

The Last Battle for Fort McClellan
An Examination of Glen Browder's Experience in Base Closure Politics

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"I didn't go to Washington to fight the Battle of Fort McClellan,"¹ former U.S. Rep. Glen Browder reflected in 2005, ten years after he had lost the battle to keep the base in his home district open. Browder, in fact, fought to save the fort four times during his seven years in Congress, but the final battle was lost before the public knew it had begun.

Browder was the Washington point man in a broad local effort which began months before the Defense Department released its 1995 base-closings list. He knew from the beginning that the effort had little chance of success but that the last battle for Fort McClellan was one he had to lead. Even as he prepared his arguments and lined up allies in Washington, he counseled the folks back home to prepare for life without the fort. Ultimately, his struggle to save the doomed base delayed Browder's entry into the 1996 race for a seat in the U.S. Senate, a major factor in his loss of the Democratic nomination for the seat.

BRAC Background

In the late 1980s, the U.S. Defense Department acknowledged that it had far more military bases than it needed. It had been unable to close any bases for a decade because of political and environmental restrictions in the 1977 law governing base closings.² The end of the Cold War and a declining national economy dictated that the Department of Defense close a large number of bases as a means of reducing long-term defense spending,³ so in 1988 Congress passed a law establishing a commission whose 12 members would be appointed by the secretary of defense and who would report to him. The defense secretary would approve the commission's recommendations and forward them to Congress, which could only accept or reject the list in its entirety. This first Base

Closure and Realignment Commission⁴ recommended closing 86 bases. The commission conducted its investigations in secret, and members of Congress from affected states complained that the commission refused to provide adequate substantiation for its recommendations.⁵ The General Accounting Office in a 1989 audit of the commission's findings noted several errors in the commission's analysis and recommended procedural changes for the next BRAC round.⁶

Early Skirmishes

When in January 1990 Defense Secretary Dick Cheney released a BRAC list that included Fort McClellan, Alabama, first-term Congressman Glen Browder from Alabama's Third District didn't know how much he could do to save the base in his district, but he knew he had to do something. The fort employed more than 8,000 people, half of them civilian. If it closed, close to 20 percent of the local workforce would lose their jobs. "I remember sitting down in my office, knowing that there was a tremendous mountain ahead that had to be climbed," he recalled in a 1990 newspaper interview.⁷

Browder lacked military credentials and had not come to Congress with the intention of becoming a defense expert, but that was about to change. He had finagled a seat on the House Armed Services Committee the previous November, and after Cheney announced the BRAC list, Browder made defense issues his top priority. He asked House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin for an appointment to the military installations subcommittee and compared notes with other members of Congress who had bases on the list. He found that they all shared a sense that the choice of bases

to be closed was arbitrary, and he realized that the only way he could hope to make the case for Fort McClellan was to get the process changed.

Browder organized 20 of these disgruntled House members into a coalition, the Fairness Network, which began pushing to reform the base-closure law.⁸ Browder and Aspin wrote new legislation which would change the structure of the commission to a maximum of eight members appointed by the president and would prescribe objective guidelines for evaluating bases to be closed or realigned. Browder served on the House-Senate conference committee that ironed out the final bill President George H.W. Bush signed into law in November 1990. The new law authorized three BRAC rounds two years apart as a way of assessing bases' military value and depoliticizing the base-reduction process. It replaced the existing BRAC process and stopped all action on Cheney's recommendations. But even as the local press hailed Browder's victory in his first effort to save Fort McClellan, he warned that the celebration might be short-lived. "There is no way we can guarantee 100 percent protection for Fort McClellan or any other bases in the country against future defense adjustments," Browder said. "But we are mandating that if Fort McClellan reappears on next year's new base-closure candidates list, then any final decision must be based on a fair and open process."⁹

The fort did appear on the 1991 list Cheney recommended for closing, but the seven-member commission rejected the recommendation 5-2. Among Fort McClellan's missions were the Army's Chemical School and its Chemical Decontamination Training Facility (commonly abbreviated as CDTF), the only school that used live nerve agent to train soldiers to defend against a chemical attack. Mindful of the concern that chemical weapons might have been used against American soldiers in the Persian Gulf War, the

commissioners maintained the Army needed the live nerve agent training performed only at Fort McClellan. No other community had agreed to allow live-agent training, and the commission removed Fort McClellan from the closure list. Again the local community cheered Browder for saving the fort, even as one commissioner noted that the Army could "try again in two years."¹⁰

The Army sought to close only two major bases in 1993, and Fort McClellan was one of them. Ironically, the new defense secretary was Les Aspin, Browder's Armed Services Committee colleague who had sponsored the BRAC-enabling legislation. Aspin's recommendation to the commission noted that Fort McClellan had "the least amount of facilities and smallest population" of any of the Army's individual training schools and was ranked ninth of 13 installations in its category.¹¹ Live-agent training was still a consideration, and the Army proposed to keep the CDTF open at Fort McClellan but move all other operations to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

Browder's staff compiled data showing the cost savings of moving Fort McClellan's other missions would be eroded by additional expenses required to maintain the CDTF as a stand-alone operation. The commissioners publicly agreed that live-agent training should not be separated from the Chemical School and voted 6-1 to remove Fort McClellan from the closure list.

Economics, however, was a minor factor in the decision to keep McClellan open in 1993, Browder said in a 2005 interview. At the time of the BRAC hearings, Browder was in his second year as chairman of a two-year special House inquiry into the international chemical and biological weapons threat. He had uncovered information that would provide a strong reason for keeping Fort McClellan open but was too sensitive for

public disclosure. In secret testimony in a "bug-free room," he revealed that Russia was conducting own live-agent training and was losing about 100 people a year. So Fort McClellan no longer had the world's only live-agent training facility, but, Browder said, "There was no facility in the world comparable to the CDTF at Fort McClellan for quality and safety of training."¹² Browder said that it was his secret testimony only two years after the end of the cold war that persuaded the commission to keep McClellan open at least two more years.

The GAO report on the Army's 1993 evaluations, however, provided guidance on how to succeed in closing the base in the next round. The GAO was pushing the Defense Department to find ways to consolidate similar missions and saw such an opportunity in moving three of Fort McClellan's training missions (Chemical School, CDTF and Military Police School) to Fort Leonard Wood, where the Army's Engineers School was located.¹³ In its next attempt to close Fort McClellan, the Army would emphasize the efficiency gained from consolidating these missions.¹⁴

The Final Battle

In 1995, Congress was in a budget-cutting frenzy. The House of Representatives was implementing its Contract With America, which called for both a tax cut and a plan to balance the budget. Deficit spending had become routine, and the national debt approached \$5 trillion. With the Cold War over, budget cutters looked hungrily at the bloated Defense appropriation, dreaming of the Peace Dividend deep cuts could bring. In that context, Secretary of Defense William Perry directed a "deep BRAC," intended to close many more bases in all services to reduce total capacity at least 15 percent.¹⁵

The military used the same criteria for evaluating bases as it had in the two previous rounds: military value, return on investment and impacts on the existing and receiving communities. Incorporating criticisms from the GAO audits of the two previous rounds and under intense pressure to present recommendations that would be upheld by the commission, the Army had honed its procedures for arriving at objective evaluations.¹⁶

Browder was now the indisputable congressional authority on chemical and biological warfare.¹⁷ He used the full weight of this reputation to try to convince Army, BRAC and Clinton administration decision-makers that Fort McClellan was critical to national security. Browder hoped that growing concern about international terrorism would compound the credence of his arguments — the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the release of Sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo subway system both happened within a month of the BRAC list announcement.

The points in favor of keeping Fort McClellan open were essentially the same in 1995 as in 1993 and 1991:

- Moving the CDTF would detract from the nation's readiness to combat a chemical or biological attack because live-agent training would halt for the seven to ten years required to duplicate the facility elsewhere. Either duplicating it or maintaining it as a stand-alone facility at Fort McClellan would eliminate much of the cost savings gained by closing the base.
- Alabama environmental permits for live-agent training already were in place; other states were unlikely to grant such permits. The 1993 BRAC commission had instructed the Army to secure the necessary permits before attempting to move either the Chemical School or the CDTF again.

- The CDTF was crucial in U.S. compliance with the international Chemical Weapons Convention, which had been signed in 1993. Fort McClellan had the only facility at which international inspectors could receive live-agent training. Closing the facility would signal to other countries that the United States was not serious about compliance.
- Support from Fort McClellan was specified in the state environmental permits for chemical weapons disposal at Anniston Army Depot, where some 4.5 million pounds of munitions containing Sarin, VX nerve agent and mustard agent awaited construction of an incineration facility to destroy them. Withdrawing McClellan's support would jeopardize the incineration permits and delay destruction of the weapons, extending the danger to the local populace and reneging on the Chemical Weapons Convention requirement to destroy chemical weapons stockpiles by 2007.¹⁸

The Army, however, had learned to counter all the arguments for keeping Fort McClellan open. Army officials made a secret deal with Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan in mid-February 1995 to expedite environmental permits for live-agent training.¹⁹ The Army recommended moving the CDTF with the Chemical School to Fort Leonard Wood, saying the expense was reasonable. And it contended that the promised emergency support for Anniston Army Depot could come from other Defense Department resources.²⁰

As in 1993, Browder had early indications that Fort McClellan would be on the Army's closure list. His staff had been compiling data and preparing counterarguments for more than a year before the list was announced on February 28. His public statements

in the days leading up to the announcement were resolute. Responding to a list leaked to the New York Times in late February, he conceded to the *Anniston Star* that the list was "probably authentic" and that getting Fort McClellan removed would be "a long shot."²¹ On the same day, he told the *Birmingham News* that he wouldn't be surprised if Fort McClellan were not on the final list, but that Anniston would survive even if the base closed. "At this point, we just have to be patient," he said. "We're veterans and we know the process."²² The morning before Perry sent his list to the commission, Browder told the *Birmingham News* that if the base were on the list, "We'll roll up our sleeves and take our case back to the base closure commission."²³

When it became clear that the Army would be willing to bear the expense of duplicating the CDTF and could get the necessary permits, Browder aggressively shifted his focus to security issues surrounding Anniston Army Depot. After Perry announced his recommendations, Browder published a six-page statement in the *Anniston Star* in which he vowed he would do "everything in [his] power" to block construction of the incinerator at the depot. He told the newspaper that saving the fort was his first priority but failing that, he would oppose the incineration permits, ask the Senate to put off ratification of the Chemical Weapons Convention and seek to force the Army to move the depot's stockpile to Missouri.²⁴ Most people the newspaper interviewed thought Browder was bluffing, particularly about moving the stockpile, and years later he admitted that he was.²⁵ However, in the heat of battle, he was willing to carry his bluff onto the floor of the House of Representatives. On March 3, he introduced a bill that would repeal the prohibition against transporting chemical weapons across state lines and would require the Army to move the Anniston stockpile with Fort McClellan. (The bill later died in

committee because it was "too controversial,"²⁶ and Browder's vow to block the permits would come back to hurt him.)

Browder was eloquent in his outrage at the treatment his home district was receiving at the hands of the Army. "For more than 40 years, the Pentagon has dumped its chemical garbage on Alabama, and Fort McClellan promised to be our 'rescue squad' in case there was any problem," he said. "Now they want to shut down the rescue squad and strike a match to that stockpile."²⁷ In a *Jacksonville News* article, he accused the Defense Department of looking for loopholes to get out of its responsibility to provide emergency support for the Depot, and asserted, "It's not their decision to make. The decision is going to be made by the state of Alabama, the Alabama Department of Environmental Management. Not by the Pentagon." Moving the stockpile, he said, was no more dangerous than removing the safeguards that Fort McClellan provided.²⁸

For the next three months, Browder met often with the local support team and with the BRAC commissioners. Hopes rose and fell with each news report. But when the BRAC commission met in late June to vote on Fort McClellan, the news was the worst possible.

The eight commissioners divided evenly on whether to close the base, and a tie went to the Army. What was worse, two of the commissioners had personal connections to Missouri and did not recuse themselves; both voted to close Fort McClellan.²⁹ The commissioners did take into account the need to maintain live-agent training, so they changed one aspect of the Army's recommendation — they would keep the CDTF open at Fort McClellan until the new facility was operational in Missouri, a decision that would prolong the closing process and delay redevelopment in Alabama.³⁰ The

commission said in its report to President Bill Clinton that the Army would "use the best available assets to provide the necessary support to Anniston's demilitarization mission,"³¹ but did not specify what those assets were. Its recommendation was that the Army retain "minimal essential facilities" to meet its obligation for emergency support for Anniston Army Depot."³²

At this point, the only thing that could save Fort McClellan was the personal intercession of President Clinton. Browder appealed to the president but conceded that removing bases from the list would be politically risky for Clinton. He told his constituents that Anniston must "plan for a future of uncertainty with the eventual closure of Fort McClellan as a likely possibility."³³ As expected, Clinton did not intervene during the two weeks before the commission sent him its recommendations. He approved the list and sent it to Congress, which also approved it. Fort McClellan was scheduled to close in 1999 at an estimated cost to the Army of \$231 million and an annual savings of \$40.6 million.³⁴ The estimated cost to the local community was \$600 million a year,³⁵ the largest impact of any closure in the 1995 BRAC.³⁶

In the following months, Browder was more involved than he wanted to be in the fractious debate over how to start the redevelopment process. As various organizations vied for standing as the official agency to receive redevelopment grants, Browder worried that the community's efforts were "inadequately focused, overly fragmented and lack[ed] sufficient public support."³⁷ He recognized that the community sorely needed his coalition-building skills to get the development process moving in the right direction, but he also knew that if he were going to run for the Senate in 1996 he needed to start right away to build statewide name recognition and, just as important, a campaign fund.

The Senate Race

Browder had decided to run for the Senate early in the year when Alabama Senator Howell Heflin announced he would retire at the end of his term. In May, Browder set up an exploratory committee to assess whether a Democrat could win and gave up the chair of the budget committee of the Blue Dog Coalition, a group of moderate House Democrats he had helped found only months before, to allow himself time to campaign "and, frankly, to raise money."³⁸ Alabama voters were moving to the right, and Browder's polling data showed that he was the only one among the likely Democratic candidates who could win the seat. While he was fighting to save Fort McClellan, however, he kept campaign activities on hold. He incorporated his campaign in August but continued to delay announcing his candidacy until late January 1996. An *Anniston Star* article the day after Browder's announcement projected that this would be an expensive race and noted that his two major opponents in the June Democratic primary already had a considerable head start in fund raising.³⁹

Browder's delay in entering the Senate race benefited his opponents beyond just fund raising. It gave them time to campaign inside the state while Browder was in Washington, and it allowed Browder's critics at home to make unanswered attacks on his Senate aspirations. One such attack came in the form of a letter to the editor of the *Birmingham Post-Herald* from Anniston politico Ted McLaughlin, who had lost to Browder in more than one campaign. McLaughlin's history with Browder was not explained, and his Anniston location lent credibility to his complaint that Browder was "in no position" to criticize the Army for its determination to close Fort McClellan

because he had not served in combat. McLaughlin called Browder's Senate bid — which would not be announced for another seven months — "a slap in the face to the tens of thousands who have served and continue to serve their country."⁴⁰ Incineration opponents also complained in the press that Browder had betrayed a promise when he backed down from his threat to block the permits for the depot incinerator if the fort closed. The arguments over incineration had been going on for years, and letters to the *Anniston Star* from incineration opponents^{41, 42, 43} probably did not hurt Browder much at home, but an article in the state's largest newspaper, the *Birmingham News*, likely had more far-reaching impact. In the article, Rufus Kinney, a very vocal incineration opponent, accused Browder of setting the stage for Anniston to become a regional incineration facility for chemical weapons from other parts of the country. "There's no question in anybody's mind that this [incinerator] will be the last one built, and it will be the eastern site. Browder knows that better than anybody. He has sold us down the river, and he is counting on the passivity of the people to get away with it," Kinney said.⁴⁴

After Browder officially entered the race, he made up some of the distance between himself and the Democratic front-runner, state Senator Roger Bedford. An independent poll in April showed that Browder now led all Democratic candidates in positive name recognition and led Bedford by nine percentage points among likely voters in the Democratic primary.⁴⁵ However, he still lagged far behind in campaign funds, and his opponent had the support of the state's powerful Trial Lawyers Association and the largest of the African-American political groups. Browder finished second behind Bedford in the primary and lost the nomination in the runoff, having been outspent in the campaign four to one.

Conclusion

The necessary but ultimately unsuccessful battle to save Fort McClellan distracted Browder from other priorities, including his Senate campaign, and ultimately it may have cost him the Democratic nomination for the seat. Browder delayed announcing his intention to run for the Senate until four months before the primary, despite several months of rampant speculation that he would run. He had little choice: Campaigning for the Senate while the fort's fate was being contested would have given his opponents the opportunity to accuse him of neglecting his constituency for his own political gain. During most of 1995, Browder could not spend as much time in Alabama as his opponents, and the time he did spend in the state had to be devoted to matters surrounding the fort closing. Even after the decision to close the fort was sealed, Browder felt he needed to devote a large portion of his time and attention to working with the redevelopment team to coordinate a unified effort and minimize internal conflict.

Delaying opening his campaign gave Browder's opponents a head start of many months for both campaigning and fund raising. Bedford, who defeated Browder in the primary runoff, and Alabama's Republican Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who went on to win the Senate seat — were in the state continuously, had no stake in the BRAC decisions, and were able to take full advantage of their positions in state government to build name recognition and to raise funds for their campaigns.

Looking back on the last battle for Fort McClellan in a 2005 interview, Browder did not fault the process he had helped to author. He compared the BRAC process to instant replay in football: The Defense Department made the calls as it saw them, and the

commission reviewed whether the calls were correct. "It's the best process we could come up with," he said. "The courts don't guarantee justice, just a chance to be heard."⁴⁶

Any remaining bitterness he felt about the decision to close Fort McClellan stemmed from the protracted efforts to close the base, despite his own initial success in fighting those efforts. "My resentment against the Army," he said, "is they wouldn't just shoot us the first time and get it over with."

Endnotes

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- ¹ Glen Browder, interviewed by Geni Certain, Jacksonville, Alabama, March 26, 2005.
- ² The Defense Secretary's Commission on Base Realignment and Closure, *Base Realignments and Closures: Report of the Defense Secretary's Commission* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1988), 6.
- ³ Col. Stephen Schwalbe, USAF, "An Exposé on Base Realignment and Closure Commissions," *Chronicles Online Journal*, June 10, 2003: 1
<http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/cc/schwalbe.html> (accessed December 4, 2005).
- ⁴ The acronym for this and succeeding commissions is BRAC, although the official name of the commission is the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission. The acronym is used for the commission and for the base-closure process.
- ⁵ Schwalbe, 5.
- ⁶ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Military Bases: An Analysis of the Commission's Realignment and Closure Recommendations* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, November 1989), 3.
- ⁷ Robert B. McNeil, "Browder: Is it skill or luck?" *Anniston Star*, October 7, 1990.
- ⁸ Glen Browder, interviewed by Geni Certain, Jacksonville, Ala., September 26, 2005.
- ⁹ Mike Stedham and Craig Whitlock, "For now a reprieve," *Anniston Star*, October 18, 1990, sec. A, p. 1.
- ¹⁰ "19 minutes of TV drama," *Anniston Star*, July 1, 1991, sec. A, p. 1.
- ¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *1993 Defense Base Closures and Realignments* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, March 12, 1993) 24.
- ¹² Glen Browder, interviewed by Geni Certain, Jacksonville, Alabama, December 20, 2005.
- ¹³ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Military Bases: Analysis of DOD's Recommendations and Selection Process for Closures and Realignments* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, April 1993), 68.
- ¹⁴ Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, Report to the President (Washington, D.C.: GPO, July 1, 1995) Chapter 1, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ Maj. Gen. John P. Herrling, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, Memorandum for Commanders, TRADOC Installations, "Preparation for Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) 95" (Fort Monroe, Virginia: Department of the Army, February 1994) 1. The Browder Collection.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Glen Browder, *Countering the Chemical and Biological Weapons Threat in the Post-Soviet World*, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services (Washington, D.C.: GPO, February 23, 1993).
- ¹⁸ Glen Browder, letter to Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, March 9, 1993.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Hargrove and Peter Copeland, "Deal imperils McClellan," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, February 28, 1995. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.
- ²⁰ BRAC 1995, Chapter 1, p. 2.
- ²¹ Eric Larson, "Browder unready to sound alarm just yet," *Anniston Star*, February 26, 1995, sec. A, p. 1.
- ²² Rose Livingston and Michael Brumas, "McClellan may face military ax once again," *Birmingham News*, February 26, 1995, sec. A, p. 1.
- ²³ Michael Brumas, "Fight for McClellan on again," *Birmingham News*, February 28, 1995, sec. A, p. 1.
- ²⁴ Eric Larson, "The battle is joined; Browder vows: No fort, no incinerator," *Anniston Star*, March 1, 1995, sec. A, p. 1.
- ²⁵ Browder interview, September 2005.
- ²⁶ Rebecca Wiener, "Cash cutoff for chemical weapons dies in committee," States News Service, *Anniston Star*, May 5, 1995. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.
- ²⁷ Eric Larson, "Browder makes good on threat," *Anniston Star*, March 3, 1995, sec. A, p. 1.
- ²⁸ "Browder restates pledge to link chemical missions at AAD, McClellan," *Jacksonville News*, March 8, 1995, p. 1.
- ²⁹ Eric Larson, "Money, politics beat fort arguments," *Anniston Star*, June 29, 1995, sec. A, p. 1.

³⁰ Thomas Hargrove, "McClellan closure could be years in making," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, June 26, 1995. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.

³¹ BRAC 1995, Chapter 1, p. 1.

³² BRAC 1995, Chapter 1, p. 2.

³³ Stephanie Desmon, "Won't give up on fort; Browder plans final effort for McClellan," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, June 27, 1995. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.

³⁴ BRAC 1995, Chapter 1, p. 1.

³⁵ Larson, June 29, 1995.

³⁶ BRAC 1995, Chapter 1, p. 2.

³⁷ Glen Browder, "What should we do after BRAC decision?" *Anniston Star*, July 25, 1995. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.

³⁸ Browder interview, March 2005.

³⁹ Frederick Burger, "Battle royale [sic] for Senate race begins," *Anniston Star*, January 27, 1996, sec. A, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Ted McLaughlin, letter to the editor, *Birmingham Post-Herald*, May 25, 1995. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.

⁴¹ Marie Welch, letter to the editor, *Anniston Star*, September 28, 1996. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.

⁴² Brenda Lindell, letter to the editor, *Anniston Star*, September 29, 1995. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.

⁴³ Dr. S. Marshall, letter to the editor, *Anniston Star*, October 2, 1995. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.

⁴⁴ Rose Livingston, "Anniston group: Browder betrayed area," *Birmingham News*, October 2, 1995. From 1995 Clippings box, The Browder Collection, 224 Curtiss Hall, Jacksonville State University.

⁴⁵ "Alabama Poll Survey Report," Mason-Dixon Political/Media Research, Columbia, Md., April 1996.

⁴⁶ Browder interview, September 2005.