
Defense Report

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Closing Excess Military Bases—No Time For Playing Politics

After more than a decade of fighting the problem, it now appears that the Defense Department and the Congress may have found an acceptable way to diffuse the political opposition that has prevented the closing of a number of unneeded military bases around the country. At the same time, there's a good possibility they may be able to save American taxpayers somewhere between \$2 billion and \$5 billion annually.

Efforts to take the politics out of the base closing process have long been foiled—witness the fact that the military services have been unable to shut down a single installation since 1977. That is mainly because of the stringent restrictions imposed by Congress. The problem, basically, is that no Senator or Representative wants to see the loss of large government payrolls from his state or district.

Now the Defense Department and Congress appear to be on the verge of a compromise that could resolve the matter of closing unnecessary posts with neither the Administration nor Congress being forced to relinquish any of their closely-guarded constitutional authority. Heretofore, the Administration couldn't close a base because of the Congressional barriers and the lawmakers feared giving the White House power to wipe out large blocks of jobs in their home districts.

Representative Dick Armev of Texas has mustered the support of Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci and at least 100 Congressional colleagues for a plan to appoint an independent, bipartisan commission to recommend a list of bases to be closed. In this way, he hopes to take the politics out of the decision making process. Once the commission has made its recommendations, the Defense Department would have two options—close all on the list or none.

The key to success of the Armev proposal would be political balance on the commission. That would diffuse earlier Congressional complaints that the President might use base closing as a political cudgel. It would also negate the charges of parochialism levelled against Congressmen who fought to keep from losing a base regardless of its military need.

In these times of budget deficits of mountainous proportions, it makes a lot of sense for Congress to get rid of some pork by removing defense spending decisions from the political arena and basing the hard choices solely on military need.