

Is Rumsfeld Plan To Close Bases Crumbling?

by Carl Osgood

As the date for the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission's (BRAC) final deliberations comes closer, almost every day sees the emergence of more evidence suggesting that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's base closing plan is in trouble. One such signal appeared in the Aug. 14 edition of the *New York Times*, which reported that eight of the nine members of the BRAC Commission were questioning the Pentagon's savings estimate of \$50 billion over 20 years. Most of the commission members interviewed by the *Times* said they agreed with a Government Accountability Office report which concluded that nearly half of the Pentagon's projected cost savings came from cuts in military jobs that would not actually be cut, but rather, relocated to other installations.

"I fail to see at this point how you could arrive at the figures they arrived at," said commission chairman Anthony Principi. "We're going through this effort to save money from excess capacity to modernize forces. If the savings aren't there, and it costs money to do this on top of all the economic upheaval, why are we doing this?"

While members of the commission are expressing more uncertainties, the anger in Congress continues to seethe. Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John Warner (R-Va.) is challenging the commission's apparent willingness to accommodate the state of Florida's attempt to poach the Navy fighter jets stationed at Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia Beach. As reported previously by *EIR* (see *EIR* Aug. 12), the commission voted on July 19 to consider Oceana for closure, because of encroachment issues that impinge upon the training of Navy fighter pilots stationed at Oceana. That vote immediately brought forth proposals from Florida, Texas, and North Carolina for alternatives to the Oceana base. Only Florida succeeded in getting a hearing, scheduled for Aug. 20, to present its proposal to the commission, to reopen Naval Air Station Cecil Field, near Jacksonville, which was closed by the 1993 BRAC round.

Warner objected to that hearing, warning the commission, in an Aug. 12 letter, that holding such a hearing could put the commission in violation of the BRAC statute. Warner noted that the law states that the commission "may not take into account for any purpose an advance conversion planning undertaken by an affected community with respect to the anticipated closure or realignment of a military installation." Warner views the Florida proposal as "advance conversion

planning” for the potential relocation of Navy aircraft from Oceana, which is diverting the commission’s resources away from its statutory responsibilities of reviewing the Pentagon’s BRAC recommendations. He warned that further consideration of Florida’s proposal by the commission “threatens the integrity and the legality of the BRAC process and the final recommendations of the BRAC Commission.”

Could Congress Reject the BRAC Plan?

The Cecil Field proposal has the backing of Florida Gov. Jeb Bush (R) and the state’s Congressional delegation, giving it that divide-and-conquer quality that seems to characterize so many of the Pentagon’s recommendations. Nonetheless, the anger in Congress over the plan is such that some members are now discussing the possibility that Congress may vote to reject the report outright, assuming that the report gets out of the BRAC Commission, which is not yet a sure thing. The commission begins its final deliberations on Aug. 24, as it proceeds to produce its report, to be submitted to President Bush by Sept. 8. Assuming that happens as scheduled, and the report goes to the Congress with President Bush’s imprimatur, then the Congress would have to muster a veto-proof two-thirds majority vote to prevent the plan from becoming law, something that has never come close to happening in previous BRAC rounds.

On Aug. 17, Senators Chris Dodd (D-Conn.) and Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) suggested that that might actually be possible, this time around, such is the anger in the Congress. Lieberman cited the amendment to the fiscal 2006 defense authorization bill, sponsored by Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) and co-sponsored by both him and Dodd, as well as the hold placed by Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Me.) on the nomination of Navy Secretary Gordon England to be Deputy Secretary of Defense, as two signs of the level of anger in the Senate over the plan. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) pulled the bill off the floor in order to avoid a vote on Thune’s amendment, as well as other amendments dealing with detainee policy. “We’re on the verge of a Congressional uprising,” said Lieberman. Dodd would not rule out the possibility that Warner might back such an uprising, because of the numerous concerns he has raised, in addition to the Cecil Field proposal. Dodd noted that the Pentagon did not bother to consult with state governors about its plan to close over two dozen Air National Guard flying units. “That kind of arrogance is what is bothering an awful lot of people,” Dodd said.

The Cost of Closing New London Sub Base

Dodd and Lieberman made their remarks during a conference-call press briefing which followed by one day the release by Rep. Rob Simmons (R-Conn.) of a Navy memo which shows that the Navy grossly underestimated the costs of shutting down the New London submarine base and moving to Kings Bay, Ga., most of its assets, which include 18 attack submarines and the Navy’s submarine school, Opponents of



DoD/Master Sgt. Reggie Sheppard, USAF

Many of the BRAC commission members agree with a GAO report which concluded that nearly half of the Pentagon’s projected cost savings came from “cuts” in military jobs that would actually be relocated to other installations. Shown here are airmen with the 175th Wing Maryland Air National Guard.

the closure are calling the June 8 memo a “white-hot smoking gun,” because it shows that the infrastructure needs for the school are much greater than the estimates the Navy developed for its BRAC proposal. The Navy used a baseline figure of \$211 per square foot for the school’s buildings, the average cost of building a high school, whereas Simmons maintains that the actual cost, because of heavier cooling, electrical, and lighting requirements, is at least \$325 per square foot, for a difference of \$47 million.

Dodd, Lieberman, and Simmons, with the help of experts such as John Casey, the president of Electric Boat, are still warning that the closure of New London would be a major mistake. Dodd noted that submarines are still performing critical missions, and that the need for them is growing. Simmons said that calculations by opponents of the closure show that, rather than saving \$1.6 billion over 20 years, as the Navy

claims, it will actually cost \$640 million, instead. He said that the personnel savings, alone, are overstated by \$84 million, in part, because the Navy counted the elimination of at least 200 vacant billets as savings, even though no money is presently being spent on those billets.

Casey warned that the closing of New London will have a dramatic impact on Electric Boat's shipyard, where new submarines are built. He pointed to the close relationship that exists between the two facilities, which are located only a short distance apart on the Thames River, which brings with it benefits that would be lost. In addition to building new submarines for the Navy, Electric Boat also repairs submarines, and that repair work helps maintain the overhead required for new construction. "I'd have to make a decision to either discontinue that line of work or uproot and try to relocate to where the work is," Casey said. So, closure of New London threatens as many as 2,000 jobs at Electric Boat, 500 workers who do intermediate maintenance at New London, and another 1,500 who do repair and overhaul at the shipyard.

Air National Guard Conundrum

The Pentagon proposal for closing down 29 Air National Guard flying units, leaving at least five states with no Air National Guard flying mission at all, is the one issue that has drawn the most heat, and appears the most difficult for the commission to deal with. The difficulty arises from the fact that only 5 of the Air Force's 26 recommendations regarding the Air National Guard, are closures of installations. The remainder are what the Air Force terms "enclaves," meaning that non-flying support units, such as firefighters, military police, civil engineers, medical, and so forth, are left behind without a flying mission to support. The Air Force argues that this is necessary because the number of aircraft in its fleet is declining, and so, in order to maintain efficiently sized squadrons, the number of flying units has to be reduced. For example, the Air Force maintains that a squadron flying C-130s has to have 12 aircraft in order to be efficient, whereas most Air National Guard C-130 squadrons have only 8. The process of consolidating squadrons has been under way in the active Air Force since the early 1990s, but has been held off in the Air National Guard until now, in order to maintain a flying mission in every state.

This plan, however, has created a firestorm of controversy in many states, as *EIR* has previously reported, and the BRAC Commission appeared no closer to resolving the issue after a four-hour hearing on Aug. 11, which took testimony from Defense Department and Air National Guard witnesses, than it had been before. During the hearing, commission members repeatedly pointed out that the BRAC statute deals only with installations and infrastructure, not the locations of particular aircraft, which is what the Air Force plan primarily deals with. Commission member Admiral Harold Gehman (ret.) did manage to wring one concession on that issue out of Air Force

Maj. Gen. Gary Heckman, who was chief of the Air Force's Base Closure Executive Group. Heckman told the commission that the Air Force would accept a commission recommendation that did not specify the movement of aircraft, if it provided the same result as the Air Force recommendations.

The Air National Guard's response, however, was to recommend that the commission toss out all of the proposals that deal with the movement of aircraft. Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke, the Adjutant General of Nebraska and the president of the Adjutants General Association of the United States (AGAUS), testified that "through our recommendations, we seek to protect the nation's interests by eliminating programmatic moves that do not save money, yet may severely diminish capabilities needed for homeland security and homeland defense." He added that not only do the AGAUS recommendations bring flying squadrons to a size considered optimal for the Air National Guard but "More importantly, adapting our set of recommendations will permit the adjutants general, the National Guard Bureau, and the Air Force to work together to transform to a modern and more lethal Air Force."

Lempke also refuted the notion that larger squadrons are more efficient, explaining the manner in which the Air Guard has been able to put together multiple-aircraft task forces to meet Air Force deployment requests, by taking three each from three different squadrons. "If you're going to rely on volunteerism with any reserve component force," he said, "you need to spread the pain, if you will. By reaching out . . . and spreading the call-ups among three different communities is far better in many cases than going to one location and tapping heavily on that community to provide resources to support those seven or eight aircraft." Conversely, if units are left without aircraft, recruitment and retention will suffer. Lempke told the commission that informal surveys have shown that if that happens, "you're probably talking in the 70-85% range of losses. . . ." He reported that some full-time Air Guard members in units slotted for closure are already exploring the job market.

Near the conclusion of the hearing, commission member Lt. Gen. Lloyd Newton (ret.) expressed skepticism that, if the commission did give the Air National Guard the time to work out a new plan with the Air Force, that the open channel of communication that Lempke described would ever materialize. Maj. Gen. Thomas Maguire, the Adjutant General of New York, replied that the problem is not that the adjutants general are unwilling to talk to the Air Force. "Our frustration has been when we've tried to move forward . . . and come up with that dialogue with the Air Staff, the door has been closed in the name of BRAC. . . ." Lempke added that the dilemma is what Gehman had referred to earlier: "Do we allow BRAC to make these force structure changes, and they become law?" Newton, in concluding his questions, expressed frustration that the Air Force and the Air National Guard still had not been able to find a solution. He vowed that, since the commission still has to deal with the problem, "We will deal with it.

I can assure you of that.” He concluded that “It is unthinkable where I find ourselves now, at a point where we’ve spent this much time . . . with trying to get us together and deciding what is the right path ahead.”