How Should We Interpret Robert Mueller’s Words?

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One’s political views affected their interpretation of Wednesday’s televised statement by the outgoing special counsel, Robert Mueller. The reactions from both sides of the aisle were predictable.

For obvious reasons, this state of affairs is unfortunate. Partisanship too often trumps (no pun intended) fair and well-reasoned analysis. This situation is not inherent and can be remedied by drawing on a knowledge of rhetoric, an understanding of which dates back to the writings of ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.

As a scholar of rhetoric, for over four decades I have empowered my students to use what they learn about communication not to preach or reinforce prior partisan narratives, but to read more accurately and thoughtfully both the lines and between the lines of messages.

This kind of analysis is clearly demanded in today’s highly polarized political world where a more objective interpretation of information is requisite for democratic deliberation.
For example, carefully parsing language helps reveal much about Wednesday’s televised statement by the outgoing special counsel, Robert Mueller. To those on the left who criticize Mueller for not going far enough to hold President Donald Trump accountable, as well as to those on the right who claim that Mueller cleared the President and the matter is therefore closed, I recommend a close rhetorical analysis of what Mueller said; his words speak for themselves, painting a clear picture of why these political interpretations are inaccurate and misleading.

First, his message communicated that he was behaving professionally and in strict accordance with the limited charge he was given by the attorney general. Second, Mueller’s words were deliberately chosen, making transparent the real reason he was asked to conduct an investigation (which, contrary to some, was not the Steele dossier), his rebuke of what President Trump has been saying about the conclusions of the Mueller Report (namely, that the Russians did not interfere in the 2016 election to help one candidate, that there was no collusion and no obstruction, and that it exonerated the president), Mueller’s disagreement — albeit phrased respectfully — with Attorney General William Barr, and, most important, the fact that the Constitution, unlike the special counsel’s restricted legal investigation, provides a specific mechanism for addressing Trump’s behavior and holding him accountable for possible wrongdoing.

Therefore, before listening to the spin of politicians and media pundits who already have made up their mind about the president and who seem reticent to reevaluate their position, I encourage Americans to apply commonsense principles of rhetoric to read the lines and between the lines of the written transcript of Mueller’s statement.

Such a careful rhetorical analysis—for the reasons just delineated—will show Americans of all political stripes that the Mueller Report and his Wednesday statement deliberately were worded in a manner designed to make obvious that he would not exceed his prescribed role as special counsel, that the case against Trump is far from closed, and that Mueller now placed the ball in Congress’s court to do their duty and act.

Mueller’s message was explicitly and implicitly transparent: The matter of potential wrongdoing by President Trump, as the Constitution specifies, is the
jurisdiction of and should be investigated and assessed by American citizens and their legislative representatives.

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