

## A Spending Commission Modeled on BRAC

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**Spending is at an all time high, and cutting it is nearly impossible because every federal program has a constituency that lobbies hard to keep it alive.** Our nation faced a similar situation of record deficits after the Cold War. At that time, the obvious target was to close down surplus military bases. However, because Congress had the authority and responsibility of closing these bases, each Member of Congress wanted their district to be exempt from any closure. It wasn't until the Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) was created that underutilized military bases were closed successfully, saving the federal government billions annually. A similar approach can be applied to examining federal programs and eliminating inefficiencies, cutting overall spending.

### Why was BRAC successful?

- When members of Congress approved BRAC, they were voting for a plan that was *guaranteed* to cut some bases (short of a resolution of disapproval). While Members didn't know which bases would be selected for closure, most Members calculated a low risk to their base. Members of Congress could vote in favor of cutting spending, which was politically popular, while avoiding having to vote to cut his or her district's or state's base.
- BRAC was an *independent* commission, composed of *independent* experts with no political careers to protect. Members of the commission were not tasked with reaching an equitable solution. Their role was to review bases and choose which ones to close based solely on military need. Fairness, equity, or other political considerations subject to deal making did not enter into their calculation.
- Congress effectively tied its own hands so that the majority position could triumph. The only way a particular base on the BRAC Commission's list of closures could be spared would be for Congress to vote to spare *every* base on the list, and thus forgo the desired cost cutting. Members without a base on the list would have no incentive to take action to reject the list, because cutting spending was politically popular. Members with a base on the list are given political cover; they can be seen by their constituencies as doing everything in their power to avoid the closure. Affected Members are given an opportunity to be seen by their constituencies as champions, while all other Members only need to take no action.

### How Can the Lessons of BRAC be applied to Spending?

- Congress can create an *independent* expert commission to evaluate spending on federal programs. Using objective criteria, Congress can recommend specific programs be cut or reformed, unless they pass a joint resolution of disapproval. BRAC employed a blue ribbon panel of independent experts with no vested interests, i.e., no sitting members of Congress or administration officials. A new spending commission that embodies the lessons of BRAC could be composed of disinterested and respected public citizens and experts, co-chaired by retired Supreme Court Justices from each party, for example.

- The commission could be given a “guiding basis” for its review of programs. President Obama has promised on many occasions to “examin[e] every program, every entitlement, every dollar of government spending and [ask] ourselves: Is this program really essential? Are taxpayers getting their money's worth? Can we accomplish our goals more efficiently or effectively some other way?” Charging a commission with cutting programs that are empirically inefficient or wasteful would hold him accountable to keeping this promise.
- The commission could have a mechanism by which their recommendations are operative unless Congress takes action to undo them. The BRAC approach did not require members of Congress to vote on closing specific bases, but instead allowed them to simply vote on the idea of a commission to close bases and then take no action to see the selected bases closed. Existing spending commission proposals would require Members to ultimately vote on a bill that lists the programs to be cut or reformed, putting Members of Congress in a position where they can be seen by their constituencies—both literal district constituencies and metaphorical constituencies that include the special interests from which they draw support—as voting for or against specific named programs. In this type of situation, Members of Congress would no longer be seen as voting simply to cut waste and inefficiency, they would be seen as cutting specific programs with strong special interests behind them.
- What about entitlement spending? It is not likely that a BRAC-style commission could be used to reform entitlement spending. These programs are so large, so entrenched, and command such a strong lobby that it is difficult to see how Congress would ever cede decisions over them to an independent body. A commission like BRAC would be better suited to tackle discretionary spending because a spending commission would review and make recommendations about closing federal programs, which are distinct units just as military bases are distinct units. Entitlement reform does not easily lend itself to empirical measurement devoid of politics.
- What about the commission’s mission? It’s important that a spending commission seeks to find and eliminate inefficiencies and waste as the President has sought to do, not simply try and reconcile the government’s long-term fiscal imbalance. The focus must be kept on reducing government spending. Under the latter charge, it is entirely possible that a spending commission composed almost entirely of the very same Members of Congress that helped get us to our present record deficits would propose to do nothing about out-of-control spending except further enable it, and increase taxes to pay for it.

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[“Some Open Government Advocates Question Administration’s Transparency Commitment.”](#) *Government Executive.com*, April 10, 2009.

[“Making Stimulus Data Transparent.”](#) *NPR*, April 20, 2009.

## ABOUT JERRY BRITO



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