

Carlucci okays base closure plan, in self-inflicted 'Pearl Harbor'

by Nicholas F. Benton

Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci gave his blessing to the report of his Commission on Base Realignment and Closure Jan. 5, moving the nation's military one step closer to taking its worst hit since Pearl Harbor.

The Commission calls for the realignment or outright closure of 145 military installations in the United States, throwing over 58,000 military and civilian personnel out of their jobs, in a move that will save a tiny fraction of the nation's annual expenditure on national defense.

The Commission released its report at a Pentagon press briefing Dec. 29, jolting every region of the nation by calling for closing down 86 military installations, outright, partially closing five others, and realigning 54.

The impact of the Commission's recommendations will be far worse than if 86 major American factories closed simultaneously. Not only will the loss of over 58,000 jobs occur overnight, but entire communities that have been built up to provide services to the military and civilian employees and their families around these facilities will be equally affected.

Communities like Victorville, California, which exists to service the 24,500 personnel and their families at George Air Force Base in California, and Chanute, Illinois, which exists as an auxiliary to the Chanute Air Force Base, will be virtually wiped off the map, together with scores of other communities across the nation.

Worse, the national security implications of the contraction of military facilities, both from the standpoint of military readiness and in the signals it sends to allies and enemies, alike, around the world, are extremely ominous.

Carlucci endorsed the report in an almost fatalistic fashion, saying that if Congress fails to provide the 2% real growth in the defense budget President Reagan will call for, when he submits his last budget on Jan. 9, then the base closings will necessarily come ahead of personnel pay cuts or cuts in vital strategic readiness areas.

However, the Commission's co-chairmen, former Sen. Abraham Ribicoff (D-Conn.) and former Rep. Jack Edwards (R-Ala.), both took it for granted that Congress would adopt

their report, since no one in all of Washington thinks that Congress will adopt Reagan's proposed budget.

In fact, the Reagan budget has been declared "DOA" (dead on arrival) even by Republican partisans. It is seen as a merely ceremonial gesture by the outgoing administration, while George Bush has already signaled that he will settle for a zero-growth defense budget for the foreseeable future.

As a further assurance of virtually guaranteed passage, the enabling law passed last October to give the Commission its mandate prohibits the Congress from dissecting the report, but limits it to either vote it up or down in its entirety. This is ostensibly in order to prevent congressmen from getting into a brawl over trying to protect regional interests.

As Congress has been increasingly wont to do since passage of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings deficit reduction law in early 1986, it made a law to protect it from itself by deliberately curtailing the democratic process. Therefore, not only is the Congress restricted to the single option of voting the entire package up or down, but it will take a two-thirds vote to reject it, and that would have to be done by a pre-set mid-April deadline.

So, having won Carlucci's blessing, the report had virtually the power of law even before any congressman even saw it, much less debated it or voted on it.

Freeze!

This pattern of unprecedented self-immobilizing by Congress has come as a result of those who have set the priority of federal budget deficit reduction as the single dominant priority of Congress. They do not bat an eye at the suspension of the democratic process involved in their obsession, nor at any risk to the strategic security of the free world.

But there is more than simply an attempt at attaining fiscal responsibility behind the base closings move, since it will create insignificant savings, at best, for all the catastrophic effects it will generate. Observers in Washington point out that there is little the Soviets could do, short of launching all-out thermonuclear war, that would be as effective in demoralizing the U.S. military and its allies than a measure of this

kind. Whoever is ultimately responsible for foisting it on the nation could not be entirely insensitive to that fact.

Just look at how little will be saved by exacting such an enormous cost. Namely, out of an annual U.S. defense budget of \$300 billion, the 145 closings and realignments are projected to save an average of only \$693 million in base operating costs annually over the next six years. That is a negligible 0.3% of the total annual budget.

That is a savings in operating costs, and does not take into account the cost of closing the facilities, moving the equipment and personnel (in the case where they will be reassigned and not just dismissed), and putting the land up for sale or other use.

In reality, the closings and realignment program will increase the size of the defense budget in order to cover these expenses, and the savings of \$693 million annually is projected by the Commission as the average per year only after six years has passed. The Commission says it will need an extra \$300 million in the coming fiscal year budget just to "prime the pump" for the closures and sell-offs.

For example, the Commission projects it will cost \$11 million to close the Navajo Army Depot in Arizona, while the payback will be only \$3 million annually. Therefore, the net effect of the closure will begin to save money only after four years have elapsed.

Such minuscule savings projected after six years also assumes a continuation of the current trends in the over-inflated real estate market and other highly volatile economic factors which many experts consider unreliable, at best.

In fact, the value of real estate was a major factor in the decisions taken by the Commission on which facilities would be put on the chopping block and which would be saved.

In response to a question on this subject by this reporter at the Dec. 29 Pentagon news conference, Edwards said, "Of course, our first consideration was military value." But then he quickly added that the "only real criteria" for selecting facilities to close was whether or not the move would result in a savings after six years.

The six year time limit was the rather arbitrary one set for the Commission. In some cases, he noted, there were facilities whose closure would generate net savings after 20 years, but that did not meet the constraints the Commission was working in.

Real estate fantasies

Under such constraints, real estate values naturally played a major role in considering which facilities to close and sell off, Edwards conceded. He cited the case of the San Francisco Presidio as one, he said, "located in a high-value area."

In that case, Edwards was unaware of the fact that the Presidio, whereas it will lose its 5,290 military and civilian personnel, will not go onto the real estate market because it is a national monument. Therefore, it will fall into the hands of the Department of the Interior. One wonders how much of

the total \$693 million annual savings estimated by the Commission for all its closings was based on the erroneous notion that they could collect a small fortune by sub-dividing and selling off the Presidio to eager real estate developers.

Edwards also cited a case of a facility that was not closed, even though it retains little use, because of its low real estate value. For example, he said that the historic Fort Monroe in Hampton Roads, Virginia, was left untouched by the Commission mainly because, he said, "No developer in his right mind would want to develop it."

There is no way, observers noted, that such a crass approach to decisions on which facilities to close would avoid having a negative impact on the national security interest. By placing unreliable real estate values ahead of use value in assessing a facility, every one of the nation's 4,200 military properties, and the personnel on them, are inherently degraded, fueling morale problems everywhere.

Members of the Commission have also been accused of other, even more unseemly criteria for their decisions by some congressmen. For example, a number of congressmen pointed out that there were virtually no changes made in the states of Georgia and Wisconsin, the states the chairmen of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees (Democrats Sen. Sam Nunn and Rep. Les Aspin, respectively) hail from. It comes as no surprise that both Nunn and Aspin have, for all intents and purposes, already put their stamp of approval on the report.

On the other hand, California takes by far the biggest single hit. A total of 24,555 jobs—17,658 military and 6,653 civilian—are slated to be lost there. In addition to the Presidio, with its 5,290 personnel, the 4,225 personnel at the Hunter's Point Naval Station, almost all military, will also be put out of their jobs in San Francisco. That means that 9,515 solid jobs in San Francisco, which have provided for much of what little sanity is left in that ravaged city, will disappear.

Also, Norton Air Force Base, with 6,653 personnel, George Air Force Base (5,358), and Mather Air Force Base (3,000), all in California, will be closed.

Other big losers include the Army's Fort Huachuca in Arizona, which will lose 2,032 personnel, Chanute Air Force Base in Illinois (3,068), the Army's Fort Sheridan in Illinois (3,000), the Army's Fort Devons in Massachusetts (3,068), Pease Air Force Base in New Hampshire (2,650), the Army's Fort Dix in New Jersey (4,656) and the Army's Cameron Station in Virginia (4,692).

When Ribicoff and Edwards were asked by this reporter at their Pentagon press conference how many total jobs would be lost by the closures and realignments, they ducked the issue, pretending not to know. In all their efforts, they said, they somehow failed to add up the total. Instead, they handed out a chart with the jobs lost for each affected facility, and told reporters that if they wanted the gross total, they should take out a calculator and total it up for themselves.