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New York Times Re-runs Retracted Story on Guantanamo Detainees' "Return to Terror"

You may recall that on this site, I posted a piece a 9 months ago castigating *New York Times* reporter Elizabeth "you can't say the President is lying" Bumiller for writing an absurd story claiming that 1 in 7 Guantanamo detainees had "returned" to terrorism. Put to one side that none of the released detainees had been convicted of terrorism prior to their release--Bumiller was basing her story entirely on a "secret" Pentagon report which the *Times* had a copy of but refused to release. I posted this blog piece, prompting Bumiller to call me (!) and suggest that I take my complaints and put them in a letter to Clark Hoyt, the Public Editor of the *Times*. I did. Two weeks later, the *Times* retracted the story.

Amazingly, tonight the *Times* has rerun essentially the same story. I will just repeat what I said about it 9 months ago:

The story indicates that the *Times* has seen a copy of the report. But had *Times* Pentagon correspondent (and Condee Rice biographer) Elizabeth Bumiller seen any names? Apparently, 74 detainees are claimed to have returned to "the fight" (up from the 5, 7, 10, 12, 31, 61, and other unsupported totals the military has issued over the years). But 45 names they won't release. (Which it to say, those claims are nonsense -- compare the "43 suspected of returning to the fight" from DOD's Jan. 14 press conference.) As to the others, "29 have been identified by name by the Pentagon, including 16 named for the first time in the report." If so, that means 13 were previously named. Luckily we have a report from the Pentagon from July, 2007 which names names, and includes the "anti-coalition militant activities" the detainees are supposed to have participated in. Included: three English detainees whose "militant" activity was participating in the making of Michael Winterbottom's movie *The Road to Guantanamo* and seeking damages for their torture in U.S. courts, and five Uighurs, shipped off to Albania to forestall a court hearing on their release in 2006 and living in a run-down refugee camp there, whose crime was to complain to Tim Golden of the same *New York Times* about their miserable condition.

In fairness, the July 2007 report's preamble claims that "anti-coalition militant activities" can include "participat[ion] in anti-US propaganda or other activities"--but the report never bothers to sort out the total number of those who have "returned to the battlefield" through the militant activity of ... typing. Or talking to

a reporter. The gaudy numbers reported previously (generally without names) have undoubtedly included all those few released detainees who dared complain about what they had experienced.

Bumiller apparently didn't scrutinize the Seton Hall Law School report tearing apart the military's earlier claims. Nor did she check the names herself, at least as far as the story shows. But, lest you think no reporting at all was involved in her Times story, she did bother to do the math -- dividing 74 into the total number of released detainees (534) to come up with a "recidivism rate" -- which she then compares to the rate in US prisons! (Wow -- that part counts as *actual research*!)

There is math in the new story too ("about one in five" has engaged in, or is suspected of engaging in, terrorism or militant activity"). The body of the new Times story avoids the implication that released detainees had done anything wrong before they were captured--the recidivism fallacy--and adds this, accurate, statement from the White House: "An administration official said Wednesday that the White House had 'been presented with no information that suggests that any of the detainees transferred by this administration have returned to the fight.'" Once again, though, the headline does the most damage: "Many Ex-Detainees Said to Return to Terror." Media bias is one thing, but friends, bias usually looks smarter than this. This is just stupidity. Dean Baquet insisted last time that the Times "did not get spun." What will he have to say now? I'm guessing he'll say exactly the same thing. Once again, he will be wrong.

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UPDATE: This morning, the *Times* has changed its online headline to "Many Ex-Detainees Said to Be Engaged in Terror" rather than ""Many Ex-Detainees Said to Return to Terror." I don't subscribe to the print edition but I'm guessing it said (and still says) "Return." Damage done. Last year I attended several post-retraction meetings with Senate staffers who insisted that 1 in 7 detainees had "returned to the battlefield" because these same clowns published it.