

Will Senator Warner Move To Block BRAC Atrocity?

by Carl Osgood

When the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC) released its initial recommendations several months ago, this news agency denounced BRAC as a blatant “real estate scam,” which had to be fought tooth and nail. Indeed, the BRAC plan contained so many outrageous proposals—from the proposed shutting of the technological heart of U.S. submarine capability, at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard and New London, to the shutting of the premier military hospital in the United States, Walter Reed—that it provoked an unprecedented bipartisan uproar against BRAC. Thousands swarmed to town meetings around the country, to protest the proposed shutdowns, and lawsuits were filed in Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee, to prevent the closing of vital Air National Guard locations.

This author had warned, however, that the Administration was playing a political game, aimed at pitting one section of the country against the other, and thus saving the core of its “transformation” of U.S. military capacity, to real estate profits. With BRAC’s final recommendations, issued Aug. 26, it appears that this strategy has succeeded to the point where Congressional acceptance of the final report, which has to be accepted or rejected in full, is nearly guaranteed.

What the BRAC panel did was classic. On the one hand, it acceded to both reason and pressure, by removing both the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, Maine, and the New London, Conn. facility from the list to be canned. It did the same with Ellsworth Air Force base, even though the beneficiary of the shutdown would have been Bush’s own state of Texas. But, at the same time, the panel approved most of the recommendations, including the most egregious example of the real estate scam: the shutdown of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and the removal of a massive amount of Pentagon office space out of one section of Northern Virginia, into another.

The Walter Reed and Northern Virginia decisions essentially insulted, and threw down the gauntlet to Virginia Senator John Warner, Republican head of the Armed Service Committee. Senator Warner, one of the principal authors of the BRAC law which set the criteria for base closings, had publicly challenged the Commission on its criteria for recommendations, and argued that they did not fall within the mandate of the law. As early as July 12, the Senator had threatened to file suit to block the recommendations, on the basis that they violated the law.

Will Senator Warner now file suit? It is likely that this is the only way the BRAC travesty can be prevented, given the divide-and-conquer decisions of the commission, which have undercut the likelihood of a Congressional rejection. As Lyndon LaRouche remarked Aug. 25, the ball is in Sen. Warner’s court, and he is not the kind of cheap politician who can be bought off with promises to his constituents. As a leader in the “Gang of 14,” which thwarted Vice President Cheney’s May attempt at a coup d’état, Sen. Warner has demonstrated the guts to fight, and lead. Now, he has to decide whether to do so again.

Day One: Rumsfeld Loses a Couple

The BRAC began its final deliberations on Aug. 24, and the blows to Rumsfeld began late in the morning. The two most significant proposals to be shot down included the plans to close both the New London submarine base and the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. According to earlier BRAC testimony, these two proposals accounted for an alleged 38% of the 20-year savings that the Navy had projected, making this proposed takedown a substantial part of the Navy’s overall plan.

Supporters of the New London sub base led a vigorous fight against the closure plan. These included Rep. Rob



CDC/Dr. Edwin P. Ewing, Jr.

You'd have to be crazy, or a salivating real estate scammer, to close down the symbol of U.S. military medicine, Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. But that's what the Rumsfeld Pentagon asked for, and the BRAC Commission agreed to do.

Simmons (R-Conn.), whose district encompasses New London; Connecticut Governor Jodi Rell (R); Connecticut's two Democratic Senators, Chris Dodd and Joe Lieberman; as well as experts such as Electric Boat President John Casey, and John Markowicz, a 1965 Naval Academy graduate who was the president of the Sub Base Realignment Coalition. Simmons repeatedly pointed out errors in the Navy proposal, including its failure to count one of the three dry docks, and the gross underestimates for the costs of moving the submarine school to Kings Bay, Ga. Casey warned of the detrimental effects that closing the base would have on his company, because of the very close relationship that exists between New London and Electric Boat, in the building of new submarines as well as the maintenance of boats currently in service.

The arguments of New London's supporters had a visible effect on the commission. Commission chairman Anthony Principi called the sub base "truly a center of excellence in submarine warfare" which would be "difficult to reconstitute at another location." He warned, "If we close New London, we'll never get it back." Not surprisingly, Simmons was ecstatic after the commission vote.

The commission's consideration proceeded similarly on Portsmouth. During the July 6 regional hearing in Boston, proponents of the shipyard demonstrated that were it to close, there would be insufficient "surge capacity" left in the Navy's three remaining shipyards, a finding with which the commission staff concurred. This appears to have been the tipping point in Portsmouth's favor, but its other attributes also impressed the commission. Principi called it "the pre-eminent shipyard in the Navy" which is also a "model for labor management relations." As with New London, "once we lose it, we won't get it back."

But Pentagon Gets Most of What It Wants

In terms of the sheer number of recommendations, however, the Defense Department got most of what it wanted in

the first two days of the BRAC deliberations. The commission regarded most of the recommendations as non-controversial, such as the hundreds of proposals to close and consolidate Army Reserve and Army National Guard centers. The only Army recommendation that was turned back, was the proposal to close the Red River Army Depot in Texarkana, Tex., which is heavily committed to repair and maintenance of war-damaged wheeled vehicles from Iraq. The commission voted to retain the vehicle maintenance activities and realign other activities at Red River, as proposed in the recommendation. As of this writing, however, the commission has yet to take up most of the Air Force recommendations, over which there has been a great deal of heat, particularly those regarding the Air National Guard.

The commission also voted to approve the recommendation to close Fort Monmouth, N.J., a center of communications and electronics research and development. These activities will be moved to Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland, providing that the Secretary of the Army certifies that there will be "no degradation" of ongoing programs or their support to the ongoing war on terror, or any other military contingency operation. This came on a 7 to 2 vote, after the commission rejected a motion by commissioner Philip Coyle to strike the recommendation altogether.

Sheer Madness

The commission also voted, on August 25, to approve the plan to close Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., a facility that commissioner Lt. Gen. Lloyd Newton (ret.) had, himself, described as the symbol of U.S. military medicine, when he toured the facility on June 10. Commission chairman Anthony Principi expressed concern that the estimated one-time cost of \$989 million to close Walter Reed and build a new hospital on the campus of the Bethesda Naval Hospital was an underestimate, but he decided, with the agreement of the rest of the panel, that the cost was worth it to

replace the “old” facility at Walter Reed because “medicine has changed.”

Not mentioned during the hearing is that Walter Reed also happens to sit on the most desirable 113 acres in the city, from the standpoint of commercial and residential real estate development, a point made very loudly by the *Washington Post* on May 23, as well as by LaRouche. Said one developer quoted by the *Post* at the time, “There’s not 113 acres anywhere around here that’s going to be available. The size allows you to do a lot of different things that can really have an impact.”

The loss of Walter Reed’s capability, in the course of the overall takedown of hospitals in the United States, is nothing less than insane. Walter Reed is the symbol of U.S. military medicine, and 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 more 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 special 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.

In addition, the facility represents a critical capability to deal with any national security emergency.

Warner Gets Snubbed

While Rumsfeld took some hits, the commission appears to have ignored the counsel of Senate Armed Services Committee chairman Warner altogether. From at least his July 7 testimony to the regional BRAC hearing in Arlington, Va., Warner has been warning the commission that the Pentagon’s proposals for moving out of leased space in Northern Virginia are violations of the BRAC law. In his prepared statement to the July 7 hearing, Warner testified that that goal “was the guiding principle for many of these recommendations not military value, cost savings or any other legislated criteria. This is not permitted by law.” Warner reported that while it was not official policy to vacate leased space during the Pentagon’s BRAC process, “there was a general sense that being in the NCR [National Capital Region] is not good . . . most space in the NCR is leased, so the connection was made that vacating leased space is favorable,” according to one Feb. 17, 2005 internal Pentagon memo.

Warner repeated his arguments in letters and memoranda to the commission several times over the following weeks, but when the commission considered the leased space proposals, on Aug. 25, it all but ignored his concerns. Commission chairman Principi said, in effect, that leased space fits the definition of a military installation provided by the law and is, therefore, under the purview of the commission.

The only dissent came from commissioner Coyle, who

first asked commission analysts if there were recommendations that fell into the category of “just want to get out of leased space,” as opposed to those that enhance military value, to which the answer was “yes.” The second question he asked was whether or not any of the leased facilities had actually been assessed for force protection, since one of the Pentagon’s arguments for getting out of leased space is that it is more vulnerable to terrorist attacks than facilities on military bases, to which the answer was always “no.” The commission approved all of the Pentagon recommendations involving leased space, by 7 to 1 votes, with one abstention.

The commission also ignored Warner in the matter of Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia Beach. The Navy had not originally included Oceana in its BRAC recommendations. As it developed testimony on the Navy plans, however, the commission decided, on July 19, to add Oceana to the list for possible closure, on the basis that commercial encroachment around the base interferes with effective training of carrier pilots. That decision caused the state of Florida to come forward with a proposal to re-open Cecil Field, outside of Jacksonville, as a replacement. Cecil Field was closed in 1999 as a result of the 1993 BRAC round, which found that not only was Cecil Field excess infrastructure, but also that the site had potential future air encroachment. The commission agreed to consider Florida’s offer to reopen Cecil Field, even though Warner warned them that the law does not provide the authority to reopen a previously closed base.

On Aug. 24, the commission voted to keep Oceana open, on the condition that the cities of Virginia Beach and Chesapeake, along with the state of Virginia, stop future encroachment within six months, and begin to roll back current residential and commercial development within the accident potential and noise zones, a stipulation that could cost as much as \$268 million to meet. If those communities fail to meet those conditions, then the Navy must close Oceana and reopen Cecil Field. Commission member Newton expressed the view that efforts by Virginia Beach authorities to address encroachment, after the commission put Oceana on the list for possible closure, were nothing more than delaying tactics. The stipulation on Florida is that it must continue to make the infrastructural improvements that it has promised, buy out current lease holders at Cecil Field, and continue its land purchases to prevent future encroachment.

Florida officials treated the commission decision as an eventual victory. “There was a clear statement that on a long-term basis, Oceana is not the logical place for the master jet base,” said Florida Gov. Jeb Bush (R) after the commission decision. Warner’s response, according to the *Fredericksburg Lance Star*, was that while he’s glad BRAC decided to keep Oceana open, he “cannot in good conscience” urge local officials to make big commitments to Oceana “unless the Pentagon is going to be a strong partner” in keeping Oceana open in the future. Warner had also suggested possible legal action should the commission act to close Oceana.