The secret to Donald Trump's electoral strategy? Emotion, not policy | Arlie Hochschild | The Guardian

In the grandiose evening finale to the Republican national convention, a dazzling row of illuminated American flags topped with golden eagles stand like soldiers guarding the pillared back side of the White House. Donald, and Melania, in a flowing, springtime green gown and spike heels, walk grandly down a long red carpet to the center stage. We hear fiery speeches, soaring notes of God Bless the USA, the cameras panning to dazzling bursts of fireworks which seem to shower the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial. For many of the 24 million viewers watching, mainly on Fox, the imperial finale of the four-day Republican convention was magical in every sense.

Pundits ask about “Trump’s strategy” and search for logic and fact in a campaign platform that does not exist – for the first time in recent memory. Analysts find logical inconsistencies: Trump proclaims himself the “law and order president” while on Fox he compares shooting to golf strokes; daily dashes off reckless go-get-em tweets; and seven of his closest advisers – Cohen, Flynn, Manafort, Papadopoulos, Gates, Stone, Bannon – have been indicted. He makes misleading statements such as: “The US has among the lowest case fatality rates of any major country.” In a video on day two of the convention, Trump is shown congratulating five grateful immigrants who have become American citizens, magically erasing his description of Mexican immigrants as “rapists” and “animals” and his border policy of caging children.

All of this incoherence leads some analysts to conclude Trump has no strategy. But he has one. It's an emotional strategy and it works like magic. Its aim is to evoke or suppress a range of emotions – fear, depression, anger at "fake Americans", love of "real Americans" and, above all, awe of himself. In pursuit of this strategy, emotion is everything.

Other public figures have used emotional strategies too, of course, but they use them as part of some larger approach or show less gift for it. But Trump strongly identifies with his chosen target audience – white, fearful, resentful, humiliated. Trump uses the truth itself as a dramaturgical tool. He treats reality – climate change, Covid-19 – as just another switch one can turn off or on, like starting the music or cueing the fireworks.

The key targets of his strategy, and the most susceptible to it, are white, older, non-college-educated, evangelical and male. They live in economically declining rural, rust belt or blue-collar suburban America. Millions of such white men are insecurely employed, in unsteady webs of family relations, subject to addiction and despair.

"When coal jobs left," a 39-year-old, high-school-educated recovering addict, grandson of a coalminer and son of a truck driver from eastern Kentucky, told me a few days ago, "I felt like the whole town turned into a funeral parlor. Everyone was bummed."

He described what he saw coming down the road in front of a women's recovery center where he works as a night watchman. "I saw a dad walking beside his five-year-old son who was pedaling his four-wheeler car. It was sweet, a rare sight for around here," he added. "But then I saw their flag; it had Trump's head on Rambo's body, holding a machine gun, a military helicopter to his side."

Donald Trump speaks from the South Lawn of the White House on the fourth day of the Republican national convention. Photograph: Alex Brandon/AP

A series of flags and posters carry Trump's magic farther – one poster shows him as Washington bravely crossing the Delaware, eagle on extended arm. In another, he's standing in a business suit atop a military tank, flag behind him, explosions all about. In a third, he's again in a suit, riding a dinosaur, shooting a gun.

Nationwide, compared with men of color or white men with bachelor's degrees, white men without four-year degrees are most likely to feel that their standard of living is worse than that of their parents. And whatever their race, compared with those with college degrees or more, men with high school educations or less are three times as likely to say the American dream is "out of reach". Especially now, fearful of job loss and urban turmoil, this group craves to lift shame off themselves, blame protesters, immigrants and the left, and seek promise in magical solutions.

The convention spectacle seemed to speak to them. Trump especially evokes the emotions on the two sides of law and order. On one side, he invites compassion for Mark and Patricia McCloskey of St Louis, who, fearful

for their suburban home, drew guns on trespassing Black Lives Matter marchers who broke their iron gate. Their home, their suburb, their assumptions about life, all threatened. On the other side, he stirs the image of the – tacitly male, uniformed – heroic protector of the McCloskeys of America. Or would-be protector. On day four, the convention featured Madison Cawthorn, a partly paralyzed 25-year-old Republican politician from North Carolina. Looking back five years, Cawthorn described "feeling hopeless". Then, he rose from his wheelchair, with help, to get on his feet to salute the flag. For those who have felt hopeless too, his effort to stand tall was undoubtedly inspiring.

Trump almost entirely sidesteps the black and white rage at the murder of George Floyd and others. "I'm not here to receive or address your anger and grief," he seems to say. Indeed, he seems to propose a tacit emotional division of labor between the two political parties. "I'll lead Republicans in *avoiding* the task of listening to that rage, fear and despair," he says, in effect, while offering no concrete plan to address the underlying cause of such feelings. Let the Democratic party be the compassionate social workers, while we Republicans bravely guard America from endlessly haranguing marauders with darker skin.

Meanwhile, on that final evening on the South Lawn, 1,500 of the president's elite supporters, dazzled by the spectacle, sat mostly maskless, unprotected from a virus against which the second amendment is no help. Magically passing over the 6,000,000 Americans who have contracted Covid and the 180,000 who have died in the trenches of this ill-gotten war, Trump threw all caution to the wind. Don't feel afraid of Covid-19 like those timid scientists, he seemed to say. Be bold. Be fearless. Take your Covid-19 like a man.

The Democratic national convention organized itself, by contrast, in recognition of the dangers of Covid-19. No maskless throngs mixed. Joe

Biden and Kamala Harris even skipped the usual arms-around-shoulder embrace. Instead of focusing on law and order, the convention celebrated racial justice and offered a new deal for all working families. Instead of central control, it gave the impression of creativity, and even, through a Hollywood MC, the actor and comedian Julia Louis-Dreyfus, irony and humor. Instead of one man, it seemed to offer the model of governance through collaboration.

This contrast poses the most urgent and ominous challenge for the Democrats and this embattled nation in the 10 weeks ahead. To complex problems, Trump offers simplistic, strongman magic. Like the image on the five-year-old boy's flag of a Rambo-Trump, muscular arms wrapped around a magical missile gun, the image fits his magical claim that only he can fix everything.

But Biden must show that real strength doesn't depend on magic. It comes from getting real – about Covid, climate change, racism and also about pain felt by the other side. It comes from pursuit of another emotional strategy – to reward goodness, heal unnecessary shame, and speak to a shared desire to join as one nation. We're in for a tough fight. But over the long haul, sheer force yields frightening but brittle power, while the political legitimacy of compassion leads to a harder to achieve but more lasting and resilient power. Goodness has a magic of its own.

- Arlie Russell Hochschild's most recent book is Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right, a finalist for the National Book Award

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Betsy Reed

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