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HEADLINE: Bitterly split delegation came together over Ellsworth

BYLINE: CHUCK RAASCH

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WASHINGTON -- Two private meetings of South Dakota's top public officials -- one last fall, one this week -- encapsulate the relentless behind-the-scenes work that culminated in Friday's stunning salvation of Ellsworth Air Force Base.

The first meeting happened in the Capitol Hill office of South Dakota senior Sen. Tim Johnson. It came just weeks after Republican John Thune had defeated former Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle. Johnson, Thune and Rep. Stephanie Herseth, a Democrat, each accompanied by a top aide, essentially buried the hatchet after four years of brutal campaigns that had made South Dakota ground zero in modern negative politics.

Afterward, a message went out to staff: History is history. Small delegations cannot survive divided.

"We are where we are, and now we have to move forward," Johnson told his staff, recalled his communications director, Julianne Fisher. "He expected the same of his staff."

A series of get-acquainted staff lunches -- often one-on-one -- ensued.

"We are not best friends, I don't think I can say that," Fisher, a New York native and a five-year veteran of Dakota politics, said Friday of her counterparts on Thune's staff. "I don't think the bosses would say that, either. But we have a good working relationship."

The second meeting occurred late Wednesday night, and showed the benefits of that working relationship. Thune, Johnson, Herseth and Republican Gov. Mike Rounds -- again each accompanied by one top adviser -- met over dinner in a private dining room at Ruth's Chris Steak House, a popular gathering spot for generals and politicians in Crystal City, Va., just down river from the Pentagon.

The tone of the dinner was optimistic, tempered by characteristic South Dakota caution. Participants took turns going over any last-minute preparations for the upcoming vote by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission.

"There was nothing substantial that could be done at that point," said Bob Taylor, 53, Thune's military adviser. "There was no angst that something was missing. There were no cliques. We were all in this together."

Jody Bennett, a Woonsocket native and Johnson's military and foreign affairs specialist, agreed.

"It was more a get-together -- one last time -- to make sure we had turned over every stone," said Bennett, 30. "The consensus was, we had ... exhausted everything we could do."

But the night was not over for everyone, even after the dinner broke up at 11 p.m.

Mark Johnston, Rounds' press secretary, was on the phone with Fisher to hash out last-minute media strategies. Tasks were roughly divided among the four offices for when the vote came down. Thune's communications people would take care of satellite time linking back to South Dakota. Rounds' office would provide equipment for a post-decision news conference. Johnson's people would make the phone calls necessary to alert media. And Russ Levens, Herseth's press secretary, got the dirty job: He had to be prepared to lead the response if the decision went against Ellsworth.

"Some of my work, thankfully, will never see the light of day," said Levens, a native of Aberdeen and graduate of Yale University.

More than 15,000 people work for members of Congress, populating six marble, fortress-like buildings surrounding the Capitol and field offices back home. Most are usually banned from talking on the record, instead relegated to gritty detail work and lobbying. In a government that often moves glacially, rarely do moments of triumph arrive like Friday's 8-1 BRAC vote in Ellsworth's favor.

In that heady atmosphere, South Dakota's politicians took pains to highlight cohesive staff work that they say set egos and past political fights aside.

"This delegation... and our staffs worked closely night and day for the last several months," Thune said.

"We are a small enough state that if you don't know somebody, you know who they're related to," said Johnston, Rounds' press secretary. "It's how we get things done in South Dakota -- personal relationships."

It was not always a smooth ride. Some ex-Daschle staffers hammered Thune when it was announced May 13 that Ellsworth was on the hit list, and the Democratic National Committee

essentially called Thune a failure.

Thune's allies privately chafed over ex-Daschle's unwillingness to let go of the bitter 2004 election, but there was no time for contretemps.

"Frankly, from our perspective here, we were not going to let that play a factor," said Fisher, Johnson's communications director. "It did not help any of us politically, or the state, for this base to disappear."

Thune's press secretary, Kyle Downey, agreed.

"It was a nuisance to me because I had to deal with it from a communications angle, but did it bother the senator? Did it bother the legislative staff? Not at all," Downey said. He said that as the delegation's cohesiveness on Ellsworth became more apparent, Thune's critics "were losing their credibility, day by day."

Thune's top military adviser, Taylor, 53, is an Army veteran from Texas and a legislative veteran on Capitol Hill. On June 21, the day of a BRAC hearing on Ellsworth, a call came to Thune's Rapid City office from a plaintiff in a lawsuit against the Dyess Air Force Base in Texas. After doing what he described as "due diligence," Taylor soon realized the delegation had a huge argument because of the uncertainty over a lawsuit claiming that flights from Dyess, where Ellsworth's B-1 planes were slated to be transferred, damaged the environment. Taylor kept the delegation informed and arranged for one of the plaintiffs to meet directly with the BRAC staff in early July.

Herseth set up what turned out to be a key June 9 meeting with Rounds, the three members of the delegation and their top aides, and top Air Force officers who had recommended Ellsworth's closure.

"It allowed us to look at their cards, see what they were holding," said Leif Oveson, 27, Herseth's legislative adviser on military affairs. The Sioux Falls native and graduate of South Dakota State also said it gave the Air Force a hint of how, in future dealings, the delegation and Rounds would be virtually joined at the hip. Part of the strategy, from elected official down to staff, was to show no daylight in South Dakota's front.

On July 1, all three South Dakota members pounced on a Government Accountability Office report that said the Air Force had massively overstated the savings of closing Ellsworth. Using alternative accounting methods that included measuring the distances between Utah bombing ranges and Ellsworth and Dyess, Taylor helped craft an argument that there would be no savings to taxpayers.

By the time of Friday's vote, the staff members had become accustomed to 7 a.m. e-mails and late-night telephone calls. Many had long ago left the 2004 election behind.

Bennett, the Woonsocket native who works for Johnson, had been inspired to go into politics by Daschle and had come to work for him in 2003. There had been hard feelings between the

Thune and Daschle camps, but she made a point of purposely setting them aside.

"At the end of the day, as a native South Dakotan myself, I did not want to see anything that would devastate" the state, Bennett said. "It was an issue that was too important to let any past feelings of who I worked for get in the way."

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