

A coveted Air Force command and the money sure to follow are seemingly headed to Cajun Country rather than to Bellevue's Offutt Air Force Base. The Air Force announced Thursday that Barksdale Air Force Base in northwest Louisiana is the preferred spot for the new Global Strike Command, which will oversee the Air Force's nuclear operations. That announcement led Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., to declare that the Air Force had made "a huge mistake" and suggested that it had whiffed on a chance to show its commitment to nuclear deterrence. "Those people bring families, and those families buy houses, buy cars, go to our schools," said Megan Lucas, director of the Bellevue Chamber of Commerce. "It's like a big company moving in." Michael Donley, secretary of the Air Force, met with Omaha Mayor Mike Fahey and David Brown, president of the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, hours after the decision was announced and told them Offutt had ranked high among the six finalists for the new command. But Donley hinted that the Air Force wanted its new command to be close to the Air Force unit at Barksdale that flies nuclear missions, Brown said. "I don't think we got caught flat-footed," Brown said after the meeting, which Omaha officials originally sought to make a last-minute argument for Offutt. "You just don't win them all." Chamber officials and contractors noted that Offutt still has a chance at an Air Force consolation prize. The Air Force soon expects to announce the permanent home for a cyberwarfare unit. Offutt is one of six finalists for that 400-person unit. Nelson, chairman of the personnel subcommittee of the powerful Senate Armed Services Committee, reacted strongly after news leaked that Offutt wasn't the first choice for the new Global Strike Command. Nelson said he had stressed to Air Force officials that the new command and Offutt's U.S. Strategic Command, which oversees the entire military's nuclear mission, should be on the same base. "The Air Force has missed an opportunity to send the message that our nuclear deterrence missions are a priority," he said. Adding the Global Strike Command would have revved Offutt's already formidable economic engine. The base already houses StratCom, the Air Force's 55th Wing and the headquarters of the Air Force Weather Agency. It's the state's third-largest employer and had a total economic impact of roughly \$2.4 billion last year, according to the Bellevue and Omaha Chambers of Commerce. More Air Force personnel would have meant more support jobs - jobs often provided by Omaha-area defense contractors. More personnel would have meant more work for area doctors, dentists and bankers, said Dave Everhart, president of Veteran Defense Services, a Bellevue defense contractor. Bringing the command to Omaha also could have led new defense companies to open shop around the base and spurred construction work starting in 2010, said Ned Holmes, the military affairs liaison for the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce. "It's the domino effect," Everhart said. "That's when you really start to see the economic impact for the whole state." Military experts downplayed the notion that being passed over for Global Strike would pose a threat to Offutt's long-term viability. John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org and a leading defense analyst, said it represents the "normal churn" within the Air Force. "This stuff gets moved around," Pike said. "They reorganize every now and again, and you get these headquarters that come and go." Barry Watts, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, suggested that the Air Force might have been uncomfortable having the command at the same base as StratCom. "So Barksdale is as good a place as any, I guess. . . . It will be warmer in Barksdale most days than it will be in Minot," he said, referring to the North Dakota base that's home to nuclear bombers and missiles. Barksdale also carries some tradition in the area of Global Strike capability, he

said. During the Persian Gulf War, Barksdale launched B-52s that attacked Iraqi forces. "That was arguably the first conventional global strike mission that the Air Force conducted," Watts said. Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said that while military commanders maintain publicly that politics are not involved in such decisions, they concede in private that politics do play a role. Terry said those politics occur primarily at the Senate level. Nelson disputed the idea that such a decision would be based on which lawmaker has more clout. "It's just not done that way," Nelson said. He said that he pushed the case for pairing the new command with StratCom, but that the Air Force saw it differently. "I don't make those decisions," Nelson said. "I don't work in the Pentagon, and they are an independent branch of government." Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., was all smiles after hearing of the announcement. "The communities worked very hard to position themselves over time and have had a huge and long-standing nuclear presence," she said. "The base is really in great shape, and opportunities for expansion are there." Air Force officials are scheduled to brief Capitol Hill lawmakers Friday about how the decision was made. Terry said he wants to know whether Offutt's assets can be improved. "We need to know so we quit being the bridesmaid on these projects," Terry said. Rejection on Global Strike could be used, he said, as motivation and leverage in the quest to bring the cyber outfit to Offutt. He also suggested that Thursday's announcement raises the stakes on that effort. "If we get passed up for both of these, it's going to raise some huge red flags," Terry said, "and I think our business community's going to be asking a lot of questions of us."

