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THUNE: Ellsworth B-21 announcement a home run for South Dakota

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Thune

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When the Air Force recently announced that Ellsworth Air Force Base would be the nation's first home to the new B-21 training and operational squadrons, South Dakota received what is nothing short of amazing news. It cannot be overstated what this means for the region, for the state, and for the entire nation. And if any base deserved this, it was Ellsworth, which is a fitting tribute to the community and its leaders.

Getting the B-21s represents an obvious strategic and military opportunity, but with hundreds of new personnel and their families coming to the Rapid City area, and with plenty of new infrastructure needs, like weapon storage facilities, hangars, schools, and housing, it will mean a huge shot in the arm for the economy, too. Ellsworth already contributes approximately \$1 million per day to the economy, so these new investments are bound to drive that number even higher.

After news broke about South Dakota soon becoming home to the new B-21s, several people asked me if I was surprised by the announcement — surprised that Ellsworth would be the first to welcome these fifth-generation bombers to its fleet. It's a fair but complicated question, and it requires a walk down memory lane.

I was a few short months into my Senate service when I received a call on May 13, 2005, that Ellsworth had been placed on the Department of Defense's Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) list, which, if approved, would have been a disaster for the local economy and resulted in Ellsworth shuttering its doors and runways. After the initial call, I wasted no time in getting to work to spare the base from closure. I dropped everything and was on the phone with anyone in President Bush's administration who would take my call. I was not going to let the base close on my watch.

I worked non-stop and with anyone who was willing to join the fight, and, to simplify what amounted to a full-court press summer, on Aug., 26, 2005, South Dakota prevailed. Ellsworth was officially removed from the BRAC list. It was an important victory, but I

viewed it as a wake-up call more than anything. We needed to learn from what had happened and do everything we could to secure the base's future by ensuring it never again faced such a grim situation.

It was at that point when we began systematically working to enhance the base's value by attracting new missions, expanding the Powder River Training Complex — now the largest training air space in the continental United States — and, through my work as then-chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, securing altitude waivers to help the base's large force exercises expand upward, too.

So, to answer the question — was I surprised to hear the news? Well, had you told me in 2005 that we'd one day be the first to welcome these next-generation stealth bombers, I probably wouldn't have believed you. But today, with everything the base and its airmen have been able to accomplish, and with the community's support, I'm not surprised at all. In fact, the only thing that would have surprised me would have been if Ellsworth had not been considered at all.

With major milestones like this one, you sometimes need to take a step back and let it sink in for a little bit. In 14 years, Ellsworth went from facing imminent closure to now receiving the newest and most state-of-the-art bombers the world has ever known. From BRAC to B-21s. A total home run. It's an amazing and exciting story — one that required a lot of teamwork. The only thing that's more exciting, though, is that Ellsworth's story and the legacy it has created is far from over. With this latest news, we've merely turned the page to its next remarkable chapter.

John Thune represents South Dakota in the U.S. Senate.