

Focus Shifts From DDO To Saving Hill

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Wednesday's visit by four base closure commissioners was somewhat of a rerun for the Ogden community, which rallied in a show of support when commissioners visited in April.

And a sense of *deja vu* is just as likely to hit Hill supporters in San Francisco Thursday, when Gov. Mike Leavitt and other Hill supporters will have 75 minutes to try and convince the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC) that a Utah military installation should not be closed. Defense Depot Ogden was the focal point of the April round of inspections and hearings. DDO now appears to be destined for closure.

But the focus this time is Hill Air Force Base's Air Logistics Center. Hill's future appears secure, if predictions based on Hill's military value hold. But players like Rep. Jim Hansen, R-Utah, repeatedly warn that the dark hand of politics could be Hill's biggest threat.

The governor and Hill's official support group, Hill/DDO '95, led by retired Maj. Gen. Mike Pavich, hosted commissioners in April and then testified at a BRAC regional hearing in Albuquerque that Defense Depot Ogden should not be closed.

No punches were pulled in their presentations. Pavich even told commissioners during the Albuquerque hearing that the Defense Department's Defense Logistics Agency broke the law when it recommended DDO for closure.

The salvo played a part in winning DDO a second review during a May 10 hearing in Washington, D.C. But DDO fared no better - and Hill joined it on the study list, which is still subject to change.

But by July 1, the commission must submit a final list of bases it recommends be either closed or realigned to President Clinton, who must either reject the entire list or send it unaltered to Congress for final approval.

Hill has one of five Air Logistics Centers in the Air Force inventory. The others are at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma City; McClellan Air Force Base, Sacramento; Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, and Robins Air Force Base, Macon, Ga.

The U.S. General Accounting Office reported in April that the Air Force had excess space to the tune of 1 3/4 depots. It further said the Air Force had long considered Kelly and McClellan to be the best candidates for closure - not Hill.

But Hansen remembers the 1993 round of base closures all too well, when he was given assurances that Tooele Army Depot was safe from closure or realignment only to see Tooele's fate change in the eleventh hour before the BRAC recommendations went to the White House.

Hansen warns that Kelly, in Texas, and McClellan, in California, are in states important to Clinton if he makes a re-election bid. Hansen believes politics drove the Air Force from an original plan of closing one or more air logistics centers that would likely have targeted those two bases.

BRAC commissioners will visit the other four air logistics center on the study list also

and will hear from their community support groups.

In San Antonio, for example, a major support bloc aimed at preserving the air logistics center at Kelly Air Force Base comes from the Hispanic community.

Kelly employs 45 percent of all Hispanic civilian Air Force employees. Closing the ALC there would have a chilling effect on the Hispanic community - both in San Antonio and across the nation - Hispanic leaders claim.

The argument is not one the base closure commission can consider directly when evaluating the base's military value. But it is an indirect factor not to be ignored.

Marsha Fetzer, a spokeswoman for Hill/DDO '95, said a major focus of the preparations for Wednesday's inspection at Hill and Thursday's hearings was dispelling a story published in the Washington, D.C., newsletter Inside Washington.

The publication quoted ``government sources" as saying Hill was the Air Force's prime target for closure, playing on the Clinton re-election angle. Hill supporters, including members of Utah's con-gressional delegation, say the Inside Washington story is inaccurate, adding that Hill would be the most expensive air logistics center to close.