

## BRAC to the Drawing Table

Lawmakers are poised to again deny the Pentagon its request for a round of base closures and realignments to begin in 2017, but the Obama Administration is upping the ante this year by adding BRAC resistance to its lengthy list of grievances against the annual defense authorization bill.

In Administration statements issued this spring on the House and Senate versions of the sprawling Pentagon policy measure, the White House's Office of Management and Budget threatened that President Obama would veto the bill because of a number of objections, including the failure to authorize a BRAC.

"The Administration strongly urges Congress to provide the BRAC authorization as requested, which would allow DOD to right-size its infrastructure while providing important assistance to affected communities, freeing resources currently consumed by maintaining unneeded facilities," according to OMB's statement on the Senate's version of the defense bill.

The House passed its version of the bill in May, and the Senate followed suit in June. As of press time, the two chambers were negotiating differences in the bills, but both measures would block a BRAC.

The Administration hasn't followed through on threatened vetoes of previous defense bills, but ongoing budget battles could force the President's hand, tying lawmakers' aversion to BRAC into a much larger end-of-year debate.

While it seems unlikely that Congress will authorize the 2017 BRAC, base-closure supporters hope that the veto threat is at least a step in the right direction. Meanwhile, a small but influential group of lawmakers support another round of base closures, including the top Demo-

crats on the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, Rep. Adam Smith of Washington and Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island. Others, including House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), have said they may not always oppose a BRAC. They just don't think now, as the military downsizes and faces dramatic budget reductions, is the right time to cut infrastructure.

As they have pled their case on Capitol Hill, the Air Force and Army have been particularly upfront about their need for another cost-saving BRAC, clamoring that they have, respectively, 30 percent and 18 percent more real estate than they are now using, according to the services' most recent analyses.

Within the Air Force, that doesn't mean the service can close 30 percent of its bases, says Kathleen I. Ferguson, the Air Force's principal deputy assistant secretary for installations, environment, and energy. But it does suggest that further analysis—presumably as part of a formal BRAC round—is warranted to determine how much excess capacity the service needs and how much it can shed.

In the last five BRAC rounds, the Air Force has closed 40 bases and saved \$2.9 billion annually, the service estimates. While the most recent BRAC a decade ago, conducted in the midst of two wars, focused on transformation, department officials have stressed that this next round would shutter installations, yielding significant savings in just a matter of years.

"Through a BRAC, we can save money to put toward other needs of the department and stop spending money where we don't really need to," Ferguson says.

If Congress doesn't authorize another BRAC, the Administration has warned that it will pursue other ways to cut unneeded infrastructure and "ensure that DOD's limited resources are available for the highest priorities of the warfighter and national security."

Communities are already bracing for another BRAC round, hiring lobbyists in Washington and putting pressure on their delegations. Some, Ferguson says, are confident in their fates, having easily survived the last round. Others are caught in limbo as they await a BRAC, with potential investors afraid to pursue new developments until they have a better idea of a base's future.

It is, many BRAC lobbyists, lawmakers, and base advocates acknowledged, not a matter of if, but when.

BRAC supporters stress that the process, which involves an exhaustive review of the Pentagon's closure recommendations by an independent commission, is the most detailed, organized, and fairest way to eliminate bases or move forces from one installation to the next.

Communities have an opportunity to appeal the department's decision to the commission and, occasionally, the commission agrees with base advocates. That was the case in the 2005 round with both Ellsworth AFB, S.D., and Cannon AFB, N.M.

And, even for bases that do shutter, there is an opportunity to rebuild and reuse the installation for civilian purposes.

"It's not a death knell," Ferguson says. "There have been tremendous success stories." ★

Megan Scully is a reporter for CQ Roll Call.



Kathleen Ferguson, USAF's principal deputy assistant secretary for installations, environment, and energy, says the Air Force has 30 percent more real estate than it needs.

USAF photo by SrA. Carlin Leslie