

# Executive Memorandum

The Heritage Foundation

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## WHY CONGRESS MUST NOT TORPEDO THE BIPARTISAN MILITARY BASE CLOSINGS INITIATIVE

Congress is well known for its reluctance to close obsolete military bases. Indeed, lawmakers have prohibited the Pentagon from closing a single domestic military base for the past fifteen years despite major changes in U.S. defense priorities and force structure since the early 1970s. There was reason for celebration last year, therefore, when Congress finally consented to a carefully crafted plan allowing the Pentagon to close outdated domestic bases. Under this plan, Congress and then Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci appointed a twelve-member bipartisan commission to prepare a list of obsolete military installations. Congress pledged itself in advance to accept all the Commission's proposed base shutdowns, recognizing that, if votes were taken on individual bases, the coalition supporting the package of savings would begin to crumble.

In December 1988, the Commission on Base Realignment and Closure completed its investigation and recommended the closure or consolidation of 91 bases within the U.S., saving the Defense Department up to \$700 million annually in operating costs. Yet despite the bipartisan agreement to accept the Commission's recommendations as an untouchable package, some two dozen legislators with targeted bases in their districts are now campaigning to persuade Congress to renege on the base closings agreement.

In late April, the House and Senate are expected to vote on resolutions to disapprove the entire list of military base closures.

**Paralysis by Analysis.** Even if Congress rules to accept the Commission's recommendations, lawmakers still could resort to backdoor methods of saving bases in their districts from the budget knife. Some are calling for "further study of the issue." This is a tactic that Representative Richard Arme, the Texas Republican who first proposed the Commission, has scorned as "paralysis by analysis." An even greater danger would come from individual legislators using the appropriations process to exempt specific bases from closure or to block allocation of the \$1 billion needed to complete the closures. These funds would be used for such expenses as transporting equipment and personnel and for assistance to affected communities. The Pentagon must spend this money to achieve far larger operational savings.

There is no national security reason for any lawmaker to block the Commission's recommendations. Many of the bases now slated for closure were identified years ago by the Pentagon as antiquated and unnecessary for the nation's defense. For example, the Commission wants to close Mather and Norton Air Force bases in California because of excessive air traffic congestion and because the runways are inadequate to service today's military jets. The Commission also wants to shut down Fort Douglass in Utah, which was built in the 19th century to repel Indian raids and is now in the middle of a university campus.

Virtually all America's military experts, moreover, agree that the Commission's blueprint for base realignment is consistent with U.S. national security interests. Then Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci approved the Commission report, and so have the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Similarly, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam Nunn, the Georgia Democrat, supports the 91 recommended base closings, as does his House counterpart, Wisconsin Democrat Les Aspin. Indeed, Nunn praises the Commission's work as an "important first step in the process of moving to a more efficient military installation structure."

**Minimal Economic Readjustment.** Thus, rather than citing national security considerations for rejecting the Commission's recommendations, legislators facing the loss of a major military base in their district insist instead that the local economy will suffer. To be sure, communities typically experience a painful, short-term period of economic adjustment when a base is closed. Yet a study of 100 base closings during the 1960s and 1970s, conducted by the Pentagon's Economic Adjustment Committee, found that communities suffering base closings bounced back so completely that more jobs were created on the land after it was placed in private hands than existed when it was owned by the Department of Defense. There is good reason to suppose that the bases targeted by the Commission will prove a boon to the local economy if transferred to private hands. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that real estate developers already are lining up to buy many of the urban bases scheduled to be closed. Pease Air Force Base in New Hampshire is slated for conversion into a commercial airport for Boston, generating considerable tax revenues, as well as jobs, for the local community. A private firm has offered to buy Fort Sheridan, an Army base located in Chicago's affluent northern suburbs. The price tag: \$52 million.

By honoring their commitment to adopt the full recommendations of the Commission on Base Realignment and Closure, lawmakers have a rare opportunity to improve national defense capability while saving as much as \$5.5 billion for the taxpayer over the next twenty years. But if individual lawmakers are successful in mounting an end run to save specific bases, the whole package will unravel. That would be a severe blow to responsible efforts to reduce the deficit. Congress thus should stand firm by its original agreement to accept the entire Commission report.

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For further information:

*Base Realignments and Closures*, Report of the Defense Secretary's Commission on Base Realignment and Closure, December 1988.

Stephen Moore, "The Army Base Closings Bill: Rolling Back the Military Pork Barrel," Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 205, June 6, 1988.