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BASE CLOSURE IN THE 1990s

The All-or-Nothing Approach

SUBMITTED BY

**RALPH GRIECO
LTC, USA
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE**

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BASE CLOSURE IN THE 1990s The All-or-Nothing Approach

"We want the absolute best possible force we can have, regardless of what size it is. Everybody will pay lip service to this philosophy. But it comes down to the vote. There is a big constituency out there to keep all bases open, keep all the units activated; don't mothball the (battleships) Missouri and Wisconsin; don't close my fort."

Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense

Introduction

The allocation of Defense dollars -- particularly in the case of permanent basing of ships, planes, and troops -- has been of great interest to the bureaucracy. By the late 1980s, Congress recognized the difficult task facing DoD in trying to reduce the Defense budget through base closings. But Congress had -- and still has -- a vested interest in base closings as evidenced by Secretary Cheney's quote above. As a means of serving the nation's best interests, the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990 was enacted by Congress. Its purpose was to "ensure a timely, independent, and fair process for closing and realigning U. S. military installations"¹ that were in excess to a post-Cold War base force.

This paper will evaluate the base closure process as a study of bureaucratic politics by following this outline:

- The Problem -- a review of past base closures.
- The Actors -- an analysis of parochial interests and bureaucratic politics.
- A Solution -- a review of the Base Closure Act of 1990.

¹ Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC), Report to the President, 1991: v.

- The Results -- the impact of the 1991 Base Closure Commission and beyond.

The Problem

Prior to the 1990s, base closings in the United States were often viewed by the Congress as an Executive "hammer" to punish uncooperative legislators by closing bases in their districts. This perception generated into partisan politics with Congressional attacks directed at the Executive Branch. Congressmen and interest groups fought very hard to keep military bases open in their districts; it was a question of losing jobs and the economic impact on the surrounding community. This conflict with the Executive Branch -- specifically, the Department of Defense (DoD) -- resulted in bases that didn't fully support defense priorities or force structure plans.

The "unfreezing" of the Cold War in the 1980s caused DoD to consider significant force drawdowns in an era of tight budgets. In conducting this drawdown, DoD wanted to prevent the reoccurrence of the "hollow force" syndrome of the late 1970s when Defense dollars were being drastically cut. For the 1990s, DoD has sought to cut excess overhead -- unneeded bases -- in order to apply limited dollars to maintaining capable and professional Armed Forces.

Beginning as early as 1985, Congress also recognized that DoD dollars could be saved by closing bases that were in excess of the Services' needs. The DoD submitted a list of 22 bases for possible closure to a hearing requested by Senator Goldwater. Since there was no process in place to handle such large closings, no action was taken.

In 1988 Secretary of Defense Carlucci formed his own DoD base closure commission to conduct an independent study and recommend bases for closure or realignment. Later in 1988, Congress passed the first base closure law. The resulting Congressional Commission recommended 86 bases be closed and 55 others be realigned worldwide.

In 1990 Secretary of Defense Cheney proposed closing 36 stateside bases. The House Democrats claimed that Cheney had unfairly targeted bases in Democratic districts. The Administration felt that this issue was too controversial for Congress to make fair and rational decisions. Needless to say, Cheney's list was not acted upon. However, the stage was set for the 1990 Base Closure Act.

The Actors

The DoD would most likely have preferred to follow Graham Allison's Model I -- the Rational Policy Model -- in solving the basing issue as a rational action of "value maximizing."² A Model I ideal became a Model II goal -- the Organizational Process Model. In earlier base closing attempts, DoD (the organizational actor) had envisioned base requirements as a result of clear organizational goals. Factored into this was interservice (i.e., Army vs. Navy) and intraservice (i.e., Ft. McClellan vs. Ft Wood) rivalries in attempts to keep service functions intact or base missions alive. The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) was to provide central coordination and control.

While a Model II example may have been a DoD goal, conceptual Model III (the

² Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," in Morton H. Halperin and Arnold Kanter, eds., Readings in American Foreign Policy: A Bureaucratic Perspective (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973), p.51.

Bureaucratic Politics Model) became reality and followed the pattern fairly well. In this particular model, power is shared between the Executive and Legislative Branches. Congressional leaders were not about to let DoD close bases in their districts without a fight.

The Constitution designates the President as the Commander in Chief of all US Armed Forces. This authority gives the Executive Branch, through the Secretary of Defense, the power to position forces. Through history and in practice this has led to DoD's exercise of authority in stationing forces both in the US and overseas to protect and defend the nation and our vital interests. Not to be left out, the Constitution gives the Congress the power "to raise and support Armies and to provide and maintain a Navy."³ Tied to this authority is the power of the purse given to Congress in Article I, Section 9 of the Constitution. One can quickly see the Constitutional conflict that results when DoD attempts to close a base. Congress must fund the costs to close facilities, move functions and units, build new facilities, etc., if base closures or realignments are to be achieved. But Congress -- in disagreeing with the closure -- may deny or fail to pass the necessary appropriations to execute the actions. This stalemate demonstrates the axiom: "dollars are policy."

In the Model III concept, policy comes about as a result of compromise, coalitions, competition, and sometimes confusion -- another way of saying bargaining. The political outcome as a result of Congressional involvement was the Base Closure Law of 1990. Many aspects of the Model III concept are clearly present: deadlines, rules and rewards of the game, and sharing of power.

³ Constitution of the United States, Article I, Section 8.

Criticism by the Congress of the pre-1990 base closure process was a major factor in rewriting the base closing legislation. Three major charges against the 1988 Congressional Commission were:

- The process had been secretive -- not open to public input or debate.
- The Commission didn't visit the sites recommended for closure.
- The data used by the Commission was in error and was not subject to review by an independent agency.

With these shortcomings in mind, a number of actors -- some new to the game -- played a role in this process: the President; the Secretary of Defense; the three Services; the Government Accounting Office (GAO); individual Congressional leaders and Congress as a whole; and local interests groups and politicians representing the public.

A Solution

Congress passed the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990 to make the base closure process work. Congress understood that politics resulted in the "where-you-stand-depends-on-where-you-sit" attitude by individual Congressional leaders. A number of these legislators had vested interests in the base closings and fought any attempt to close those in their districts. In most cases their disagreement was without regard to the efficiency and cost reduction that would result. As such, the 1990 law "strictly limited the ability of elected leaders to influence base closing decisions."⁴

A short summary of the 1990 law and the role of the players is as follows:

⁴ Steven G. Koven, "Base Closings and Politics-Administration Dichotomy Revisited," in Public Administration Review September/October 1992, Vol 52, No. 5: 526.

- The Services analyze their own base requirements comparing them with the force structure plans and eight selection criteria. The selection criteria were finalized by DoD after public comment: four concerned military value; three involved impact on economy, community infrastructure, and the environment; and one concerned return on investment.
- The Services submit their proposals to the Secretary of Defense who acts as the sanity check for DoD -- the central coordination and control of the Model III. The Secretary's scrub is sent to the Presidential Commission by an April 15th deadline.
- The Commission holds open hearings in which testimony and viewpoints are heard from community and Congressional leaders. All affected bases are visited by the Commission. They further ensure that the proposed list of closings and realignments don't "substantially deviate from the force structure plan and selection criteria."⁵ The GAO assists the Commission in its review by analyzing the DoD's proposals and process. The Commission can add or delete bases from the DoD list; and its recommendations are submitted to the President on July 1st.
- The President must approve or disapprove the Commission's recommendations as a package deal by July 15. If he rejects the report, it's returned to the Commission for revision and resubmission within one month. Again, the President can approve the list, as revised, or disapprove the complete action. The approved package must be sent to Congress by September 1st. If the President disapproves the revised report, then the process for that year is finished -- no action is taken and the Commission is dissolved.
- Congress has 45 days to accept or reject the approved list in its

⁵ Defense BRAC Report: 1-2.

entirety. A majority vote of both Houses is needed to reject the list. If Congress passes such a resolution, the President can still veto this disapproval. Congress then must have a two-thirds vote of both Houses to override the President's veto.

By creating these procedures, Congress has limited the ability of opponents to stop the base closing action without a clear Congressional consensus. No one district or regional area is likely to mount sufficient opposition to the Commission's Report. Where Congressional leaders must now try to impact the process is not on the floor of Congress but rather at the Commission hearings and better yet to influence the Secretary of Defense prior to his submitting the list to the Commission. In 1991 both of these tactics were used -- some successful, some not. The requirement for a GAO review serves as an effective barometer of the entire process. ✓

The 1990 Law called for the base closing process to be started in 1991 and repeated in 1993 and 1995 -- in between election years. Each round would be adjudicated by a different 8-person commission appointed by the President: four with concurrence by the House and Senate majority; two with concurrence by the House and Senate minority; and two independently selected by the President. The President designates one commissioner as Chairman. The Commission represents a cross section of former national leaders -- but no serving legislators. Majority and minority party "allegiance" was envisioned by the Congress in defining the composition of the Commission. With this year's Democratic Congress and President, one would expect 6 Democrats and 2 Republicans to be appointed to the 1993 Commission.

The Results

The 1991 Base Closure Commission pretty much followed its founding charter in four very important ways. First, the Commission held 15 sessions to hear from DoD, legislators, and experts. Second, it held 14 regional and site hearings to receive public comments. Third, the Commission visited the major facilities proposed for closure. Lastly, the Commission and GAO reviewed the Services' input to ensure it met the selection criteria and force structure plans. As a result of this process, the 1991 Commission's report to the President recommended 34 bases or activities be closed, 48 be realigned, and 4 ~~to~~ remain open. These recommendations were approved by President Bush on July 10, 1991. A resolution to kill the report was easily defeated in the House: 60 against, 364 for the action.

As a tribute to Congress' political courage and resolve, the commission process "insulated the politically sensitive process from the tendency of members to protect their hometown facilities"⁶ with its all-or-nothing vote. President Bush praised the panel: "This Commission has served without political motivation and the report, I'm satisfied, is without political bias or motivation."

The Commission process was successful in 1991 and one hopes will remain so if the Clinton Administration requests additional base closings in 1993 and 1995. The process owes much of its success to its democratic and fair approach to the problem, its openness, its independence, as well as its outside review by the GAO.

⁶ Elizabeth A. Palmer, "Opponents Lose Final Bid To Save Installations," Congressional Quarterly August 3, 1991: 2190.

Some implications and conclusions can be drawn from this case study of bureaucratic politics:

- To achieve government economies and efficiencies, Congress may have to give up some of its power to influence federal governmental actions in various districts. A sharing of power -- through separate judgements of the Executive and Legislative Branches -- is evident in this issue.
- The military bureaucracy can't ignore the political aspects of its mission. Defense must understand the impact of the political process; it must work through the process (as was done in 1991); and it must accept the fact that its actions may become more political as resources become even more constrained. Within this bureaucracy, pressure will mount on the Executive Branch to maintain good relations with political leaders (a Model III concept) while seeking to maximize organizational effectiveness -- a Model II concept.

In terms of Allison's Model III, the "rule of the game" was the 1990 Base Closure Law. The "reward of the game" was effectiveness: to "make government do what is right."⁷ My hat's off to the Congress for the law, to DoD for its professional approach to a difficult task, and to the Commission for its execution of a "timely, independent and fair process for closing and realigning U. S. military installations."⁸ Clearly, the current base closure process has evolved into a best-case sharing of authority between the Executive and Legislative Branches to achieve common goals -- saving scarce Defense resources and posturing the military for a 1995 Base Force.

⁷ Allison: 75.

⁸ Defense BRAC Report: v.

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