Mass Shootings—Rhetoric Matters

By Richard Cherwitz

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The nightmare continues: 21 dead in El Paso, 9 in Dayton and still counting.

Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick would have us believe that a major cause of this crisis is violent video games which encourage our youth to kill. “How long are we going to ignore — at the federal level particularly — where they can do something about the video game industry,” Patrick told Fox News.

This kind of response already has been and no doubt will be the refrain of many Republican leaders and members of the media — including President Trump. In his address to the nation on August 5, even as he refused to acknowledge that his own language contributes to the problem, he blamed social media and the internet, downplayed guns by focusing on shooters and failed to call for a ban on assault weapons and background checks as some speculated he might.
Aside from the fact that many other nations where there aren’t rampant mass shootings also have violent video games, it’s time to be brutally honest.

As someone who has taught and studied rhetoric for over 40 years, what we say, what we don’t say and how problems are labeled matters. Enough with politicians calling for “thoughts and prayers” and deflecting our attention from the real culprits of violence. Thoughts and prayers and absurd claims like Patrick’s only ease our minds, assuage our conscience and normalize violence.

But they ignore the actual problem. These are terrorist attacks and hate crimes from within — not committed by Muslims or Hispanics entering the country.

It is true that there always have been shootings and always will be. However, we must be honest that what has transpired in the last few years is unique and far different from the past. Let’s be candid about the contributory causes of this crisis — including easy access to high-capacity assault weapons, potentially increasing mental illness and, yes, the incitement of hate and fear spurred by the discourse of our president. The latter is called “stochastic terrorism.” Together these constitute the perfect storm.

Beto O’Rourke, a former Texas congressman whose district included El Paso, argued on Saturday that white nationalists have been encouraged by Trump. He noted the rise in hate crimes over the past three years since Trump’s election, the president’s travel ban on people from Muslim countries and his attacks on four Democratic congresswomen of color.

Said O’Rourke, "Trump is a racist and he stokes racism in this country. And it does not just offend our sensibilities, it fundamentally changes the character of this country and it leads to violence.” On Sunday, O’Rourke told ABC News that Trump “doesn’t just tolerate, he encourages the kind of open racism.”

One thing is clear: As long as we have a president of the United States who incessantly spews racist and hateful words that are applauded by white nationalist groups — not to mention Republican leaders who are cowards and refuse to stop him — little progress will be made to ameliorate this dangerous problem.
The shooting in El Paso was another sad chapter in our nation’s history. We have the power to lessen the chances of future instances of violence. However, at minimum we must acknowledge that rhetoric has consequences — what leaders say and don’t say, as well as how they frame a problem, matters.

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