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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

Bureaucratic Politics and the Defense Budget The Formation of the 1988 Base Realignment and Closure Commission

Core Course 3 Essay

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Core Course 3
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Closing military bases has always been a highly political process A vivid example of this is the story told about President Lyndon Johnson and Amarillo Air Force Base Johnson was looking for votes to extend the limit on the national debt, and he threatened members of the Texas delegation that he would close their base if they failed to support him. They refused so he kept his promise and closed Amarillo. (Kotz 19) To the relief of many Chambers of Commerce, no president since Johnson has been so effective in shutting down military bases

The pressures to close military bases have varied over the years. In the mid-1980s Congress concluded that the armed forces needed to downsize, and began exploring legislative solutions to the force structure problem. Working with the executive branch, Congress eventually passed a base closure law in a classic struggle of bureaucratic politics This paper analyses that legislative struggle which led to the formation of the defense secretary's 1988 Commission on Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Its thesis is that the BRAC law represented an ad hoc budgetary rather than a rational solution to the military force drawdown issue This legislative - executive struggle closely reflected the dynamics of Graham Allison's bureaucratic politics model, and is best understood in the larger context of the budget process evident in 1988

To prove this thesis, I'll first briefly outline Allison's bureaucratic politics model, then explain the budget process which provided the crucial context in which the bureaucratic

politics flourished. I'll also provide the historical background which placed military base closing on the 100th Congress's agenda The remaining analysis will examine the legislative and executive branch deliberations with Allison's model as the framework. Finally, I'll conclude with some thoughts on the significance of the BRAC process in future government decisionmaking

ALLISON'S MODEL OF BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS

In a seminal analysis published in 1969, Graham T Allison offered three frameworks for evaluating government behavior The discussions between Congress and the executive branch which ultimately led to the BRAC law reflect the dynamics in Allison's definition of bureaucratic politics: "bargaining along regularized channels among players positioned hierarchically within the government." (Allison 69) These players look at problem-solving "according to various conceptions of national, organizational, and personal goals, making government decisions not by rational choice but by the pulling and hauling that is politics " (69)

Government policy results from "compromise, coalition, competition, and confusion among government officials who see different faces of the same issue " (71) Any given issue has a near-term as well as a longer, strategic face, and the politics of bureaucratic bargaining force players to focus "not on the total strategic problem but rather on the decision that must be made now " (73) These decisions are usually structured by "action channels" which define the major players and provide the operating environment for bargaining (73)

All of these characteristics of policy formulation were evident throughout the 1988

discussions which led to the BRAC legislation The specific issue of military base closures was woven into the larger fabric of the budget process This process, and Allison's model, provide the crucial framework for understanding how the BRAC law came about.

THE BUDGET PROCESS

The Constitution distinguishes legislative and executive branch responsibilities for budgeting the national defense Congress is required "to raise and support armies" while the Commander in Chief is instructed to "give to the Congress information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary " Over time, presidents have assumed responsibility for defining the size of the armed forces required for both peace and war, principally through annual budget submissions to Congress and, less frequently, through supplemental appropriation requests Congress has, for the most part, followed the executive branch's lead on national defense matters, codifying this reliance in landmark legislation like the 1947 National Security Act which created the Department of Defense under the executive branch But in the mid-1970s, following Vietnam and Watergate, Congress became more assertive in budgeting the national defense.

To properly understand the bureaucratic politics of national defense budgeting in the Reagan years, one must accept the premise that the ballooning national deficit, rapidly rising entitlement program funding requirements, and growing use of omnibus appropriation bills all contributed to a breakdown in the budgeting process (Schick 2) The breakdown in budgeting

allowed a "procedural crisis manifested in the collapse of established budget methods, the strained relationship between the president and Congress, [and] reliance on ad hoc arrangements to make the budget." (Schick 3) By 1985, the passage of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings law was a tacit recognition that Congress and the executive branch had reached a state of budgetary paralysis. Only an automatic sequestration mechanism could exact a measure of discipline in curbing government spending This mechanism would have had a tremendous impact on the national defense budget if it had been exercised Through the dynamics of budgetary bureaucratic politics, a different mechanism with a similar goal of decisionmaking discipline emerged to aid Congress and President Reagan downsize the nation's military infrastructure

THE NEED TO CLOSE MILITARY BASES

From FY80 - FY85, national defense funding increased in real terms by 53 percent (Foelber 1) Actual force strength, however, did not expand significantly the Navy grew from 13 to 14 carriers, the Army added two light divisions, and the Air Force went from 37 to 38 fighter wings (Foelber 6) By the mid-1980s, at least five factors convinced Congress to level off and then reverse this defense buildup. One, the actual size of each successive spending increase dwarfed what was appropriated for most non-defense programs Two, the growing concern over the skyrocketing deficit and its impact on the financial markets, culminating in the October 1987 stock market crash Three, the apparent failure of supply-side economics to generate increasing government revenues to offset higher defense expenditures Four, a series of defense-related

scandals in weapon system acquisition and spare parts management Fifth, the uncompromising attitude presented by the Reagan administration through its chief spokesman on military matters, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. (Blechman 35) At the conclusion of the 1987 budget summit, the Administration's FY89 defense budget reflected a decline of about 11 percent in real terms over the 4-year FY86 - FY89 period. (Foelber 1) Congress and the President chose to focus proposed spending reductions on modernization and elements of force structure, hoping to avoid any return to a "hollow force" by continuing substantial funding of readiness and sustainability accounts (Foelber 3)

One element of force structure, base infrastructure, quickly surfaced as a candidate for reduction President Reagan's Private Sector Survey on Cost Control, commonly referred to as the Grace Commission, had previously recommended that a non-partisan, independent commission be established to study base closures The Grace Commission supposed that a non-partisan, rational body of experts would effectively circumvent the most corrupting political aspects of selecting bases for closure The Commission prided itself on its rational review of cost saving opportunities for the nation, and figured a similar deliberative process could winnow out military facilities for which there was no longer a requirement (The Reporter 22) It was against this backdrop that the players in budgetary bureaucratic politics negotiated the rules and limits of the BRAC law in 1988

THE BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS OF BASE CLOSURE

In the early 1960s, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara executed an independent, rational process for base realignment and closure. More than 60 major bases were closed by executive branch actions The criteria were defined without advice from the Military Services or Congress, and the latter institution suffered enough political backlash that it resolved never to be out-maneuvered again (BRAC Report 8) In 1977, Congress passed legislation requiring the executive branch to notify it of any base closure affecting 300 or more civilian employees, and directed DOD to comply with the procedural requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which called for detailed impact reports before any decision could be implemented The net effect of this was an end to major base closures by any independent, rational process

For the reasons outlined above, by the mid-1980s the executive and legislative branches had gravitated toward a consensus on drawing down the military Then-Secretary of Defense Weinberger had battled with both the White House budget managers and Congress to preserve defense funding levels above what was politically acceptable By the time he left office in late 1987, Weinberger's management style and stubborn relationship with key congressional leaders permitted one observer to conclude that "the secretary had contributed decisively to yet another reassertion of congressional decisionmaking on defense issues " (Blechman 37) In the effort to narrow the zero-sum character of defense budgeting, to bring it more sharply into focus as an element in reducing the federal deficit, the politics of national defense had grown very partisan

and antagonistic (Tierney 108) It was in this environment that a lame duck Republican president, a Democratic Congress, a new and conciliatory defense secretary, and a lone Republican congressman from Texas merged on the base closure issue

In 1987, Rep Dick Armey surprised House Democratic leaders by coming within seven votes of passing a floor amendment on closing obsolete bases In April, 1988, he proposed a similar bill Democratic leaders recognized significant bipartisan support for it, and carefully orchestrated it on the Hill to ensure final passage The specific dynamics of Armey's bill reaching final law reflect five key attributes of Allison's model of bureaucratic politics, as the following analysis shows

First, there was intense "bargaining along regularized channels among players positioned hierarchically within the government " The chairmen of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, Les Aspin and Sam Nunn, took the lead in guiding Armey's proposal through their respective chambers Their strategy was to staff it as part of the 1988 Defense Authorization bill, ultimately reconciling different versions in the conference committee Senator Nunn had just assumed his chair and was staking out his authority on defense matters. Asserting his leadership, he invited Democratic committee members and majority staff to a country club dinner to map out defense budgetary priorities, quietly but firmly establishing his position in the "pecking order " (Blechman 46) At the same time, President Reagan allowed Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci wide latitude mediating with Congress on defense budget matters In

numerous appearances before Hill committees, and through OSD staff - Hill staff meetings, Carlucci bargained for the executive branch on the shape of the BRAC law within the larger debate on the defense budget He recognized where the battle was headed. "The laws that have had probably the greatest impact on the department's ability to realign or close bases are the annual authorization and appropriation acts " (Carlucci 1) The BRAC proposal's "regularized channel" became the annual authorization bill in the defense budget process, and the "hierarchical players" were the key defense committee chairmen and the defense secretary

A second bureaucratic politics attribute is that "players look at problem-solving according to various goals " For Secretary Carlucci, potential savings were not as important as national security "Our increasingly scarce resources must be applied to higher defense priorities so that we do not jeopardize America's national security interests " (Carlucci 1) He constituted the BRAC Commission on May 3, 1988, without legislation in order to assert traditional executive branch leadership in national defense matters Carlucci did not dictate explicit criteria for the Commission to use, he did ensure that OSD and the Military Service organizational goals were integrated into the review process independent of Congress (Halloran B7) Congressional goals were more diffuse Emboldened to greater activism on defense matters, many congressmen insisted that the legislative branch limit the executive branch's freedom to close military bases with statutory restrictions Rep Armey summarized this organizational goal by identifying its source "Members believe that bases have been closed for political reasons rather

than reasons of defense preparedness " (Mills 1817)

Individual congressmen with threatened military bases had two related goals First, to ensure that the BRAC process insulated them individually from voter backlash with effective "blame avoidance" legislation that would remove accountability from them and assign it squarely to the BRAC Commission (Thurber 72) Second, they wanted a BRAC process which, when the final announcement of candidate bases came, would "spread the pain across the board " (Blechman 56) Chairman Aspin waited until that announcement to publicly state what had been privately on the minds of all congressmen.

> My reaction, looking at what the Commission has done, asking "Does it basically look fair?" and "Does it basically look like the kind of thing that Congress might support?" And I think that the distribution looks fair enough, the distribution geographically, the distribution affecting Democratic congressmen and Republican congressmen, it looks okay.

A third dynamic of bureaucratic politics is that "policy results from compromise, coalition, competition and confusion" among players Secretary Carlucci asked Congress for a compromise on the NEPA procedures to achieve a streamlined BRAC process and he got it Congress wanted to show cost savings, and added a requirement to Armey's proposal that the executive branch initially disliked -- the cost of base closure or mission relocation had to be paid back with savings in six years (Mills 1725) Further, while Sen Nunn managed the BRAC proposal in the Senate, three separate House chairmen claimed jurisdiction and significantly marked it up prior to the House Senate conference Most of these parochial amendments were removed in conference because Nunn and Aspin resolutely insisted on a final wording which

would allow rather than hinder base closures (Lawrence 1910) They ensured decisive congressional play in the BRAC process by increasing the commission's membership, and by establishing an environmental cleanup fund which had to be funded by Congress before a base could be closed (Towell 2808)

A fourth characteristic of bureaucratic politics is that "players focus not on the total strategic problem but rather on the decision that must be made now " The Democratic leadership in Congress was interested in showing some cost savings in the defense budget quickly By attaching the Armey proposal to what was an "omnibus" defense authorization package, they guaranteed action in 1988 This strategy placed budget institutional pressures on both Congress and the White House to compromise in the short term

Finally, in bureaucratic politics, "action channels" define the major players and provide the environment for bargaining While this has been fleshed out above, two additional comments are warranted Congress selected the budget process as its "action channel" because its ad hoc nature allowed the powerful Democratic leaders to develop and control consensus on the BRAC proposal within the larger debate on the defense authorization bill Also, the Gramm-Rudman mechanism of automatic sequestration transferred to the BRAC process -- base closures would be automatic unless Congress or the defense secretary actively vetoed the Commission's entire list Secretary Carlucci used his executive powers to panel an essentially "hollow" BRAC Commission in May to use it in his bargaining with Congress He knew that

Congress would provide the enabling legislation for the Commission, but by setting it up and tying in his office as well as the Military Services early he created an effective "action channel" and "operating environment" for negotiating with Congress and special interest groups before the final law was passed

On October 13, 1988, President Reagan signed the defense authorization bill, approving the BRAC process as law On December 29, the Commission issued its report The Secretary of Defense approved its recommendations without comment on January 5, 1989, and Congress did not vote to overturn

IS THE BRAC PROCESS THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE?

This paper has concluded that the 1988 BRAC law did not grow out of a rational government decisionmaking process Instead, it evolved out of the tug and pull of bureaucratic politics between key players in the ad hoc budgetary process prevalent at the time Congress reasserted its interest in shaping the structure of the armed forces, using the defense authorization bill as its venue, joining with the executive branch in intense bargaining over a BRAC process which could be signed into law that year

The term "BRAC process" refers to more than just the Commission and its role of selecting military bases for realignment or closure It also refers to the bureaucratic politics of deciding national defense matters Congress and the executive branch have Constitutional obligations to provide for national defense, and they normally accomplish it through the annual

defense budget process But with Armey's BRAC proposal, a new decision ethic emerged to color the context of defense budget politics That decision ethic was the "all-or-none" outcome first seen in the automatic sequestration rule in Gramm-Rudman In that law, if deficit reduction targets were missed, then "all" of a set of non-entitlement programs were affected by an across-the-board cut

This same "all-or-none" decision ethic found its way into the BRAC law· the defense secretary and Congress had to either passively accept "all" of the Commission's recommendations, or accept "none" by actively rejecting the entire list. By not requiring Congress to actively approve the list, were lawmakers abdicating a responsibility to make an accountable decision on an issue of national significance to voters?

Only the American voter can answer that question The 1994 elections suggest they have Americans held many elected officials accountable on a variety of issues and for a variety of reasons Accountability seems to matter today -- the Contract With America clearly provides for it An "all-or-none" decision ethic has a place in government decisionmaking -- subsequent BRAC Commissions have been chartered with the rule -- but it won't become an institutional fixture as long as elected government officials believe they are held accountable at the polls

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