

WHY DO THEY DO IT?

CHRISTOPHER DORNER



In early February 2013, Christopher Dorner went on a killing spree in Southern California that resulted in four people dead, including two police officers, and three officers wounded. His intent was to murder as many law enforcement officers as possible, especially those whom he blamed for losing his job with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), where he had served as an officer from 2005 to 2008. One of the initial victims of his killing spree included the daughter (and her fiancé) of the LAPD captain who unsuccessfully represented him in his appeal of charges of misconduct while on patrol.

Dorner made his intentions quite clear in a “manifesto” he wrote and posted on his Facebook page just before he began his killing spree. In this manifesto, he listed many individuals he planned to stalk and kill, as well as celebrities and others whom he claimed to admire, such as the actor Charlie Sheen. He also made very clear in the manifesto that his goal was to get the LAPD to admit that his termination was in retaliation for reporting excessive force by a fellow officer. After his initial killings, he fled to Big Bear, California, in San Bernardino County, where he burned his truck and holed up in a vacant residence.

Dorner’s rampage led to one of the largest manhunts in LAPD history, involving many other agencies in the search. These agencies included the San Bernardino County Sheriff’s Office and several federal agencies, such as the U.S. Fish & Wildlife agency, whose agent finally spotted Dorner and exchanged gunfire with him just before the siege that took place at the cabin near the small town of Angelus Oaks, California, in the San Bernardino National Forest.

Despite Dorner’s killing of innocent victims, many people came out to support him for taking a stand against the LAPD. Although the authors of this book find it hard to believe, he did gain much support in stalking and killing police officers and their family members. Perhaps Dorner gained this support by articulating his reasons, albeit sometimes delusionally (e.g., praising drug-addicted, sex-crazed celebrities), in his manifesto.



U.S. Marshals Service photo

Christopher Dorner went on a shooting spree, killing police officers and innocent victims in retaliation for his termination from the LAPD.

Dorner shot himself in the head during the mountain siege, after an intense gun battle that killed two more officers. (It is notable that one of the coauthors of this book [Tibbetts] lives in Angelus Oaks. The official population, according to the 2010 Census, is 535.) Law enforcement authorities used incendiary devices to force Dorner out of the cottage, which elicited an outcry from some of Dorner’s supporters, who saw this as an attempt to kill the suspect by whatever means available. Regardless of the motives of law enforcement officers, Dorner was neutralized.

So why did Dorner do it? Given the reasons laid out in his manifesto, he likely was feeling frustrated or strained after being fired from the LAPD as well as being relieved from his service in a U.S. Naval Reserve unit on February 1, 2013. So in addition to an unstable psychological state (which his manifesto reveals, along with documented past domestic issues with several of his former romantic partners), he was likely acting out a deep-seated anger that stemmed from his being fired by the LAPD. Thus, general strain theory, which places a focus on anger, as well as lack of more conventional coping mechanisms is likely the best theory for explaining why Dorner took out his frustrations by killing both law enforcement officers and innocent family members of persons against whom he wanted to exact revenge.

THINK ABOUT IT:

1. Can you articulate reasons why Dorner’s case is a good example of strain/general strain theory?
2. Do you see any justification to Dorner’s actions, based on the issues in his past and his frustrations?