

BASE CASE LOOKS OPEN (HILL) AND SHUT (DDO) `BASE' BALL: HILL LOOKS SAFE AND DDO OUT

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While waiting for Utah's turn before the Base Closure Commission last week, a few of the state's partisans went bowling.

It was the first sign that the Utah contingent was feeling confident about the upcoming presentation on Hill Air Force Base. But mostly, it was a way to kill time.

California base supporters had been speechifying for hours in a dank theater on the closing of Treasure Island Naval Station in San Francisco Bay. For a handful of early-arriving Utahns, there was nothing to do but hang out, walk the grounds of the breezy island or go bowling in dresses and suits at the alley next door.

By 2:30 p.m., the crowd from the Beehive State was swelling. As California wrapped up ahead of schedule, Gov. Mike Leavitt, Rep. Jim Hansen, Air Force Lt. Gen. Lawrence Farrell and Hill/DDO '95 President Mike Pavich took the stage.

Leavitt gave the opening argument, Hansen and Pavich stated the case, and Farrell, his three general's stars gleaming, added the punch Utah officials intended by giving an outsider's verification that what they said was true.

They all gave the standard line: Hill is No. 1 among all five Air Force logistics centers. They noted it is tops in military value and the only one rated "Tier 1" as an operational installation and a maintenance depot.

They all were calm and collected. And afterward, they seemed relieved.

No one from Utah is making any bets publicly. But after three months of arguments, base visits, hearings and rallies, there are some strong indications about how the 1995 base-closure round will turn out.

Hill and the Ogden Air Logistics Center? Safe. Four base-closure commissioners purportedly have told senior Utah politicians there is no way they could justify closing the Air Force's highest-ranked base.

Commissioners were talking along that vein Wednesday when five of them, an unprecedented number, visited Hill for a firsthand look.

They told reporters afterward they were awed by the base and did not question the Air Force rankings.

"That really went well for us," said Hansen aide Steve Petersen.

Going poorly is the fight for Defense Depot Ogden. Officials all but concede the warehousing and supply base will be closed. The question now is whether its key tenant missions will stay in Utah when it goes.

Base boosters believe the depot's fate was signaled when the commission declined earlier this month to add two California depots to the closure-study list for comparison with Ogden.

"I ask you to reconsider the decision to close DDO," Hansen urged commissioners at the Treasure Island hearing. But in his next breath came the new emphasis: If the depot must be closed, move its mobile-hospital mission and the Defense Reutilization and Marketing Office to nearby Hill.

Of the 1,100 jobs that would be lost in a depot closure, relocating the hospital and marketing operations would salvage about 200.

Pavich said the Ogden depot was an uphill battle from the start because it was offered for closure by its parent command, the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA).

"The data could go either way," Pavich said. "Our position is, 'No, you can't close it; it's a great cost-efficient operation.' But the commission looked at the data and said, 'We tend to agree with the DLA. It can be closed without significant impact on the overall operation.' "

With Hill compelling and DDO doomed, that leaves only Dugway Proving Ground to sort out -- if only the Army could.

Dugway's fate remains murky as high-ranking Army officials continue to disagree about whether the biological-chemical-defense test center should have been offered for reduction in the first place.

By Hansen's count, five Army officials -- including a deputy undersecretary and two generals -- have conceded that Dugway should not be closed. Another general insists that it must.

"Now I hear that Army Secretary Togo West is looking into this confusing situation, so maybe we'll get some answers," Hansen told the base-closure commissioners last week.

It is hard to tell if the Army's vacillating will work in Dugway's favor. Sure to help the base, however, is a fact the Army acknowledges: The states tapped to take Dugway test missions are not likely to grant permits for the work.

Another factor helping Dugway is its remoteness. The desert expanse 75 miles southwest of Salt Lake City is the ideal place to conduct experiments with deadly pathogens and chemicals, base boosters say, and its scientists are all on site.

Commissioner Lee Kling apparently was swayed after seeing it for himself April 13. He agrees there would be considerable hardship created if Dugway's English Village community were closed, giving employees a minimum round-trip commute of 120 miles to get to work each day.

Of course, nothing is certain until the Base Closure Commission starts deliberations and voting June 22. And commissions tend to be unpredictable until the last minute. They smile, banter cheerfully with communities, then close their bases and disband.

But there are enough signs out there to draw conclusions. From bold statements to subtle body language, every detail gets studied.

Kling, for example, was said to be one of the four commissioners who offered assurances that Hill was safe. Pressed about Defense Depot Ogden, the commissioner would only smile.

Also noticed are the warm nods of recognition the panel gives Pavich. The slender ex-general with the intellectual bearing and fact-popping delivery is said to be a favorite.

Leavitt said Farrell's presence on Treasure Island also was telling. Farrell is vice commander of Air Force Materiel Command, parent to Hill and the four other Air Force logistics centers competing for survival.

The general told the commission he was available to appear at any regional hearing and testify about the command's bases. All a community had to do was ask. Hill supporters did.

Advocates of the lowest-ranked logistics center, California's McClellan Air Force Base, which shared the same hearing with Hill, did not.

"It will be interesting to see who gets Farrell in after this," Leavitt said. Regional hearings for the remaining ALCs -- Kelly Air Force Base, Texas, Tinker Air Force Base, Okla., and Robins Air Force Base, Ga. -- are scheduled through June 10.

Utah now is done, except for an hour or so of testimony from its congressional delegation June 12-13 in Washington.

By this time next month, the state will know -- good or bad.

As Leavitt reminded the Base Closure Commission last week, the state has taken its share of defense cuts without complaining. But now it stands with every one of its bases on the list for closure, realignment or study -- except Tooele Army Depot, which was realigned in the 1993 closure round.

If Hill, DDO and Dugway all go down, "we in Utah would have nothing left except the 42 percent of the nation's stockpile of obsolete chemical weapons at Tooele," the governor said. "Which we would not resist you moving somewhere else."