

Pentagon's Hiding of BRAC Data Intensifies the Base-Closing Fight

by Carl Osgood

While Pentagon officials are running around the country promoting the “economic opportunities,” of the current proposed rounds of base closings, local communities, their elected officials, and many members of Congress from both parties are digging in their heels for a difficult uphill battle to stop the plan. That battle is now before the nine-member Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC), chaired by former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi, and made up of retired general officers, former Pentagon officials, and two former members of Congress. So far, members of the commission are maintaining an open public face, by speaking publicly of the potential impact on many communities of the proposed base closings, and welcoming comments and testimony from elected officials and community leaders.

Another side of the battle is the growing tug of war between the Congress and the Defense Department over the documentation that the DoD generated over the two years that it took to develop the base-closing list. The law requires that all of that data be turned over to Congress and the BRAC Commission within seven days of the release of the list. However, on June 7, nearly four weeks after the Pentagon released its BRAC report, Senators Susan Collins (R-Me.) and Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.), the chairman and ranking Democrat of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, respectively, felt compelled to issue a subpoena to the DoD for the remaining unreleased data. This followed a very large, but incomplete release of data on June 4, including the minutes of meetings of the DoD's various BRAC committees. The volume of data release was so overwhelming, and without indexes or finding aids, that working through the documentation will be a very slow, laborious process.

As for the subpoena, “We are doing this because we feel that the department has not fulfilled its obligations, its very clear obligations under the base-closing law to disclose all information related to its decision-making,” Collins said. “It is a matter of fairness to the affected communities who need this information in order to prepare their case before the base-closure commission, when it holds its public hearings.” Lieberman reported that even the classified data made available to Congressional staffers with security clearances were not complete.

The entire issue is clouded by the fact that the decision to classify BRAC data was made on May 24, eleven days after

the Pentagon released its initial BRAC report. According to a leaked May 27 memo, signed by Acting Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England, the May 24 meeting “discussed the need to protect BRAC information that standing alone, or in aggregation, would cause serious damage to national security if known by U.S. adversaries.” The decision was made, therefore, “Because of the difficulty in extracting such classified/sensitive information from the large BRAC databases. . . .”

Deliberate Obfuscation?

Lieberman also reported that the documentation that has been publicly released provides little insight into how the decisions were made. He noted that during the 1995 BRAC, minutes of meetings were very informative. “They provide a concise transcript of the meeting discussions in a format and language that provides context and understanding of the Pentagon's decision.” In contrast, the minutes of the 2005 meetings are “very summary and don't really give an understanding of how decisions were made.”

Lieberman also reported that the Pentagon's data-collection process, itself, may be part of the problem, particularly on the military-value criterion, which the law specifies as the most important. The Navy Submarine Base in New London, Connecticut is the center of training for all submarine crew members in the Navy, yet it ranked lower in military value than the submarine base at Kings Bay, Georgia, which is where most of New London's assets are to be relocated. Initially, when the Pentagon sent out its data calls to military bases, it included a question on the presence of unique facilities on the installation. Lieberman called the Submarine School in New London “an extraordinary, unique facility,” but the question was withdrawn from the data calls, last Fall, “and we'd like to know why. . . .”

Collins made a similar charge with respect to the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, Maine. She reported that the Pentagon had sent out a series of data calls with a list of questions and asked the facilities to provide estimates of costs associated with closing the yard. “What we don't know is what the Pentagon did with that initial data, whether it was altered, as some people at the shipyard believe, and whether it was subject to new criteria when the department didn't like the answers that it got.” She added that “we want to have a



CDC/Dr. Edwin P. Ewing, Jr.

The hospital at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C. The facility is the “flagship” hospital for the U.S. military, providing top-flight medical care to 150,000 people. It is on the list of installations to be closed.

full picture of the deliberative process so that we can make sure that it was, in fact, fair, and that the cost analysis is accurate,” because there’s some suggestion that the information in cost savings is not correct.

Pentagon officials are, not surprisingly, touting the supposed cost savings as well as supposed economic benefits of closing bases. Philip Grone, the Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Installations and Environment, told a conference in Denver, on June 7, that the projected savings of almost \$50 billion “are real and they are significant.” He also claimed that, while the Defense Department is “mindful” of the impact of base closings on local communities, the impact of past base-closing rounds has been found to be “a positive one.” Patrick J. O’Brien, the director of the DoD’s Office of Economic Adjustment, in written remarks reported by the American Forces Press Service, said that local officials should reverse their initial negative reactions and “reverse course to seek a bright future for their families, workers, and businesses.” Of course, neither of them noted that the previous BRAC rounds occurred at the beginning phases of a financial and real estate bubble, and that the 2005 BRAC round is occurring as that bubble is about to blow out, as indicated by the impending bankruptcies of both Ford and General Motors.

In fact, the base-closing plan is nothing more than a giant real estate swindle, as *EIR* documented in the June 3 and June 10 issues.

Walter Reed Hospital on the Hit List

Three days after Collins and Lieberman issued their subpoenas, the battle moved to Northwest Washington, when BRAC Commission member retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Lloyd “Fig” Newton toured Walter Reed Army Medical Center in the company of D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, D.C. Ward 4 Councilman Adrian Fenty, and local community leaders. Walter Reed is the symbol of U.S. military medicine

and is the center of a health-care system that provides care to 150,000 service members, their families, and retirees in the Washington area. The hospital includes every medical specialty except for obstetrics, burns, and Level III trauma. Walter Reed has drawn attention in recent years, because of its role in treating combat casualties from Iraq and Afghanistan. One result of that is that the hospital has developed a particular competence in treating amputees, because there have been so many of them, from service in Iraq. More than 6,900 people work at the 113 acre campus, including 5,000 on staff at the main hospital.

Delegate Norton reported, after Newton’s tour, that D.C. officials were “stunned to learn that the Pentagon would even consider its flagship hospital” for closing. “We do not accept that there is only one way for the Army

to accomplish the mission it must accomplish,” she said. She also warned against any fantasies about commercial redevelopment of the property on which Walter Reed sits, because there is, in fact, no guarantee that that land would ever be turned over to the District. Norton noted that the process is weighted in favor of the Pentagon, which puts a much heavier burden on those who wish to keep their facilities open, making a larger issue of the full release of the Pentagon’s documentation. Newton, for his part, was noncommittal about the fate of the hospital, only emphasizing that the commission’s job is to evaluate the Pentagon’s plan according to the criteria established by law, to see whether the Pentagon has deviated from those criteria.

The response in Washington is hardly unique. The Congressional delegations of both Texas and Arkansas have mobilized to save the Red River Army Depot and the Lone Star Army Ammunition Plant in Bowie County, Texas, along the border with Arkansas. Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee even pledged \$25,000 out of his emergency fund to the Texarkana Chamber of Commerce’s BRAC campaign to help keep the two facilities open. In South Dakota, counties around Ellsworth Air Force Base are considering giving their employees paid leave in order to attend the June 21 BRAC hearing in Rapid City. County and local governments in Alaska are also considering the same measure for the June 15 hearing there, in order to protest the closing of the Kulis Air National Guard Station in Anchorage and the realignment of Eielson Air Force Base in Fairbanks. New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson said on June 10, “I will continue to convey my total opposition” to the proposed closing of Canon Air Force Base.

In every case, opponents of closing bases note the difficulties inherent in challenging the Pentagon’s conclusions when the data those conclusions are based on are not available to be scrutinized.