Testimony of Senator Alan J. Dixon
Chairman, 1995 Base Realignment and Closure Commission
before the Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, and International Security
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate
June 9, 2011

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I am Alan Dixon. In late 1994, President Clinton appointed me Chairman of the 1995 Base Realignment and Closure, or BRAC, Commission on the recommendation of my good friend Senator Sam Nunn, who was Chairman of the Armed Services Committee at the time.

I also had a lot of experience with the local impact of the military base closure process during my service in the United States Senate. Several major installations in my home state of Illinois were closed by previous BRAC Commissions, including Chanute Air Force Base and Fort Sheridan in 1988 and Glenview Naval Air Station in 1993. I worked very closely with all of the communities in my state that were affected by base closures.

I would like to make a few general observations about the base closure process, and then point to some aspects of the process which I think were important in making it successful.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, closing military bases was essential. We were reducing the size of our military in the aftermath of the Cold War, but it was almost impossible for the military services to reduce their infrastructure because of the restrictions that Congress had placed over the years on closing military bases in the United States.

The result was that we were wasting scarce defense dollars maintaining bases that we didn't need.

Everyone agreed we needed to do something. Congress created the Base Realignment and Closure Commission to operate a limited number of times to bypass the restrictions that remain in current law today that effectively prevent the Defense Department from closing domestic military installations.

The BRAC process worked.

According to the GAO, the first 4 rounds of the BRAC process closed 97 major military bases, realigned another 55, and approved another 235 minor closures and realignments, all in the United States. The annual recurring savings were $7.2 billion once all the actions were completed.

The 2005 BRAC round closed 33 major bases, realigned another 30, and approved another 774 minor closures and realignments. GAO and DOD are still debating the annual recurring savings, but they lie somewhere between $2 and $4 billion.

Let me offer a few observations on the BRAC process for you to consider as you work on the proposal for a Civilian Property Realignment proposal.

First, the Defense Department had a strong incentive to make the BRAC process a success because it got to keep the annual recurring savings and apply them to other areas of the defense budget.

Second, the BRAC law set up clear criteria for evaluating bases that everyone concerned – the military services, the local communities, the Commission and the Congress – knew would be used. While military value criteria were understandably the most important, Congress decided that the economic impact of a closure or realignment on a community could be used to offset the military value. This was an important criterion in some cases where the closure of an installation would have a devastating impact on a particular community.

Another important point about these criteria concerns the environmental impact of closing bases. DOD determined that while environmental compliance costs could be a factor in a base closure or realignment decision, environmental cleanup costs were not to be considered in the cost of closure calculations because DOD was legally obligated for these costs regardless of whether the base was closed. Including environmental cleanup costs in a closure decision could have skewed the process to close only bases with little or no environmental cleanup costs.

Third, the BRAC process was widely accepted because the Commission was perceived as independent and objective. The Defense Department came up with its closure recommendations to the Commission in a closed process. In contrast,

everything the Commission did was open and transparent to the public – our hearings, our visits to bases, our deliberations, all the information we received from the Defense Department to support their recommendations and from the communities and others to support their positions. The commissioners were subject to all conflict of interest laws, and several members of the 1995 Commission which I chaired recused themselves from participating in certain decisions.

Communities and Members of Congress might have disagreed with the BRAC Commission's ultimate decisions, but I think they felt they were listened to and treated fairly.

I noticed that under the Administration's proposal, the Civilian Property Realignment Board's meetings are not open to the public, and the Chair and Ranking Member of the Congressional oversight committees can sit in on all meetings of the Board. I respectfully suggest that the Subcommittee might want to look closely at these two aspects of the Administration's proposal in light of the BRAC experience.

Finally, the BRAC experience showed that some form of government assistance to communities affected by major closures or realignments was essential both for losing communities to overcome the economic impact and in some cases for gaining communities to prepare local infrastructure to receive new activities.

Closing a military base was almost always a painful decision for the BRAC Commission and a wrenching experience for the communities involved, many of which had a long history of support for the installation.

And it was painful for Members of Congress to be put in a position where Congress could only accept or reject, but not modify, the Commission's recommendations.

But the BRAC experience shows that military base closures can be done in a fair, open and compassionate manner, and the communities affected can recover economically.

I congratulate this Subcommittee and the Administration for turning to the problem of getting rid of excess federal civilian infrastructure. I hope my testimony this afternoon will contribute to the success of this effort.