A Communication Scholar Discusses Impeachment and 2020 Election

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By Richard Cherwitz

Now that the House Intelligence Committee portion of the impeachment inquiry has been completed, the issues are coming into clearer focus. I was especially appalled but not surprised by Louisiana Sen. John Kennedy’s saying “I don’t know” to Chris Wallace of Fox News when asked who is responsible for hacking the DNC and Clinton campaign—despite the unanimous conclusion of the U.S. intelligence
community that Russia was responsible. After pushback, on Tuesday Kennedy was forced to retract his claim, suggesting he misunderstood Wallace’s question.

The response of Kennedy and other Republican leaders prompt me as a rhetorical scholar, who for over 40 years has studied political communication, to make a few observations followed by some serious concerns.

(1) The House performed—and continues to discharge—its required and important oversight function as prescribed by the framers of the Constitution.

(2) The highly credible and professional witnesses who testified presented a compelling and nonpartisan case that there was indeed a quid pro quo—and that Trump’s behavior was not only unorthodox and unacceptable but violated his oath of office, and threatened national security.

(3) Not surprisingly, the House very shortly will vote to impeach President Trump.

(4) It is likely that no House Republicans will support any of the articles of impeachment—that they will remain in lockstep with President Trump’s debunked conspiracy theories just as they have from the very beginning—and perhaps some vulnerable Democrats could vote against impeachment.

(5) Given polling data released in the last week showing support for impeachment has either declined or has not changed, especially in key contested states, as well as retiring Texas Republican Rep. Will Hurd’s emphatic claim that the facts don’t support impeachment, it is unlikely that any Republican Senator (including Kennedy) will vote to convict the President.
President Trump will enter the 2020 campaign embracing the less than factual, illogical House Republican narrative that has been repeated by Rep. Devin Nunes and his colleagues every day during the hearings. Trump will boast that once again he was acquitted and that this is one more example of the Democrats being unwilling to accept the results of the 2016 election.

While the impeachment inquiry was necessary and in accord with Constitutional expectations and the duty prescribed by our country’s framers, I continue to worry about where our country is headed.

To be clear: I no longer believe that impeachment should have been avoided in order to prevent a Democratic defeat in 2020. Nevertheless, my concern now is what will happen to the rule of law and our democracy if Trump succeeds in leveraging Republican impeachment rhetoric and his acquittal to win reelection.

What this will mean is that Trump will be unchecked, essentially knowing that he has been given the license and authority to do whatever he desires—even if it is illegal and jeopardizes sacred democratic principles. Worse yet, our system of checks and balances, the separation of the branches of government and our nation’s institutions will be undermined—perhaps permanently.

Moreover, the Constitutional mechanism of impeachment itself will no longer be possible. After all, if what Trump has done does not provide a viable and persuasive case for impeachment and conviction, then what act could ever rise to that level?
Although my own political bias is obvious and while I plan to vote against Trump, my hope is that all Americans will become engaged and understand the unique importance and potential consequences of the 2020 election.

Regardless of whether one supports impeachment, we must search our conscience, asking whether the country can afford four more years of a President who jeopardizes our national security, violates the rule of law, emboldens hatred and does things primarily for personal gain.

My fondest wish is that people will fulfill their democratic duty and vote, especially if they never have done so—and that they will bracket their partisanship, seriously contemplating what kind of a nation they want for their children and whether they are willing to place principle above party.

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