A rhetorical perspective often provides insights into political events that might be less possible via historical, political scientific and journalistic accounts. The impeachment and senate trial of a president is a case in point.
On January 22, 2020, House impeachment manager Rep. Adam Schiff (California) delivered a powerful opening presentation at the Senate trial of President Donald Trump. According to some, the speech was a tour de force—one that rhetorical critics will examine closely for years to come and portions of which might be used productively by public speaking teachers. It could even become an example of the capacity of rhetoric to change people’s minds.

First, Schiff’s cogent arguments were deftly adapted to multiple audiences, including members of the Senate, Americans and history. The speech blended together a rigorously evidenced and chronologically ordered narrative, with frequent internal summaries followed by succinctly phrased overarching themes focusing the audience’s attention on salient takeaways.

Second, Schiff effectively invoked references to our nation's origin and the concerns of our founding fathers—all of which by obvious implication paralleled what is transpiring today with the behavior and motives of the 45th President of the U.S. Moreover, he delineated clear, common sense and easy to digest constitutional principles enabling the audience—even if they at first disagree—to comprehend the case for the President being removed from office. Comprehension, of course, is the first step of persuasion.

Finally, every section of Schiff’s speech concluded with carefully crafted, as well as sincerely and passionately asked rhetorical questions. Each question was designed to challenge audience members, imploring Americans and the Senate that they have no
choice but to support conviction less our democracy be threatened and the country’s future placed in danger.

Obviously, it is not yet known if Schiff’s speech will make a difference—whether it will influence the outcome of the senate trial or change the preferences of 2020 voters. Nevertheless, in my nonpartisan opinion as a scholar who for over 40 years studied and taught political communication, I believe Schiff’s presentation offers an excellent example of how rhetorical principles can be used effectively in a speech addressing a highly complicated and controversial topic. It also gives public speaking teachers a pedagogically useful artifact to share with students aspiring to become proficient speakers.

Beyond this rhetorical analysis, let me conclude with a more partisan claim: As an advocate for the impeachment and conviction of Donald Trump, I hope Schiff’s speech, as well as those presented by other House managers, will become illustrations of the capacity of discourse to create cognitive dissonance, resulting in at least a few senators rethinking their support of the President and their beliefs about whether witnesses should testify.

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