President Donald J. Trump and members of his administration are stonewalling on the issue of the Mueller report and subsequent congressional investigations. They are employing a political version of
the “four corners” offense. The four corners offense, technically the four-corner stall, is an offensive strategy for stalling in basketball. Four players stand in the corners of the offensive half-court while the fifth dribbles the ball in the middle to run down the clock. It was a strategy used in college basketball before the shot clock was instituted. This conclusion is unmistakable in view of Trump’s rhetoric and its effects.

As Aristotle made clear, rhetoric operates in the realm of the contingent (probable) rather than the absolute. Hence, although none of us can be certain about the intent of a politician’s words, nor their effects, we have clues—pieces of a puzzle that can be put together through rhetorical analysis. Scrutinizing what is said, when and how it is said, as well as what isn’t said, enables rhetorical analysts to make informed inferences about intent and effect.

How so?

First, the evidence mounts to suggest that President Trump’s refusal to allow former White House counsel Don McGahn and others to provide documents, testify, and comply with subpoenas is a deliberate and calculated attempt to play a four corners offense. The same is true of Trump’s incessant mantra: “No collusion, no obstruction.” Early on, he preemptively controlled this narrative, disseminating it through his surrogate, Fox News and via relentless Twitter posts.

Second, the President seems to believe that this tactic will force the Mueller issue into the courts, thus making resolution prior to the 2020 election extremely unlikely. Like the four corners offense, he will run out the clock. While many legal observers contend that Trump eventually will lose these legal battles, there is ample reason to believe that this potentially is Trump’s most effective rhetorical strategy to remain in office, especially given the support of Republicans in Congress and voter fatigue with and apparent disinterest in the Mueller report.
Third, Tuesday’s declaration by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell that the Mueller matter is a “closed case,” echoing the same sentiment previously expressed by Senate Judiciary Chairman Lindsey Graham, is further indication that this rhetorical strategy may work. As House Speaker Nancy Pelosi candidly observed Tuesday, “Trump is goading us [Democrats] to impeach him.”

Regardless of whether one insists that the Democrats, because of the duty to discharge their oversight function, have an obligation to impeach (both as a necessary response to the Mueller findings as well as the President’s refusal to comply with almost every Congressional request, which itself reasonably could be interpreted as “obstruction”), surely we can see why Trump’s stonewalling might very well work.

As always, this poses an enormous challenge for Democrats who need to devise an effective rhetorical strategy to counter the President. Thus far, there doesn’t seem to be one. Hence, those opposed to Trump should worry about whether the Democrats will be successful in holding him accountable for his actions and whether he will be voted out in 2020.

Yet, this is far more than the typical partisan concern expressed by those opposed to an incumbent President’s policies. It is about larger democratic principles, the rule of law and the Constitution’s system of checks and balances.

Behind closed doors, Republican senators and representatives must have angst over the same issues. However, to date they remain loyal to party, pragmatically believing that holding power—and what comes with that (saving their own positions, court picks, deregulation, etc.)—is more important than standing up for principle and what is right for the entire nation.

Will the average American see through what Trump and the Republicans are doing? Will they be able to separate the substance and form of the President’s discourse? It is doubtful. We live at a time when many of us
are locked into our existing opinions and receive most of our information from electronic screens and from those who reside in the same political bubble.

If nothing else, this issue documents that today’s political events—and the polarized responses they evoke—constitute a real test of the great experiment created by our constitutional framers.

The moral of the story: as scholars of communication, we have an obligation to teach the principles of rhetoric to the public as well to our students. This will help all citizens become better consumers of political discourse regardless of their political commitments.

POSTSCRIPT: Although the Democrats are in an awkward position, in the last few days their best rhetorical strategy might be emerging. Democrats may have decided to walk a fine line, continuing relentless investigations, delaying impeachment until as Pelosi says it becomes “self-imposed” by the President—all while passing legislation benefitting Americans. The rhetorical advantage of this approach is that it allows Democrats to fulfill their constitutionally prescribed oversight function, giving the President enough rope to hang himself. They then can claim: “We didn’t act in a partisan manner by rushing to impeachment hearings. However Trump’s actions forced the choice.” In short, Democrats would have a stronger persuasive position, arguing that if impeachment occurs it isn’t politically motivated—it is the President’s choice (“self-imposed”).
Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor in the Moody College of Communication and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), University of Texas at Austin—a nationally acclaimed cross-disciplinary initiative.

Publications include two books and over one hundred journal articles, chapters, and reviews. Taking rhetoric beyond disciplinary boundaries, Cherwitz is a frequent contributor to professional associations and educational organizations, exploring issues pertaining to academic engagement and public