The Fallacy of Senator Lamar Alexander’s Argument

February 3, 2020

Late in the evening on January 30, 2020, Lamar Alexander, the distinguished senator from Tennessee who is retiring, announced his decision to vote against the motion allowing additional documents and witnesses in the trial of the 45th President of the United States. This decision reflected a desire to place party and longtime friendship with Majority Leader Mitch McConnell above principle.

As someone who respects Alexander and who taught a course in argumentation for 45 years (a class comprised of aspiring lawyers), I was astounded by the logic of the major claim included in his written statement: “I worked with other senators to make sure that we have the right to ask for more documents and witnesses, but there is no need for more evidence to prove something that has already been proven and that does not meet the United States Constitution’s high bar for an impeachable offense.”

Alexander’s claim, offered prior to the actual verdict, is akin to a judge or juror in a court of law declaring they oppose the introduction of new
evidence because they already have made a decision about and know the outcome of the case. Such an assertion constitutes an effort to suspend due process because of an a priori decision about the yet to be determined verdict—something that contradicts the guarantee of a fair trial. It also is an example of the kind of fallacious reasoning I taught students in my argumentation class to question.

Like most members of congress during the Nixon era who in their obituary are remembered for their position on Watergate, Alexander’s decision will be a significant and indelible part of his legacy. While he had a chance to end his career on a courageous and high note, history will record that his otherwise successful career is stained by his vote on the motion to introduce witnesses and documents.

Rick Cherwitz,
Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor Emeritus in the Moody College of Communication and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), University of Texas at Austin.