Trump’s Team Uses Rhetorical Strategy to Deflect, Divert

February 2, 2020

Scholars of political communication understand that one available rhetorical strategy to those accused of wrongdoing is to change the genre, the speaking occasion—what in her research Carol Jablonski labeled “generic transference.” We are witnessing an excellent example of this rhetorical tactic in the Senate trial of the 45th President of the United States.

The President’s attorneys (most recently Pam Bondi), Iowa Senator Joni Ernst, and now Florida Senator Rick Scott are attempting to rhetorically transform the Senate trial, an occasion normally calling for legal discourse, into a pitch for Donald Trump’s 2020 re-election, something typically employing campaign rhetoric.

First, notice that the President’s attorneys suddenly shifted attention on Monday from Trump did “absolutely nothing wrong” to a lengthy critique of Hunter and Joe Biden. Pam Bondi forcefully delivered what many describe as a red meat attack that not only is irrelevant to but will have no impact on the ultimate outcome of the Senate trial.
Second, consider as well the less than subtle statement made—with a smile, no less—by Iowa Senator Joni Ernst who may have spilled the beans following Monday’s proceedings: "Iowa caucuses are this next Monday evening. And I’m really interested to see how this discussion today informs and influences the Iowa caucus voters, those Democratic caucus goers. Will they be supporting VP Biden at this point?"

Finally, on Tuesday Senator Rick Scott from Florida surprised many by running a strange television ad in Iowa. Sitting next to a microphone Scott declared that he wants to "thank the Democrats for badly botching this impeachment charade and for spending so much time in a cover up for Joe Biden." He then purports to present the "the real story here," itemizing a series of false and previously debunked allegations that former vice president Joe Biden engineered the removal of a top Ukrainian prosecutor who was investigating a company associated with his son, Hunter.

Why would Scott run this ad in Iowa instead of focusing his attention on the Senate trial where he serves as a judge/juror? The answer is obvious. Like Ernst and the President’s attorneys, Scott is engaging in generic transference, attempting to transform the Senate’s case, which necessitates legal rhetoric, into a personal attack on Biden, a tactic normally employed in campaign discourse.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, what the President’s attorneys, Ernst and Scott are doing comes directly out of Donald Trump’s own rhetorical playbook. Put simply, this seemingly orchestrated defense strategy is tantamount to invoking, reinforcing and amplifying Trump’s politically motivated effort to get Ukraine to find evidence to weaken
Biden’s chances to be nominated in 2020—and thus increase the likelihood of a second term for Trump as President.

We shouldn’t be surprised by this rhetorical maneuver. After all, like other politicians accused of wrongdoing, as well as their supporters, generic transference might provide a successful rhetorical tool for diverting and deflecting attention from the issue at hand.

As someone who has studied and taught political communication for nearly five decades, this strategy reminds me of the well-documented claim that often what matters is the form rather than the content of messages—something we continually have seen with Donald Trump.

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