Pelosi’s Pen-Signing Ceremony—the Medium Is the Message

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As a doctoral student in communication 45 years ago, I learned that the job of a rhetorical critic is not to promote partisan beliefs nor advocate specific causes. Instead, rhetorical scholars must stand back and in a detached manner analyze the discourse of both political parties—even if that portends negative implications for the critic’s own preferred politicians and public policies.

Full disclosure: I believe the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives was right and had sufficient evidentiary justification to impeach President Donald Trump. I also believe the Senate should subpoena witnesses which might result in a vote to remove the President from office. Nevertheless, allow me in my capacity as a communication scholar to offer these nonpartisan observations about how House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s pen-signing ceremony was a rhetorical miscalculation—how it contradicted her original message, providing fodder for the Republicans.
To be clear, signing the articles of impeachment is an important historical and rhetorical moment, one that should be marked appropriately by creating a permanent record for future generations. However, in my opinion as someone who has spent his academic career studying political messaging, it was a rhetorical mistake to stage a formal signing ceremony followed by the gleeful distribution of pens.

Such formal signing ceremonies normally are reserved for celebratory occasions, rhetorical instances when important laws promoting the public good are enacted. Several examples immediately come to mind, including President Lyndon Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act in 1968, President Barak Obama signing the Affordable Care Act in 2010 and President Donald Trump signing the Criminal Justice Reform bill in 2018. Conversely, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s choice to create a ceremony for signing the articles of impeachment communicated the wrong message, especially to those who still could be persuaded that the charges against Trump are serious, and not just a political move by those who oppose and dislike the President—a theme promoted by President Trump and the Republicans from the outset of the impeachment inquiry.

Pelosi’s message for months prior to and following the House vote on the articles had been that impeachment is a “sad” and “somber” event and that nobody is happy about this “necessary” and constitutionally obligated action. Yet her signing the impeachment articles seemed overly orchestrated, dramatic and designed to create a media event. This played directly into President Trump’s hand, affording him and his defenders additional evidence to rebuke the seriousness of the moment. Moreover, Pelosi’s smiling and handing out pens to fellow Democratic House members—which was captured in print and video by the press—did not match her prior message; in fact, it undermined that message.
Pelosi’s actions offer a lesson for politicians of all political stripes: Be careful not only to have a consistent and rehearsed rhetorical message but make sure choices about how and where to communicate parallel and reinforce those messages. After all, sometimes the medium and choice of occasion can contradict the intended and well thought out message. As Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously noted, “The medium is the message.”

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