Adam Schiff’s Speeches—a Rhetorical Tour de Force

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During the past week I watched closely the opening and closing arguments delivered by House impeachment manager Rep. Adam Schiff at the Senate trial of the 45th President of the U.S. Aside from my partisan beliefs, as a communication scholar for over 40 years I was impressed and inspired. His speeches provided an archetypal example of Francis Bacon's definition of rhetoric as "the application of reason to the imagination for the better moving of the will."

According to some, Schiff’s speeches were a tour de force, oratorical gems—presentations that rhetorical critics will examine closely for years to come and portions of which might be used productively by public speaking teachers. It could even become an example of the capacity of rhetoric to change people’s minds.

First, Schiff’s cogent arguments were deftly adapted to multiple audiences, including members of the Senate, Americans and history. The speeches blended together a rigorously evidenced and chronologically ordered narrative, with frequent internal summaries
followed by succinctly phrased overarching themes focusing the audience’s attention on salient takeaways.

Second, Schiff effectively invoked references to our nation's origin and the concerns of our founding fathers—all of which by obvious implication paralleled what is transpiring today with the behavior and motives of the 45th President of the U.S. Moreover, he delineated clear, common sense and easy to digest constitutional principles enabling the audience—even if they at first disagree—to comprehend the case for the President being removed from office. Comprehension, of course, is the first step of persuasion.

Finally, every section of Schiff’s speeches concluded with carefully crafted, as well as sincerely and passionately asked rhetorical questions. Each question was designed to challenge audience members, imploring Americans and the Senate that they have no choice but to support conviction less our democracy be threatened and the country’s future placed in danger.

Obviously, it is not yet known if Schiff’s speeches will make a difference—whether they will influence the outcome of the senate trial or change the preferences of 2020 voters. Nevertheless, in my nonpartisan opinion as a communication scholar, I believe Schiff’s presentations offer excellent examples of how rhetorical principles can be used effectively in speeches addressing a highly complicated and controversial topic. It also gives public speaking teachers pedagogically useful artifacts to share with students aspiring to become proficient speakers.

While vested, I predict Schiff will go down in history as a true patriot, dutiful public servant and courageous politician—someone who tried to save our constitutional system of government. While not an advocate without flaws (after all, who is), there can be no doubt that he loves his country and our Republic. I wonder if, regardless of our partisan views,
we will be able to say the same thing about the President's attorneys after hearing their defense.

I am troubled, but not surprised, that Republicans who emerged from the Senate chamber following completion of the House case immediately attacked Schiff, rather than disputing his arguments, rhetorically proffering any excuse they could to justify what probably will be an a priori decision not to subpoena witnesses and documents. Like their boss, President Donald Trump, it seems they have mastered the discursive art of diversion and deflection.

My fondest wish is that we can survive this painful and dangerous chapter of our country's history.

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