

**E**ven before the last round of Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) was completed, the Pentagon had already started asking for another. According to Defense Department and Air Force estimates, the military services own and must operate much more infrastructure than they have need for, creating inefficiency and needless cost. Yet despite significant budget cuts and the looming threat of sequestration in recent years, Congress has repeatedly rejected those calls for a new BRAC round.

“I am in an ongoing argument, essentially, with Congress over this necessity,” Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter told troops in Germany in June. “We need BRAC. . . . We can’t afford to be inefficient and do all the things that we have to do all around the world.”

The situation is particularly challenging in the Air Force. A 2014 analysis determined USAF only utilizes 70 percent of its capacity. Moreover, Air Force facilities, on average, are 40 years old, with a quarter more than 50 years old, and “the bottom line is our buildings and our facilities are just simply too costly to operate,” Miranda A. A. Ballentine, the Air Force assistant secretary for installations, environment, and energy, told a House Appropriations subcommittee in March. “There is more we can do to

improve the affordability and viability of our installations, which today are simply too big, too old, and too expensive.”

The Air Force has about 50,000 fewer people and about 500 fewer aircraft than it did when the capacity analysis was done for the 2005 BRAC round, Kathleen I. Ferguson, the Air Force’s former principal deputy assistant secretary for installations, environment, and energy, told *Air Force Magazine*.

“When you start reducing anything, you start having excess capacity,” said Ferguson, who is now a consultant.

However, 30 percent excess capacity doesn’t mean the Air Force would close 30 percent of its bases, she noted.

“That’s an indication that we could really gain efficiencies by having a BRAC,” Ferguson said. “What BRAC really allows you to do is . . . to move force structure from one location to another, and it allows you to close some installations to create those savings.”

After several efforts to close military bases failed, Congress established the BRAC process in 1988 and amended it in 1990. Under the amended process, the President appoints an independent bipartisan commission to analyze the Secretary of Defense’s recommendations on closures and realignments, hold hearings on the recommendations, and then

send its own list—with justification—to Congress and the President to be approved or rejected wholesale.

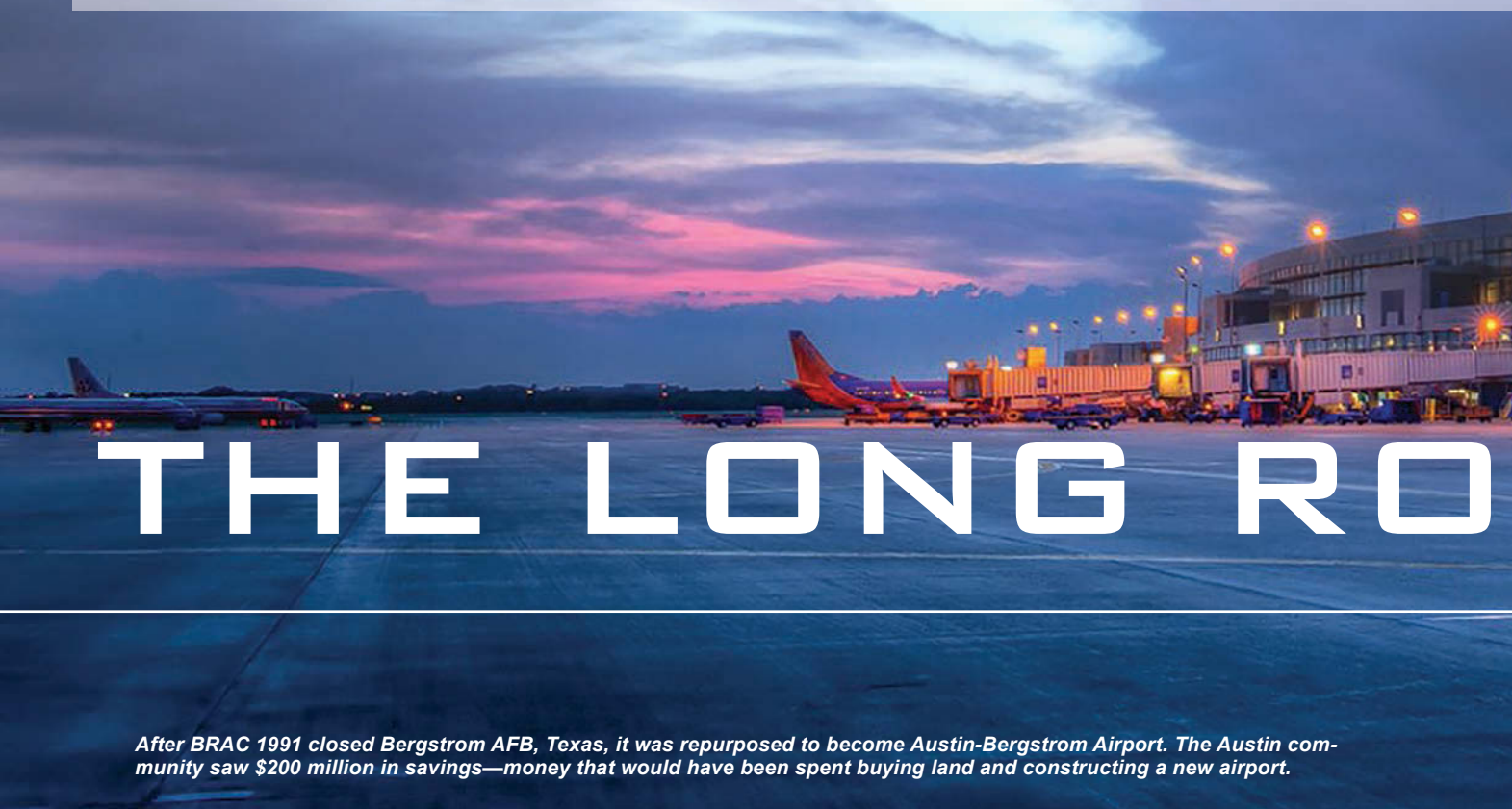
The process avoided the problem of the Defense Department closing or threatening to close bases for political reasons, according to a 2005 Congressional Research Service report.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, this past October called BRACs “an act of cowardice” on Congress’ part, since, he said, the legislative body could not bear to close a base on its own.

All together, the 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, and 2005 rounds of BRAC closed or realigned hundreds of bases, including 40 Air Force bases. This saved the Air Force nearly \$3 billion a year, Ferguson said.

“I always call it . . . the gift that keeps on giving, because once you close a base, you never have to pay for it again,” she said.

BRAC provides “the only fair, objective, and comprehensive process” to eliminate excess infrastructure and avoid wasting money, the Pentagon said in a 2014 request for a new round of BRAC. In March, John Conger, performing the duties of the DOD assistant secretary of defense for energy, installations, and environment, told a House Appropriations subcommittee that a new round of BRAC would save about \$2 billion a year after implementation.



# THE LONG RO

After BRAC 1991 closed Bergstrom AFB, Texas, it was repurposed to become Austin-Bergstrom Airport. The Austin community saw \$200 million in savings—money that would have been spent buying land and constructing a new airport.

“Many members of Congress have stated that the government as a whole could more efficiently use its resources. We absolutely agree,” Conger said. “BRAC is an objective, proven, and effective means of doing just that.”

As the defense budget continues to shrink and troop numbers decline, the Pentagon must find ways to save money, Conger has told Congress on multiple occasions.

During the House Armed Services Committee’s April 29 markup of the National Defense Authorization Act, Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), the ranking Democrat on the committee, said that while there has been “a significant shrinkage in the force, we have not seen a shrinkage in the infrastructure.”

Smith said Congress should not spend money on excess capacity at the expense of new funding priorities. In a statement to *Air Force Magazine*, he called it “death by a thousand cuts.”

Through sequestration, “Congress has put the Department of Defense in a position where it has been required to reduce force structure in order to live within the budget constraints,” Smith said. “As a result, the department has fallow infrastructure that is excess to its requirement and is being forced to maintain it at a considerable cost and

without benefit to the military or local community.”

BRAC is not popular, he said, but it is the “only transparent process by which the Department of Defense can properly align its infrastructure capacity and force structure. Savings and efficiencies that would be realized through a BRAC could be used to reinvest in critical equipment, training, and other capabilities that will do more to increase military readiness.”

Michael E. O’Hanlon, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution, said in a September essay published in *The National Interest* that in this budget environment, “it makes no sense to spend money on things the Pentagon no longer needs.”

Equipment and training are being shortchanged, O’Hanlon wrote, in part because of excess infrastructure. “For a finite number of defense dollars, something has to give,” he added.

With 30 percent excess infrastructure, the Air Force is “spending funds to maintain buildings, runways, hangars, and other infrastructure we don’t need, at the expense of funding critical mission requirements,” said Richard K. Hartley, Ferguson’s successor as principal deputy assistant secretary for installations, environment, and energy. “BRAC authority is required to effectively eliminate excess infrastructure so the Air Force’s limited

budget can be used for critical priorities like mission readiness, modernization, and support to our airmen.”

The money saved through BRAC could be used for the recapitalization and sustainment of weapons systems—such as the KC-46, the F-35, and the Long-Range Strike Bomber—for readiness, or for improving quality of life for airmen, Ferguson said.

“The private sector doesn’t have constraints on closing plants like we have on closing military bases,” she said. “I truly believe the Air Force needs another round of BRAC.”

One of the main roadblocks that has stalled recent BRAC discussions is the outcome of the 2005 round. Unlike the previous rounds, it focused on realignment, not closure, and was not designed to save money, Conger said in March.

“Roughly half of the recommendations from the BRAC 2005 round were not projected, even from the outset, to save money within the first seven years after implementation. Many of them weren’t projected to actually have recurring savings,” he testified.

Though the 2004 capacity assessment showed 24 percent excess capacity, DOD only reduced 3.4 percent of its infrastructure.

O’Hanlon wrote that the process may have focused too much on “fostering

Photo by Dave Wilson



# AD FOR BRAC

By Jennifer Hlad, Senior Editor

USAF AND DOD WISH TO SHED EXCESS INFRASTRUCTURE,  
BUT CONGRESS HAS LITTLE APPETITE FOR BASE CLOSURES.



**“WE CAN’T AFFORD TO BE INEFFICIENT AND DO ALL THE THINGS THAT WE HAVE TO DO ALL AROUND THE WORLD.”**

**During a June visit to US Army Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told soldiers “we need BRAC.”**

jointness across various military services, rather than simply achieving efficiency,” leading to “worries that perhaps all the low-hanging fruit had already been picked in the base closure process.”

Still, Conger noted, the recommendations that were designed to save money cost just \$6 billion, out of \$35 billion overall, and have brought in \$3 billion in recurring savings.

“When we want to save money with BRAC recommendations, we do,” he said.

Many members of Congress are not convinced.

“I understand that the 2005 BRAC was a reshaping BRAC, but a lot of money was spent to move things around,” Rep. Sanford D. Bishop Jr. (D-Ga.) said in the same

March hearing. “I have some concerns regarding another round of BRAC, but I also have some concerns about maintaining infrastructure that we don’t need.”

At a roundtable in March, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Texas) told reporters he would oppose a new round of realignment and closures.

“I’m not sure we can afford another BRAC,” he said, *The Hill* reported. “Remember, BRAC costs more in the early years than it saves. We have not yet broken even from the 2005 BRAC.”

In a discussion about the National Defense Authorization Act at the Brookings in October, McCain said he regrets some of the changes that came with past

BRACs—particularly the closing of NAS Cecil Field, in Jacksonville, Fla., and the consolidation of the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda and the Walter Reed Army Medical Center into one hospital.

“To think somehow that BRACs are nirvana is really not an accurate depiction,” McCain said.

The worries are all about the savings, said Ferguson, who managed the implementation and execution of the 2005 BRAC for the Air Force. The Air Force invested \$3.8 billion on 64 BRAC recommendations and completed them all on time and on budget, Ferguson said. Now the Air Force is saving a billion dollars a year, she said. These savings come primarily from military and civilian personnel savings, base operating support, recapitalization and sustainment savings, housing allowance eliminations, and mission activity reductions.

“We did have payback within six years. But that is one of the key concerns from Congress. They want to know, show me the savings,” she said.

**BRAC 2005 consolidated the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., and Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C. The combined facility (at right and below) is the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.**



US Army photo



USN photo by Chief Warrant Officer 4 Seth Rossman

Another recurring concern with BRAC is the impact on the communities with bases that are closed. Military families, civilian jobs, and support services go away, and communities are left with the shell of the installation.

“Anytime a base is closed, it’s impactful,” Ferguson said. “But what I would tell you is there are a lot of great success stories of bases being reused after Base Realignment and Closure.”

DOD’s Office of Economic Adjustment provides resources to communities dealing with issues related to BRAC, including unemployment and land use planning. The Association of Defense Communities also provides assistance to communities affected by BRAC.

Ferguson offered two examples of Air Force base success stories. In Austin, Texas, the community repurposed the former Bergstrom Air Force Base—closed in the 1991 round of BRAC—into a new international airport. The community was able to save \$200 million in land costs and now has about 16,000 new jobs associated with the airport, Ferguson said.

The former Williams Air Force Base in Mesa, Ariz., also closed in 1991, resulting in the loss of 728 local jobs. But it became an international aerospace center, with 2,200 new jobs, as well as 2,300 college and 600 high school students who go to school there, Ferguson said.

“They’re looking to eventually get up to 17,000 jobs,” she said. “Some areas are certainly harder to redevelop than others, but there is legislation and authorities to help the communities work through that process.”

**“WHAT BRAC REALLY ALLOWS YOU TO DO IS ... TO MOVE FORCE STRUCTURE FROM ONE LOCATION TO ANOTHER, AND IT ALLOWS YOU TO CLOSE SOME INSTALLATIONS TO CREATE THOSE SAVINGS.”**

Ferguson worked for the Air Force for nearly 35 years, starting her career as a design civil engineer at Plattsburgh Air Force Base in New York. So, she said, she was happy to be the one to hand over the keys to the community for the final transfer of that property.

***Kathleen Ferguson, Air Force acting assistant secretary of installations, environment, and logistics, testified on BRAC before the House Appropriations Committee in 2014.***

“It was amazing for me to go up there, ... to see the transformation,” she said. “There are opportunities for installations and the community to have a life after BRAC.”

The most recent NDAA did not directly address BRAC. However, it did call for a force structure plan from each of the services, as well as a “categorical inventory of worldwide military installations.”

The provision requires the Secretary of Defense to describe the infrastructure necessary for the projected force structure, discuss excess infrastructure, and assess the value of keeping some excess infrastructure for future contingency and surge requirements.

Ferguson said the requirement is “great news, and it may be a step in the right direction for Congress to begin to feel more comfortable with the department’s request for another round of BRAC.”

She said, up until now, “I think the department’s been saying, ‘Hey, we need another round of BRAC, trust us,’ and I think Congress is just looking for a little more information to be comfortable that that really is what is needed.”

Thornberry in October was clear there will be no BRAC in the immediate future, but signaled he is willing to consider the data.

“Come give us more specifics about it, and we’ll look at it, and there may well be another BRAC in the future,” he said.

For Rep. Jeff Fortenberry (R-Neb.), the problem may be one of terminology. During the March 3 House Appropria-

tions subcommittee hearing on military construction, veterans affairs, and related agencies, he suggested changing the name BRAC to “Military Installations and Savings Commission.”

The name and its acronym, MISC, imply “if there’s miscellaneous or excess space out there,” removing it will improve effectiveness and efficiency and save money. The money could be used for military readiness and therefore national security. “That becomes a much more important statement than just the negative idea of various communities competing against one another to stop their base from being closed,” he said. “We need to think of this as a partnership as to how ... we strengthen the opportunities for you to protect America.”

No matter what the name, Air Force officials continue to stress that Congress needs to authorize another round of closures.

“Both from a taxpayers’ perspective and also from a former Air Force official’s perspective, it’s really about doing the right thing,” Ferguson said.

The communities that support military bases are fantastic, she said, and it can be difficult and emotional to be faced with the possibility of losing that base. But, she said, the Air Force could better use the money elsewhere.

“It’s the balance there, being able to execute the mission at a more effective cost,” Ferguson said. “It’s not easy, but I think it’s necessary, given where the country is and given where the Air Force is.”



USAF photo by SSgt. Carlin Leslie