

THE ARMEY BASE CLOSINGS BILL: ROLLING BACK THE MILITARY PORK BARREL

Congress since 1985 has reduced the annual Department of Defense operating budget by about 5 percent in real terms. This deep cut in spending has forced the Pentagon to cancel major weapons systems, postpone its goal of a 600-ship navy, and release thousands of military personnel. Yet, despite the threat to United States security from these actions, Congress continues to prevent the Pentagon from saving as much as \$2 billion annually by closing or consolidating obsolete military bases. This is money that could be used to replace some of America's pared down military muscle. The Pentagon thus is obligated to spend millions of dollars each year operating Fort Monroe, Virginia, which was built during the War of 1812 to repel British Redcoats and has served little military purpose since. Similarly, it is required by Congress to keep open Fort Douglas, Utah, the original purpose of which was to protect stagecoaches from bandits and Indian raids and now is used as an Army Reserve post.

400 Superfluous Bases. To close these and other superfluous domestic military bases, Representative Richard Armeay, the Texas Republican, with 130 cosponsors, has introduced legislation empowering a nonpartisan Defense Department commission to prepare a list of bases that ought to be shut. Senator William Roth, the Delaware Republican, has sponsored similar legislation in the Senate.

As many as 400 of the over 4,000 domestic U.S. military installations are considered by the Pentagon to be of no use to U.S. national security. Yet lawmakers refuse to close these bases for the most parochial of reasons: the bases provide jobs and a steady flow of federal funds into their districts. Ironically, by sparing obsolete bases from extinction, lawmakers actually do a disservice to the communities they represent. A 1986 study by the Pentagon's Economic Adjustment Committee reviewed 100 major base closings since 1961 and found that while 93,000 Pentagon civilian jobs were lost, some 138,000 new positions were created on the same land after it was converted into industrial parks, commercial airports, or to other private purposes.

Delaying Tactics. Legislators prevent the Pentagon from shutting bases by tangling the process hopelessly in red tape. In 1977, for instance, Congress began to require the Pentagon to complete expensive and time-consuming environmental impact statements — even though closing a military base almost always has been found to benefit rather than endanger the environment. When such delaying tactics lose effectiveness, lawmakers have slipped language into authorization bills prohibiting specific bases from being shut down. As a result of these

legislative impediments, not a single major domestic military base has been closed in over a decade.

Bipartisan Support. To outflank these congressional roadblocks, earlier this year Defense Secretary Frank C. Carlucci appointed a nonpartisan commission of military experts to prepare a list of unnecessary bases. Chaired by former Senator Abraham Ribicoff and former Representative Jack Edwards, the commission is composed of highly respected military and environmental experts. The Arme(y) legislation would empower the Pentagon to close the obsolete bases identified by this commission without further congressional interference. Influential Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam Nunn, the Georgia Democrat, and his House counterpart Les Aspin, the Wisconsin Democrat, endorse the idea, thus ensuring widespread bipartisan support. In May, the legislation passed the Senate as an amendment to the Defense Authorization bill.

True to form, however, the opponents of base closings attached several "killer amendments" in the versions of the bill reported out of the House Armed Services Committee and the House Government Operations Committee. These amendments would:

- 1) Force the Pentagon to obtain authorized funds from Congress before it can spend money to initiate a base closing.
- 2) Require Congress to vote its approval of the list of bases identified by the Commission before any could be shut.
- 3) Add foreign bases to the purview of the commission.

The additional congressional review required by these amendments reduces to near zero the likelihood of even a single base ever being closed. If the Pentagon were forced to obtain from congressional authorization committees the funds to pay for the up-front costs for closing a base, lawmakers simply could block closures by refusing to approve the funding, just as they do now. Similarly, requiring Congress to vote on the list of bases targeted for extinction by the commission defeats the entire purpose of creating the commission, and reintroduces pork barrel politics into the process. Finally, measuring the military benefits of foreign bases lies far beyond the scope of the commission's mandate. This provision, in fact, is intended to entangle domestic base closings within Congress's controversial "defense burden sharing" agenda, which seeks to force U.S. allies to contribute more to allied defense spending.

\$2 Billion in Pork. Only the original Arme(y) legislation provides a strategy for taking parochial politics out of the process of identifying and closing obsolete bases. Indeed, it is precisely because the Arme(y) idea would be so effective in cutting pork out of the military budget that some legislators are desperately waging an eleventh hour attempt to emasculate it. Congress should not allow them to torpedo this rare opportunity to shift \$2 billion of defense spending from pork barrel bases to programs to strengthen America's defenses.

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For further information:

Representative Richard Arme(y), "Base Maneuvers," *Policy Review*, Winter 1988, pp: 70-75.

"Defense Cuts That Won't Hurt Defense," *The New York Times*, October 23, 1987, Editorial Page.