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The Bush Administration's Data on Global Terrorism in 2005

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Flash Report

The Bush Administration's Data on Global Terrorism in 2005

Today, the State Department issued its annual report on global terrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005*. In conjunction with this release, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) also issued its own *Report on Incidents of Terrorism 2005*. This Flash Report provides an assessment of the data on which these reports are based.

The new data from 2005 shows that the number of reported terrorism incidents has increased exponentially in the three years since the United States invaded Iraq. There were 11,111 terrorist attacks that caused 14,602 deaths in 2005, compared to 208 terrorist attacks that caused 625 deaths in 2003. This is an increase of over 5,000% in the number of terrorist attacks and over 2,000% in the number of deaths in three years.

Officials from the State Department and the NCTC asserted in a briefing yesterday afternoon to congressional staff that the dramatic increase in terrorism attacks was due to the use of a new methodology and a more rigorous review. These are the same assertions that the Administration made last year, when the 2004 data showed that terrorism attacks had tripled since 2003. Experts consulted prior to the release of the 2005 data urged the Administration to release directly comparable numbers, but the Administration refused to do so.

Terrorism Has Surged Since 2003: In the three years since the invasion of Iraq, the Bush Administration's own data has revealed an astonishing increase in worldwide terrorism:

<u>2003</u>	<u>2004</u>	<u>2005</u>
175 "significant" attacks (208 total attacks)	651 "significant" attacks (3,168 total attacks)	11,111 terrorist attacks
625 deaths	1,907 deaths	14,602 deaths
3,646 injuries	6,704 injuries	24,705 injuries

Reports by independent organizations, such as the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, the British-based insurance firm Aon Corp., and the independent Terrorism Research Center, confirm that terrorism is increasing rapidly.¹ The nonprofit National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, which was established after the Oklahoma City bombings, lists 4,924

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incidents of terrorism in 2005, up from 2,646 in 2004 and 1,898 in 2003.² Although there are differences in every organization's methodology, each independent assessment shows that global terrorism is on the rise.

The Administration Claims Each Year that Terrorism Did Not Increase: When the data for 2004 was released last year, John Brennan, the Acting Director of the NCTC, asserted that the increase in the number of attacks “does not necessarily mean that there has been a growth in actual terrorist incidents.”³ Philip Zelikow, the State Department Counselor, also denied any increase. When asked whether the Administration believed terrorism was increasing, Mr. Zelikow responded: “No, we don't.”⁴

This year, the Administration makes the same claim, asserting: “Year-to-year changes in the gross number of incidents across the globe, however, may tell us little about the international community's effectiveness in preventing these incidents.”⁵

The Administration Claims Each Year that Data Is Not Comparable: When the 2004 data was released, Mr. Brennan stated that “the data you will see today represent a break from previous years, and the numbers can't be compared to previous years in any meaningful way.”⁶

This year, the Administration is again making the same claim. According to the 2005 NCTC report, “the overall data set cannot be meaningfully compared with previous Government efforts to compile terrorist statistics.”⁷ State Department spokesman Sean McCormack states: “it's comparing apples and oranges.”⁸

The Administration appears to apply a different rule, however, when terrorism data shows a decline in terrorist attacks. When the Administration released its first report on terrorism incidents in 2003, it purported to show that terrorism incidents had declined in 2003 compared to prior years. This led Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to claim the data was “clear evidence that we are prevailing in the fight” against terror.⁹ Subsequently, the initial 2003 numbers were shown to be erroneous, and corrected numbers were released that showed significant terrorism attacks to be at an all-time high.¹⁰

The Administration Claims Each Year that the Rise in Terrorism Attacks Is Due to Increased Surveillance and Better Methodology: When the 2004 data was released, Mr. Zelikow explained the increase by saying, “we made a much more aggressive effort to compile the data, and therefore we have a much larger data set.”¹¹ Similarly, Mr. Brennan claimed that the sharp spike over previous years was not a result of more attacks, but “a result of much more rigorous research and identification,” explaining that the NCTC “significantly increased the level of effort from three part-time individuals to 10 full-time analysts.”¹² According to Mr. Brennan, the 2004 data was “the most comprehensive U.S. effort to date to track terrorist incidents worldwide” because it was based on a “rigorous review of the database, computer technology, procedures, interagency process, methodology, criteria and definitions.”¹³

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This year, Administration officials are making the same claim. They argue that the 2005 data “is a far more comprehensive data set than that for 2004,” and that the 2005 report is the result of a “more robust job of counting.”¹⁴

The Administration Rejected the Advice of Its Own Experts: The Administration claims that, for the 2005 data, it “invited academic, commercial, and research organizations to brainstorm and consult on the methodology used to compile terrorism incidents.”¹⁵ The NCTC contracted with leading independent experts on terrorism trends, including Professor David Laitin of Stanford University, to advise the NCTC on the compilation and presentation of the 2005 data. Prof. Laitin recommended that the NCTC present the 2005 data in a way that would allow for the identifications of trends over time. On March 28, 2006, Professor Laitin advised the NCTC to “recalibrate the data from the previous five years for every time there is a change in the rules, such that we do not lose a sense of the time trends when you change the criteria for inclusion.”¹⁶

The final NCTC report does not follow these recommendations. When Russell Travers, Deputy Director for Information Sharing and Knowledge Development at the NCTC, was asked at a congressional staff briefing yesterday whether any independent experts had recommended that the NCTC present the data in a manner that would allow year-to-year comparisons, Mr. Travers asserted that he had received no such recommendations.

The Law Requires Data on “Acts of International Terrorism”: The principal difference between the definition of terrorism used in 2004 and the definition used in 2005 is that the 2004 definition applied to acts of “international terrorism” whereas the 2005 definition eliminates the “international” requirement. According to the State Department, the new definition was applied “in order to meet new Congressional requirements.”¹⁷

In fact, the statutory definition of international terrorism has remained in place since well before 2003. Section 2656f(a) of title 22 of the U.S. Code requires the Secretary of State to transmit to Congress by April 30 of each year a “full and complete report” that includes “acts of international terrorism.” The definition of “international terrorism” is set forth explicitly in section (d) of the statute. In preparing the report on the 2005 data, the Bush Administration has disregarded this express statutory definition.

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NOTES

¹ Congressional Research Service, *Terrorist Attacks by Al-Qaeda, 2004-2005* (Apr. 28, 2005); Congressional Research Service, *Terrorist Attacks by Al Qaeda* (Mar. 31, 2004); Aon United Kingdom, Ltd., *European Businesses Face Increasing Terrorism Risk* (Apr. 18, 2005) (online at www.aon.com/uk); Aon United Kingdom, Ltd., *2005 Terrorism Risk Map* (Apr. 2005); Terrorism Research Center, *Frequently Asked Questions* (accessed Apr. 26, 2005) (online at www.terrorism.com); Terrorism Research Center, *Terrorist Attack Archives* (accessed Apr. 26, 2005) (online at www.terrorism.com).

² National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, *Knowledge Base* (accessed Apr. 28, 2006) (online at <http://www.tkb.org/IncidentDataModule.jsp>).

³ U.S. Department of State, *Remarks on Release of "Country Reports on Terrorism" for 2004* (Apr. 27, 2005).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ National Counterterrorism Center, *Report on Incidents of Terrorism 2005* (Apr. 11, 2006).

⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Remarks on Release of "Country Reports on Terrorism" for 2004* (Apr. 27, 2005).

⁷ National Counterterrorism Center, *Report on Incidents of Terrorism 2005* (Apr. 11, 2006).

⁸ *2005 Worldwide Terror Attacks Exceeded 10,000*, Associated Press (Apr. 22, 2006).

⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Statement of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage on the Release of the 2003 "Patterns of Global Terrorism" Annual Report* (Apr. 29, 2003).

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism — 2003* (Revised June 2004). *See also* U.S. Department of State, *Remarks on the Release of the Revised Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003 Annual Report* (June 22, 2004).

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, *Remarks on Release of "Country Reports on Terrorism" for 2004* (Apr. 27, 2005).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ National Counterterrorism Center, *NCTC Fact Sheet and Observations Related to 2005 Terrorist Incidents* (undated); *2005 Worldwide Terror Attacks Exceeded 10,000*, Associated Press (Apr. 22, 2006).

¹⁵ National Counterterrorism Center, *Report on Incidents of Terrorism 2005* (Apr. 11, 2006).

¹⁶ E-mail from Prof. David D. Laitin to National Counterterrorism Center (Mar. 28, 2006).

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Fact Sheet: Country Reports on Terrorism 2005* (Apr. 28, 2006).