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# Style • Perspective Sexism is a serious issue, not a cheap shot



Rep. Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) on Nov. 15 blocked Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.) from yielding time to Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-N.Y.). (The Washington Post)

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Columnist

By Monica Hesse

Watching Friday's 30-second exchange between Reps. Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) and Elise Stefanik (R-N.Y.) felt like watching an abbreviated game of Clue. It was tense and theatrical, with a rising sense that someone was going to be accused of something at the end, but, since nobody was showing all their cards yet, it wasn't clear who or what. By Saturday, there was a suspect and an allegation: It was Schiff, in the impeachment hearing room, with the lead pipe of sexism.

Early in the afternoon, Rep. Devin Nunes (Calif.), the Republican ranking member of the intelligence committee, attempted to yield some of his time to Stefanik. This attempt, however, violated a House resolution: Only ranking members and their staff counsel were allowed to speak at that moment. So when Stefanik began a question, Schiff gaveled over her.

"What is the interruption for this time?" Stefanik asked witheringly. Schiff explained, and then, when Stefanik again spoke, he again cut her off.

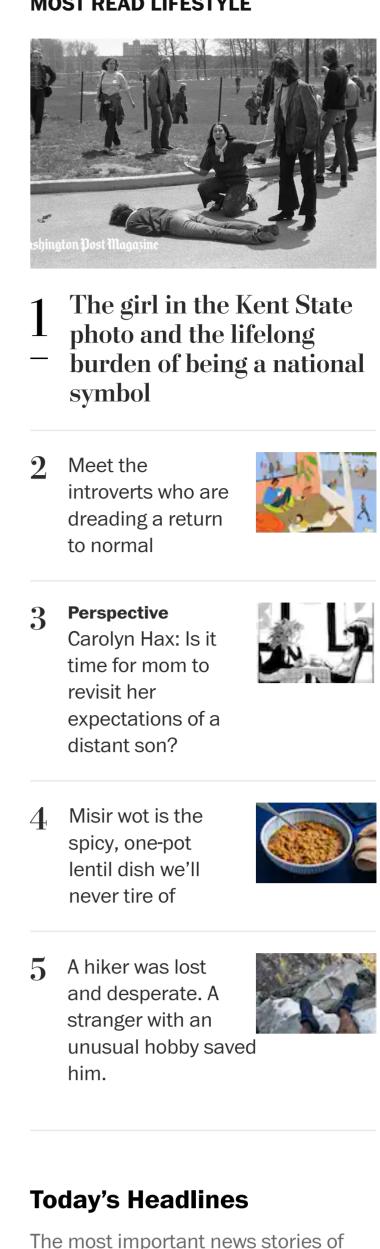
Nunes got involved: "You're gagging the young lady from New York?" he fumed, in an interesting turn of phrase. Stefanik is 35 — hardly elderly, but well beyond the age to which "young lady" is reasonably applied.

But "gagging the young lady" makes good television. It's an outrage-inducing sentiment, much more so than if Nunes had accused Schiff of "declining to recognize the congresswoman." It seemed designed to make Stefanik look wronged and Schiff look misogynistic.

Is that what happened? Did the chair of the intelligence committee mistreat his junior colleague because she's a woman?

For many amateur detectives, the answer was apparently yes. On Friday, Marie Yovanovitch, an esteemed female public servant, spent hours answering complicated questions while the president of the United States attacked her on Twitter, but this weekend my inbox contained mostly emails demanding to know when feminists were going to write about the horrible treatment of Stefanik.

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Was it the liberals, in the spin room, with the double standard?

In the narrative that emerged on the right, Schiff had enablers. "If a Republican did this, the media and the Democrat Party would instantly accuse them of being sexist," wrote Ryan Saavedra, a reporter for the conservative Daily Wire. After the hearing — at which Stefanik in fact spoke extensively, just when it was her scheduled turn — Stefanik told reporters that she and other Republicans had been "muzzled."

Compounding matters, over the weekend prominent Never-Trump Republican George Conway called Stefanik's exchange with Schiff a "ridiculously trashy gaslighting stunt," and Stefanik responded by calling Conway a "misogynist." Republican strategist and ABC News analyst Matthew Dowd tweeted, and then deleted, that Stefanik was "a perfect example of why just electing someone because they are a woman or a millennial doesn't necessarily get you the leaders we need."

So, by then all the cards were on the table.

Dowd's tweet was disgusting and, yes, sexist. Shame on him. Conway's "ridiculously trashy" comment was — I dunno. Men can be called "trash," too, but "trashy" is one of those dog-whistle words that gets lobbed at women more than men; it's a teasedhair, cheap-manicure kind of term — so even though Conway was referring to her "stunt" not her personhood, let's call that one sexism-tinged.

But, going back to the alleged crime that started it all.

It's not sexist to hold women to rules and laws. If a woman is talking in a movie theater and the usher asks her to leave, that's not sexist. If a woman is speeding and a cop gives her a ticket, that's not sexist. If a woman cuts in line and the cashier tells her wait her turn — none of these situations are sexist, not unless authority figures are ignoring men committing the same infractions. And it's not sexist when, after a female member of Congress disobeys an established rule, the chair of the committee tells her to knock it off.

Those who insist that Schiff's interruption of Stefanik was sexist are confessing something about themselves: that they believe

sexism is a crime of optics, not substance.

But sexism isn't about punishing a woman because she's wrong. It's about punishing a woman because she's a woman. And it's a thing that actually happens to actual women; it's not something to be conjured out of thin air for personal gain.

What's maddening about the Schiff-is-sexist charge is that there's plenty of real sexism to go around. Liberals can, and do, engage in it with conservative women: see the execrable slut-shaming of first lady Melania Trump, a former model, for once posing nude. Stefanik herself has been a victim: See Dowd's tweet above. The Schiff exchange just doesn't happen to be an example of it.

What's further maddening about the Schiff-is-sexist charge is that at root, the folks perpetuating it are not merely accusing Schiff of being sexist. They're embracing the narrative that sexism doesn't exist; what exists are women who can pretend to experience it to score political points.

The writers in my inbox want to know why feminists aren't defending Stefanik, but when Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) ignored Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's (R-Ky.) attempted silencing, "Nevertheless She Persisted" got bedazzled on anything that would stay still.

I agree that it looks murky; I really do get that. I'm running out of column inches here, but here's the brief answer:

1) Stefanik wasn't silenced. She did get to speak, when it was her turn. Warren was not allowed to finish reading out loud civil rights icon Coretta Scott King's letter on the Senate floor.

2) But a man was! When Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) took up the charge a few hours after Warren was forbidden from continuing, he read the whole thing without objection.

3) Blame McConnell. Blame his talent with words. In attempting to chastise Warren, he inadvertently gave a speech that sounded like a Dixie Chicks feminist anthem: "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted." You think women aren't going to slap that on a T-shirt?

There are other reasons, which are harder to enter as evidence. They have to do with tone, and cadence, and with the way women can tell when they're being demeaned as women, and when they're just being asked to follow the rules. Every bone in my body says Stefanik was just being asked to follow the rules.

Adam Schiff, in the impeachment hearings, with the lead pipe of sexism?

I don't think so. Slide the sexism card back into your Clue folder. It shouldn't be treated as a card to play, anyway.

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