

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

