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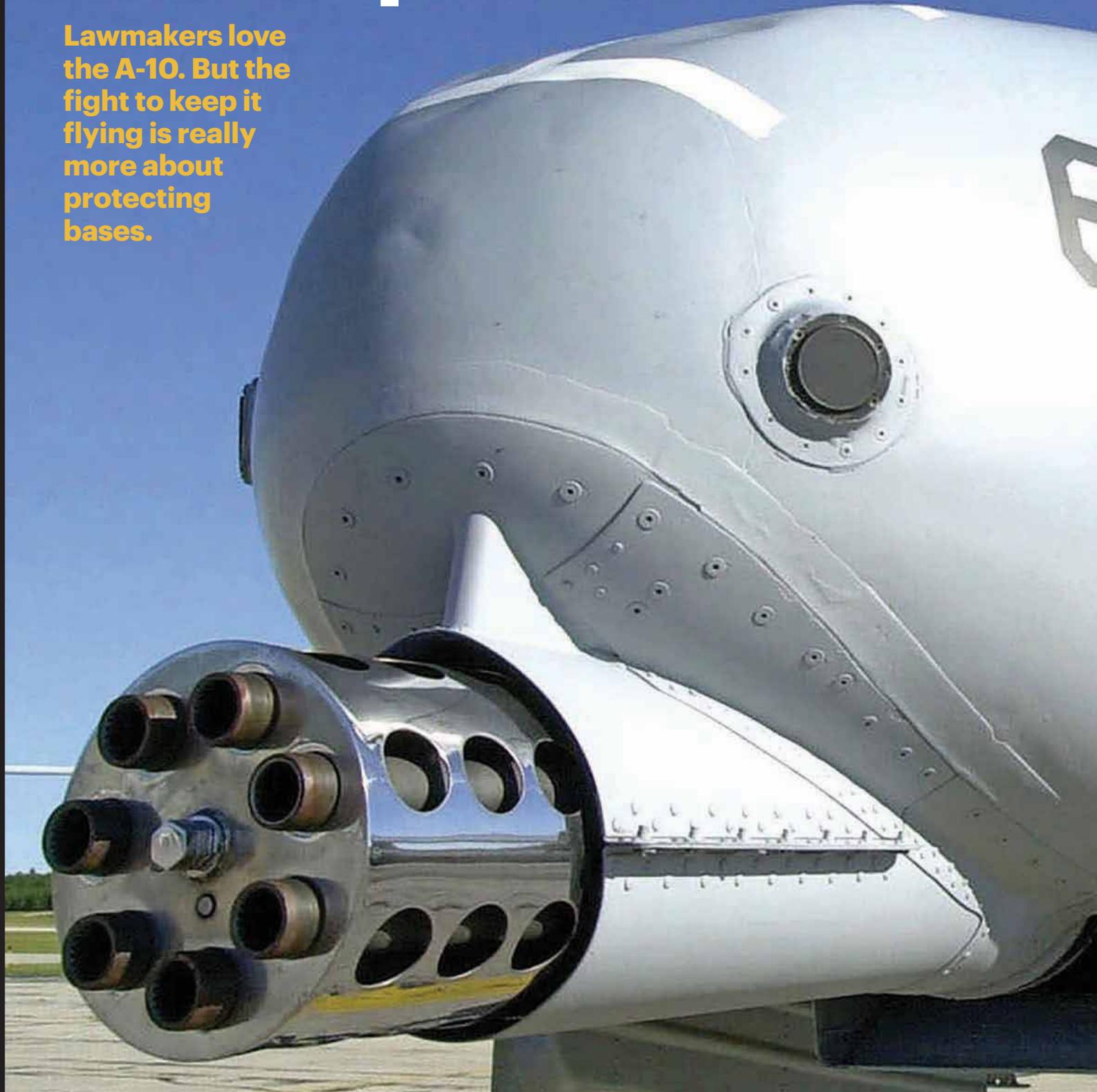
Battle Plans

Why the fight to keep the A-10 is really about keeping military bases open. P. 22

||| COVER STORY

Preemptive Strikes

Lawmakers love the A-10. But the fight to keep it flying is really more about protecting bases.





By MEGAN SCULLY

The slow and low-flying A-10 Warthog is the heart of Arizona's Davis-Monthan Air Force Base and, by extension, a critical economic driver in the surrounding Tucson community.

Aside from the 83 Warthogs stationed at the vast desert installation, the base's other major claim to fame is its dusty, rusty boneyard, a dumping ground for more than 4,000 discarded fighters and other military planes that have long since passed their glory days.

The Air Force wants the venerable A-10s that now fly in the skies over Davis-Monthan and at bases in eight other states to join the ranks of the retired aircraft in that boneyard, a cost-saving move officials hope would free up more cash in a tight Pentagon budget to buy newer and more capable aircraft.

So far, Congress has been standing in the way. The fight is partly over the perceived need for its combat capabilities. But losing the A-10s would also mean stripping many bases of their central mission and, perhaps even more importantly, of the pilots and support personnel that fly and maintain the close-air support planes.

For Davis-Monthan, which has more Warthogs than any other base in the country, the ongoing — and so far successful — battle to keep the planes flying is about much more than the aircraft themselves. Indeed, the fate of the Tucson-area outpost and the surrounding community could hang in the balance.

The threat of base closures appears to be becoming more real. While Congress has for the past few years united to block the Pentagon's effort to launch another politically fraught round of base realignments and closures, known as BRAC, the political winds may be shifting. The pressure of austere budgets, combined with an improved economy, means that more voices on Capitol Hill are acknowledging that base closures may be inevitable in the near future.

As budgets tighten and the Army and Air Force try to become leaner, more cost-effective forces, many once-mighty and thriving bases are seeing their populations plummet. That's leaving buildings, barracks and hangars empty, making these bases tempting targets in any future BRAC round.

Given these risks, Davis-Monthan isn't alone in gearing up to defend its mission. Communities in Florida, Alabama, North Dakota and elsewhere are taking steps to shore up their military value as locations for bases. Even though Congress hasn't authorized a base-closure round yet, many are pre-emptively seeking out hired guns in Washington, pleading their cases for new missions and working to improve life both on and off the base.

Having been through five previous

rounds of base closures, military communities have become savvy about getting ahead of BRAC. Once there were only three or four base-closure lobbyists in town; now it's a lucrative cottage industry. Local officials and business leaders make frequent trips to both the Pentagon and Capitol Hill to advocate for bases in their communities. Air Force officials alone meet in the Pentagon with about 70 communities a year, including a sit-down last month with Tucson area leaders.

The ultimate goal is to avoid making the base-closure list at all. Despite an evaluation by an independent commission that includes a lengthy public appeals process, once the Pentagon targets a base, there's about an 86 percent chance it will remain on that list, according to Anthony Principi, chairman of the 2005 BRAC commission.

"That's pretty bad odds," says Principi, who is now a base-closure lobbyist and consultant who represents states such as Florida and Alabama. "So you better do everything you can now and not wait until the list comes out."

“We don’t know when BRAC’s coming, but we know it’s coming at some point in time.”

— Alabama Lt. Gov. Kay Ivey

A-10 Charm

Arizona Republican Rep. Martha McSally, a former A-10 pilot whose district includes Davis-Monthan, has been at the forefront of the battle to save the Warthog, which she considers a critical asset for protecting ground combat troops. The planes were tapped during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and most recently have flown missions against Islamic State targets.



But McSally, who frequently wears a gold A-10 charm around her neck, says the community has a strategy that includes pushing for an honest discussion about what could one day replace Warthogs while ensuring the base is “used for the national security treasure it is.”

“Having been stationed there four times, I will tell you it’s a treasure for one reason primarily, and that is training tactical air-to-ground pilots,” McSally says of Davis-Monthan. She points to its sunny flying weather, open airspace and easy access to the 1.7 million-acre Barry M. Goldwater training range — all crucial assets that, in BRAC parlance, give the base significant “military value.”

With the future of the A-10s uncertain and the threat of a BRAC looming, the community, for whom the military has a \$1.75 billion annual economic impact, has one explicit message for lawmakers, military brass and Pentagon leaders: Tucson supports Davis-Monthan Air Force Base and all flying missions the Air Force wants to put there, says Brian Harpel, president of DM50, a local group that advocates for the base.

Harpel and other community advocates argue that, with or without the A-10s, the base is simply too important to give up. And DM50, in conjunction with the Southern Arizona Defense Alliance, a local organization that advocates for several bases, including Davis-Monthan, Fort Huachuca



Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

A WARPLANE CLOSE TO HER HEART

McSally often wears a gold charm around her neck promoting the A-10 Warthog, which has a big presence in her Arizona district.

and the Yuma Proving Ground, is looking for help selling Davis-Monthan's attributes in Washington, with plans to award a contract for lobbying and consulting services this summer or fall — not necessarily to block a round of base closures, but to help them prepare for it.

"We see Tucson, and we see Davis-Monthan, as always being home to a major flying mission," says Michael Varney, president of the Tucson Chamber of Commerce.

The BRAC Pitch

For the last several years, Pentagon officials have tried and failed to convince Congress to authorize another round of base closures.

The promise of eventually saving \$2 billion annually by shuttering unneeded facilities should appeal to lawmakers concerned about other spending priorities in a tight defense budget. But BRAC is a risky venture for members, since most have an installation in or near their districts.

Congress last year asserted in the fiscal 2015 defense authorization law that the Defense Department has the authority to proceed with an excess infrastructure study, but officials still have a long way to go to get the actual BRAC authorization they seek. Most recently, the House passed a fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill (HR 1735) that rejects the request for a BRAC to begin in 2017; the Senate Armed Services Committee adopted a companion measure (S

1376) that does the same. The White House has issued a vaguely worded veto threat for BRAC and a slew of other objections to both bills. And while the administration hasn't followed through on threatened vetoes of previous defense bills, ongoing budget battles could force the president's hand.

Nonetheless, a decade after the last base-closure round, there are signs that Congress may be coming around to the idea of another BRAC. Key lawmakers, including the top Democrats on the House and Senate Armed Services committees, support a new round as a necessary way to save money.

Adam Smith of Washington, the ranking Democrat on House Armed Services, has been pushing for a base-closure round for years and says he isn't optimistic that it will happen soon. "Do you think you'll see a unicorn? I haven't seen one yet," he quips.

Still, the opposition to a new BRAC round appears to be quietly diminishing. Even those who remain opposed to a BRAC in 2017 are not foreclosing the possibility of eventually authorizing a new round — they just don't think now is the right time.

"We just keep coming. We have not gotten it now two, maybe even more successive years," Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said last week. "But we're going to keep trying. And I think at some point we'll get there."

Critics once rested their arguments largely on the costs of a BRAC, which requires an upfront investment and costly

environmental cleanup before savings kick in. But faced with the prospects of years of tightened spending — and the need to generate savings in future years — opponents now emphasize the need to preserve military infrastructure until there is a better idea of the long-term budget picture.

"We are still having a discussion in this country about what the role of the United States is in the world and about what sort of military capabilities we need to fulfill that role. Once you give up a base or a training range, it's gone forever," House Armed Services Chairman Mac Thornberry, a Texas Republican, says. Defense officials insist that they can hedge for various possibilities in the future, preserving high-value assets, such as ranges, that cannot easily be replicated.

Some communities, meanwhile, are coming around to the idea of a BRAC, which they see as an opportunity to build their population through growth.

"People bring bases to life, not buildings," Principi says. "And sometimes we lose sight of that."

Democratic Rep. Beto O'Rourke represents the Army's 32,000-person Fort Bliss in Texas, but the sophomore lawmaker has joined the ranks of those who support a BRAC. While the surrounding El Paso area isn't actively advocating for a new round, O'Rourke says the community is confident that the Army would not shed the enormous post, which boasts expansive training space. Bliss itself has more than 1 million acres, and it abuts New Mexico's 2.3 million-acre White Sands Missile Range.

O'Rourke recognizes that a new BRAC could adversely affect some communities, and says he wouldn't support it if money were unlimited. But the Pentagon's budget isn't increasing at the historical levels of a decade ago. Dramatic wartime spending hikes have been replaced by budget caps, forcing the Pentagon to prioritize.

"I think it's a very politically difficult but a very necessary thing to do," he says.

The Air Force and Army, which say they desperately need a BRAC, are working to do just that. Both services recently completed analyses of their "excess infrastructure," with the Army and Air Force reporting, respectively, that they have 18 and 30 percent more real estate than they are currently us-

A Swift Rebound

BROOKS CITY BASE, TEXAS

Dozens of communities have seized on the opportunity provided by a base closure to transform a military base into a thriving commercial or residential center. But few have rebounded as quickly as Texas' Brooks City Base, which lost its Air Force mission as a result of the last round of closures a decade ago.

Brooks Air Force Base, as the San Antonio-area installation was once known, got a jump start on its post-military preparations, having been targeted but ultimately saved during the 1995 base closure and realignment round. State and local officials, however, saw the writing on the wall.

In 1997, San Antonio and the Air Force began preparations for what ultimately became known as a "city base concept."

Two years later, Congress, at the behest of then-GOP Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas, authorized the Air Force to sell the 1,300-acre campus to the newly created Brooks Development Authority and lease back property for the service to use. In return, the local community paid for the base's maintenance, providing a major cost incentive for the Air Force.

The unusual deal essentially helped Brooks create a transition plan, in the expectation that the Air Force base would one day close. When the 2005 BRAC commission recommended the Air Force leave Brooks, the city's efforts were already well underway. Not only did the community already own the base, but there was a vision and plan for how to proceed.

"We needed to be proactive," says Leo Gomez, Brooks City Base president and CEO. "Rather than continuing to build our forces to protect against closure, we really got prepared to deal with eventual closure."

And, while the base closure meant the departure of nearly 3,000 military, civilian and contractor personnel, the city has managed to rebound since the last Air Force mission left Brooks in 2011.

Today, 26 businesses have created more than 3,000 jobs at Brooks, a mixed-use development with an average salary of \$50,000. There are plans to develop another 771 acres, with the goal of adding another 3,000 jobs to the campus.

"We have made up for what we've lost and are well on our way to dou-

bling the impact," Gomez says.

Norton A. Schwartz, the former Air Force chief of staff who now serves as the president of Business Executives for National Security, says the key to surviving — and thriving from — a closure is having a shared vision in the community on how to navigate the run-up to a BRAC and the post-BRAC years.

"I think it takes courage to change, and there is risk in reuse and redevelopment," Schwartz says. "And so communities sort of have to decide whether they are going to contest closure or whether they want to expend their energy on pursuing longer-term outcomes."

Schwartz acknowledges that not all communities are in the same position. The closure of a rural base, for instance, brings many more challenges for redevelopment.

"While some originally thought this was sort of a death sentence, I think that there is ample evidence that through good planning, collaboration, management and assistance, communities can thrive — or at least survive," he says.

— M.S.

ing.

In discussing BRAC on the Hill, defense officials see some progress.

There is "less of a guttural negative reaction this year than the past two years," says Paul D. Cramer, the Army's deputy assistant secretary for installations, housing and partnerships. "We are inching our way towards an authorization."

For some, BRAC could be an opportunity to attract new missions to their bases, including those that have been depleted of duties and personnel.

Take Fort Knox in Kentucky, a historic installation that has lost 40 percent of its military population since 2013, when the Army eliminated the base's brigade combat team. With its 100,000 acres of ranges and maneuver areas, Fort Knox is a valuable military asset east of the Mississippi that would likely never close.

"You only get so many maneuver acres," says Barry Rhoads, a veteran BRAC lobbyist at Cassidy and Associates who recently signed on to represent nearby Fort Campbell. "You don't get that back ever again, no matter where it is," he adds.

And so the storied base, which has attracted a smattering of new personnel but has struggled to grow significantly in the last two years, could actually stand to gain in another BRAC.

"You're not going to reuse Fort Knox and optimize its utility outside a BRAC process," says Andrew Napoli, the Army's assistant for BRAC. "You're just chipping away at the margins, a few dozen here, a few dozen there."

To address lawmakers' concerns about cutting too much real estate at a time of uncertainty for both the budget and national security, defense officials stress that they want to preserve the military's most valuable assets, and are sensitive to any potentially important ones that would be difficult or impossible to replace or replicate.

"That would all be part of the calculus," says Kathleen Ferguson, a veteran of the 2005 BRAC round who currently serves as the Air Force's principal deputy assistant secretary for installations, environment and energy. "Our chief and secretary and the secretary of Defense

would have the vision of what might be coming in 15 years out, in 20 years out, and that would be part of the analysis we would do.”

While the Pentagon’s arguments for savings and its infrastructure could help its case on Capitol Hill, local communities — and their ability to sway congressional delegations — will ultimately be the deciding factor in whether or not there is another BRAC.

“You’re not going to convince members to vote for a BRAC round based on some arcane national-level thing,” says Napoli. “Maybe you can convince a Cabinet official of that. But a member has to check in with their constituencies and say, ‘Do we think we have more to gain than lose if we do a BRAC round?’ And only that conversation is going to be decisive.”

Community Preparation

There are few issues in defense that have the potential for such direct domestic repercussions as base closures do. Everything from local schools to the real estate market to small businesses can be affected in targeted communities. The environmental cleanup is complicated and can take years. For some, closures can be a devastating blow from which it can take years to recover.

The high stakes for these communities were driven home for Principi on the day the George W. Bush White House announced him as its pick to chair the 2005 BRAC commission. Even though Principi still had to be confirmed, and the Pentagon hadn’t released its own list of base closures and realignments, states wasted no time making their case to the former Veterans Affairs secretary.

“I had a line of governors outside my office,” Principi recalls. That round, which occurred at the height of two wars and in the middle of a military buildup, was more about transforming and modernizing the Army than saving money and shedding unneeded real estate. This time around, Pentagon officials have already said that their primary motivation is to save money, and the best way to do that is to turn the lights out at entire bases.

Local leaders say it takes years to pre-

Long Road Ahead

FORT ORD, CALIFORNIA

More than 20 years after the military shuttered California’s Fort Ord, the surrounding Monterey-area community is still struggling to recover from the closure of an installation where more than 36,000 people once lived and worked.

With the base, one of the largest military installations ever closed, went about one-third of the area’s population. Once-full apartment complexes were suddenly struggling to fill half of their units. And local businesses, which relied on soldiers and families for as much as half of their revenue, had difficulty staying afloat.

“You give your economy such a devastating blow that you know it’s going to take several decades to recover,” says Michael Houlemard, executive director of the Fort Ord Reuse Authority, which is spearheading the redevelopment of the once-thriving base.

Houlemard, who has worked on rebuilding Fort Ord since the base was targeted in the 1991 base closure and realignment round, says the community’s initial goal was to recover 75 percent to 80 percent of what was lost within two decades.

That, however, proved

too ambitious.

In reality, the community built back only about a third of the population in 21 years, thanks in part to the Army’s slow and arduous cleanup process, which could take another 20 years. Demolishing old buildings and barracks, meanwhile, has taken hundreds of millions of dollars and years to complete.

Democratic Rep. Sam Farr, who has represented the area since 1993, says the years following the BRAC decision were a learning process for the community, which was still reeling from the shock that the base closed. He would like to see better consultation between the Defense Department and affected communities on life after BRAC.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity to reinvigorate a community if they know all the tools that are in the toolbox and they get to choose how to use them,” says Farr, who would back another BRAC round, with some tweaks to the process.

With several large building projects underway and housing selling at a brisk pace, Houlemard, who served as the president of the Association of Defense Commu-

nities in the years following the 2005 base-closure round, is optimistic about the area’s future. The focus now is on completing the cleanup, including the ongoing removal of dangerous munitions, beefing up the infrastructure and completing about six miles of roads that still must be built.

Even after two decades spent attempting to recoup lost business and revenue, Houlemard still sees the BRAC process as a generally good one.

The community, for one, was able to take advantage of economic and planning assistance offered by the Defense Department in the years after Fort Ord closed — something that, he believes, helped speed up the early redevelopment process by several years.

Houlemard also says a full closure can be preferable to the slow drain of military personnel and missions now occurring at bases elsewhere, a process he calls a “death by a thousand cuts.”

At least once the base’s doors close, the community has a chance to rebuild, even if that process can be painstakingly slow.

“BRAC may not be perfect, but what’s the alternative? The alternative is worse,” Houlemard says.

— M.S. and C.O.

pare to survive a BRAC round. A number of communities are already taking proactive steps to boost their value to the military.

FLORIDA. The state's military bases contribute a whopping \$73 billion annual economic impact, meaning that officials have lived since the last round in a continuous state of preparation for another BRAC.

Florida's plan has included working with communities to minimize commercial encroachment around installations, a head-

ache for military training and operations that can hurt a base's military value — the No. 1 criteria in a BRAC round — and become a significant motivation for shuttering a facility. The state legislature has also passed dozens of initiatives to make the state more military-friendly, such as speeding up professional licensing for military spouses who have relocated to the state.

In 2013, as the military continued to make its case for another base-closure

round, Florida enlisted Principi to lobby on the state's behalf in Washington. Since then, the state has paid Principi's firm about \$300,000 for its services.

"You can't fix some problems in two or three years. In fact, it takes 10 years to fix some of them," says Tom Neubauer, vice chairman of the Florida Defense Support Task Force and the president of the Bay Defense Alliance.

ALABAMA. Eager to preserve their \$17 billion of military-related economic activity, officials are pursuing the same advanced preparation tactics through a state-wide military stability commission created in 2011 led by Republican Lt. Gov. Kay Ivey. Those efforts have included establishing development buffer zones around bases, allowing local communities' federal building authorities to spend money directly on upgrades at military installations and boosting quality of life for military families. And, like Florida, Alabama has signed up Principi to help with their efforts in Washington.

"We don't know when BRAC's coming, but we know it's coming at some point in time," Ivey says. "Our plan has always been to be prepared before it's announced."

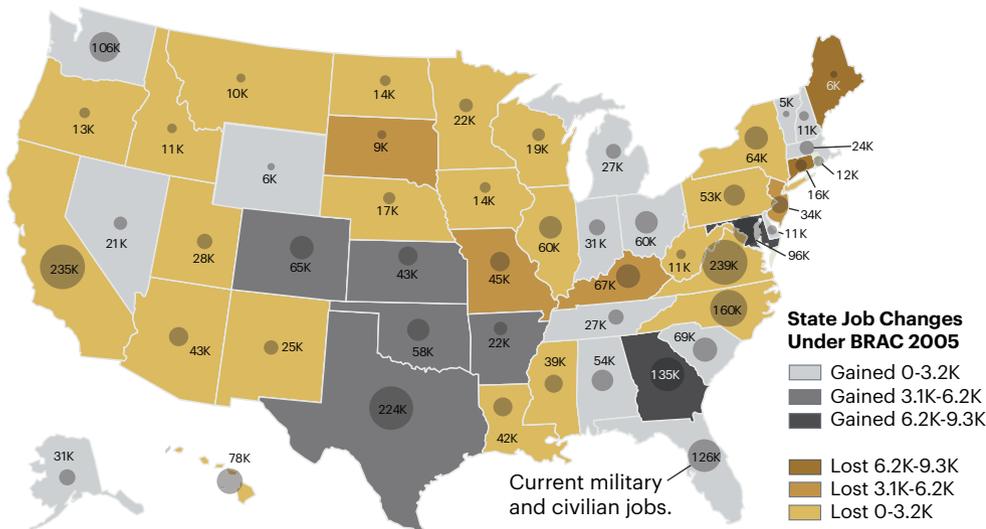
Alabama's goal, Ivey adds, is to not make the list in the first place.

NORTH DAKOTA. Some communities are trying to improve their bases through partnerships aimed at bringing down energy costs and leasing empty office space. At North Dakota's Grand Forks Air Force

Where the Troops Are Now

The last round of base closings and realignments a decade ago was a big winner for most states in the South but a loser for more than half the nation that lost military jobs.

CURRENT MILITARY JOBS



BIGGEST MILITARY STATES



Virginia

239,233

- Defense spending contributes **\$60 billion** to gross state product each year
- Military spending accounts for **44%** of federal spending in Virginia

California

234,764

- Roughly **\$60 billion** — more than **10%** of federal defense dollars are spent in California
- The roughly **235,000** defense personnel are spread among **348 facilities**, and account for more than **\$60 billion** in tax revenue.

Texas

223,947

- **\$23 billion** in annual military expenditures
- **\$150 billion** in total economic impact
- **\$83 billion** in gross state product
- **\$55.6 billion** in disposable personal income

North Carolina

159,746

- The military supports **540,000 jobs** — **340,000** in the private sector.
- Provides **\$30 billion** in state personal income
- **\$48 billion** in gross state product

Georgia

134,898

- **\$20 billion** in annual expenditures
- Accounts for **5%** of gross state product

Source: State governments

Base, whose bombers, tankers and missiles have been replaced by Global Hawk drones, the community reached a deal in February to build an unmanned aerial systems commercial research and development, training, testing and business center.

The center, called Grand Sky, brings in jobs and revenue to the base while also being “synergistic with the existing Air Force mission,” Ferguson says.

Other communities are boosting area resources through new sports complexes and, in the case of Columbus, Miss., a new pistol range minutes from the local Air Force base, fulfilling a training need for the airmen stationed there.

Gauging Risks

There’s another reason that a new BRAC round may start to appeal to lawmakers. The White House has already warned that it will find other ways to shed the military’s costly excess real estate if Congress continues to refuse to give the administration the green light on a base-closure round.

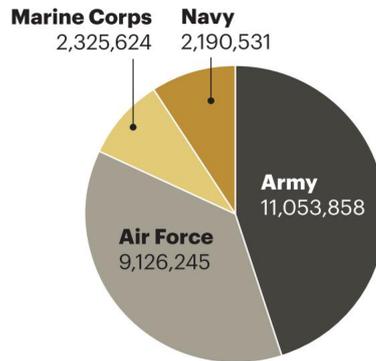
“The administration will pursue alternative options to reduce this wasteful spending and ensure that DOD’s limited resources are available for the highest priorities of the warfighter and national security,” the Office of Management and Budget said about the House version of the defense bill.

For the communities surrounding military bases, a formal round of base closures — with the benefits of an independent com-

Military Lands

The Army occupies 45% of the base space.

ACRES BY SERVICE



Source: Department of Defense

mission and a public appeals process — may be much more preferable to what many fear could become an ad hoc back-door BRAC.

“Communities always felt in a BRAC they were getting a fair shot to make their case,” Rhoads says.

Recalling his days as the BRAC chairman, Principi says the commission made extraordinary efforts to ensure its work was open and transparent. “The beauty of the BRAC commission is you have a commission,” he adds.

A formal BRAC round is also far more efficient and effective for the military, allowing officials to conduct a comprehensive look at its real estate and force structure to determine what should stay, and what must

go. It also allows them to shutter mid-size and large installations, something that is very difficult to do outside a BRAC.

“You’re pretty limited to just reshuffling units on your post to try to make [it] a little more efficient,” Napoli says. “But you’re not going to save a lot of money.”

Some lawmakers — so far, a small minority — agree that BRAC is the best way to shed expensive and unneeded real estate.

“For some, it sounds counterintuitive. Why would you want to mess with what we have?” O’Rourke says. “But there’s going to have to be some reckoning at some point and we might as well do it in a thoughtful way — and BRAC is the way to do that.”

Most others, however, aren’t quite so sure. The last BRAC, which was slow to generate real savings, left a bad taste in the mouths of many lawmakers. McSally, an Armed Services member, says Congress needs more information on how the military will hedge for the future before it can consider shedding infrastructure.

But even with her home base targeted to lose its core mission and possibly in the crosshairs of another BRAC, the Arizona lawmaker doesn’t rule out another round of base closures, which should give defense officials some consolation even as they won’t get an authorization for 2017.

“It needs to be a fact-based analysis moving forward,” she says. ■

Connor O’Brien contributed to this report.

Florida



- **\$73.4 billion** in gross state product
- In 2008, average military earnings per job were **\$70,505** compared to an average of \$37,563 for all Florida jobs
- Defense-related spending accounts for nearly **47%** of economic activity in certain counties

Washington



- **\$7.9 billion** in installation expenditures and **\$5.2 billion** in contract spending
- **\$30 billion** in economic activity
- **\$12.2 billion** in gross state product

Maryland



- **\$51.8 billion** in economic activity
- Supports **350,000** jobs
- **\$23.9 billion** in employee compensation
- **15%** of gross state product

Hawaii



- **\$8.8 billion** in annual expenditures
- **\$14.7 billion** in gross state product
- **\$3.5 billion** in earnings
- **16%** of the state’s workforce

South Carolina



- **\$19 billion** in economic activity each year
- **\$8.6 billion** in employee compensation
- Nearly **\$800 million** in state tax revenue