

Mythologizing Killers: How Language Distorts Debate and Response

Daniel Modell, Lieutenant (retired), New York City Police Department

Suppose I want to describe an edged weapon. I describe it as “*an object consisting of a smooth handle attached to a metal blade with a cutting edge and converging to a point.*”

I can describe it differently as “*a forge-fired blade of cut-steel, gleaming against sunlight, wielded by a fist clenched around rugged hilt, tapering to a lethal point.*”

Both descriptions characterize the selfsame *thing*. But the first is colorless, bland. It inspires little reflection. By contrast, the second ignites the imagination in a bonfire of robust association: war and warrior; battle and blood; anticipation, drama and conflict. The description *says* none of these things, yet says them all.

Language is powerful. As the practical expression of our thinking, language colors how we conceive the world. It can describe; it can distort. It can do both at once.

I purport to argue that the language employed in talking about *Active Shooters*, including the term “Active Shooter,” *distorts* understanding, misdirects debate and warps response.

Consider some facts.

On April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, two students rampaged through Columbine High School, attacking, shooting and murdering anyone upon whom they chanced. When, at length, the Police closed in and the prospect of armed confrontation became inevitable, the pair killed themselves. The result was thirteen dead and twenty-four injured (excluding the killers).

On June 8, 2001, in Osaka, Japan, a man rampaged through Ikeda Elementary School, attacking, stabbing and murdering anyone upon whom he chanced until he was subdued by two teachers. The result was eight dead (ranging in age from six to eight) and fifteen injured.

On January 23, 2009, in Dendermonde Belgium, a man rampaged through a nursery, attacking, stabbing and murdering anyone upon whom he chanced. He was apprehended without resistance shortly thereafter by police. The result was three dead (including two infants) and twelve injured.

On August 3, 2010, in Manchester, Connecticut, a man rampaged through Hartford Distributors, attacking, shooting and murdering anyone upon whom he chanced. When Police closed in and the prospect of armed confrontation became inevitable, he killed himself. The result was eight dead and two injured.

On April 9, 2014, a sixteen year old student rampaged through Franklin Regional Senior High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, attacking and stabbing anyone upon whom he chanced. He

buried his blade into twenty victims before being stopped. When tackled, he yelled, “My work is not done, I have more people to kill!”

These incidents reveal a pronounced pattern. Abstracting essentials, a sociopath driven by the impulse to mass murder marches into a poorly secured location offering a trove of defenseless victims, and kills (or attempts to do so) at random until he is stopped. The instrument elected is beside the point. The impulse to commit mass murder at random is not. Whether a victim is killed or maimed by a gun or by a blade (or by some other instrument still) makes no difference to the victim.

The primary myth, then, is that “Active Shooters” are shooters.

The term “Active Shooter” misnames and mischaracterizes. It misnames the phenomenon; it mischaracterizes the facts underwriting the phenomenon. Ron Borsch of the Southeast Area Law Enforcement Academy has noted pointedly that the phrase “Active Shooter” is composed of neutral words; as such, it fails to provide the differentiation essential to effective description. There are, after all, no “Inactive Shooters.” Shooting someone is, by nature, active whether during a domestic incident, a gang initiation, a drug transaction or a mass murder event. More to the point, as the examples attest, the phrase mischaracterizes the *facts*, decaying into contradiction. The assailants in the relevant incidents often enough employ firearms. And they often enough do not. Events in Belgium (The Dendermonde Nursery Attack), Canada (the 2014 Calgary Stabbing), China (the 2008 Beijing Drum Tower Stabbings), and Japan (The Osaka School Massacre) afford bloody illustrations of “active” killing by way of blade. Indeed, across the Far East particularly, where possession of firearms is strictly controlled, the phenomenon tends to express itself by way of edged weapon. In short, many “Active Shooters” are not shooters. The definition proposed by Department of Homeland Security, advancing the idea that “*most active shooters [italics mine]*” use “firearms” is consequently something of a howler, a tissue of messy inconsistency. *Most* shooters use firearms? *Some* shooters do not use firearms, then? The conclusion must come. Some shooters are not shooters. The phrase purchases cachet at the price of coherence (“Active Knifer” does not apparently carry the same tactical chic). The bargain hardly seems worth it. Borsch recommends “Rapid Mass Murder.” This phrase carries the advantage of focusing on the essential activity rather than on the inessential choice of instrument in carrying out the activity. But the peculiar allure of the shooter who is “mostly” a shooter but sometimes not a shooter stumbles on blindly, fueled by stubborn inertia and lazy politics.

Active Shooters are not necessarily shooters. But the term, steeped in blandness and inaccuracy, plays to the cherished prejudices of particular political orthodoxies. After all, “shooter” *presupposes* gun. Since “shooter” is employed in naming the phenomenon, and “shooter” *presupposes* “gun,” guns must of course be the problem. Conversely, no gun, no shooter; no shooter, no problem; to solve the problem, then, arrogate the gun. Thus, a series of feeble inferences drowning in casuistry resolves the impulse to mass murder into a debate over guns.

Substantive inquiry into the cultural pathologies that underwrite the phenomenon of rapid mass murder should emerge out of patient and, at times, painful reflection about where we are and where we have been as a society, not out of dubious inferences gleaned from colorful phrases. If we were serious about understanding rather than posturing, we might begin by acknowledging the lamentable truth that we live in a celebrity-obsessed culture. In case you are unconvinced, ask yourself this question: do you know things about the Kardashians, about Lindsay Lohan, about Justin Bieber that you wish you did not know? If the answer is yes, then it is fair to say that we live in a celebrity-obsessed culture (if the answer is no, then you are a hermit). Whether you want to know such things or not, all around us invisible airwaves crackle with the lurid idiocy of celebrities. To *be*, it seems, is to be talked about. This is the implicit message institutionalized by media.

Now, consider what happens in the wake of rapid mass murder: the Press descends like warring vandals on a grieving township. They interview anyone willing to talk—anyone: extended “family,” peripheral acquaintances, random passers by who profess to occasional mulling in the same circles as the killer. All peddle the same theme, a theme rippling with self-absolution: “Nice guy, quiet guy, you never would have known.” (If you never would have known, no one is to blame of course). The old good guy gone bad story. This is *never* true.¹ But the myth paints a thick drama—tales of monstrous “Active Shooters,” centered in fabulous metamorphoses from pleasant, inoffensive villagers of solid stock into raging savages, incomprehensibly mysterious even to the wise. The shooters (that are not all shooters) become subjects of endless coverage, discussion and debate, all couched in a kind of strange, stifling sameness, their images bounding on a ceaseless trajectory across an obsessive electronic landscape, accompanied by theme music specially composed to optimize pathos. The myth of lamb to lion, soaked in endless coverage and feeding the deep cultural pathology of celebrity-obsession urges on the phenomenon. The point is worth lingering over.

Imagine, within the framework of a celebrity obsessed culture, that you are awkward, bullied, sociopathic. No one takes you seriously. No one notices you (except, perhaps, to poke fun). No one talks about you. You are, in your own estimation, a nobody. You would like to be a somebody—and to be a somebody is to be a subject in the conversation of others, to have an

¹ The Columbine Killers watched *Natural Born Killers* obsessively; wrote reports extolling the Nazis in satisfaction of assignments for school; had significant arrest records; underwent court-ordered psychological counseling; and one of the pair wrote a short piece of fiction, submitted for class, in which the protagonist donned a black trench coat, marched into the center of town and randomly started shooting people. The Virginia Tech Killer was known to be anti-social; was censured for his creepy interactions with female students and submitted plays teeming with grotesque violence and aberrant sexual imagery. The Sandy Hook Killer was prone to angry outbursts—one reason that his mother was reluctant to take him out in public; was anti-social; was obsessed with guns and compiled an exhaustive compendium of rapid mass murder events. Perhaps most tellingly, his mother openly fretted to friends about what he might be capable of. No. You never would have known.

image seen and scrutinized, to be enshrined in public as a subject worthy of analysis. You see, as everyone sees—and therein lies the allure to a sick mind—the coverage of an “Active Shooter” event: images, music, analysis; endless repetition of the killer’s name. A history that would have passed into oblivion with scarcely a sniffle now bursts into a fat pregnancy of seemingly important detail. The killer seems like you in some ways—a goofy looking, talentless kind of nobody. You, too, would like to be talked about. You, too, would like your image disgorged across the panorama of media. You, too, would like your own theme music. You, too, would like to excite the kind of hand wringing that signals, “I have been noticed.” You, too, would like a name swimming in infamy, for infamy is fame and fame is the cultural coin of the day. Talent, discipline and focus will not bring it to you—you have none of these. No matter. Murder. Murder many. Media will take care of the rest. Idiot-like, we wonder why it keeps happening.

So long as mass murder is a path to celebrity in our celebrity-obsessed culture, this phenomenon will endure. Remove or restrict guns how you will, the pathology will continue to find expression—and has found expression in areas of the world where firearms are strictly controlled—through other instruments. The cultural pathology that underwrites the phenomenon runs a thousand times deeper than the incidental issue of guns. Media is complicit in the pathology. It turns mass murderers into celebrities. In the scale of priorities, this is the fundamental. To swamp the fundamental in the very derivative issue of guns is a demoralizing sign howling the peculiar superficiality of the age—and the ready tendency to self-acquittal. Tackle the fundamental issue. Then, *by all means*, let us have a legitimate debate about the meaning, range and application of the Second Amendment, but *for god’s sake* not before. It is a pitiable and paltry evasion to speak of guns when we celebrate mass murder.

Frustratingly, the bloated language of myth has warped the tactical response of law enforcement as well.

Police officers stand between the predators and the innocent. That is the point and the value of policing. By and large, the intrepid souls that brave the profession embrace a mandate to protect the good even when it means their blood. The mandate is a bold one, not for faint hearts. The nature of policing entails an audacity of spirit, a mindset steeled in “I can”.

It takes some doing to transition from “I can” to “I cannot;” from “I will go” to “I will wait.” The transition surely costs lives. “Experts” recommend tactics that galumph where circumstances cry for speed. Multi-man stacks plod and clear. Worse, the cautionary language of the “expert” replaces a winning mindset with an uncertain one. Language distorts tactics.

Factually, what is menacingly termed an “Active Shooter” is no more than a man with a gun (you need not remind me that it is no less). Yes, he is shooting. Police officers term this a “shots fired” call. It is a familiar one. Every police officer responds to hundreds of such calls during the course of a career. In responding, no police officer supposes that he is incapable of handling such a call. They respond to “man with gun” and “shots fired” calls all the time and without

hesitation. In fact, they rush to them. On the way, they do not say, “I cannot handle this by myself. I need others. I need special tactics gleaned from special training. I need to establish an ad hoc stack three to four deep and move systematically (and clumsily, in the nature of the case) to secure my own safety while those I have sworn to protect wait helplessly.” They do not say it even though in responding to volatile circumstances involving weapons they will, on occasion, suffer injury or death. They know that in the vast majority of cases, they will outmatch their adversaries. Who is stopping Active Shooters? SWAT Teams? Well, no. The number of Active Shooters stopped by trained SWAT Teams is so miniscule as to be negligible. (This is not a criticism. The temporal dynamics of rapid mass murder preclude the response of tactical teams as a matter of practice. Undoubtedly the teams wish devoutly that it were not so.) Do ad hoc SWAT Teams composed of several patrol officers, likely strangers to one another, stop Active Shooters then? Well, no—no more than established teams. Still, agencies speak of special response teams as if they stop rapid mass murders and center training in it, often with public fanfare. This academic approach imposes on the data rather than emerges out of it. The inversion is, as always, unhealthy. Who *is* really stopping these killers then? Officers working alone or in pairs certainly are. Think of Officer Justin Garner out of Carthage, North Carolina or Bexar County Sheriff Lisa Castellano out of San Antonio Texas. More tellingly, citizens, often unarmed, stop rapid mass murders. Consider a few: Norina Bentzel, Red Lions Pennsylvania; David Benke, Littleton, Colorado; Frank Hall, Chardon, Ohio; Bill Badger, Tucson, Arizona; Anthony Sadler, Alek Skarlatos and Spencer Stone on a train in France. Had any of these heroes been compulsively fixated on safety or specialized tactics, many (or many more in some cases) would have died. The lesson from the data is clear. You need not employ special weapons, special tactics, special training or concede to special “experts” to stop these killers. Mindset, resolve, speed and aggression have stopped them.

Given these facts, why do officers slide from a ready to a hesitant mindset in contemplating rapid mass murder? Enter the “experts,” epic poets of anxiety, boasting lengthy pedigrees in uniform, scolding, cautioning those working the field that they will confront not a mere “man with a gun” but, cloaked in the tedious argot peculiar to myth-makers, a special kind of mad and incomprehensible savage known as an “Active Shooter,” requiring a special kind of response and a special kind of training (which, surprise, is just the old familiar SWAT stuff from old SWAT guys) sanctioned and funded—yes, wads of government cash drive much—under federal gaze. Thus, through repetition of alarming language peddled by experts with fluffed biographies, impressive certificates and the allure of “train the trainer” status, the “I can” mindset seizes, overwhelming fact. The killers are, in truth, most often awkward, bullied, by and large goofy, weak sociopaths. Who, after all, do these killers target? The defenseless. At what sorts of locations? Those without armed presence. Whom do the killers murder? Children, the elderly, churchgoers, shoppers, many begging for their lives. When confronted, what do the killers do? Kill themselves or yield—often, as noted, to the unarmed. What sort of person does this describe? A special kind of “take on the world” warrior? No. It describes a coward. I do not especially care to debate statistics because how you interpret the data—what even gets included

as “data” seems, sadly, to depend on political or financial investments in the phenomenon. But *whatever* that may be, no matter *how* you twist it, precious few officers have been injured *responding* to Active Shooter incidents in this country. Fewer still have been killed (perhaps on a measured interpretation of the data, none have). In fact, the sample is so small that, mathematically, it is irrelevant.

Of course, the Government would not fund the more accurately described “Coward Shooter” training. Certifications in “Coward Shooter” training could not be peddled successfully across the country. Coward Shooter training could not make careers much less fuel entire organizations. No one would feel any special need to attend “Coward Shooter” training. On the contrary, officers would simply respond as they always have and stop the coward who is shooting. It is only when SWAT styled trainers talk SWAT styled language that non-SWAT patrol officers concede authority, shrug and say “I guess *I* can’t do it. I’d better do what *they* say.” Thus a kind of cheap status-peddling terminates in learned helplessness. “I can’t protect innocent lives unless...” is a phrase you never want to hear from police officers. Again, Borsch, the quiet voice of good sense in all this adduces a telling analogy. Suppose, he says, that Lifeguards decided to adopt the following strategy in discharging their functions: “I won’t go help that drowning swimmer there until I have at least three other Lifeguards capable of working in an established formation with me to maximize my safety. Drowning swimmers can be unpredictable and dangerous.” If the Lifeguards wait to establish and move in structured formation, they will all be safe, to be sure. And all the troubled swimmers will drown. It is reasonable to ask at that point why we need Lifeguards. We may ask the same question of police when they become compulsive about safety and insist on stacks, rear guards and structured movement while the innocent are being murdered. Safety is, after all, a rather relative concept, given the choice to protect the innocent against the predator. There comes a point after which obsessiveness about safety yields diminishing returns and makes a mockery of the oath that is the noble heart of policing. At any rate, dispassionate scrutiny of the facts does not call for nail biting.

Can a cop stop a murderer? Of course he can—he has proved it many times. Can he stop a mass murderer? Of course he can. If he can stop a murderer, he can stop a mass murderer. What has quantity to do with it? Can he stop a rapid mass murderer? Of course he can. If he can stop a murderer, he can stop a rapid mass murderer—and he has proved it. What has time to do with it? Should he employ electric kool-aid tactics that necessarily slow his response to do it? No one has ever provided a coherent argument grounded in anything but prejudice and myth to establish that he should.

Language is powerful. It colors how we conceive the world. The language swirling about the “Active Shooter” has painted it redder than it need be.

Lieutenant Daniel Modell served over twenty years in the New York City Police Department. He was Coordinator of the Tactical Training Unit and Training Coordinator for the Firearms and Tactics Section. He is also Adjunct Professor at the State University of New York-FIT where he teaches self-defense. Lieutenant Modell secured a Bachelor of Arts Degree, Philosophy, New York University, 1989 and a Master of Arts Degree, Philosophy, University of Texas-Austin, 1994. He is author of “The Psychology of the Active Killer.”