

# Countering Pentagon Propaganda About Prisoners Released from Guantánamo

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

For several years now, one organization in the US government has persistently undermined attempts to have a grown-up debate about the perceived dangerousness of prisoners at Guantánamo, and the need to bear security concerns in mind whilst also trying to empty the prison and to bring to an end this particularly malign icon of the Bush administration's ill-conceived response to the 9/11 attacks.

That organization is the Pentagon, and its habit of issuing announcements regarding the alleged recidivism of prisoners released from Guantánamo — without documentation to back up its claims — has also exposed a startling lack of journalistic integrity in the mainstream media. Although the Pentagon had regularly drip-fed alarmist reports about recidivism into the media during the Bush administration, which were picked up and reported despite their lack of sources and their often contradictory nature — as explained in a detailed report by researchers at the Seton Hall Law School in New Jersey ([PDF](#)) — the propaganda war has become noticeably more bold under President Obama.

The first report under Obama, issued on May 21, 2009, gained high-profile approval when, to its shame, the *New York Times* [uncritically published](#) a front-page story entitled, “1 In 7 Detainees Rejoined Jihad, Pentagon Finds,” in which Elisabeth Bumiller, relying on an advance copy of a Pentagon report, stated that “74 prisoners released from Guantánamo have returned to terrorism, making for a recidivism rate of nearly 14 percent.”

In fact, the Pentagon had only provided names and “confirmation” for 27 of the 74 prisoners cited in the report, and there were doubts about the recidivism of some of the 27 prisoners named in the report, as was revealed a week later, when the *Times* allowed Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann of the New America Foundation to write [an op-ed criticizing Bumiller's article](#), in which they concluded, from an examination of the report ([PDF](#)), that a more probable figure for recidivism — based on the fact that there were “12 former detainees who can be independently confirmed to have taken part in terrorist acts directed at American targets, and eight others suspected of such acts” — was “about 4 percent of the 534 men who have been released.”

The *Times* later apologized by publishing an [Editor's Note](#), noting that its original article should have stated that “about one in 20 of former Guantánamo prisoners described in the Pentagon report were now said to be engaging in terrorism,” but as I explained at the time, the damage had already been done, as it led directly to the following assertion by former Vice President Dick Cheney, discussing the prisoners still held at Guantánamo:

Keep in mind that these are hardened terrorists picked up overseas since 9/11.

The ones that were considered low-risk were released a long time ago. And among these, we learned yesterday, many were treated too leniently, because 1 in 7 cut a straight path back to their prior line of work and have conducted murderous attacks in the Middle East.

More importantly, the *Times* story conveniently appeared on the front page on the day that President Obama delivered [a major national security speech](#) at the National Archives, reviving the much-criticized Military Commissions at Guantánamo (which [he had suspended](#) on his first day in office), and also alerting the world to [his depressing plans](#) to hold some prisoners at Guantánamo indefinitely without charge or trial. These developments were profoundly dispiriting to those who hoped that Obama would thoroughly reverse and repudiate the Bush administration's innovations regarding detention policies and trials for prisoners seized in the "War on Terror."

In January 2010, the Pentagon again issued a warning about recidivism, this time the day after President Obama [announced a moratorium](#) on releasing any Yemenis cleared for release from Guantánamo by his own interagency Guantánamo Review Task Force. The impetus for this unprincipled moratorium was the hysterical response to the news that the failed Christmas Day plane bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, had been recruited in Yemen, and while it may have suited Obama to have the Pentagon release a new recidivism claim to bolster his moratorium (as it may have suited him in May 2009 to have a report released when he was laying down tough new policies that enraged progressive supporters), it also remains possible that the Pentagon was conducting its own game.

Certainly, the claims issued in January last year showed every sign of having been whipped up in a hurry. Instead of a report, the Pentagon briefed reporters that the recidivism rate was now 1 in 5 of the released prisoners, without providing any back-up information whatsoever, and then watched contentedly as one media outlet after another parroted their comments. [Reuters uncritically ran an article](#) entitled, "One in 5 ex-Guantánamo detainees joining militants," (which it later changed to "US believes 1 in 5 ex-detainees joining militants"), and other media outlets soon joined in, including the *New York Times* (in an article that is no longer available online), in which the discredited claims of May 2009 were again repeated in the following line: "The rate of those returning to militancy was first reported early last year to be 11 percent. In April it was 14 percent."

In early December, another "report" — actually [a two-page statement](#) issued by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "consistent with direction in the Fiscal Year 2010 Intelligence Authorization Act" — claimed that the number of recidivists was now 1 in 4 of the prisoners released. As [I explained at the time](#):

[O]f the 598 detainees released from Guantánamo, "The Intelligence Community assesses that 81 (13.5 percent) are confirmed and 69 (11.5 percent) are suspected of reengaging in terrorist or insurgent activities after transfer." The assessment also noted, "Of the 150 former GTMO detainees assessed as confirmed or suspected of reengaging in terrorist or insurgent activities, the Intelligence Community assesses that 13 are dead, 54 are in custody, and 83 remain at large." It was also noted that, of the "66 individuals transferred since January 2009" — under President Obama, in other words — "2 are confirmed and 3 are suspected of reengaging in terrorist or insurgent activities."

As I also explained:

The assessment's own claims were amplified in subsequent headlines, which failed to distinguish between "confirmed" and "suspected" terrorists or insurgents. [Fox News](#) ran with "25 Percent Recidivism at Gitmo" ... [and] although the [[New York](#)] [Times](#)' headline was the modest, "Some Ex-Detainees Still Tied to Terror," the article itself stated that the report "offered the most detailed public accounting yet of what the government says has happened to former Guantánamo detainees, a matter that has been the subject of heated political debate."

This, again, was nonsense, as there was no "detailed public accounting," and it was not until last week, on the 9th anniversary of the opening of Guantánamo, that Peter Bergen, Katherine Tiedemann and Andrew Lebovitch of the New America Foundation issued [their own report](#) challenging this latest propaganda, accompanied by an article in [Foreign Policy](#), in which they concluded, based on a sober assessment of available public documentation, that:

[O]ur analysis of Pentagon reports, news stories, and other publicly available documents concerning the 600 or so released detainees suggests that when threats to the United States are considered, the true rate for those who have taken up arms or are suspected of doing so is more like 6 percent, or one in 17. This figure represents an increase of 2 percentage points from [our previous analysis](#) from July 2009, which indicated that barely 4 percent of those released from the prison in Cuba were confirmed or suspected of engaging in terrorist or insurgent activities against the United States or its interests.

This latest report by the New America Foundation was made available to reporters prior to its publication in *Foreign Policy* at a panel discussion, "[Nine Years of Guantánamo: What Now?](#)" that I had organized at the New America Foundation on the afternoon of January 11, and it prompted questions from the audience, and responses that were noted by Dan Froomkin of the [Huffington Post](#). Froomkin explained that I was "concerned at how the recidivism figures were 'conjured up out of nowhere' but treated as fact by many mainstream media outlets," and that I described it as "bad journalism," and that is certainly the position I have always maintained.

He also picked up on comments made by Tom Wilner, the former attorney for the Kuwaiti prisoners at Guantánamo, who represented the Guantánamo prisoners during their habeas corpus claims in the Supreme Court in 2004 and 2008. Wilner directly addressed another problem with the recidivism claims — the US authorities' failure to consider whether some of the released men confirmed to have engaged in terrorist activity had not "returned" to a battlefield, but had actually been radicalized by their experience in US custody, and his conclusions were stark.

Speaking of [Abdullah al-Ajmi](#), a former client of his who died as a suicide bomber in Iraq in 2008, two and a half years after his release, Wilner explained, "I was absolutely convinced that he did not do anything wrong, but I was concerned about his release, because he had become furious. He had turned, at Guantánamo, into this sort of madman."

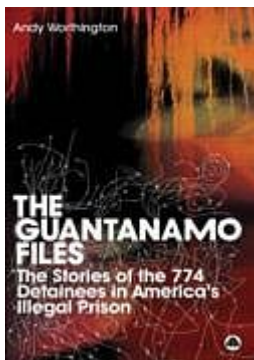
This chimes with [comments made in June last year](#) by Abdulrahman al-Hadlaq, the director of the Saudi rehabilitation center responsible for re-educating prisoners released from

Guantánamo, along with suspected or confirmed militants seized within the country and in other locations. Al-Hadlaq actually claimed that “about 20 per cent of the 120 repatriated former prisoners [from Guantánamo] have returned to radical activity” (whereas the New America Foundation mentioned only 15 confirmed or suspected Saudis in its report), but, crucially, in explaining why this rate was double that of the other men who passed through the program, he told reporters, “Those guys from other groups didn’t suffer torture,” unlike the men held at Guantánamo, adding, “Torturing is the most dangerous thing in radicalisation. You have more extremist people if you have more torture.”

As the gulf between the 1 in 4 recidivists claimed by the government clashes with the figure of 1 in 17 reported by the New America Foundation, it may be, as the authors of last week’s report conceded, that “there might be some additional former detainees who are suspected or confirmed of engaging in terrorism or insurgent activities who we could not identify in the publicly available sources.”

Those, however, cannot reasonably be expected to turn a figure of 48 “recidivists” into 150, and in addition, as I highlighted above, all of these assessments fail to consider whether the men in question are indeed recidivists, or whether it was their treatment at the hands of their US captors that prompted what Tom Wilner described, in Abdullah al-Ajmi’s case, as fury and madness.

While supporters of Guantánamo still follow Dick Cheney’s line, critics of the prison’s ongoing existence will be paying close attention to the circumstances of the men’s radicalization, and will not be at all surprised to discover that the United States cannot, in all honesty, claim that, in some instances, what happened to the men after their release from Guantánamo was not determined by what happened to them while they were held — and brutalized — in US custody.



Andy Worthington is the author of [The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America’s Illegal Prison](#) (published by Pluto Press, distributed by Macmillan in the US, and available from Amazon — click on the following for the [US](#) and the [UK](#)) and of two other books: [Stonehenge: Celebration and Subversion](#) and [The Battle of the Beanfield](#). To receive new articles in your inbox, please subscribe to my [RSS feed](#) (and I can also be found on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)). Also see my [definitive Guantánamo prisoner list](#), updated in July 2010, details about the new documentary film, “[Outside the Law: Stories from Guantánamo](#)” (co-directed by Polly Nash and Andy Worthington, and available on DVD [here](#)), my [definitive Guantánamo habeas list](#) and [the chronological list of all my articles](#), and, if you appreciate my work, feel free to [make a donation](#).

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