

MULTIMEDIA REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of David S. Sorenson, *Shutting Down the Cold War: The Politics of Military Base Closure* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

The end of the Cold War has precipitated dramatic cuts to defence budgets in the United States, leaving politicians and military officials scrambling to reassess the balancing of scarce resources and military effectiveness and efficiency. The closure and/or reduction of bases is a means of decreasing an expensive and often redundant inventory of properties amassed over the last century or more. During the last decade, the Base Realignment and Closure Commissions (BRACCs) voted to close 330 military installations in the United States, with an additional 173 slated for realignment. Hundreds of communities were affected, hundreds of thousands of jobs lost, and billions of dollars spent on cleaning up and closing the bases. This politically contentious context is what attracted Sorenson to the topic, and he sets out to assess the base closure process within the frameworks of congressional behaviour and bureaucratic-politics theory.

The author begins by conceptualizing base-closure decision-making in terms of the variety of military bases, their military value, and their importance to surrounding communities. He then discusses the politics of base-closure in its many facets, exploring the socio-economic, environmental and military impacts of downsizing, as well as the implications of base conversion for host communities. Sorenson assesses the BRACC rounds of 1991, 1993 and 1995 respectively, examining the interplay of actors in the base-closure selection, implementation, and conversion stages. He concludes that, while the three rounds were generally successful in achieving results, "politics ultimately interfered with the rational process that the Base Realignment and Closure Commission epitomized," and fewer bases were closed than the services had recommended (243). This does not trouble the author. Compromise, as a fundamental tenet of American democracy, was not only present but was key to the success of the entire base-closure effort.

While this book is an important and groundbreaking study in a subject area that tends to fall into the abyss between political and national security studies, *Shutting Down the Cold War* has its shortcomings. There is a general lack of context in which the BRAC process was introduced. A first round of BRACC was created and implemented by Congress in 1988 and based its report solely on Department of Defense information (with no provision for political or public input). Political scientist Lilly Goren demonstrated in her 1998 dissertation that the perceived shortcomings in this early round led to the more sophisticated versions of the Commission that reported in 1991, 1993 and 1995. A chapter on the pre-1990 base-closure process would have put the latter case studies in better context. Furthermore, many of the case studies are superficial. The broad comparative framework that Sorenson employed meant that little space could be devoted

to the details of each case study. Critical studies of individual cases might have helped to bring Sorenson's insights into better focus.

Shutting Down the Cold War makes an important contribution to our understanding of the national and localized issues concomitant with base-closures. The issues involved should interest not only national security scholars and political scientists, but also military historians and policy-makers. A similar study of base closures in Canada would serve as a useful comparison and illuminate the very different decision-making processes used to shut down bases north of the 49th parallel.

P. Whitney Lackenbauer