Trump Calls Terrorists 'Sick' and 'Deranged.' Is That A Good Strategy?

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November 3, 2017

Soon after an assailant rammed a rented truck into passersby in New York City, President Donald Trump tweeted, "In NYC, looks like another attack by a very sick and deranged person. Law enforcement is following this closely. NOT IN THE U.S.A.!"

In recent months, Trump has used such terms for attackers who authorities label terrorists. In September, after a man caused a fire on a London subway car, which authorities treated as terrorism, Trump tweeted, "Another attack in London by a loser terrorist. These sick and demented people who were in the sights of Scotland Yard. Must be proactive!" He added minutes later, "Loser terrorists must be dealt with in a much tougher manner." In May, after an explosion after an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, the president said, "I won't call them monsters because they'd like that term. … I will call them, from now on, losers, because that's what they are. They're losers."

Describing assailants in such a negative way is a useful strategy, according to some security experts and victims' advocates. Tom Teves, whose son Alex was killed in the 2012 movie theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado, has told Newsweek he refuses to refer to mass killers as people. He and his wife Caren Teves started a campaign called No Notoriety to discourage the media from naming the perpetrators of such violence.

"We're not asking you not to name the things," Teves told Newsweek in 2015. "Don't turn them into anti-heroes. Stop calling them 'monsters.' They're little punks, and you should be calling them cowards." Publishing information about the killers, he adds, encourages "one of these things that's in its mommy's basement to go kill somebody."

The Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center at Texas State University, which has trained more than 100,000 police officers and partners with the FBI, started a similar campaign, called Don't Name Them. In its guidance for the media, the center says the assailants "should be as unrecognized in their deaths, as they were in their lives."

Christopher Preble, the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a right-leaning think tank, has agreed. "The word 'loser' works because it doesn't imply that there is anything particularly special about the individuals who perpetrate these heinous acts," he wrote in May. "They might wish to make a statement by indiscriminately killing and injuring

helpless victims. They might fashion themselves as heroic, or uniquely evil, or superhuman. They are none of these things."

Not everyone agrees that a United States president should make such comments. "I want him or her to be one step above and I don't want them talking like I would talk," Whoopi Goldberg said on The View after the Manchester attack. "When it comes down to it, if you're the president of a country, you have to speak for that country." The blogger Ben Mathis-Lilley wrote for Slate, "The problem is not that Trump calls terrorists losers, but that he weakens a potentially useful word by throwing it around it carelessly elsewhere."

John Horgan, a professor at Georgia State University and the author of The Psychology of Terrorism, said that studies show that portraying mass shooters in a certain light can impact future events, but doing so for extremist assailants is different.

"Those kinds of strategies are effective for certain kinds of offenders," he said. "There's no way that there's a deterrent effect, as far as the president of the United States portraying these guys as losers. If anything, those comments will be seized upon and might actually serve to sustain some people's commitment to terrorism." He added, "There are ways to think about counternarratives that are far more sophisticated than just going on Twitter and calling them all losers."

The New York Police Department said Tuesday evening that the 29-year-old male suspect killed at least eight and injured at least a dozen. Police apprehended the suspect.