The Rhetorical Effect of A.G. Barr’s Testimony

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Attorney General Barr’s testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee was both instructive and frustrating. There was a huge difference between how the Republicans and Democrats questioned, as well as the form of Barr’s responses to each side.

The Democrats’ questions and Barr’s hair-splitting responses may not get us anywhere. I fear that Americans do not have the patience and willingness to wade through this nuanced interaction; nor will they read a 400 page report that raises numerous important points.

The Republicans, on the other hand, seem to have diverted the issue to, among other things, FISA procedures and the reason for Mueller’s appointment. They applauded Mueller’s report and underscored his credibility, claiming the matter has been concluded.

Frankly, future testimony by Mueller may do little to change the narrative that Trump and his sycophants preemptively framed and made more persuasive by Barr’s initial letter and news conference. Holding Trump accountable and providing a check against his lying and inappropriate—perhaps illegal—behavior comes down to finding a rhetorical strategy that will remove the President from office.

As a communication scholar, that strategy remains talking about the 2020 election and not immediately calling for impeachment hearings. Congressional
oversight and investigations are important but must not blur the kinds of issues that might persuade Americans to vote for the Democratic nominee.

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