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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.

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. In that position that she leaned on heavily when she got into the GOP primarily 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 office for any kind of a long time.”

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

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 the 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, it’s going to 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.

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