On Wednesday House impeachment manager Adam Schiff made a powerful opening speech at the Senate trial of President Donald Trump, one that rhetorical critics will examine closely for years to come and portions of which might be used productively by public speaking teachers. It was deftly adapted to multiple audiences. The speech blended together a rigorously nuanced, thoroughly evidenced and chronologically presented narrative with frequent summaries and succinctly phrased overarching themes which gave the audience important takeaways.

Schiff effectively invoked references to our nation’s origin and the concerns of the founding fathers — all of which he implied paralleled what is transpiring today with Donald Trump’s behavior and motives. Moreover, he delineated common-sense constitutional principles enabling the audience—even if they initially disagreed--to understand the case for the president being removed from office.

Finally, each section of the speech ended with carefully crafted and sincerely asked rhetorical questions, each designed to challenge the audience, persuading Americans and the Senate that they have no choice but to support conviction lest our democracy be threatened and our future placed in danger.

While it is not yet known if Schiff’s speech will make a difference, in my nonpartisan opinion as a scholar of communication for over 40 years, it
offers an excellent example of how rhetorical principles can be used effectively in a speech addressing a highly complicated and controversial topic.

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