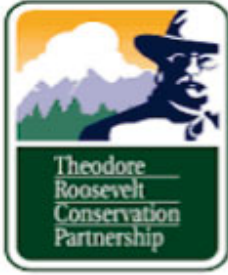




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Sarah Huckabee Sanders gets a SOTU spotlight. Trump gets the credit for her ascent in the GOP.

Arkansas governor gets plum speaking gig and Trump gets proof his influence endures

BY DAVID SIDERS

Sarah Huckabee's State of the Union response Tuesday night marked the payoff of an extraordinary bet that many Republicans took in 2016 — that they could hitch themselves to Donald Trump, accumulate power in the process and, ultimately, outlive the most unsavory parts of the association.

It hasn't always worked. In competitive states and districts, several of Trump's chosen candidates flopped in the midterms. And there's a whole fraternity of Trump allies — people like Rudy Giuliani, Roger Stone and Steve Bannon — who have found themselves embroiled in legal and political scandal.

But among those who did prosper, Sanders ranks among the richest. The former press secretary is now the governor of Arkansas, having leapfrogged dues-paying politicians who would have, in another era, been frontrunners for the post. And on Tuesday night, she bracketed President Joe Biden on behalf of the Republican Party — a massive responsibility for the most watched political address of the year.

"Most Republicans clearly didn't get hurt by their association with Trump," said Saul Anuzis, a former chair of the Michigan Republican Party. "They probably even benefited from it."

Delivering the State of the Union response is, by most accounts, a dreadful gig, one filled with political tripwire. The most memorable speeches are recalled for all the wrong reasons: a bit of spittle on one's lips, a frantic lurch for a water bottle at the table nearby.

But getting tapped for the response is still an honor. And it does give a snapshot for where the opposition party is trending at that moment in time. When Sanders delivers her address it will provide a healthy reminder that Trump's impact on the GOP is likely to last for generations, even if many Republicans claim they're ready to move on from him.

Kevin McCarthy — "my Kevin," as Trump once called him — was sitting behind Biden during his address. In attendance were members of Congress, including Ryan Zinke of Montana, a Trump-era Interior secretary, and Max Miller of Ohio, a former Trump aide. Ronna McDaniel, who went so far as to jettison the family name — Romney — to remain in Trump's good graces, last month was reelected chair of the Republican National Committee.

Several former Trump administration officials are poised to run for president, including Mike Pence, Mike Pompeo and Nikki Haley. Even Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, now Trump's chief rival for the Republican presidential nomination, has Trump to thank for the distinction. He would likely be a little-known former congressman



Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said John Thomas, a Republican strategist, "was able to navigate Trump world and come out the other side of it." Sanders delivered the GOP's State of the Union response on Tuesday.

ROGELIO V. SOLIS/AP

had he not ingratiated himself to Trump in his gubernatorial primary in 2018.

Indeed, DeSantis may have provided the template for Sanders to follow. Then-Florida Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam had worked his way through GOP circles and appeared likely to win the

Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, benefited from a lineage recognizable to conservatives in her home state. And selecting her to respond to Biden on Tuesday may help Republicans to reconnect with suburban women, who fled the GOP in the Trump era. In an appeal to Latinos, with whom Trump made modest gains during

her stature in Congress — said on Twitter that the GOP "embodies the American dream."

But in the Republican Party, there is another dream in the post-Trump era, too: Riding the Trump fervor to a place of prominence, and then — after two impeachments, Trump's loss of the White House

He described her as drawing a "road map to success in the post-Trump Republican Party."

Prior to joining the Trump White House, Sanders had been a fairly standard political operative. She worked for several campaigns, including her father's, and was not considered a MAGA die-hard. But she embraced the role, fought aggressively with the press, and earned Trump's trust in the process. It was her experience in that position that she leaned on heavily when she got into the GOP primary last year, as much as she did her political lineage.

"It's not just that [Sanders] was literally the voice of Donald Trump in those early, heady days, but she also has the Huckabee name, and conservative Republican primary voters know the Huckabee name," said Janine Parry, who runs the Arkansas Poll, a survey housed at the University of Arkansas in Sanders' home state. "She's old-school Republican but not old-school Republican. She's Trump — but not Trump-Republican ... She does kind of straddle two worlds."

And how does a Republican straddle them? Right now, Sanders does what a lot of Republicans are doing — stating a fondness for Trump while skirting any question about whether they want him to be president again.

"I love the president," Sanders said on Fox News last month, when asked whether she would endorse Trump's 2024 campaign. However, she said, "Right now, my focus isn't 2024, it's focusing here, in Arkansas."

In a statement announcing her State of the Union engagement, Sanders said she will contrast "the GOP's optimistic vision for the future against the failures of President Biden and the Democrats." It's early in her post-Trump career, still. And as the opinion editor of the Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette put it over the weekend, "she's not held elective offices of any kind before."

"What exactly is it that recommends her to be, for one night, the standard bearer for the national Republican Party?" wrote the editor, Greg Harton.

Eventually, though, Sanders will have a post-Trump record. She is already starting to assemble one. On her first day as governor, she signed an executive order banning use of the term "Latinx" in state government documents, and issued other directives involving critical race theory and TikTok — all conservative-pleasing measures.

"She's not sitting around in an office waiting for the phone to ring for people to ask her what she thinks about an issue," said Robert Coon, a Republican strategist based in Little Rock, Ark. "She's running a state."

Trump may have elevated her profile, Coon added, but eventually, like everyone who makes it to the other side of their Trump experience, she will forge some record of her own. "Make no mistake, it's about her," said Coon. "She's tremendously talented. She understands politics. She's incredibly smart."

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— Janine Parry Director, Arkansas Poll

party's nomination before DeSantis got Trump's attention with his frequent Fox News hits defending his presidency.

None of Republican politicians enjoying Trump-adjacent rises are without selling points of their own. Sanders, daughter of former Arkan-

his tenure, Rep. Juan Ciscomani of Arizona will deliver a Spanish-language response.

Heralding the two lawmakers' appearances, House GOP Conference Chair Elise Stefanik — the New York Republican whose own MAGA conversion elevated

in 2020, and a disappointing midterm — living to make something more of it.

Sanders, said John Thomas, a Republican strategist who runs a pro-DeSantis super PAC, "was able to navigate Trump world and come out the other side of it."