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Fayetteville: America's Most Pro-Military Town

By Nathan Thornburgh

At the world's largest military baby shower, there was no doubting the sincerity of Fayetteville's convictions. The North Carolina city that is home to both Fort Bragg and the Pope Air Force Base threw a party on Nov. 15 for a thousand new and expectant military moms--a baby boomlet prompted by the return since October 2007 of some 22,000 members of the 82nd Airborne from active duty in Iraq. The event was held in Fayetteville's Crown Exposition Center, complete with a buffet, a cupcake table, plenty of bottled water and raffle prizes ranging from 2009 Chevy Malibu to a Fisher-Price Take-Along Swing for infants.

But Fayetteville's support for the troops is about a lot more than cupcakes. In September, the city and surrounding Cumberland County adopted the new slogan "World's first sanctuary for soldiers." It's a curious rebranding that seems to imply that life for service members elsewhere can be miserable. As one city document puts it, military families need a sanctuary because some American communities are telling soldiers they're not welcome, "through protests, legislation and sometimes violence."

That's a dubious claim, at best. But it's a clever move by this city of 210,000 along the Cape Fear River. In a time of long deployments, the city is stepping up to take care of the families left behind. It boasts, for starters, an "Army's Army" of 900 civilian volunteers who help families with everything from flat tires to job placement. Sergeant Daniel Gobel, who recently moved here from Fort Bliss, Texas, with his wife and daughters, says he appreciates the support the troops decal in storefronts and the way people thank him on the street. He doesn't get that everywhere. "I don't expect to be thanked," he says, "but it sure is nice to hear."

The campaign is being driven by both patriotism and economics. Base realignments will bring 20,000 new soldiers (on top of the almost 50,000 already stationed) by 2011, and the military's economic impact in the area will go from \$5 billion to \$6.5 billion in the process, says Breeden Blackwell, the county commission chairman. "You can see why we take care of our investment," he says.

Realignment also creates a country where some towns really do understand military life better than others do.

Smaller bases will close and consolidate into megabases like Fort Bragg, and large swaths of the U.S. will have even less contact with the all-volunteer military than they do now.

The sanctuary concept is jarring after an election in which pandering to "pro-America" parts of the country--to use Sarah Palin's clumsy word choice--failed. But being promilitary in Fayetteville is not a red-vs.-blue issue. The entire county commission and Mayor Tony Chavonne are all Democrats. The mayor says, "War is not a political word here."

It's not the first time Fayetteville has marketed its love of country. In 2005 it declared itself America's most patriotic city, and even floated the idea of writing fake tickets to drivers of foreign cars. Behind the bluster is an insecurity that dates back to the days when Fort Bragg was a staging ground for Vietnam-bound troops. While the base was training draftees for combat, Fayetteville's sudden glut of strip clubs and bars seemed to be training them for a debauched night out in Saigon. People called the town Fayetteenam, a slur that hasn't lost its sting. "I despise that term," Blackwell says. "Whoever says that needs to come see how much this town has changed."

He is right. While there are still strip clubs and tattoo parlors on Bragg Boulevard, the town largely reflects the values of today's Army--professional, family-oriented. The community is bearing the hardships of war with admirable grace and a sense of shared sacrifice. "I get taken care of here better than other places," says Millie Ferris, 26, an expectant mother whose husband is in Iraq. She went to the baby shower with half a dozen other pregnant Army wives and says more of her friends are deciding to stay in Fayetteville when their husbands deploy instead of returning to their hometowns. That's a story that doesn't need slogans to sell itself.

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