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June 21, 2005

The Honorable Anthony J. Principi
Chairman
BRAC 2005 Independent Commission
2521 South Clark Street, Suite 600
Arlington, VA 22202

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Dear Chairman Principi,

With gratitude for your service, I must express my concern with the Air Force's proposal to turn 23 Air National Guard bases, including Birmingham's 117th Air Refueling Wing, into "enclaves" and request that the Commission conduct a hearing into this proposal. At this time, I do not know of any existing enclave bases and am highly skeptical the concept is practical, or even proper, under BRAC. As to the 117th ARW specifically, it is illogical. Closing the 117th ARW makes no sense from a military and national security standpoint or from a dollars and cents standpoint.

ENCLAVES

As I understand it, "enclaves" are bases that will entirely lose their flying units but are expected to retain Expeditionary Combat Support units. This concerns me for several reasons.

First, it is not clear that an enclave base can sustain expeditionary combat units. Once flying units are removed from the enclave bases, many will no longer be able to support military or civilian aircraft operations. Even in cases where there is a civilian landing area, the loss of rated firefighters will cause many shared airports to lose FAA ratings and fail to meet minimal Air Force and civilian criteria for landing and loading.

Second, I am concerned that this is an effort to circumvent the BRAC process. The Air Force has indicated that these bases will be kept in "anticipation" of follow-on missions; however, they plan to "shrink" the facilities. It seems this shrinkage will hinder the growth required for a follow-on mission down the road. So, in reality, these enclaves are closures that will happen slowly and without following the BRAC process.

Third, in addition to logistical concerns, recruitment of new Air Guard personnel and retention of Expeditionary Combat Support and air crew personnel will become increasingly difficult. Given recent experience with the B-IB, as shown in GAO's September 2002 analysis (GAO-02-846), and the on-going war effort, it is critical that we have a better understanding of the possible retention impacts of creating enclaves.

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MILITARY VALUE

As the Commission is aware, the law states, "The Secretary shall give priority consideration to the military value criteria." However, military value was ignored in the realignment of Birmingham Air National Guard base.

Birmingham's military value was rated at 63. Yet, six Air National Guard Tanker wings determined to have **less** military value than Birmingham are remaining in place with some seeing an increase in aircraft.

REALIGNMENT COST

Since converting to the KC-135R aircraft over 10 years ago, $73 million has been spent on Birmingham's infrastructure to make it a world-class tanker base. There is room today to bed down 13 KC-135R aircraft at no cost to taxpayers, yet "military judgment," in lieu of military value was used to realign our jets to other locations that require costly additional infrastructure to accept our aircraft. When the capability of the 117th with a 12,000-foot runway is compared to McGhee-Tyson with a 9,000-foot runway, the result is even more puzzling.

The "realignment" of the 117th ARW will cost, not save, the taxpayers millions of dollars.

The city of Birmingham will have to assume operation of the fire station, fire fighting equipment and 15 full-time firefighters that currently protect the Birmingham Airport, if the current recommendations are to take effect. This comes to a cost of $250,000 a year. Compare this with the Secretary's report indicating a savings to the Department of only $23,000 a year!

I urge the Commission to hold a hearing specifically on the enclave concept. Nowhere in the BRAC legislation is enclave mentioned as an option. If it is a good idea, that can only become clear through a thorough investigation of the Air Force's plans and rationale in a public hearing.

Thank you for your service on this critical Commission and the decisions you have made that will positively impact the state of Alabama. If I can answer any questions regarding these concerns, please let me know or have your staff contact my chief of staff.

Sincerely,

Spencer Bachus
Member of Congress

STB/jb