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Attorney General Barr's Rhetoric Admonishing Trump Was Disingenuous

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Perhaps I am a skeptic but, as a rhetorician who for over 40 years studied political language, I believe Attorney General William Barr's statements on February 13 that President Trump's tweets "make it impossible for me to do my job" and "I won't be influenced or bullied" mean little. They are weaker than what at first blush might be inferred.

Those flashy declarations had no teeth. For people who justifiably have become suspicious since Trump assumed office, Barr's claims are an example of what communication scholars label "mere rhetoric"—a theatrical or public relations ploy to take heat off the Administration rather than to deter Trump. Put simply: He doth protest too much.

It should be noted that the White House response to Barr was mild at best. Stephanie Grisham, the White House Press Secretary, said in an official statement: "The President wasn't bothered by the comments at all and he has the right, just like any American citizen, to publicly offer his opinions. The President has full faith and confidence in Attorney General Barr to do his job and uphold the law." How categorically different this discourse is than the usual harsh and vitriolic attacks on those who stand up to and disagree with the President.

If Barr really wanted Trump to stop undermining our judicial system (which, by the way, Barr also has done), then he should have explicitly threatened to tender his resignation unless the President ceases his irresponsible, reckless and damaging rhetorical assault against the country's legal institutions and personnel.

On the other hand, if Barr is in cahoots with the President, his statements simultaneously sent a message to Trump to be quiet so he could carry out the President's agenda and created another rhetorical diversion—something that at least for the moment would take the media's eyes off what the Justice Department is doing to undermine our system of justice.

Rick Cherwitz
Austin, Texas