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

Sarah Huckabee Sanders

From the Briefing Room to the Governor's Mansion

The White House Press Secretary Who Spoke for President Donald J. Trump and Became Arkansas's First Woman Governor

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Author's Note, A Note on Sources and Method, Prologue, and Chapter One

The President's Choice · The First Term · Book Three

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Author's Note

There are public servants whose names are known everywhere and whose lives are known almost nowhere. Sarah Huckabee Sanders is one of them. For two years, millions of Americans watched her stand at the most closely scrutinized lectern in the world and speak for the President of the United States. They saw her composure, her dry humor, the steady look she gave a reporter who had asked the same question three times. Some of them cheered her. Some of them could not stand her. Very few of them knew where she had come from, what she had been through to get there, or what she would do once she walked away.

This book is the second volume in the First Term part of The President's Choice Series, a set of portraits of the men and women who served President Donald J. Trump. Its subject is the woman who stood at the White House podium as the President's press secretary from July 2017 to the end of June 2019, and who then went home to Arkansas, ran for the office her father had once held, and became the first woman ever elected governor of her state.

It is, at heart, a story about home. It begins in a pastor's household in a small Southern state, with a little girl stuffing envelopes at a kitchen table for a father nobody in Washington had heard of. It passes through Iowa snow and Ohio battlegrounds, through campaign offices and hotel ballrooms, through a briefing room where every word was recorded and every stumble replayed. It passes through ridicule at a black-tie dinner and rejection at a small-town restaurant, through a cancer diagnosis sixty days before the most important election of her life. And it ends where it began, in Arkansas, on the steps of the State Capitol, with a hand raised and an oath spoken.

The book is written with admiration for its subject and with respect for its readers. It tells the story of a young woman raised in a political household who learned the craft of campaigns from the ground up, who became one of the most recognizable public faces of the Trump

administration, who endured personal attacks with grace and composure, and who carried the lessons of the briefing room into an executive office of her own. It is a story of loyalty, faith, perseverance, and achievement, and it is told here as such. Where she faced controversy, as every public servant does, the book says so briefly and lets her own words and her record answer.

Every fact in these pages has been checked against the public record. Dates, titles, election results, statutes, and official actions are drawn from contemporaneous news reporting, from official records of the State of Arkansas and the United States government, from published reference works, and from Sarah Huckabee Sanders's own public statements and books. Where words appear in quotation marks, they are words that were actually spoken or written, and the endnotes identify where they can be found. Where something could not be confirmed, it has been left out. Where this book draws a conclusion or describes what a moment must have meant, it says so, and the reader is free to disagree.

I came to this subject as a veteran, a publisher, and a lifelong student of how leaders are formed. I have spent much of my own life in uniform, in public service, and in the work of helping people who had been written off by the system find their way back. What drew me to Sarah Huckabee Sanders was not only her loyalty to the President she served, though that loyalty is a central theme of this book. It was the shape of her life: the long apprenticeship before the spotlight, the refusal to be broken by the spotlight once it came, and the decision to take what she had learned and bring it home.

This is an independent work. It has not been authorized, reviewed, or endorsed by Sarah Huckabee Sanders, by President Donald J. Trump, by the White House, or by the Office of the Governor of Arkansas.

Robert Miller

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A Note on Sources and Method

Three kinds of sources stand behind this book.

The first is the official record. The American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara, preserves the President's public statements, including his social media posts. The Office of the Governor of Arkansas publishes the texts of Governor Sanders's major speeches and announcements of the bills she has signed. The Arkansas General Assembly publishes the acts it passes, and Arkansas Legislative Audit publishes its reports. The Arkansas Secretary of State publishes certified election results. The report of Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III, released in redacted form in April 2019, contains the statements Sanders made to investigators.

The second is contemporaneous journalism: the Associated Press, the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, the Arkansas Advocate, CNN, NBC News, ABC News, CBS News, Fox News, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, USA Today, Axios, and other news organizations that covered her career as it happened. These sources do not always agree in their judgments. They are used here for what they reported, and where a judgment is quoted, it is identified as the judgment of the person who made it.

The third is the published reference literature, above all the entry on Sarah Huckabee Sanders in the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, a project of the Central Arkansas Library System, which provides a careful outline of her life and career, and the companion entry on her father, Mike Huckabee. For historical background on Arkansas, on the Little Rock Central High School crisis, on the White House press office, and on the presidential nominating process, the book draws on standard reference works, which are identified in the Notes.

Sarah Huckabee Sanders has written two books of her own: Speaking for Myself: Faith, Freedom, and the Fight of Our Lives Inside the Trump White House, published by St. Martin's Press in 2020, and Unapologetic: Clarity and Conviction in a World Gone Crazy, published by St. Martin's Press in November 2026. They are her account of her own life. Where this book describes what she has written, it relies on the published record of those books, on the publisher's descriptions, and on reviews of them, and it says so. Other participants in the events she describes may remember them differently.

Interpretation is labeled as interpretation. This is an admiring portrait, and when it draws a conclusion about her character or her accomplishments, it tries to make clear that a conclusion is being drawn and to rest it on the record. Where the narrative pauses to imagine what a scene would have looked like, from the shape of a room to the weather of a season, it draws only on what is publicly known about that place and time, and it does not put words in anyone's mouth. The reader should always be able to tell the difference between what happened and what someone believes it means.

Prologue

Even the Hard Minutes

The announcement came the way so many announcements came in those years: not from a lectern, not in a press release, but in a burst of words on a telephone screen.

On the afternoon of June 13, 2019, President Donald J. Trump wrote on Twitter that his press secretary was going home. “After 3 1/2 years, our wonderful Sarah Huckabee Sanders will be leaving the White House at the end of the month and going home to the Great State of Arkansas,” he wrote. “She is a very special person with extraordinary talents, who has done an incredible job! I hope she decides to run for Governor of Arkansas - she would be fantastic. Sarah, thank you for a job well done!”1

In Washington, the news moved through the West Wing and out into the city within minutes. Reporters who had spent two years sparring with her began composing assessments of her tenure. Supporters began composing tributes. Television producers began pulling the footage that had made her one of the most recognizable faces in American public life: the briefings, the exchanges, the long patient pauses, the moments when she leaned on the lectern and looked out at the room as if to say that she had heard the question and was not going to be rushed.

A short time later, the President brought her to the stage at a White House event. It was not a ceremony arranged for her. It was an event about helping former prisoners find work, about second chances for men and women who had paid for their mistakes and wanted to build something better. The setting was fitting in a way few people noticed at the time. The woman being honored had spent her career in rooms where people were rarely given a second chance, where a single

sentence spoken in haste could follow a person for years. She knew something about that.

The President called her “a warrior.” “We’ve been through a lot together,” he said. “She’s tough, but she’s good.” And he repeated, before the cameras and the audience, the hope he had written that afternoon: “If we can get her to run for the governor of Arkansas, I think she’ll do very well.”2

Then he stepped aside, and she spoke.

The Words She Chose

She did not speak for long. She said she would “try not to get emotional, because I know crying can make us look weak sometimes.” It was a line that drew warm laughter from the room, and it was also, in its way, a confession. For two years she had not been permitted to look weak. She had stood at a lectern where any visible crack would be magnified a million times, replayed, dissected, and turned into a headline. She had learned to hold her face still. Now, for a moment, she let it go.

She called the job “the honor of a lifetime.” She said of the President that he “has accomplished so much in these two-and-a-half years, and it has truly been something I will treasure forever.” And then, her voice breaking, she said the words that would be quoted again and again in the coverage of her departure: “I have loved every minute, including the hard minutes.”3

Including the hard minutes.

There had been a great many hard minutes. For nearly two years Sanders had been the public voice of one of the most closely watched and most fiercely contested presidencies in American history. She had defended the President’s policies, his personnel decisions, and his words before a press corps that was often openly skeptical of all three. She had been mocked by a comedian at the White House

Correspondents' Dinner while she sat at the head table, a few feet from the microphone. She had been asked to leave a restaurant, with members of her family, because of the man she worked for. She had been second-guessed by reporters, columnists, and former officials on nearly every answer she gave, often in terms no previous press secretary had faced, and she had gone back to the lectern the next day anyway.

She had also earned, through all of it, the steady confidence of the President, who kept her at the podium longer than any other press secretary of his first term. In an administration famous for sudden departures, for officials who learned of their dismissals from the news, she was leaving on her own schedule, with his public thanks and his public encouragement. That alone set her apart.

The Road Not Yet Taken

It would have been easy, on that June afternoon, to treat the President's words about Arkansas as a pleasantry, the kind of generous send-off a boss gives a departing aide. The governor's office was more than three years away. The incumbent, a Republican, had not yet finished his second term. Sanders herself said nothing that day about running for anything.

But the people who knew her best understood that the President had touched on something real. Arkansas was not simply the place she came from. It was the place that had made her. Her father had been its governor. Her mother had raised three children in its Governor's Mansion. She had graduated from its most famous public high school and from the Baptist university where her father had studied. She had helped elect both of its United States senators. When she spoke of home, she did not mean a point on a map. She meant the Buffalo River and the flooded timber of a duck hunt at sunrise. She meant a whole way of life.

Three and a half years after that announcement, she did exactly what the President had hoped she would do.

January 10, 2023

On January 10, 2023, standing on the steps of the Arkansas State Capitol in Little Rock, Sarah Huckabee Sanders raised her right hand and took the oath of office as the forty-seventh governor of Arkansas. She was the first woman to hold the office, the first daughter of a governor to take the oath, and, at forty, the youngest governor then serving anywhere in the United States.4 Only four months earlier she had undergone surgery for cancer. On that January morning she told the people of her state that she was cancer-free.

And on November 3, 2026, the voters of Arkansas elected her to a second term.5

What This Book Is

This book tells the story that connects those moments. It begins in a pastor's family in Arkansas, follows a girl who stuffed envelopes for her father's first campaign at the age of nine, and traces the career of a political professional who learned her trade in Iowa, Ohio, and Arkansas before she ever stood at a lectern in Washington. It examines her service as deputy press secretary and then press secretary, including the episodes that made her a hero to millions of Americans. And it follows her back home, through a campaign for governor, a fight with cancer, a sweeping reform of the state's schools, a series of income tax cuts, natural disasters, and a second election victory.

The book is organized in five parts. Part One, "Formation," describes her family, her childhood in a governor's household, and her education. Part Two, "The Apprenticeship," follows her through more than a decade of campaign work, from county field operations to the Iowa caucuses to a winning Senate race. Part Three, "The Briefing

Room," covers the 2016 campaign and her years in the Trump White House. Part Four, "Speaking for Herself," follows her from the White House to the governor's race and through her battle with cancer. Part Five, "The Governor," examines her first term as governor of Arkansas, her return to the President's side during the 2024 campaign, and her reelection in 2026.

Readers who come to this book admiring Sarah Huckabee Sanders will find here the record of why so many people do. Readers who come to it knowing her only from the headlines will find a fuller and more human portrait than the headlines ever allowed.

But every reader is asked to remember one thing as the story unfolds. Behind the podium, behind the headlines, behind the campaign signs and the cable segments and the arguments that never seemed to end, there was a person: a daughter, a wife, a mother of three, a woman of faith who believed, as her mother had taught her, that fear of the unknown paralyzes us but faith propels us to charge boldly ahead. She loved every minute, she said. Even the hard ones.

And remember one more thing. This book belongs to a series called The President's Choice, and the title is meant literally. Donald Trump chose Sarah Huckabee Sanders three times: first to speak for his campaign, then to speak for his White House, and finally, from the stage on that June afternoon, to go home and lead her state. Each time, she proved the choice right.

This is the story of those minutes, and of that choice.

PART ONE

Formation

Chapter One

Hope and Faith

A Town Called Hope

Every life has a geography, and the geography of this one begins in southwest Arkansas, in a small railroad town in Hempstead County whose name has always seemed almost too fitting for a political family. The town is called Hope.

Mike Huckabee, the father of the future governor, was born there in 1955.1 Hope was the kind of place where people knew their neighbors, where church on Sunday was not a matter of debate, and where a boy with a quick mind and a talent for words could imagine a future larger than the town itself without ever ceasing to belong to it. Hope would become famous in American politics, because it was also the birthplace of another Arkansas boy who would one day be governor, Bill Clinton. That two men from the same small town would both lead the state, and both run for President, is one of the improbable facts of Arkansas history. It is also a reminder of something that Arkansans have long understood about themselves: a small state can produce outsized ambitions.

In 1974, Mike Huckabee married Janet McCain. He studied religion at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia and spent the early years of his career as a Baptist pastor and in Christian broadcasting before he entered politics.2 He was a preacher before he was a politician, and he never stopped being one. The cadences of the pulpit, the sense of a message that must be delivered whether or not the audience wants to hear it, and the conviction that public life is a form of service rather than a form of self-advancement ran through everything he would later do in government. His daughter would inherit those cadences. Anyone who listened closely to Sarah Huckabee Sanders at the White House podium, or on the Capitol steps in Little Rock, could

hear in her voice the rhythms of a Southern Baptist sermon: the plain words, the measured pauses, the turn toward a closing line meant to be remembered.

The Young Bride

Before there was a pastor, a governor, or a presidential candidate, there was a young married couple facing something that no young married couple should have to face.

The story belongs to Janet Huckabee, and her daughter has told it many times, most memorably on the day she was sworn in as governor. Standing on the Capitol steps in January 2023, Sarah Huckabee Sanders told the people of Arkansas about her mother. “She was 20 years old and in her first year of marriage when she was diagnosed with spinal cancer,” Sanders said. “The doctors told her she might not live. If she did live, they said she’d never walk again, and if she did walk again, she’d definitely never have children.”3

Imagine, for a moment, what those words would have meant to a twenty-year-old woman in the 1970s. She was newly married, at the very beginning of a life she and her husband had planned together. She was told, in effect, that the life she had imagined was over before it had begun. She might die. If she lived, she might never walk. If she walked, she would never be a mother.

She lived. She walked. And she became the mother of three.

“Three kids and seven grandkids later,” her daughter said on that inauguration day, “Janet Huckabee is as tough as ever.”4 The crowd on the Capitol grounds applauded, and the woman being honored was there to hear it.

A Creed Is Born

What makes the story more than a family memory is the lesson Janet Huckabee drew from it, a lesson her daughter would carry with her through every season of her life. Sanders has quoted her mother's words in speech after speech: "if God had given us the ability to look into the future, none of us would go beyond where we were at that moment."5

It is a remarkable sentence, and it rewards a second reading. Janet Huckabee was not saying that the future is hopeful, or that suffering always leads to good things, or that faith makes pain disappear. She was saying something harder and more honest. If we could see everything that lay ahead of us, the trials as well as the blessings, we might be too frightened to take a single step. The mercy of God, in her understanding, lies partly in what He does not show us. We are given enough light for the next step, and we are asked to take it.

From that thought her daughter drew her own conclusion, which has become something like a personal creed: "Fear of the unknown paralyzes us, but faith propels us to charge boldly ahead."6

That phrase, and the conviction behind it, would recur in her speeches for years. She used a version of it in her response to the State of the Union address in February 2023, when she told a national audience that "you and I were put on this earth for such a time as this to charge boldly ahead." She used it again at the Republican National Convention in July 2024, days after an assassin's bullet had grazed the man she had once served.7 The words "for such a time as this" come from the Book of Esther, the story of a young woman who found herself, unexpectedly, in a position of great influence at a moment of great danger, and who was told that perhaps she had been brought there for exactly that purpose. It is not hard to see why the verse spoke to her.

A Pastor's House

The family's early life followed Mike Huckabee's ministry. Sarah grew up in Pine Bluff and Texarkana before the family moved to Little Rock.8 A pastor's household is a particular kind of home. It is never entirely private. The congregation knows the pastor's children, watches them, and holds them, fairly or not, to a higher standard. The telephone rings at all hours, because someone has died, or someone is sick, or someone is in trouble and needs to talk. The family's schedule bends around Sunday services, Wednesday-night suppers, weddings, funerals, and revivals.

For a child, such a home can be a burden. It can also be an education. A pastor's child learns early that leadership means showing up when people are hurting. She learns that a crowd can be won with a story and lost with a careless word. She learns that every public figure lives under scrutiny, and that the scrutiny does not stop at the front door. Sarah Huckabee learned all of these things long before she learned them again, at far greater intensity, in Washington.

Her parents were people of strong faith, and they raised their children in it. Governor Sanders would later describe her parents, in her inaugural address, as two people who "raised me in a home with love," who "prayed for me and nurtured my faith," and who "taught me the meaning of principled leadership by the power of their example."9 The phrase "the power of their example" is worth noticing. She did not say that her parents lectured her about leadership, or sent her to leadership camps, or drilled her in the arts of politics. She said they showed her. Children of strong families often say this, and it is usually true. The most important lessons are rarely spoken. They are watched.

The Youngest of Three

Sarah Elizabeth Huckabee was born on August 13, 1982, in Little Rock. She was the youngest of three children of Mike and Janet Huckabee, and the only daughter; she has two older brothers, John Mark and David.10

To be the youngest child and the only girl in a house with two older brothers is to learn certain lessons early. Her father would later say so, with evident pride. “She grew up pretty doggone tough,” he said. “She had to, as a matter of survival.”11 Anyone who has grown up in such a household will recognize the truth in that. The youngest learns to hold her ground, to talk fast and think faster, to refuse to be intimidated by people who are bigger and louder. She learns, in short, the skills that would one day serve her well in a room full of reporters.

But her father was careful to add a second half to his description, and it is the half that matters most to understanding her. “She’s got a very sweet heart,” he said, “but she’s tough, and she can handle herself.”12

A sweet heart and a tough exterior. It is a combination that her admirers would recognize instantly and that her critics often failed to see. At the podium, they saw only the toughness: the unyielding defense of the President, the refusal to concede a point, the sigh that greeted a repeated question. They did not see the mother who mentioned her daughter’s birthday on one of the most stressful days of the administration, or the young woman whose voice broke when she said goodbye. Both were real. Both had been formed in a pastor’s house in Arkansas.

Everything Costs Something

The Huckabees made a point of teaching their children the value of work. Mike Huckabee recalled that when his children went to church camp as teenagers, the family would not simply pay their way. “We told them that they needed to work in the cafeteria or snack bar to cover their costs,” he said, “not because it was absolutely necessary, but because we wanted them to understand and appreciate that everything costs something.”13

Everything costs something. It is a simple lesson, the kind that parents across America try to teach their children every day. In the life of Sarah Huckabee Sanders it would take on a meaning her parents could not have foreseen. The most visible job in American politics would cost her privacy, peace, and at times a measure of safety. Her family would pay part of the price. She would pay it, she would later say, willingly, because the work was worth it. But she never pretended that it was free.

The Seed of Everything

It would be easy to read the story of Sarah Huckabee Sanders backward, to look at the governor and the press secretary and assume that the path was always clear, that a politician’s daughter was simply destined to become a politician. That is not how lives work. Her parents did not set out to raise a governor. They set out to raise children who loved God, worked hard, told the truth as they understood it, and treated other people with respect. Everything else came later.

But the seeds were there, planted early. A mother who refused to be defeated by a diagnosis. A father who believed that words could change minds and that public service was a calling. A household where faith was not a Sunday habit but the frame of daily life. And a small state, rich in history and pride, that would always be home.

In the years ahead, she would carry those seeds into some of the most difficult rooms in America. They would sustain her there. And when the time came to choose what to do with everything she had learned, they would lead her back to where they had been planted.

The World of the Southern Church

To understand the household she grew up in, it helps to understand the world of the Southern Baptist church in the 1980s and 1990s. In towns across Arkansas, the church was far more than a place of Sunday worship. It was the center of community life. Families gathered there on Sunday morning and Sunday evening, and again on Wednesday night for supper and prayer meeting. Children attended Sunday school, vacation Bible school in the summer, and youth camps where they learned hymns and memorized scripture. Weddings, funerals, baptisms, and potluck dinners marked the rhythm of the year.

In that world, the pastor and his family occupied a special place. They were expected to be present at every gathering, to visit the sick, to comfort the bereaved, and to set an example in their own lives. The pastor's children were known to everyone. Their successes were celebrated and their missteps noticed. It was a demanding position, and also a privileged one: a front-row seat to the joys and sorrows of an entire community.

Sarah Huckabee grew up in that front row. She saw her father preach on Sunday and sit by a hospital bed on Monday. She saw how a congregation rallied around a family in crisis. She learned the hymns and the verses that would one day surface in her speeches. And she absorbed, without perhaps realizing it, the conviction that leadership is a form of service to a community, not a privilege to be enjoyed.

Words That Carry

The Southern church also gave her a particular relationship with language. Sermons are a form of oratory meant to move people, to persuade them, and to stay with them after they leave. A good preacher knows how to tell a story, how to build to a climax, how to repeat a phrase until it lodges in memory. Generations of Southern politicians, from both parties, learned the art of public speaking in the pews long before they ever stood on a campaign stage.

Her own speeches bear the marks of that training. Her inaugural address built, like a sermon, toward a closing call to faith and action. Her convention speech returned to a single refrain. Her signature phrases, from “first in everything” to “normal or crazy” to “charge boldly ahead,” were crafted to be remembered and repeated. The pastor’s daughter had learned how words can carry.

About the Author

Robert Miller is the President and Treasurer of International Publishing Corporation of Washington, D.C., and the author of its China Series. He is the Executive Director of Vets Working for Vets, Inc. (vetsworkingforvets.com), a Washington, D.C., nonprofit organization, and he serves as International Defense and Government Relations Advisor for G3 Global Solutions LLC (g3globalsolutions.com).

Mr. Miller is a United States Army veteran of the Vietnam War era. He served from 1970 to 1976 as a military policeman with the 545th and 709th Military Police Battalions in Germany and the United States, and later as an Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID) narcotics undercover operative in Frankfurt, achieving the rank of Sergeant, and he received an honorable discharge. After his military service he held police commissions with two agencies, serving as a commissioned Special Police Officer with the New Orleans Police Department from 1977 to 1979 and as Honorary Police Captain of the Ocean Springs, Mississippi, Police Department from 1979 to 1981.

He served as Civic Bureau Chairman of the Young Men's Business Club of New Orleans from 1976 to 1977, and as Religion Director and host of a religious radio program for WNPS, the NBC affiliate radio station in New Orleans, from 1975 to 1977. In 1986 he received the Key to the City of Butler, Pennsylvania.

He holds two law degrees, a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B.) and a Juris Doctor (J.D.), and has led legal services firms in Washington, D.C. A justice reform advocate since 2004 with Constitutional Law Advocates, he has helped free more than 100 people from prison over the past twenty years. A Grand Master holding the seventh-degree black belt in Taekwondo and Hapkido, he earned his first black belt in 1969 and taught Asian and Eastern philosophy for more than five decades. He is the co-author of The Metaphysics of Creative

Consciousness series and the author of The President's Choice Series, of which this book is a part. He lives in Washington, D.C.

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The President’s Choice

Portraits of the people who served
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