

When the Pentagon Walks Away



Don Logan Charles/The New York Times

By SEYMOUR MELMAN

ON April 12, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney sent a shock wave through hundreds of American communities. He announced the closing of 31 major and 12 minor military bases and the "realignment" of 28 others. As a military budget reduction program proceeds, more of the nation's 889 bases will be vulnerable to closings.

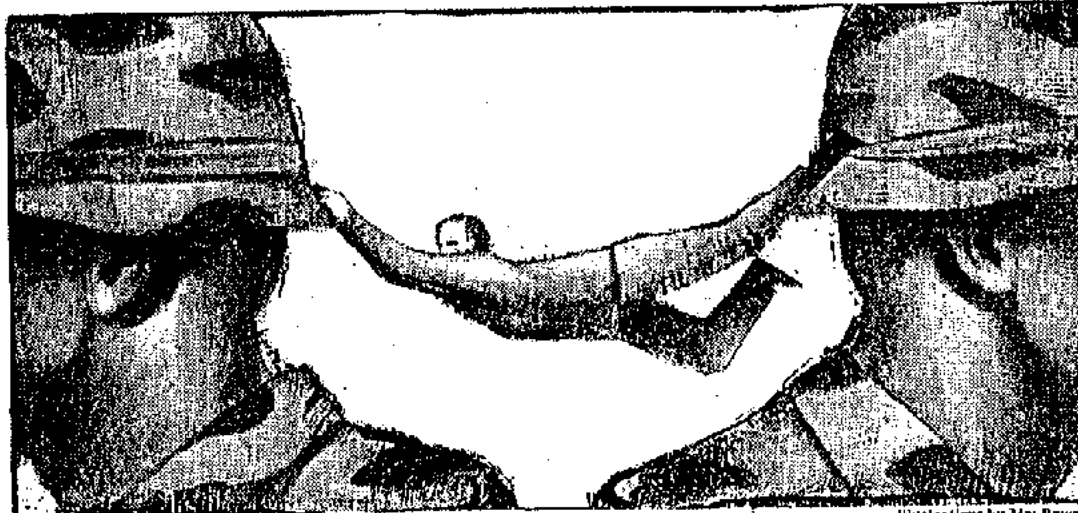
The Government has put the economic future of

workers at these bases — and in surrounding communities — needlessly in jeopardy. Jobs and incomes for whole communities could have been reasonably assured by better planning. But this is contrary to Pentagon doctrine. Since World War II, the Department of Defense has tried to keep people on military bases and in nearby communities dependent on the military, both economically and politically. This gave the Pentagon a coast-to-coast network to lobby mayors, chambers of commerce, bankers and members of Congress to maintain military bases and their budgets.

Every proposal requiring advance planning to convert defense-dependent operations or communities to civilian uses — like Representative Ted Weiss's H.R. 441 — has been opposed by the Pentagon and the White House. They slight the inevitable economic disruption and personal upheavals that are a standard risk of Pentagon presence.

But converting military bases to civilian use is a way to assure an economic future for those de-

Seymour Melman is professor emeritus of industrial engineering at Columbia University and chairman of the National Commission for Economic Conversion and Disarmament.



Illustrations by Tim Bower

Don't abandon bases, convert them for civilians and local economies.

pendent on the military. A so-called alternative-use plan must be crafted that involves making an inventory of the material and human resources on the bases — everything from the number of maintenance shops to an assessment of the skills of the civilian employees. A full year — at least — would be required to prepare an inventory of available facilities and to draft a good alternative-use plan. Clearly it is too late for the bases already targeted for closure, but the others would be wise to contact regional planners and get started.

The Pentagon — with the tacit approval of Congress — has opposed such advance conversion planning. It has preferred to keep local communities on its political-economic leash until the announcement of a base closing. The Pentagon prefers what it calls "adjustment" — encouraging local communities to undertake planning *after* the base closing has been announced and is being carried out. Then, too late, the Pentagon makes information available about possible assistance to individuals, like unemployment insurance and retraining programs.

But that leaves base employees and communities vulnerable; people start moving away, property values begin to fall. As plans for base conversions are researched, designed and put in motion — which could take several years — there is disruption, uncertainty, unemployment.

More than 800 defense-based communities are still in place in this country and are vulnerable to planned military budget cuts. Decent regard for the needs of these communities and the wider task of rebuilding American industry and infrastructure are served by advance conversion planning to free bases, laboratories and factories for civilian uses. Economic and political confidence in demilitarization requires advance alternative-use plans. If the Weiss bill were law today, base closings would translate into economic opportunities. ■