

Hansen Claims Victory in Securing HAFB's Future

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Rep. Jim Hansen says the tug-of-war with the White House over air-logistics center privatization is over, and he won.

After battling the Clinton administration for nearly a year on its attempt to ease the economic blow of two base closures on California and Texas -- a move which would have clouded the future of Utah's Hill Air Force Base -- Hansen said his side prevailed Tuesday among House and Senate conferees working on the 1997 Defense Authorization Bill.

"This settles it," said Hansen, a senior member of the National Security Committee and one of the bill's House conferees. "There will be no wholesale privatization of the depot system. Maybe the president can now start to think about what is right for America instead of what is good for Bill Clinton."

No conference report had been signed when the congressman made the announcement, and the House and Senate still must separately approve the final version, which then could face a Clinton veto.

But Hansen was feeling confident.

"The Congress has spoken loud and clear," he said. "We will not put military readiness at risk for the sake of election-year pandering in California."

That was the issue pitting Clinton and his Defense Department against members of Congress from both parties, mostly Republican defense hawks, who have maintenance depots in their states.

The Air Force logistics centers at McClellan Air Force Base (AFB), Calif., and Kelly AFB, Texas, were ordered closed by the 1995 base-closure panel which recommended some privatization of their workloads and consolidation to the three remaining Air Force air logistic centers (ALC) -- Hill, Tinker AFB, Okla, and Robins AFB, Ga.

Clinton then came up with a privatization-in-place plan under which the private sector would come in and perform the same work at the bases with the same people. In order to proceed, however, the administration needed repeal of a section of defense policy known as the 60/40 provision. It requires that no more than 40 percent of a maintenance depot's work be contracted to the private sector.

The measure failed to clear the House's National Security Committee in June, but the Senate a month later allowed some maneuvering room, according to Utah Sen. Bob Bennett.

It adjusted the workload provision to 50/50, but also added language barring privatization-in-place unless there was compliance with current law and competition allowing the military depots to compete for the work, too.

What the conferees did Tuesday was adopt the House language. It retains the 60/40 formula, affirms that "core" work -- that which must be performed by the Defense Department -- be done only by the depots and requires that any workload valued at over \$3 million be subject to public-private competition.

Bill Johnson, Hansen's military aide, said Clinton is not expected to veto the defense bill over this issue. If a veto occurs, it will be because the spending level the Republican-controlled Congress approved is higher than he requested.

Before the base-closure round, all five ALCs together were operating at only 50 percent of their capacity. By closing two, the base-closure panel aimed to improve efficiency. For Hill, it was estimated the consolidation would increase capacity at the Ogden Air Logistics Center to 80 percent.

The Air Force also estimates consolidation would bring Hill more than 3,100 new positions, mostly due to McClellan workload transfer, Johnson said.