Rhetorical Miscalculations Can Have Disastrous Political Consequences

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One of the ironies in politics is how our nation’s leaders often employ rhetoric that results in the exact opposite effect of what was intended. Put simply, whether by design or effect, rhetoric plays an enormous role in politics, and it can produce negative as well as positive outcomes.

Let me explain.
Full disclosure: I am a lifelong Democrat and a fervent critic of Donald Trump, remaining convinced that he has been perhaps the most dangerous president in the history of the United States. Nevertheless, as a more objective observer who for over 40 years was a scholar and teacher of communication, I am astounded and perplexed by the all-too-frequent examples of Democratic leaders engaging in counterproductive and self-defeating rhetoric — something that undermines their political advantages.

The two most recent examples of this are: Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s tearing up the President’s State of the Union address and last week’s verbal attacks on Supreme Court Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Neil Gorsuch leveled by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer.

As a partisan, in both cases I completely understand — and even sympathize with — the motivation underpinning these behaviors. At the same time, however, they underscore a persistent rhetorical miscalculation resulting in potentially disastrous political consequences.

Why do I say this?

If there is one thing we have learned since Donald Trump became president it is that using tactics directly out of his playbook inherently won’t work, are doomed to failure and in fact will backfire. As tempting as it may be to employ Trump-like discourse, therefore, all this succeeds in accomplishing is adding grist to his and the Republican rhetorical mill.

It was hardly surprising, for instance, that following Pelosi and Schumer’s actions, a disingenuous but arguably persuasive outrage was voiced by the President and his minions, including Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. Sadly, Pelosi and Schumer dished up the perfect
rhetorical opportunity to persuade some that Democrats are guilty of
the very things for which they correctly accuse Trump.

The moral of the story: It’s time for Democrats to stop shooting
themselves in the foot. They need to be more astute in the
communication strategy, avoiding discourse that damages their own
cause, credibility and capacity to persuade others. After all, character
will be on the ballot in 2020. So why would Democrats want to weaken
their most persuasive argument?

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