

**CLINTON'S CATCH-22 Base-Closure List A Hot Potato That Still May Burn Utah Base Hit List Could Burn Clinton or Utah**

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The recommended closure of Air Force logistics centers in California and Texas has boxed in President Clinton.

Sometime between Friday and July 15, he will have to either:

-- Slam California, the state he most needs for re-election, by accepting the base-closure commission's list of shutdowns and reductions.

-- Reject the list, upset the other states and unleash considerable turmoil.

Except for some sympathetic words for California, Clinton has not said what he will do when he gets the list of roughly 100 closures and realignments from the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC) on Friday.

If he does reject it, as some insiders predict, the commission has until Aug. 15 to send Clinton another list. That second version could incorporate the president's ideas.

Or BRAC could defy Clinton, another insider prediction, by sending its original list right back to him.

If Clinton rejects it a second time, the statutory BRAC round dissolves. There will not be any closures in 1995. There will be upheaval.

Budget Battles: Future defense budgets are tied to the \$1.6 billion in savings the Pentagon calculated it would receive from the 1995 closures. Those budgets would unravel.

States that mounted million-dollar campaigns to save their bases would be out in the cold. Utah spent \$600,000 in taxpayer funds and private donations to fund the Hill/DDO '95 community group. The state won two big victories -- Hill Air Force Base and Dugway Proving Ground -- but lost Defense Depot Ogden.

Without a list from the commission, the closure task would fall to the Defense Department and Congress -- the two entities that forfeited the responsibility in 1990 because they were too political to get the job done.

The drama has major stakes for Utah, particularly Hill.

In its final deliberations last week, BRAC voted to close the McClellan and Kelly air-logistics centers in California and Texas, respectively, and distribute their work to the remaining centers in Utah, Oklahoma and Georgia.

That decision shut down two of the biggest bases in the defense system in two states with a combined 86 electoral votes, which is why air-logistics centers now are in the eye of the storm.

Clinton has been bombarded with alternating pleas and threats from fellow Democrats in the California delegation who want him to feel the state's pain and alleviate it.

Pressure: History says the president cannot reject the recommendations of the commission because it is independent and above politics. White House political aides tell him he must.

The pressure continued to build at midweek as California's two Democratic senators weighed in. They were counterpunched by House Majority Leader Richard Arney, R-Texas, author of the bill that created the BRAC process, members of Utah's delegation and two California congressmen who are senior members of the House National Security Committee.

"It would be a huge mistake for the president to make the decision based on 54 electoral votes," said GOP Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham of the San Diego area. "My district and my state have been hit by this process at least as hard as the rest of the country, but I realize that it is a necessary process and it must remain above political meddling."

Charged Utah GOP Rep. James Hansen: "If the president thinks that sparing a base or two in California in the name of potential electoral votes will go unnoticed in the other 49 states . . . he is badly mistaken."

No one on the other side is spotlighting electoral votes. From California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, the buzzwords are "cumulative economic impact," "devastation" and "national security."

In all, the Golden State has nine bases facing the ax this year. As Feinstein and Boxer said in a letter they sent Clinton on Tuesday, that is too much.

"If California continues to suffer blow after blow, not only will this slow our economic recovery, but {also} could set it back," the senators said.

They also reminded Clinton that the McClellan closure went against the position of his Defense Department. "Surely our military leaders know what's best for the nation's defense," the pair said.

Two years ago, a majority of the California delegation voted in favor of the BRAC list, which wiped out a dozen California bases. That same year the Pentagon concluded McClellan was expendable, but because of a convoluted series of actions it survived the 1993 round.

“What I would advise the president to do if I were his adviser, would be to get a four-foot pen, stand back from his desk, sign that list as soon as it came to the office and get it out with no fingerprints on it,” said Mike Pavich, president of Hill/DDO and a past commander of McClellan.

According to figures released by Hansen, Armev and Cunningham, the 1995 commission concurred with the Pentagon on more than 85 percent of its recommendations -- a rate higher than either the 1991 or 1993 rounds.

And on its most controversial decisions, including the logistics centers, the panel made up of four Democratic appointees and four Republicans did not vote along any party lines.

Traveling in the West this week, Clinton said he had not reached a decision. But he acknowledged California's suffering and said national security is not compromised “if we wait another year or two” to close bases.

“The decision to close McClellan and the base down in Texas really concerns me because the Defense Department went out of their way to try to recommend an across-the-board reduction in capacity for the five bases that do that work to minimize economic impact, to support defense conversion,” Clinton said.

“The secretary of defense will make a recommendation to me about July 1st and then I will look at it closely.”