

May 25, 2005 - Slaughter Addresses BRAC Process and Assault on Women in Uniform

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Ranking Democrat Addresses Important Issues in Defense Authorization Bill

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Ranking Member of the House Committee on Rules, today led debate on the rule concerning the Defense Authorization Bill delivering the following remarks focusing attention on the BRAC process and the Republican Majority's attempt to limit the service of women in uniform:

Rep. Slaughter's Comments:

I thank the gentleman from Oklahoma, Mr. Cole for yielding me the customary 30 minutes and yield myself such time as I may consume and I ask unanimous consent to revise and extend my remarks.

We find ourselves here today debating the rule for next year's Defense Authorization Bill...but while we should be discussing ways to better support our hard working men and women in uniform, we find ourselves revisiting a debate I'd assumed we settled years ago.

Buried within H.R. 1815 is Section 574, a provision that would severely limit the participation of women in our military. To say that I am disappointed would be an understatement of enormous proportions.

Some will say that Section 574 merely codifies existing military policy...but if this provision is passed, we will be sending an entirely different message...not just to the brave women currently serving our nation throughout the world but also to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice...those who have been wounded or even killed. We will be telling them and indeed their families, "We have seen you at work, defending freedom and liberty here at home and abroad...and you aren't good enough." I cannot think of a more disgusting message to be sending our troops, especially in a time of war.

The idea that these women are unfit to serve is misogynistic. Under existing policy, women have served equally alongside their male counterparts with distinction and honor for years. Section 574 not only limits the future role of women in the military, it erases years of progress they've made in the armed services.

This year, the Military Personnel Subcommittee hasn't held hearings, commissioned studies or released reports on this important issue...in fact, we haven't seen a shred of evidence that a problem even exists with the integration of women in the armed forces...yet the Republican Leadership, against the advice of our military leaders, has once again decided to bend the process of government to their political will and force this issue upon America, without research, without fact, without debate, and without the benefit of the Democratic process.

In fact, Democrats in the Armed Services Committee had less than one night to review this 576 page defense authorization bill before voting on it. And I might add that this bill is perhaps the most important piece of legislation that committee will consider during the entire 109th Congress.

An issue of such gravity and import, as the future role of women in our military, deserves the full and undivided attention of the Armed Services Committee. It deserves the benefit of the complete oversight process, and a careful, thoughtful discussion and debate...All of which were sadly disregarded in this instance..

We are in the middle of a war... in Iraq and on terror. Now is not the time to be telling more than 20,000 women that we don't not value their service...especially when you consider that we are having serious problems meeting our recruitment goals. What woman is going to join a Military that treats them as if they are second class citizens not worthy of respect and dignity?

Last night in the Rules Committee we watched as the coalition of members who stand rightly beside our women in uniform were slapped down on a party line vote by the Republican Majority in their attempts to approve the Skelton/Snyder Amendment which would remove this ill-conceived provision from the bill. They did not stand alone...both the Secretary of the Army and the Army Vice Chief of Staff wrote the Armed Services committee voicing their strong opposition to this provision. Because of the Republican Majority's actions, there will be no debate. There will be no discussion.

And likewise, we can have no real discussion on the future of America's defense without talking about the Base Realignment and Closure Process.

I share the concerns of many experts and many of my colleagues across the political spectrum when I say that...We are a nation at war...Now is not the time to be closing American military bases.

Many experts are also concerned that we are over consolidating our resources in too few locations...especially when the greatest threat to our security comes, not from a massive invasion, but from a sneak attack by a terrorist organization on a target of opportunity.

I mean, didn't we learn after Pearl Harbor not to put everything in one place? Doesn't it make more sense to have our resources strategically placed across the country?

Moreover, as record numbers of guard and reserve troops are dying in combat defending this country, the Defense Secretary's proposed BRAC list would ground a third of the nation's Air National Guard and Reserve units, and shutter hundreds of other armories and readiness centers across the country.

Many local leaders and homeland security specialists, including the National Guard Association of the United States, has said that the consolidation would hamper state responses to local emergencies and domestic terrorist threats.

Unfortunately, the DOD did not adequately take into account a military installation's value to homeland security when developing their criteria. For example, the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station has been recommended for closure despite the fact that it is the closest base to 3 major U.S. cities and the two largest cities in Canada.

The Guard and Reserves who train there assist the Department of Homeland Security in interrogating suspicious individuals detained at the northern border.

Yet the Air Force proposes to reduce the Air Mobility Command by 54 percent in the Northeast, incapacitating homeland defense in a region which comprises 20 percent of the U.S. population.

I understand this is also a problem for other major cities and population centers around the country. That is why I offered an amendment last night in rules that would have required the BRAC Commission to evaluate bases for their homeland security value.

My colleagues won't have the opportunity to consider that Amendment here on the floor today, because it was defeated on a party line vote.

All of us here know that recruitment is another major issue we are facing with our military today. We have a recruitment crisis here in America and an Armed Forces already stretched too thin. But the DoD wants to close bases that regularly exceed their recruitment goals for the guard and military reserves, like the one in Niagara Falls.

We don't know what will happen to the large guard and reserve units who serve at bases recommended for closure. We know exactly where their equipment is headed, but even the Pentagon admits it doesn't know what is going to happen to our most valuable military assets stationed at these bases, our people.

But perhaps what is most troubling about the BRAC list that was submitted to the Commission is that according to an Air Force BRAC spokesman, the extensive criteria used to evaluate the strategic military value of each base was not even adhered to by the Pentagon when compiling their closure list.

Instead, the Base Closure Executive Group used their "collective judgment" to recommend closure for bases that had higher rankings than many others which were kept off the list.

Now, I don't know what "collective judgment" is supposed to mean exactly , but I know that in Niagara, thousands of people are at risk of losing their jobs, and a base that is highly ranked at performing the duties it was asked to undertake, a base situated on our northern border, a base that has some of the highest recruitment levels in the country and regularly performs duties that are critical to homeland security...is at risk of being closed, and not because of its scoring, but because of the "collective judgment" of a few individuals at the pentagon.

This is unacceptable to me, and it should be unacceptable to this body.

This BRAC constitutes a complete reorganization of our military resources during a time of war. It will do untold damage to our National Guard and military reserves and does not even consider the homeland security role each of these bases plays in this age of terrorism.

But there are many concerns my colleagues and I have about the Pentagon and about this bill which will not be considered today. Of the 86 amendments offered in Rules Committee to make this legislation better, only 29 we made in order. That's just 33%. It is my hope that the Republican Majority will relent in the future and give each and every member of a Congress the opportunity to do the job we were elected to do... only through an open rule can we all have the ability to debate, amend and vote on these crucial issues that come before us in this House.