

Is Rumsfeld Playing Divide and Conquer with BRAC Base Closings?

by Carl Osgood

One of the things that became readily apparent early-on, after the Pentagon released its base closing plan on May 13, was that the plan moves a substantial chunk of military assets from northern to southern regions of the country. However, as the independent Defense Base Closure and Realignment (BRAC) Commission proceeded through its grueling schedule of regional hearings across the country, over June and July, that divide became more defined, such as: Connecticut versus Georgia, Maine/New Hampshire versus Hawaii, South Dakota versus Texas, Indiana versus Illinois, Alaska versus the Lower 48 states, and so on. Although citizens and political leaders in states targeted for major closures have banded together, regardless of party, to defend their bases, politicians in states that are set to gain from the plan appear to be hoping to poach other states' assets for parochial advantage.

Some observers have attempted to attribute this outcome to political motivation on the part of the Bush Administration, to punish states that voted for Democrat John Kerry in the last Presidential election, a charge that, for the most part, people on both sides of the BRAC debate have denied. They point to so-called red states, like Alaska and South Dakota, taking big hits in the BRAC plan.

The politics of BRAC may be more related to Vice President Dick Cheney's "nuclear option," however. One Senate source told *EIR* in June, that Maine's two Republican senators, Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe, went to Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John Warner (R-Va.) at the point that they were threatened with base closures in their state, if they did not throw their support behind Cheney's cold coup attempt in the Senate. Warner became the leader, along with Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), of the "Gang of 14," the bipartisan grouping of Senators which sabotaged Cheney's attempted coup on May 23. Collins and Snowe were both part of that grouping.

Ten days earlier, the Defense Department had released its BRAC recommendations, which included closing the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, in Kittery, Me., as well as the Defense Finance and Accounting Service Center in Limestone, and the realignment of the Brunswick Naval Air Station, actions which, by the Pentagon's own estimates, would cost Maine nearly 7,000 jobs, directly.

Warner, himself, took a hit from the BRAC Commission on July 19, when it voted to add Oceana Naval Air Station,

in Virginia Beach, to the closure list. Oceana is the Navy's "master jet base" for all East Coast carrier fighter squadrons, and there are about 190 F-14 and F-18 jets stationed there. However, there are also significant issues with commercial encroachment in the area around the base. This led the commission to ask the Pentagon, on July 1, what considerations were given to realignment of Oceana to Moody Air Force Base in Georgia. In its July 14 reply, the Pentagon said "The best basing alternative for East Coast tactical aviation would be to build a new 21st Century master jet base, but such action would occur outside the BRAC [6-year] window." Thus, the commission voted to take a closer look at Oceana.

Growing Anger in the Congress

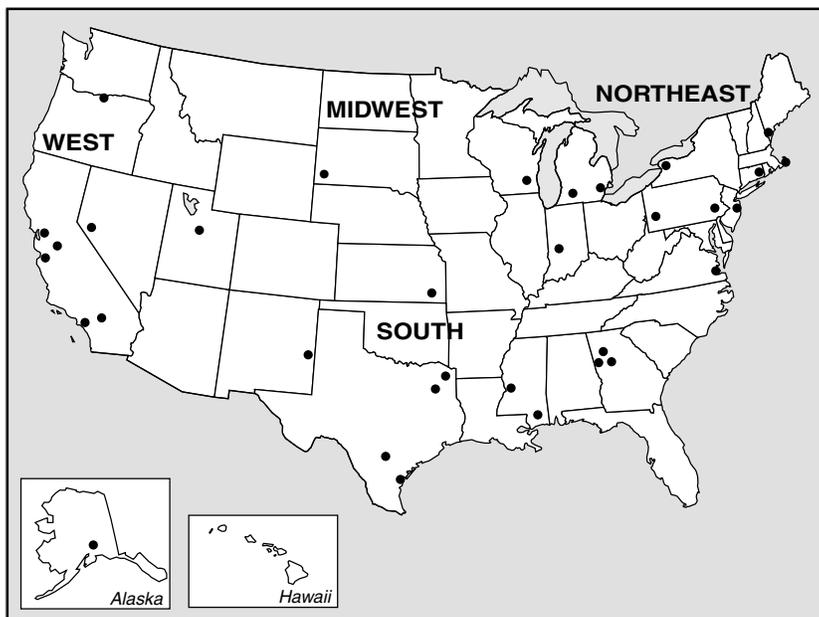
Not surprisingly, Warner did not agree with the commission's decision to add Oceana to the closure list. Warner publicly announced, at an Aug. 4 BRAC commission hearing in Washington, that allegations were brought to his attention that the commission was in receipt of *ex parte* communications from a Department of Defense official that had not been made part of the public record, "which raises a question of whether or not they laid a foundation for a decision or decisions" about Oceana's future. He would not comment on the content or source of that communication, but said only that he had invoked a provision in the BRAC law that allows the chairman of the Readiness Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Sen. John Ensign (R-Nev.), to investigate those allegations in order to insure that the BRAC process is open and transparent, as provided for in the BRAC law.

Warner referenced remarks made by commission member Gen. James Hill (ret.) during the July 18 BRAC hearing, in which Hill said that Admiral Vern Clark, who has just retired as the Chief of Naval Operations, had said that he wanted to close Oceana, but that he couldn't find another alternative. Warner said that he could not substantiate this statement anywhere in the documents available on the BRAC Commission's website.

The BRAC Commission must complete its report and submit it to President Bush by Sept. 8. The commission will begin a series of meetings in Washington on Aug. 22, to vote on each of the elements in the Pentagon proposal, a process which could take several days. Once the report is submitted

FIGURE 1

The 33 Major Military Bases Rumsfeld Would Close Down



Source: U.S. Department of Defense.

to the President, he has 15 days to accept or reject it. If he rejects it, it goes back to the commission, which has until Oct. 20 to resubmit the report. If Bush accepts it, then, he must forward to it to Congress by Nov. 7, which then has 45 legislative days to act on the report. The only action Congress can take is to pass a joint resolution rejecting the report, which must be signed by the President. Otherwise, it becomes law automatically.

Divide and Conquer

One obvious example of the divide-and-conquer quality of the Pentagon plan is the proposal to close the Navy’s submarine base in New London, Conn. The plan would distribute the New London-based submarines between Norfolk, Va. and Kings Bay, Ga., and relocate the submarine school to Kings Bay. Connecticut’s Congressional delegation, Republicans and Democrats alike, have been vigorously opposing the proposed closure, while Georgia’s delegation testified in favor of it at the BRAC Commission’s June 30 regional hearing in Atlanta.

Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.) told the BRAC Commission that Kings Bay “is the best for gaining both submarines and the submarine school.” Rep. Jack Kingston (R-Ga.), whose district includes Kings Bay, said that “whatever way we go, the combination of Norfolk and Kings Bay will accommodate all the needs required in the future.” He stated, “Adding new missions to Kings Bay is the right move from a national security and an economic standpoint.”

Even more parochial was Rep. Mark Souder (R-Ind.) at the June 20 hearing in St. Louis. The BRAC proposal calls for shifting the Illinois Air National Guard’s 15 F-16 jets to Fort Wayne, Ind., replacing older F-16 jets there, and leaving Illinois with no aircraft at all. Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich (D) has already filed a suit in Federal court to stop the transfer.

At the St. Louis hearing, Souder was more than a little parochial when he argued before the Commission that Fort Wayne is a better airport, because it has longer runways, a brand new control tower, and other improvements that were paid for by earmarks that he had added to appropriations bills over the last several years. He also argued that aircraft assigned to the Air National Guard belong to the Federal government and, therefore, state governors cannot force that property to stay in their states.

A similar problem arose in the July 7 Baltimore hearing regarding Fort Monmouth, N.J. The Army plan for Fort Monmouth, a research and development center, is to close it down and redistribute

its activities to Aberdeen Proving Ground and Fort Meade in Maryland, and Fort Belvoir in Virginia. Because Maryland is set to gain about 11,000 jobs from the Pentagon plan, including most of the 4,600 that New Jersey is going to lose, Maryland’s Congressional delegation expressed nothing but support at the Baltimore hearing. Rep. Dutch Ruppersberger (D-Md.) went so far as to say that “These recommendations represent the kinds of transformation objectives Secretary Rumsfeld is trying to achieve in this round of BRAC.”

There have been notable exceptions to this pattern, however. One alternative bandied about to the closing of Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, is instead to close the Pearl Harbor Naval Shipyard, but, Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) shot down that idea during the Boston hearing. “It is not our position that Pearl Harbor should be on the [closure] list,” he told reporters. In any case, the BRAC Commission rejected a proposal to do just that at its July 19 meeting.

On another occasion, New Hampshire Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Kenneth Clark, told an audience at a June 16 forum in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the National Guard Association of the United States, that some states should not gain at the expense of others in terms of the proposed redistribution of Air National Guard aircraft from many to fewer bases—and he was speaking from the standpoint of a state that gains three KC-135 tanker aircraft under the plan. “I don’t believe New Hampshire’s gain is in the best interests of the Air Force,” he said.

Anger in the Congress

In addition to those noted above, the Pentagon process has angered many in the Congress, particularly Republicans, because of how poorly it appears to have been executed. One indication of this is that Rep. Rob Simmons (R-Conn.), whose district includes the Navy submarine base in New London, is so incensed about the plan to close New London, that he personally contacted *EIR* on Aug. 1, to relate his concerns. Simmons argues that the closure is “a very significant mistake,” because of the more than \$220 million in military construction invested at New London over the past decade; its proximity to the Electric Boat shipyard, in Groton, where submarines are built; and the presence of the submarine school and other valuable submarine-related activities there. Simmons warned that taking New London apart, and scattering the pieces would be “kind of like taking the different components of Yale University, throwing them around the country and expecting a great university.”

From miscounting the number of C-130 parking spots at



Rep. Rob Simmons (R-Conn.)

the West Virginia Air National Guard base in Charleston (there are 12 while the Air Force says there are only 8), to miscounting the number of dry docks at the New London submarine base (there are 3, but the Navy counted only 2 and didn't count the 10 piers at all), the process appears to be full of errors—errors which have been noted individually at many BRAC Commission hearings. “I think a process that can't count dry docks is a process with problems,” Simmons said, perhaps indicating that when the BRAC Commission report goes to Congress, it will face further intense scrutiny.

Another angry Republican is Alaska Senator Ted Stevens (R), who wrote to the BRAC Commission July 27, that the Air Force's recommendation to convert Eielson Air Force Base, outside of Fairbanks, Alaska, into a “warm base” is a “broken recommendation that does not deliver promised savings, ignores strategic value, and undermines joint training opportunities.” He reported that the Air Force's “poor analysis” was revealed during a site survey of Eielson “when it was determined that an additional 1,000 personnel are needed to maintain the installation than originally anticipated.”

Stevens also reported, as the Government Accountability Office had stated in a July 1 report, that the Air Force counted as “savings,” personnel who are going to relocate to other bases as a result of the realignment, by counting them as if they were leaving the Air Force. As a result of those two miscalculations, Stevens wrote that “An annual recurring savings of \$229 million goes to \$27 million!”

Simmons reported that Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) had told him that if the amendments to the Fiscal Year 2006 defense authorization bill calling for a slowdown of the BRAC process had come to a vote, before Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) had pulled the bill from the floor, he thought they would have passed. Simmons was not optimistic, however, that Congress will defeat the plan. “There is increasing distress over BRAC in the House of Representatives,” he said. “The biggest problem with BRAC is that you go out and absolutely screw about a third of the Congress, but two-thirds feel they're okay, so the numbers aren't there.”

There is a lot of anger and animosity, particularly among Republican members of Congress, Simmons said. “Ironically, a lot of the people that are getting screwed around with are people like myself who are great advocates of the U.S. military.” He noted that Rep. Bill Young (R-Fla.), the chairman of the Defense Appropriations subcommittee, thinks that the New London plan “is a terrible mistake,” in part, because he has overseen the appropriating of the hundreds of millions of dollars in military construction and other improvements that have gone into New London over the last two decades.

“I don't know that there's enough concern to scuttle the process,” Simmons said, “but there is growing concern, and I've had it since day one. I voted against the BRAC process because there's too much money up front to clean up these facilities, and the funds recovered are too far into the future. We should not do this process at this time.”

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