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RANKING DEMOCRAT:

**COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION
AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2308
June 22, 2005

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The Honorable Anthony Principi
Chairman
BRAC 2005 Independent Commission
Arlington, Virginia 22202

Dear Chairman Principi:

I am writing concerning the proposed retirement of fighter aircraft at the 148th Fighter Wing in Duluth, Minnesota.

Given that it focuses on infrastructure, I find it odd that the BRAC report includes a statement calling for retirement of the 148th Fighter Wing's F-16 fighters. Equally disturbing is an Air Force report released in conjunction with the BRAC report that calls for retirement of the aircraft in 2007, along with the elimination of 132 full-time and 451 part-time positions. The specific retirement of aircraft and accompanying loss of jobs falls under the Air Force's reorganization plan known as Future Total Force. What is less clear is whether the FTF proposals fall under the auspices of BRAC. Are the two proposals connected? Where does BRAC end and FTF begin? As a large reorganization proposal, FTF would normally be debated in Congress as part of the annual defense authorization and appropriations processes. I am concerned that Congress' input would be nullified by the FTF being submitted under BRAC.

While it was expected that the 148th FW would eventually lose its aircraft, I was quite surprised that the aircraft were slated for retirement in 2007 – less than two years from now. I was also surprised that this retirement was not accompanied by a firm follow-on mission for the Duluth base. I am not sure if this is a reflection of the low military ranking the BRAC report gave Duluth (136). This ranking itself is baffling, given that other bases with lower rankings are receiving additional aircraft while other bases with more military limitations than Duluth were ranked higher. The ranking also doesn't seem to take into consideration a number of excellent characteristics of the 148th FW and the entire Duluth community:

- Fourth highest recruiting and retention rating in the Air National Guard
- High strategic value in homeland defense
- Outstanding unit performance
- New, state-of-the-art aircraft facilities
- Minimal congestion
- Unsurpassed military airspace availability

The fact that the Duluth base is scheduled to remain open after the retirement of the aircraft suggests the Air Force places some value on the facilities. While the proposed retirement of the 148th FW aircraft was unexpected, I see it as an opportunity to further improve the Duluth base's military value. I believe it is in the best interest of the Department of Defense that the retirement of the 148th FW aircraft be delayed until follow-on missions are defined. This would make strategic and fiscal sense.

One mission that should be considered is the Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. Based on the points listed above, Duluth could be the prime location in the Midwest for such a mission. Additionally, Camp Ripley, located in central Minnesota (with a 6,000 foot runway and restricted airspace to 27,000 feet) could provide added support for UAV operations. Outside of the UAV, the Duluth base has the space and facilities to accommodate almost any Air Force mission with minimal or no military construction.

Thank you for your service on this important Commission. I invite members of the BRAC commission to visit Duluth and see for themselves how valuable the city and the fighter wing can be to the overall Air Force mission. If you have any questions regarding my concerns, please let me know.

With best wishes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James L. Oberstar". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

James L. Oberstar, M.C.

JLO/dsb