The terrorism industry

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Take one part fact, six parts fiction, three parts racism and five parts disinformation. Have the media shake vigorously and, *voilà*, the famous Terrorism Cocktail, one sip of which is guaranteed you silly.

Unfortunately for those who have turned terrorism into a profitable industry, a recent FBI report on the subject has just caused this once frothy brew to go flat. Statistics, as the old saw goes, don't lie; liars use statistics.

What we learn from the FBI report quickly confirms the contention, made often in this column, that the hoopla and hysteria over terrorism is a cynical manipulation of the credulous public by the media, some politicians and special interest groups. Terrorism is still a real danger but, as FBI figures show, one that has been wildly and purposely exaggerated.

The number of terrorist incidents involving U.S. citizens has remained constant between 1975 and 1985. So much for the "tidal wave of terrorism" ballyhooed by the press during 1985.

An average year will bring 250 bombings worldwide. Last year there was a surge to 404. Yet in 1972, 452 bombings occurred. Bomb incidents on aircraft are down by 75% — the result of tighter security. Exclude bomb-happy places like Sri Lanka and Lebanon, and the worldwide total drops sharply.

Americans and Canadians may think of the Mideast as acutely dangerous. Interestingly, in the last five years, there were 84 terrorist incidents against Americans in the Mideast. In Latin America, by contrast, there were 369 over the same period. In Europe, 458. In Canada, hysteria over non-existent Libyan terrorists almost closed Toronto's airport while, ironically, real terrorists managed to blow up an Indian airliner under the nose of the RCMP.

During 1980-1985, 7,260 people were killed worldwide in terrorist incidents. Of these casualties, only 162 were U.S. citizens; 162 deaths in five years out of a population of 230 million is not exactly a "bloodbath." Almost 10 times more Americans die each year from falls in their bathtubs than are killed by terrorists.

There were seven major terrorist acts during 1985 in the USA. Were they caused by Col. Khadafy's hit squads? Not at all. Four, says the FBI, were staged by Jewish terrorist groups, two by Puerto Rican separatists and one by an extreme left group.

The American media heaped much abuse on Greek and Italian airports, no doubt in part because of these nations' refusal to go along with the phony U.S. crusade against terrorism. Tourists stayed away from these places in droves. Now, says the Federal Aviation Administration, it turns out that the two most dangerous airports are New York and Miami. Over the last eight years, there have been 14 hijackings at Miami and ten at New York — and only one at Athens.

Reporting on domestic terrorism, the FBI notes that between 1977 and 1984 there were 395 terrorist incidents: Mideasterners were involved in only 8 — mostly against each other. In one year more people were murdered or attacked on New York City's streets.

These are the facts and they show clearly that terrorism, while certainly a menace, is by no stretch of the imagination the threat that most people think. Unfortunately, the industry of "terrorism experts" has by now taken on a life of its own. If enough terrorists cannot be found, new ones must be created. All of this sells papers, gains TV ratings and helps special interests.

Terrorism hysteria also diverts resources away from truly pressing issues — like crime, national defence and the economy. Just last week, for instance, it was revealed that the RCMP and the CSIS were too busy hunting for terrorists to bother catching communist spies. Similarly, the CIA is wasting tens of millions niggling away at Libya while the far greater dangers of Afghanistan and Nicaragua receive insufficient attention.

When we look back on this period a decade from now, I suspect that our current panic over terrorism will be regarded with pitying amusement.

Chicken Little is alive, well and doing fine on network TV.