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HUM 104

A-Draft

13 May 2026

### Moving Backwards and Forwards: Multidirectional Memory in Political Speech

In the new digital age, where headlines break in real time and social media makes everyone a journalist, politicians can reach more voters than ever before. Often, politicians choose to grow their followings by explicitly describing the details of their platforms. However, the United States also has a long tradition of encoded political messaging. For example, in the 1960s the leaders of the Republican Party discovered that they could communicate race-baiting ideas to Southern voters without explicitly stating them. Later politicians—including Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama—also embraced cryptic rhetorical tactics, bringing encoded language to the forefront of American politics. In recent years, politicians like Donald Trump have used memory to craft implicit messages in their political speech, pushing radical platforms of change and redirection. Multidirectional memory serves as the means and foundation of encoded language in political speech. In his 2020 address accepting the Republican nomination for president, Donald Trump employed this tool alongside revolutionary language in order to attract change-averse voters to his campaign.

In order to understand the significance of Donald Trump's rhetorical strategy, it is first necessary to view memory as multidirectional. Michael Rothberg coined this term in his 2009 book *Multidirectional Memory*. According to Rothberg, memory is often "subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing" (Rothberg 3). Memory is not simply a collection of historical facts from which politicians may select one idea or another, but an overlapping and

evolving array of conversations. For this reason, “individuals and groups play an active role in rearticulating memory” (Rothberg 16). As politicians appeal to memory, they add new material to existing historical narratives. In turn, multidirectional memory frames and supports politicians’ campaigns. According to Rothberg, “historical memory serves as a medium for the creation of new communal and political identities” (Rothberg 11). If memory can reach into the future, then politicians can base new ideas on old events. These new ideas may call for radical change as they rely on and redefine memory. Multidirectional memory acts as both subject and object in conceptions of the past and the future.

Multidirectional memory can help politicians establish their identities because it is fundamentally noncompetitive. While competitive memory sees the “public sphere as a pre-given, limited space,” multidirectional memory “encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others” (Rothberg 5). Rothberg sees memory as a creative tool rather than a scarce resource. By identifying the multidirectional, noncompetitive nature of memory, one can understand how politicians’ appeals to memory simultaneously construct discussions of the past and inform campaigns of the present.

At a basic level, multidirectional memory is both collective and shared. This means that appeals to memory target specific groups of people while existing within broader contexts. When multiple individuals remember an event within a common framework, that framework is “collective.” When individuals and groups communicate with each other about an event, their different perspectives become a single story. That story becomes a “shared memory” (Rothberg 15). Since shared memory is built through conversations between individuals, a politician who

appeals to shared memory is directly targeting those people. A reference to collective or shared memory recognizes a specific audience within a larger conversation.

In the past, politicians have appealed to shared memory in order to encode their values and gain the support of new voter demographics. For instance, in his 1964 campaign for president, Barry Goldwater heavily relied on a shared memory of the Civil War in order to capture votes from white Democrats in the South. To attract white Southerners who “had never voted Republican in their lives” (Haney López 21), “Goldwater compared his states’ rights [anti-integration] platform with the past efforts of southern Democrats. ‘These things...[we] are fighting for today are the same things your fathers’ grandfathers fought for as Democrats,’ he declared (R. Baker 1964)” (Galsworthy). Goldwater’s strategy is a valuable example of how politicians before Donald Trump have employed multidirectional memory. First, Goldwater used the existing memory framework of the Lost Cause to reach white Southern voters. Then, he added to that conversation by comparing the old Democratic Party, which was originally opposed to civil rights reforms, to his Republican platform. In this way, Goldwater covertly expressed his own racialized values. Although Barry Goldwater lost the 1964 election by a landslide, he succeeded in breaking up the “Democratic Solid South” (Galsworthy). His appeals to memory laid the foundation for the Republican Party’s acquisition of white Southern members. This demographic shift was revolutionary for the GOP. By appealing to shared memory in the South, Barry Goldwater was able to attract likeminded Americans to his 1964 campaign.

More than fifty years after Goldwater harnessed the power of memory in the South, Donald Trump adopted a similar strategy with a national set of listeners. In his 2020 Republican nomination acceptance speech, Donald Trump used collective memory to encode his admiration of Big Stick diplomacy and white male populism. Trump initially celebrated the United States as

“the home of larger-than-life figures like Teddy Roosevelt and Andrew Jackson, who rallied Americans to bold visions of a bigger and brighter future” (Thrush). Trump’s reference to the two former presidents represents his reliance on American memory to signal support for controversial values. Teddy Roosevelt is particularly memorable for his “Big Stick Diplomacy” approach to international relations. Roosevelt famously adopted the West African proverb “Speak softly and carry a big stick” as his own motto for domestic and foreign affairs. He used that principle to “police the small debtor nations [in Latin America and the Caribbean] that had unstable governments” (Britannica Editors). This historical context reveals the big stick hiding behind Trump’s brief mention of Roosevelt. Listeners at the Republican National Convention might have deduced that, by listing Teddy Roosevelt as a role model, Trump meant to signal his personal aggressive stance on foreign policy. Likewise, Trump’s choice to mention Andrew Jackson represents his prioritization of white working-class Americans. Jackson is “known as a populist and the first president who did not come from the nation’s East Coast elite” (Katkov). Notably, Jackson infamously passed the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and owned enslaved people. By praising Andrew Jackson, Trump likely hoped to draw his listeners’ attention to an empowering but racialized narrative about the former president. His decision to emphasize positive details about Andrew Jackson sent yet another encoded message about his own political priorities. Trump’s references to Teddy Roosevelt and Andrew Jackson used different shared memories to indirectly convey his political agenda.

Even as Trump’s appeal to presidential memory encoded his controversial values, it justified those same beliefs. Trump hoped to substantiate his arguments for American expansion and white male populism by invoking authority figures in his rhetorical strategy. Notably, he called the two presidents “larger-than-life” (Thrush). This assured listeners that Jackson and

Roosevelt's ideas transcended their lifetimes. Their stances on race, democracy, foreign policy, and patriotism emerged from American memory and stood behind Donald Trump as he made his speech.

Donald Trump's mention of former American presidents moved both backward and forward in time, making it an appeal to multidirectional memory. His celebration of Andrew Jackson drew on a historical narrative that exists within a framework of patriotism and democracy. In an 1863 cartoon print from the Library of Congress (see appendix), artist Samuel Canty portrays a "somewhat premature allegory of reconciliation between the North and South, extolling former Presidents Andrew Jackson and George Washington as defenders of the Union." Near Jackson "stands the figure of Liberty holding a large American flag" (Canty). Evidently, some Americans did remember Jackson as a president who fought for freedom and his country. Trump's celebration of Jackson appealed to the people who shared this memory. As he borrowed the memory, he also built on it. In a 2025 statement, Trump proclaimed: "My Administration is proudly upholding the vision of President Jackson's historic movement by reining in unwieldy government spending, advancing a strong manufacturing base, and restoring a Government that answers to the American People" (The White House). This later appeal to memory reached back into time to assign positive meaning to Jackson's presidency. It revealed the intention behind Trump's 2020 celebration of Jackson, namely his embodiment of a skewed narrative about the controversial president. Trump revealed memory's multidirectionality as he both relied and built on a favorable collective memory of Andrew Jackson.

In addition to Roosevelt and Jackson, Trump used a third presidential figure to communicate and support the details of his own political platform. Just after formally accepting his nomination, Trump called the GOP "the party of Abraham Lincoln" (Thrush). In mentioning

Lincoln, Trump appealed to a shared American memory of Lincoln's role in unifying the country and issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. By emphasizing Lincoln's part in shaping the Republican Party, Trump painted himself as a similarly revolutionary figure. He signaled that he, too, intended to lead his followers into a new era. After connecting the GOP to Lincoln, he expressed his party's readiness to accept "millions of Democrats, independents and anyone who believes in the greatness of America and the righteous heart of the American people" (Thrush). Trump brought an existing memory forward in time, then reached backward to assign it additional meaning. His connection to Lincoln suggested that, since a Republican leader abolished slavery, the current party prioritizes minority voters in a similar way. This narrative ignores the GOP's 20th century history of "us[ing] racism to become 'the White Man's Party,'" a political strategy led in part by Barry Goldwater (Haney López 18). Trump's portrayal of Lincoln's values as the Republican Party's values added substance to a memory that overlooks the GOP's past racism. Trump's speech drew and built on Americans' shared memory of Abraham Lincoln to signal change as well as racial tolerance to his listeners.

Like his use of presidential history, Trump's description of Westward Expansion reflected his reliance on collective memory to encode and support a revolutionary attitude. Toward the end of his speech, Trump appealed to the imperialistic concept of manifest destiny: "When opportunity beckoned, [our American ancestors] picked up their bibles, packed up their belongings, climbed into their covered wagons, and set out West for the next adventure" (Thrush). Trump's description of American pioneers used the memory framework of manifest destiny to support his expansionist attitude. Under the doctrine of manifest destiny, Americans thought of "the United States as a divinely Chosen Nation" (Hughes 143) and thus justified their aggressive expansion into the West. Trump's retelling of Westward Expansion asked listeners to

adopt that sense of divine entitlement once again. An existing collective memory of manifest destiny allowed Trump to implicitly push for American domination abroad while supporting his argument with a common belief in the US's right to "overspread" in the names of God and liberty (O'Sullivan). Trump's use of collective memory both communicated and justified his stance on the American right to expand.

Trump capitalized on another American memory to argue the importance of a strong US military. After describing Westward Expansion, Trump moved on to discuss four major battles: "Whenever our way of life was threatened, our heroes answered the call, from Yorktown to Gettysburg, from Normandy to Iwo Jima" (Thrush). Trump mentioned famous American victories from the Revolutionary War, Civil War, and World War II to portray military involvement in a positive light. As he appealed to those memories, he furthered the myth of American innocence. According to Richard Hughes, author of *Myths America Lives By*, "a profound sense of innocence characterized the American experience for much of the twentieth century...America stood for good against evil, right against wrong, democracy against tyranny, and virtue against vice" (Hughes 198). Hughes identifies a collective American memory of the United States as morally superior to its enemies. When Trump mentioned a threat to the American way of life in his speech, he constructed a framework of innocence around his references to major battles. He hoped that his listeners would remember US military victories as a testament to their country's flawless moral character. While this tactic would have failed without an existing framework to pull from, Trump actively chose to connect American innocence with domination. His speech both used and built on a collective memory of American innocence in order to campaign for military assertiveness.

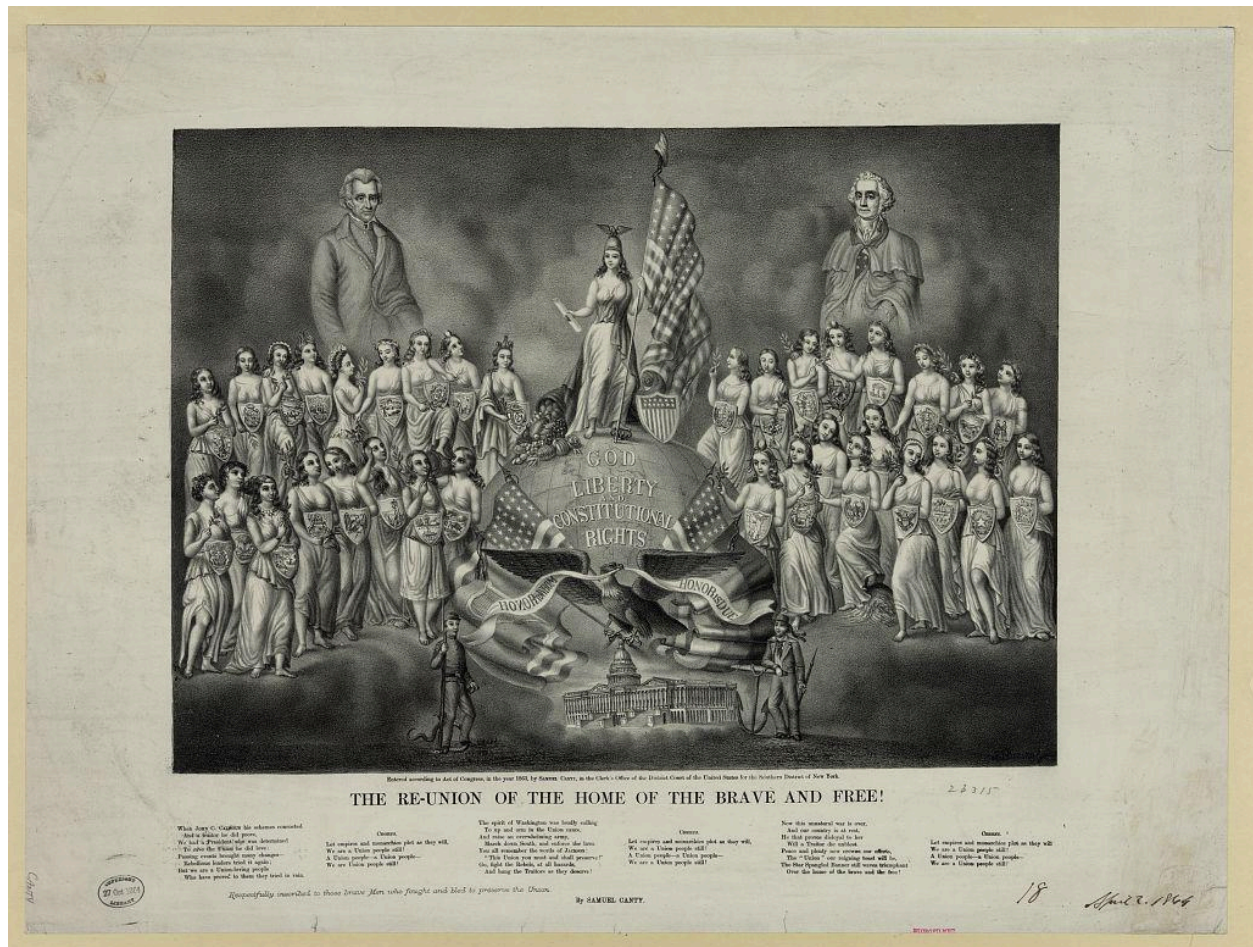
Apart from bolstering US exceptionalism, Trump mentioned major US military victories to connect with voters' sense of national pride. After naming the four battles, he described how "American patriots raced into cannon blasts, bullets, and bayonets to rescue American liberty" (Thrush). Trump's emphasis on patriotism reinforced the multidirectional quality of his appeal to memory. While battle victories are events of the past, courage and love of country are attitudes that can be adopted in the present. Trump's speech asked listeners to recall past conflicts within a common framework of patriotism. This means that the four military conflicts did not illustrate merely a long history of American prowess, but the American commitment to patriotism that enabled those victories. Trump appealed to Americans' memories of successful battles in order to tie US military power to the natural duty of a citizen.

While many of Trump's appeals to collective memory were strictly historical, others hid within future-focused language. These more immediate juxtapositions of past and future further demonstrated Trump's reliance on multidirectional memory to deliver encoded messages. At several points in his speech, Trump emphasized his goal to "launch a new age of American ambition in space" (Thrush). In looking toward future American conquests of outer space, Trump implicitly asked listeners to think back to the old US-Soviet Space Race of the 1960s. During the Space Race, "[s]pace supremacy was extensively linked to world domination" (Werth 567). Like Trump's mention of Teddy Roosevelt, space functioned to signal Trump's aggressive stance on foreign policy in his 2020 speech. His declaration recalled the past as it outlined goals for the future, moving in two directions at once. Without his audience's collective memory of the Space Race, Trump's future-focused language would have failed to support his campaign values. Trump's revolutionary language contained an appeal to memory despite its immediate subject matter.

Donald Trump pulled from existing American memories to argue his own radical policy approaches. As he delivered encoded messages, he used his new ideas to shape existing collective memories. This multidirectional strategy encouraged Trump's audience to consider his revolutionary ideas within a familiar framework, attracting voters to his campaign. Although Trump's 2020 speech was notable for the sheer amount of collective memories that it employed, it was not rhetorically unique. US politicians like Barry Goldwater historically made appeals to memory in order to attract new voters to their platforms. Trump's speech differed from Goldwater's approach because of the intention behind his rhetorical strategy. Goldwater was looking to attract new voters without offending a broader portion of the population. On the other hand, Trump was not afraid to alienate people during his campaigns for president. Where past politicians used encoded language to maximize their votes, Trump layered his speech with memory to rally people to his vision. He first told an attractive story about the US's old strength and innovation, then sold that history to listeners in the form of his new campaign. This suggests that the purpose of politicians' appeals to memory is no longer concealment, but persuasion.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others.

Samuel Canty's Cartoon:



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