As we saw in Thursday’s reaction by the Republicans and White House to passage of the House Resolution approving rules for the impeachment inquiry, the rhetorical deflection and diversion campaign by the Trump administration is predictable and ongoing.

Rather than denying the facts, whenever he is in trouble the President and his supporters distract the media and public by changing the subject, focusing on process issues and attacking others. Whether by design or effect, examples of this rhetorical tactic abound.
As someone who has studied and taught political communication for 45 years, let me offer a few cases.

First, in response to the increasing number of credible witnesses coming forward to testify that the President may have held up congressionally appropriated money to Ukraine (perhaps constituting a quid pro quo), Trump and his Republican supporters have accused the impeachment inquiry process for being unfair and denying due process.

They also have attacked the ethos of highly qualified civil servants and professional witnesses. Whether these accusations are accurate, the discourse itself takes our eyes off the content and substance of what is being said about the President.

Second, the President’s sudden and unexpected pullout from Syria, as well as his unusual letter to Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan, created a fury of reactions. This prompted numerous media stories and resulted in political conversations diverting attention from the impeachment inquiry and the mounting evidence of wrongdoing.

Third, Trump used his announcement of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi’s death as what some have called a public relations stunt, focusing attention more on himself and using inflammatory and inhumane language to describe the details of the killing (the truthfulness of which has not yet been confirmed). Again, the President’s rhetoric—whether intended or
not—deflected attention from the primary discourse of the time pertaining to impeachment and charges of wrongdoing.

Consider the most recent example of diversion and deflection. In a new interview conducted during his trip to Israel, Trump senior advisor Jared Kushner said that he is “cleaning up the messes Biden left.” Trump biographer Michael D'Antonio poignantly notes, “Kushner was obviously trying to distract us from the worsening impeachment crisis that has enveloped the administration, and to impress the Oval Office occupant.”

Aside from the fact that it was inappropriate for Kushner to engage in politics on foreign soil, this is what we would expect from a person with a background in real estate development and absolutely no foreign affairs or national security credentials—one whose only qualification is that he is the son-in-law of President Trump.

Moreover, we shouldn’t be surprised that Kushner lashed out against Biden on the very same day Trump was being exposed for wrongdoing and for placing national security in jeopardy—an irrefutable reason for impeachment that not even Trump Republicans can dismiss—by war hero Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, a real expert with national security bona fides.

Chalk up Kushner’s gamesmanship as just one more instance of the administration’s ongoing rhetorical tactic of circumventing the truth. As additional and compelling facts incriminating Trump pile up,
we must wonder how long diversion, deflection and distraction can be sustained as a rhetorically viable defense of the President. At a time of extreme political polarization, the issue is whether this rhetorical tactic will be effective—especially in states whose Senators might determine if Trump is convicted and that also will be pivotal to the outcome of the 2020 election.

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