



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Repeating Pentagon Lies on Gitmo Recidivism **by Andy Worthington**

What is to be done about the idiocy that has spread, like a poisonous but imperceptible gas, from the Pentagon to Congress, and is now wafting through the White House, deranging all it touches? As it travels, this dismal infection transforms statistical impossibilities into magic numbers, which appear, to the uninformed observer, to confirm the most shameless lies of former Vice President Dick Cheney: that Guantánamo was teeming with hardcore terrorists, who couldn't wait to "return to the battlefield."

Only last month, [I tore into the mainstream media](#) for abandoning all its fabled fact-checking and objectivity, when the Pentagon claimed, without producing any evidence whatsoever, that 1 in 5 prisoners freed from Guantánamo had "engaged in terrorist activity after their release," and these claims were repeated as facts by numerous supposedly reputable media outlets.

As I explained at the time, this was just the latest installment in a campaign of misinformation, which, in May last year, [led to humiliation](#) for the *New York Times*, when its editors allowed a front-page story to run, claiming that 1 in 7 released prisoners (74 in total) had "returned to terrorism," even though only 27 names were provided, and, of those, independent experts could only verify somewhere between 13 and 20 of them.

Last May, the Pentagon at least provided names, but last month's fact-free assertions have now found their way to the White House, and were repeated on February 1 by John Brennan, the assistant to President Obama for homeland security and counterterrorism, in a letter to House Leader Nancy Pelosi, which was [obtained by ABC News \(PDF\)](#).

Brennan wrote:

[T]he Intelligence Community assesses that 20 percent of detainees transferred from Guantánamo are confirmed or suspected of recidivist activity. This includes 9.6 percent of detainees who have been confirmed as having returned to terrorist

activities, and 10.4 percent whom the Intelligence Community suspects, but is not certain, may have engaged in recidivist activities.

Brennan attempted to use these spurious figures to score points, asserting that all of the largely unidentified prisoners had been released by the Bush administration. Defending the Obama administration's careful and thorough interagency review of the remaining prisoners' cases, he wrote:

I want to underscore the fact that all of these cases relate to detainees released during the previous administration and under the prior detainee review process. The report indicates no confirmed or suspected recidivists among detainees transferred during this Administration, although we recognize the ongoing risk that detainees could engage in such activity.

Despite this, it frankly beggars belief that a spokesman for an administration that has pledged to close Guantánamo would publicly cleave to the kind of wretched propaganda that will make that task all but impossible.

So who are these approximately 116 men (out of the 532 prisoners released from Guantánamo under George W. Bush) who have allegedly “engaged in recidivist activities”?

We know, from earlier Pentagon claims, that this “recidivism” has included — and may well still include — publishing houses, the offices of newspapers, TV studios, and film sets because the Pentagon admitted (in a press release that was subsequently deleted from the Pentagon's website, but is [mirrored here](#)) that it included former prisoners, like the [Tipton Three](#) — three young men from the West Midlands — who had appeared in a movie, [The Road to Guantánamo](#), which dramatized their experiences, and the five Uighurs [sent to Albania](#) in 2006, after tribunals at Guantánamo cleared them of being “enemy combatants.” In the latter case, this was apparently because one of them, Abu Bakker Qassim, wrote an opinion piece for the [New York Times](#) in which he urged U.S. lawmakers to defend habeas corpus.

In the years since, many more ex-prisoners have written books, newspaper articles, and op-eds, and have appeared on TV and in films. Perhaps [Omar Deghayes](#), the British resident (released in 2007), who appeared in the Guantánamo documentary that I co-directed, [Outside the Law: Stories from Guantánamo](#), has now joined this ever-expanding group of “recidivists” who have dared to use their words and their voices to “attack” the United States for what it did to them in its brutal, experimental prisons in Afghanistan, Guantánamo and elsewhere.

Clearly, however, the main thrust of this propaganda is directed not at these men, but at others — 70, 80, 90 men, perhaps — who have supposedly engaged in terrorism since their release.

Is this plausible? In a word, no.

Even the most rampant apologists for the lawless regime created by George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld have never realistically tried to claim that more than a dozen or so Saudis slipped through the Saudi government's rehabilitation program with their burning hatred of America still intact. Moreover, once a handful of other regularly cited names have been dealt with, and it becomes apparent that no "recidivists" have emerged from a vast array of countries — throughout Europe, North Africa and the Gulf — the only conclusion that a logical analyst can reach is that this vast and largely undefined number of "recidivists" must include as many as 1 in 3 of all the Afghans who were ever held.

This, to be honest, is no less preposterous, as only a handful of Taliban commanders (released through [the Pentagon's own ineptitude](#)) were mistakenly freed from Guantánamo, but it at least has the benefit of a certain amount of logic, in that men repatriated to a country still occupied by a foreign army that is as useless at rounding up "terrorists" as it was eight years ago, may find a reason to resist the occupier on their doorstep, even if they have never been near a "battlefield" before.

Even this, however, presupposes that the Pentagon's "facts" and "suspicions" are remotely accurate, and as researchers — particularly those at the Seton Hall Law School, who have relentlessly analyzed the repeated claims of recidivism — have demonstrated time and again ([PDF](#)), the propaganda does not stand up to any form of scrutiny. John Brennan may be at liberty to talk about a few dozen released prisoners who have "engaged in recidivism," but entertaining the prospect that this figure could be as high as 116 is, to put it frankly, either a dereliction of duty, or a sign that he has fallen under the sway of Dick Cheney's still malevolent influence.

To understand how easy it is for credulous officials to fall for this propaganda, I'd like to take you back to last month, when Senator Dianne Feinstein, who, laughably, is the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, [falsely claimed](#) on CBS's "Face the Nation" that "about a third of former inmates at the U.S. naval base who have returned to fight against U.S. interests come from Yemen," as AFP described it. "If you look at Yemen, and we're taking a good look at Yemen," Feinstein said, "what you see is, I think, at least 24 or 28 are confirmed returned to the battlefield in Yemen, and a number are suspected. If you combine the suspected and the confirmed, the number I have is 74 detainees have gone back into the fight, and I think that's bad."

It was a poor day for the Senate's "intelligence" when Feinstein (drawing on the May report) made this ridiculous statement. Its most baleful effect was to add a deceptive veneer of acceptability to the pressure exerted on President Obama to [suspend the release](#) of any more cleared Yemeni prisoners at Guantánamo, for one simple reason: only 16 Yemeni prisoners were released from Guantánamo between 2004 and November 2009, and only one of these men allegedly became involved in terrorism.

But in this new world of groundless hysteria, which seems to reveal only how the baleful reach of the Pentagon's scaremongering has finally engulfed the White House, no one cares that Feinstein couldn't even get her facts straight.

With John Brennan embracing the lie that 116 of the 532 men released from Guantánamo between 2002 and January 2009 have “engaged in recidivist activities” — and with a compliant and complacent mainstream media happy to regurgitate such rubbish without asking for facts — it may as well be true, as Feinstein claimed, that 28 of the 16 Yemenis returned from Guantánamo have become terrorists.

Once upon a time, we used to pride ourselves on making policy decisions based on facts, rather than on the propaganda that was so prevalent in totalitarian regimes. Now, however, we might as well give up all pretense that this is the case. Just as people were [tortured in Guantánamo](#) to produce false confessions that could be used in show trials, like every other totalitarian regime, representatives of the U.S. government now attempt to scare and intimidate the American public with “facts” about “recidivism” that have no basis in reality. In 2010, fear blinds reason, and the truth, it seems, is irrelevant.

Andy Worthington is the author of [The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison](#) (published by Pluto Press) and serves as policy advisor to the Future of Freedom Foundation. Visit his website at: www.andyworthington.co.uk.

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