

Revolt Brewing Around Base-Closing Swindle

by Carl Osgood

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's base-closing plan, which is nothing more than a giant real estate swindle, has generated a vehement reaction across the country. Although it is natural that constituencies would arise to defend bases targeted for closure in their area, what makes the reaction more pointed is that Rumsfeld's plan intersects austerity measures being pushed by the Bush Administration. These include the shrinkage of the Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system, in a plan written by former VA Secretary Anthony Principi, who is now Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) chairman. The Bush Administration's proposed VA cuts feature the closure of VA hospitals and VA-funded nursing homes, and substantial cuts in the Medicaid program.

These Administration efforts run parallel to efforts by Wall Street interests to slash and burn employee benefits, including pensions and health care, in the airline, steel, and automotive industries.

As *EIR* reported, soon after the Pentagon's release of its base-closing report on May 15, members of both the House and the Senate introduced legislation to slow the process down. Within days, the bill of Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) garnered 17 co-sponsors. In the House, debate on the base closing, led by Rep. Jeb Bradley (R-N.H.), went straight to the floor May 25, with the House consideration of the Fiscal 2006 defense authorization bill. Bradley noted that just four days before the BRAC closure list came out, the Overseas Basing Commission released its report, recommending that the base-closing process be slowed down, so that decisions can be made in a reasonable manner about where to put the 70,000 troops, plus 100,000 family members, who are scheduled to come home from bases in Europe, and build any new infrastructure that will be required. Also there will be requirements for the 30,000 new troops that the House has voted to authorize as an addition to the Army's end strength.

"We need to slow the process down to ensure we do not make critical mistakes when we are deciding our national security and military strategy," said Rep. Stephanie Herseth (D-S.D.).

Bradley's amendment was defeated by a vote of 316 to 112, but the last word on the subject has yet to be heard in the House. Rep. Joel Hefley (R-Colo.), the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee Readiness Subcommittee, told the House that although he had led attempts in the previous two years to slow the process down, this time around, "as the

old cliché says, 'the train has left the station.' I think it is very difficult to call that train back at this stage." Hefley noted that Congress will have one more chance to consider the final BRAC plan. "And while I recognize that disapproving the recommendations is a difficult hurdle to overcome, that is our best remaining opportunity to terminate the BRAC process." House Armed Services Committee chairman Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.), who on May 13 had issued a statement in favor of keeping open the Navy's Submarine Base in New London, Conn., seconded Hefley's analysis, but urged members to take their cases to the BRAC Commission.

In the Senate, that debate has yet to take place, but Thune, along with Maine's two senators, Olympia Snowe (R) and Susan Collins (R), are determined that debate will occur. Under the plan, South Dakota will lose Ellsworth Air Force Base, the second largest employer in the state, and Maine will lose the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, and the Brunswick Naval Air Station.

Snowe, in particular, has been angry that the Pentagon has been slow to release the data on which it based its determinations of the military value of its installations. On May 25, Snowe and Thune introduced legislation that would require the DoD to turn over all of its data within seven days of enactment, or terminate the current BRAC round. "In this country, we simply do not allow our government to make decisions in the dark that profoundly impact so many citizens' lives," said Snowe.

A day later, May 26, 22 senators from Maine to Nevada sent a letter to Rumsfeld demanding that the Pentagon release that data. During the base-closing rounds of the 1990s, such data were released within seven days of the closure proposals. "If the Department continues to delay the release of this data, communities adversely impacted by BRAC, and the BRAC commission, will be unable to assess the Department's recommendations in the limited time allotted to them under BRAC law," the senators wrote, noting that the BRAC commission's first field hearing is on June 7.

In addition to the senators, 14 state governors signed a letter to President Bush, initiated by Maine's Gov. John Baldacci, making the same demand. "The confidence of the American public in the fairness of the process and the ultimate decisions that will be made to close or realign military installations relies on the accuracy of the data used by the various services, as well as the validity of the calculations and comparisons made using this data," the governors wrote.

Under this growing pressure, the Pentagon made all of the data available, in a classified setting, to members of Congress, the BRAC Commission, and their staffs, on June 1, and promised to make it publicly available on June 4, although some of it would remain classified.

Surprising Revolt from the Military

By law, active duty military personnel at affected bases are prohibited from speaking out in defense of the bases to



DoD/Helene C. Stikkel

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's plan to close or relocate 18 military bases has generated an outcry from citizens and Congressmen whose districts will be devastated by the actions—even as real estate speculators stand to make a killing.

be closed. However, that prohibition does not apply to the National Guard, whose members are considered state employees, unless called up for Federal service. And the National Guard has made no bones about its position on BRAC. On May 26, Thune announced that the National Guard Association of the United States, the Adjutants General Association of the United States, and the Enlisted Association of the National Guard had all endorsed his legislation, and leading members of all three associations appeared with him at a press conference, that day.

Maj. Gen. Francis Vavala, the adjutant general of Delaware, who was representing the Adjutants General Association, said, "We do this as a body to underscore flaws in the recommended decisions fueled by the exclusion of key information pertaining to the Air National Guard."

Vavala was echoed by the adjutant general of Montana, Maj. Gen. Randy Mosley, who was reported to have told Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer (D) that if the recommendations go through, "then our urban center areas and the homeland security support we provide to the nation, states, and governors will be less capable than what we were pre-Sept. 11, 2001."

A major feature of the plan is the redistribution of National Guard aircraft to fewer bases around the country. Twenty-eight states would wind up with fewer aircraft than they presently have, and five of those, including Montana, would have no aircraft at all. Schweitzer is threatening legal action if the Montana Air National Guard is shut down.

Mosley further complained that the National Guard was never part of the Pentagon's process. "We were never involved or informed," he told the Associated Press. "All of the adjutant generals were purposely excluded from the process. They did not want to involve us." Mosley speculated that the reason for the exclusion was that the Pentagon thought it would never get agreement from all of the adjutant generals.

Focus on New England

The focus in recent days has been on New England, where members of the BRAC Commission made visits to the New London Navy Submarine Base in Connecticut, Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod, and the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard and the Brunswick Naval Air Station in Maine. Before departing Washington, commission chairman Principi received the Maine and New Hampshire Congressional delegations, as well as the states' governors in his office in Washington, D.C. Prior to the meeting, Senator Snowe had told reporters that the delegations would tell Principi that the recommendations to close the shipyard, along with Brunswick Naval Air Station and the Defense Finance and Accounting Service Center in Maine, "are based on faulty data and assumptions and ultimately would be detrimental to our national security."

The delegation also argued that clean-up costs for the shipyard are higher than the Pentagon is estimating, and that keeping the shipyard open will actually save the Navy more money than closing it. Representative Bradley added that the delegation stressed that Portsmouth's nuclear license would be "gone forever in all likelihood," once the yard were closed. Rep. Tom Allen (D-Me.) said that the delegation was "able to make the point that Portsmouth is the most efficient yard in the country and it needs to be kept in place or the Navy will lose money overhauling submarines for years to come."

When Principi and other members of the BRAC Commission showed up on June 1, to tour the Portsmouth shipyard, they were greeted by the Maine and New Hampshire governors, congressional delegations, and thousands of shipyard workers and townspeople, all rallying to keep the shipyard open. Representative Bradley told the *Fosters Daily Democrat* that the commission members frequently asked the workers to explain how productivity would suffer if the shipyard were closed and those skills lost. "I think that's a good sign," he said.