Pelosi’s Impeachment Ceremony—A Rhetorical Mistake

January 18, 2020

Yes, signing the articles of impeachment is an important historical and rhetorical moment—one that should be marked appropriately, creating a record for future generations. But in my opinion as someone who has spent over 40 years studying political communication, it was a rhetorical mistake to stage a formal signing ceremony followed by the distribution of pens.

Such signing ceremonies normally are reserved for celebratory occasions, rhetorical instances when important laws promoting the public good are enacted. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s choice 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 hearings.

Pelosi’s message for months had been that impeachment is a sad and somber event and that nobody is happy about this necessary action.
Her signing the impeachment articles seemed overly orchestrated and dramatic, affording Trump and his defenders additional fodder. Moreover, Pelosi’s smiling and handing out pens to fellow Democratic House members did not match her prior message—in fact, it undermined that message.

Richard Cherwitz,
University of Texas at Austin