Why Democratic Rhetoric is Counterproductive

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I am a lifelong Democrat and a fervent critic of Donald Trump, remaining convinced that he has been the most dangerous president of the United States. Nevertheless, as scholar and teacher of communication for over forty years, I am flabbergasted by and worried about the frequent examples of Democratic leaders engaging in counterproductive and self-defeating rhetoric.

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

While in both cases I understand—and even sympathize with—the motivation for these behaviors, they underscore a persistent rhetorical miscalculation that results in potentially disastrous political consequences. If there is one thing we have learned since Trump
became president it is that using tactics out of his playbook inherently won’t’ work and in fact backfire. As tempting as it may be to employ Trump-like discourse, all this succeeds in doing is to ad 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 expressed by the President and his minions, including Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. Pelosi and Schumer afforded the perfect rhetorical opportunity to contend that Democrats are guilty of the very things for which they correctly accuse Trump.

It’s time for Democrats to be more communicatively astute, avoiding discourse that undermines their own cause, credibility and capacity to persuade others. After all, character will be on the ballot in 2020; so why weaken its persuasive impact?

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