

# BRAC Attack Unlikely for Members, Even in Districts With Losses

- By Louis Jacobson
- Roll Call Staff
- March 15, 2006, Midnight

Early in 2005, as the Base Realignment and Closure Commission was deciding which military facilities should be shuttered, politicians and their advisers watched nervously. Fearing that a major installation back home could be closed and hundreds of constituents forced out of work, elected officials across the country did everything they could to shape the panel's recommendations.

In retrospect, they needn't have worried so much. Since Congress officially signed off on the BRAC decisions last October, loads of military jobs have been put on the chopping block — but few if any politicians are seeing their own job security threatened as a result.

An Out There review of BRAC decisions and the 2006 campaign landscape suggests that, at most, one vulnerable incumbent — Rep. John Hostettler (R-Ind.) — could face negative fallout from a base-closing issue. And in Hostettler's case, he already has enough obstacles to re-election, from a shortage of campaign funds to discontent over his staunch

social conservatism, that the downsizing of the Crane Naval Surface Warfare Center is not expected to become decisive this fall.

"It's hard for me to come up with any Congressional race that will be seriously impacted by base closing," said Jamie Gallagher, a Republican lobbyist who specializes in base-closing and military issues. "It's one of those things where the prognostications beforehand were overstated."

All told, Gallagher said, the Republican Party dodged a bullet in last year's BRAC process, since the party controlled the White House, both chambers of Congress and the Pentagon, meaning it could have been targeted by voters angry over closures.

But if anything, Gallagher said, the BRAC process produced some winners among elected officials — many of them Republicans.

Perhaps the biggest winner was Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.), who ousted then-Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D) in 2004, in large part due to his argument that he would be able to exercise more clout for South Dakota with the White House and the Republican Congressional majority.



In the initial BRAC recommendations, Ellsworth Air Force Base was slated for closure. But Thune spearheaded the counterattack, and in the end, Ellsworth was spared. Thanks to this turnaround, Thune is “now bullet-proof in South Dakota,” said Pierre-based lobbyist Bob Miller.

Other South Dakota politicians — notably Sen. Tim Johnson (D) and Rep. Stephanie Herseth (D) — are also likely to win points from voters for helping keep the base open, though probably not as many as Thune, who was most closely identified with the issue.

Of the South Dakota politicians, only Herseth faces the possibility of a competitive race this fall, and she appears to be making use of the BRAC issue to bolster her standing.

“Herseth has already sent out a franked piece with a large color photo of a B1b bomber on it,” said Todd Epp, a Sioux Falls activist who has worked for Democrats in recent elections. “She has also been crowing about her bipartisanship in working with [Gov. Mike] Rounds (R), Johnson and Thune. The three [Members of Congress] even had a joint booth together at the State Fair in Huron this summer — a first. So, Ellsworth’s salvation will likely be a major component of her campaign.”

Another winner appears to be Rep. Rob Simmons (R-Conn.). Though Simmons’ district did suffer a net loss of jobs, his successful efforts to save the Naval Submarine Base New London from a feared total closure is expected to give him a major boost in his nip-and-tuck race against former Democratic state legislator Joe Courtney.

“He’s in a district where the registration is more Democratic than Republican, and if that base had been lost, then he would have been in trouble,” said Paul Hirsch, a base-closure lobbyist in Washington, D.C.

But Connecticut Democratic consultant Roy Occhiogrosso was somewhat less sanguine on how much help the BRAC decision will offer Simmons. “The sub base being taken off the list just means that he’s got one less headache,” Occhiogrosso said.

Another potential winner from BRAC is freshman Rep. Joe Schwarz (R-Mich.), who “might be able to get some points in his native Battle Creek for his successful efforts to stave off the closing of Fort Custer,” said Bill Ballenger, who publishes the newsletter Inside Michigan Politics. In Schwarz’s case, his toughest challenge this year will be winning a GOP primary in which he’s being challenged from the right.

In New Hampshire, Rep. Jeb Bradley (R) — and to a lesser extent, neighboring Rep. Charles Bass (R) — should benefit from the decision not to close the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. Both New Hampshire Members sit in somewhat marginal districts, though so far neither one faces a top-tier challenge for 2006.

And in some states, the jobs that were lost in BRAC were partly offset by gains (or at least big losses avoided) elsewhere in the state. In Maine, for instance, 3,275 jobs at Naval Air Station Brunswick were lost, but Portsmouth, many of whose employees live in Maine, was saved.



Base-closing specialists point to several factors that helped create such a modest electoral impact this time around.

One is that the BRAC process was widely deemed to be fair and transparent. Most voters appear to have viewed Members in affected districts as working hard to protect jobs for their constituents. "Every politician worked in a bipartisan fashion to make sure that their base didn't close," said one GOP strategist.

Moreover, in contrast to the previous three rounds of BRAC — in 1991, 1993 and 1995 — the 2005 process tended to result in partial realignments rather than massive closures. This eased the impact for at-risk politicians.

Of course, as the BRAC process soldiered on, a bevy of new issues emerged that helped push base closing down the list of national concerns. But the most important factor in minimizing collateral damage was probably that last year's BRAC was the first to be held since the pro-incumbent redistricting after the 2000 Census. That meant that many Members who might otherwise have been at risk from losses are now set to coast to re-election.

Except for Hostettler and Simmons, the 10 Members with the largest 2005 BRAC job losses, according to calculations by The Hotline, all hold seats that are generally safe.

Now, of course, all worried Members know what they have to do on base closing: Lobby hard to avoid another BRAC round, at least for another decade.