

## The World Burns. Sarah Sanders Says This Is Fine.

The White House press secretary has set a new precedent: Partisanship over patriotism. Victory over truth.



Kevin Lamarque / Reuters / Chip Somodevilla / Getty / The Atlantic

MEGAN GARBER

JUL 19, 2018 | CULTURE

Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to [The Atlantic Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

SIGN UP

**O**N WEDNESDAY, TWO REPRESENTATIVES of the United States government held press briefings, both of them touching on one of the most astonishing news stories of the Trump presidency—a series of events that had begun two days earlier, when Donald Trump traveled to Helsinki to meet, behind closed doors, with Vladimir Putin.

Here was the White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders [responding to a question from \*The New York Times\*' Maggie Haberman](#) about the notion that Putin had raised of a group of U.S. officials, including the former ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, being interrogated by Russia: “The president is going to meet with his team, and we’ll let you know when we have an announcement on that.”

Here, on the other hand, was Heather Nauert, the State Department spokesperson, [on the](#)



11 American citizens and the assertions that the Russian government is making about those American citizens. We do not stand by those assertions.”

It was a striking juxtaposition, this tale of two briefings: the one spokesperson, outraged that the United States would entertain the idea of handing over its citizens to a nation that is an autocracy and an adversary; the other offering, in response to the suggestion, a pro forma “We’ll let you know if there’s an announcement on that front.” *The Stakes of Diplomacy* chafing against *The Art of the Deal*. A house divided, live on C-SPAN.

What the collision makes clear, though, is how readily the first spokesperson, as she stands behind the White House briefing lectern, also stands behind her boss. It is a well-worn cliché of the Trump presidency—which is also to say, it is a well-worn cliché about the Trump psyche—that, within a White House as vertically integrated as this one, loyalty counts above all. And Sarah Sanders, the press secretary who will have been on the job, this week, for one year—the White House **announced** her promotion to the role in July of 2017—performs that loyalty every time she meets the press.

This is a White House that prioritizes the scoring of points over the complexities of compromise. Sanders, on behalf of the president she works for—a happy warrior in a culture war that has found a front in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue—takes for granted an assumption that would be shocking were it not so common in the American culture of the early 21st century: There are things that are more important than truth.

Things like, for example, the claiming of victory against the other side. Things like, for example, the owning of libs and the trolling of Dems and the ability to victor-write history so thoroughly that you can **claim**, with an air of annoyance about being asked to make such a clarification in the first place, that the president’s long history of commentary on Russia has now been nullified because the president had, in a single public event, “misspoken.” All of which made Wednesday’s briefing—*the president will work with his team*—both deeply typical and astounding: Here was one of the most prominent representatives of the White House choosing partisanship over patriotism. Winning above all.

**T**HERE ARE, IN SARAH SANDERS’S briefing room, a series of predictable punch lines. Even the blandest of informational updates—as in yesterday’s **announcement** that *the president will be traveling to Kansas City, Missouri, next Tuesday to address the Veterans of Foreign Wars 119th Annual Convention, because he is committed to our veterans and has worked to reform the VA and to ensure veterans are given the care and support they deserve*—tend to be

of his presidency, the foolishness of those who might question those priors. (Sanders, [commenting on civility](#) after her [departure](#) from the Red Hen restaurant in Lexington, Virginia, sparked a national debate on the matter: “America is a great country, and our ability to find solutions despite those disagreements is what makes us unique. That is exactly what President Trump has done for all Americans by building a booming economy, with record low unemployment for African Americans and Hispanics, the defeat of ISIS, and the ongoing work to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula.”)

Sometimes far fewer words are required. Sometimes standing by the president—supporting Team Trump from within—comes down to subtler work: taking Trump’s actions and coating them with the palatable veneer of evident normalcy. Michael McFaul, Bill Browder, Vladimir Putin, the notion that the United States might decide to use its citizens as bargaining chips in order to make deals with a despotic regime known for murdering dissidents: *We’ll let you know if there’s an announcement on that front.*

It is an approach that bumps up against world history and American foreign policy and, just as Nauert’s statement reminded, Trump’s own State Department. But it is also an approach that is wholly consistent with the Trumpian worldview—one that valorizes strength above all (he has “great control over his country,” the president [has mused of Putin](#)), one that is populated by a collective of *uses* and *thems*, one whose sum, always, is zero. Ivana Trump [tells the story](#) of the birth of Don Jr. on New Year’s Eve of 1977: She wanted to name the boy after his father, Donald’s first wife recalls; Donald the elder, however, balked at the notion. “What if he’s a loser?” the future president said.

A world of winners and a world, consequently, of losers: It is perhaps the clearest distillation of Trumpism. This White House, whether it is taking on health care or gun policy or tax policy or immigration policy, assumes everything is a competition—and reveres, to the general exclusion of the alternative, [#winning](#). Sickness is weakness. Poverty is weakness. Otherness is weakness. And Trump understands the world according to one crucial insight: He himself is not weak. He is strong. He is a very fine person, fine enough to be the consummate winner: This is a White House that subscribes to the incontrovertible realities of the world according to one man. *Donaldpolitik.*

It is this world—it is this worldview—that Sarah Sanders, every day, helps to spin. Her handling of Maggie Haberman’s McFaul-related question on Wednesday was not a gaffe; it was, in fact, a tidy reminder of one of the ways that Sanders has transformed the job of the press secretary itself in the year that she has spent as its occupant. Gone are the tense cordialities that defined

Josh Earnest; gone, too, are the shouted lies of Sean Spicer and the swaggering camp of Anthony Scaramucci.

Instead, briefing by briefing, Sanders strides to the lectern in the Brady briefing room and makes an argument about who belongs among the world's winners (Trump and those in his orbit, the forgotten Americans who will be helped by Trump's work, North Koreans, the participants in the upcoming Veterans of Foreign Wars 119th Annual Convention in Kansas City, Missouri) and who must be counted among its losers (congressional Democrats, Democrats in general, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, the American news media who are not on the payroll of the Fox News Channel). Sanders recently responded to a question from CNN's Jim Acosta [by saying](#), "I know it's hard for you to understand even short sentences."

This kind of thing—civility, perhaps, by another means—seeks to justify itself through the argument that Jim Acosta is "fake news," and that therefore Jim Acosta is a loser, and that therefore Jim Acosta needs to be mocked by the White House press secretary on national television. It's partisanship, all the way down. (When reporters point out that the president lies—[more than 2,000](#) known ones at this point—Sanders often responds by accusing them of being agents of an anti-Trump agenda.)

In a Sanders briefing, even the most straightforward questions are often met with obfuscation and indignation. Even the most basic matters of fact are disputed. The logic of the battlefield wins out, and the assigned teams face off, and it becomes clear, if you watch for long enough, that the thing being fought for is reality itself: facts, truths, common knowledge. The content and the contours of the world as we agree to understand it. In Sanders's briefings, [the Overton window](#) doesn't widen or narrow so much as it angrily yells at you for not being a door.

**I**N THE SUMMER OF 1954, a group of 22 boys, all of them rising sixth graders, were invited to spend time at a summer camp in the Sans Bois Mountains, in southeastern Oklahoma.

While there, the idea went, the kids would swim and boat and run and play and otherwise do the things you'd expect might be done at a summer camp tailored to the tendencies of 11-year-old boys. The campers were separated into two cabins—two separate camps, effectively—that were located far enough apart to be beyond seeing and hearing distance of one another. Neither group was aware, at first, of the other one. Nor were they aware that their idyllic camp was also a psychological test—the one that would come to be known as the [Robbers Cave experiment](#).

It went like this: The boys, extremely similar but strategically separated, were initially left to

in, each group was made aware of the fact that there was another cabin—a different cabin—nearby. With remarkable efficiency, as the psychologists Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn Wood Sherif and their team of counselor/assistants observed it, the logic of the team took over: The boys—they had been selected not only for similarities in age, but also for ethnicity and class and intellect—immediately wanted to compete with the members of the other cabin. And the competitions were not the friendly kinds you might associate with summer camp. Members of each group started to call the strangers of the other taunting names. They conducted raids on the other cabin, stealing some possessions and destroying others. One group, attempting to lay claim to the baseball diamond the two cabins shared, staked a flag on the pitcher's mound. The other group burned it down.

*Robbers Cave*, *Lord of the Flies* but with better experimental design, remains a dire warning, not only when it comes to psychology, but also when it comes to democracy—a lurking suggestion of how readily humans can be convinced to turn against one another on the grounds of otherness itself. It has lingered throughout American history. James Madison worried about factions and Alexander Hamilton worried about demagogues and the Framers as a messy collective worried about the inevitable inertias of human pettiness—and it was because they understood intuitively what the events at Robbers Cave would suggest, centuries later, to be true: Citizens would be inclined, they realized, to argue not just in the best of ways, but in the worst. It would be exceedingly easy for their fragile new republic to lose itself in the temptations of partisanship.

It is a fear that is realized every time the person whose job it is to help the American people understand the daily doings of the executive branch instead mocks White House reporters to their face. It is a fear that is realized every time Sanders, the daughter of [a man who has made a career with the help of regular denigrations of the “media”](#) (a collective to which, through a TV show broadcast to the masses, he insists he does not belong), uses her pulpit to promote the president's [“fake news awards.”](#) It is a fear that is realized every time Sanders accuses reporters of [“purposely putting out information you know is false”](#) and [“purposefully misleading the American people”](#)—offenses that, anyone familiar with the workings of the press will know, are grounds for instant firing. It is a fear that is realized every time Sanders [compares](#) professional White House reporters to her three small children.

And it is a fear that is realized every time Sanders takes a question about a specific matter of public policy—the state of diplomacy with North Korea, the fate of the Affordable Care Act, the White House attitude toward presidential self-pardons, the use of an American diplomat as a pawn to ratify the deal-making capabilities of the 45th president—and, instead of offering

stubbornness of the Democrats, the venality of the media, the manifest greatness of Donald Trump. Team above all. Victory at all costs.

American politics, overall, has ceded so much to the logic of warfare: This is a time of factions, of [widespread bad faith](#), of normalized trolling, of [the plodding weaponization of everything](#). But Sanders, for her part, serves as an omen in real time: a reminder of what happens when the airy ideals of republican government—compromise, commonality, objective truth—get refracted through competition and resentment and battle. The daily victories claimed by political Darwinism. “[Lol nothing matters](#),” the old joke goes, but it turns out one thing still does.

Last fall, when she was still settling into the press secretary job after taking it over from Scaramucci, *The New York Times* [asked](#) Sanders, who is very much an evangelical Christian, what led her to want to work for Donald Trump, who is very much not. Sanders replied, matter-of-factly: “I thought he could win.”

**T**HE AMERICAN PRESIDENT went to Helsinki, and his performance on that stage—*treason*, people said in response, and *impeachment*, and *shocking*, and *shameful*, and *disgrace*—laid bare the truth of the matter: The team in question, in this White House, is no longer one’s country. It is so much smaller than that.

It is this team—her team—that Sarah Sanders stood up to defend on Wednesday, as she has done so many days before: a team that, in her apparent estimation, included the president of Russia but did not necessarily include her fellow Americans. (*We’ll let you know if there’s an announcement on that front.*)

If Sanders thought the whole thing was absurd, she kept it to herself. If she thought the whole thing was shocking and sad, she did not let on. That would hurt the cause. She’ll let you know what Trump says, if he says anything at all. On Thursday, Trump again [called](#) those who dare question him the “enemy of the people.” Hours later, Sanders [had more news to break](#): The president is planning to invite Vladimir Putin to America, to visit the White House, this fall. Neatly wrapped in the language of bureaucratic protocol (“ongoing working-level dialogue”), you can almost overlook the fact that Sanders is announcing that a dictator will soon be welcomed to the West Wing. This is the new world order to which Sanders is so fiercely loyal. This is *Donaldpolitik*. Her president, right or wrong.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**MEGAN GARBER** is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, covering culture.

