atco, made a lasting impression. Reagan's 1984 landslide, in which he carried forty-nine states, came when she was in high school. It was, among other things, a lesson in how a candidate dismissed by many elites could build a coalition of working people that the experts had not anticipated. She would not forget the lesson.

It would be a mistake to overstate the political content of her childhood. She was, first and foremost, a hardworking girl in a hardworking family. But by the time she left Atco for college, she had absorbed three convictions that would guide her career: that ordinary Americans were often wiser than the people who presumed to speak for them; that women in particular were frequently misunderstood by the political class; and that the only reliable path forward was work, more work, and then some more work after that.

The Meaning of Roots

Biographers of political figures sometimes treat childhood as a kind of prologue, a few colorful pages before the real story begins. In Kellyanne Conway's case that approach would miss something important. Her roots are not decoration. They explain a great deal about how she approached her later work.

Consider her unusual ability, later on display in thousands of television interviews, to remain calm and even cheerful while being challenged, interrupted, and sometimes insulted. Many observers found it remarkable, and some found it maddening. But it makes sense in light of her upbringing. A girl raised by four strong-willed women learns early how to hold her ground in a spirited argument without losing her temper or her affection for the people she is arguing with. She learns that a conversation can be heated without being hostile. She learns to keep talking.

Consider, too, her lifelong habit of describing herself as a working person rather than a member of an elite, even after she had become one of the most powerful women in Washington. Critics sometimes dismissed this as a pose. Her supporters see it as a simple fact of identity. She knew what it was to be a girl from a family without money in a township without prestige, and she never pretended otherwise. When she later argued, in the summer and fall of 2016, that there were millions of Americans whom the polls and the pundits were missing, she was in a sense describing the people she grew up with.

The house in Atco did not produce a politician. It produced a worker, a believer, and a fighter. The politics came later. But the foundation was laid there, among four women who did not have much and who gave her everything they had.

CONTINUE READING

The President’s Choice

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

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