

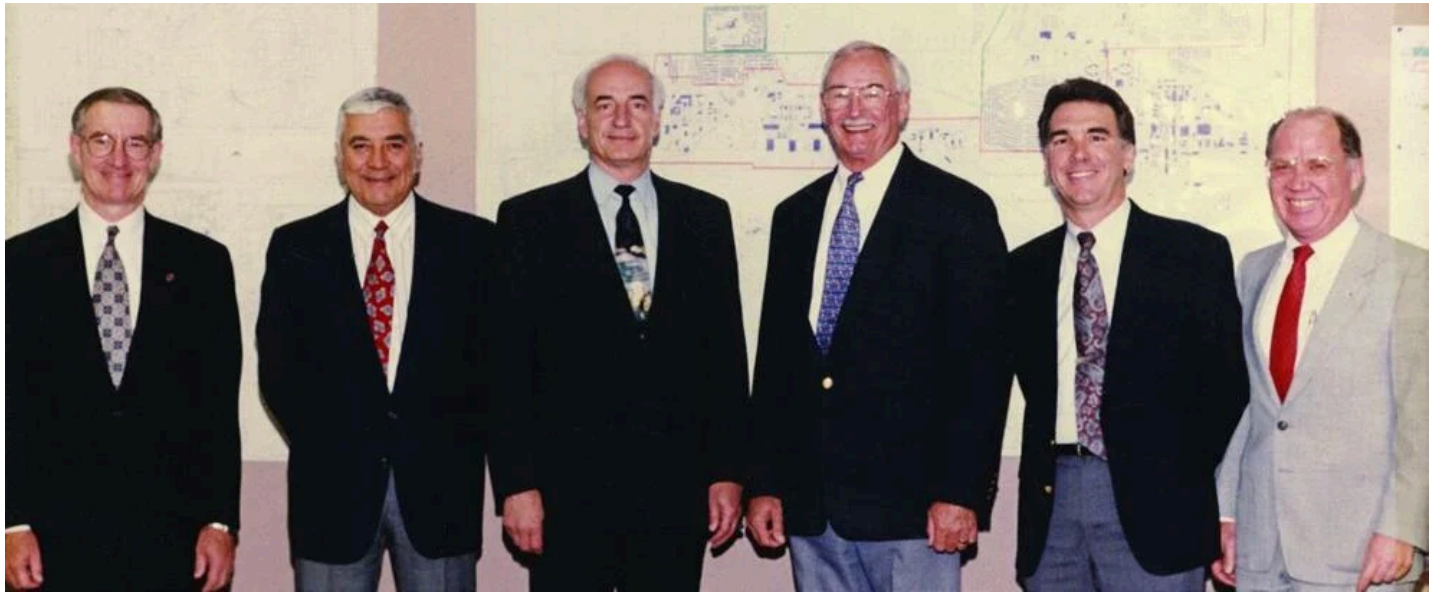
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FEATURED

Saving Kirtland Air Force Base — 30 years later

By Gillian Barkhurst / Journal Staff Writer

Jun 8, 2025



The Kirtland Retention Task force are pictured in this 1995 archive photo. From left to right, Gen. Hansen Scott, Lieutenant Gen. Leo Marquez, Col. Charlie Thomas, Col. Bob Francis, John Vuksich, and Sherman McCorkle.

Courtesy of Sherman McCorkle

In a makeshift war room two generals, a colonel, a base commander, a science adviser and one civilian sat around a conference table, where they plotted a battle — not against foreign enemies but their own government.

The patchwork bunch convened after the Department of Defense put Kirtland Air Force Base on the chopping block in 1995. Kirtland was to be shuttered, its mission redistributed, and nearly 7,000 jobs lost, according to federal documents. If the base closed, Albuquerque would lose \$5 billion in revenue over the next 10 years, the task force estimated. The outcome would be economically devastating, the group agreed.

“It wouldn’t be the same picture (today),” said retired Gen. Hansen Scott, who was Kirtland’s director of aviation at the time.

This story has a happy ending: Monday marks the 30th anniversary of the official announcement that Kirtland had been spared by the Pentagon, after civilians, politicians and Air Force personnel united to resist the proposal. But the story of how it was saved is worth revisiting as those lessons still are applicable to modern day challenges.

In 1988, as the Cold War came to an end, Washington decided the country had an excess of military infrastructure which was an unnecessary drain on the federal budget during peace time. Congress subsequently established the Base Realignment and Closure process, or BRAC, in which the Department of Defense made a list of locations slotted for closure.

Congress since has authorized four rounds of base closures, including in 1995 when Kirtland nearly met its end. The last BRAC round was in 2005.

“Once you were on the list, you really didn’t get off,” said Sherman McCorkle, chairman and CEO of the Sandia Science and Technology Park Development Corp. and a civilian volunteer on the Kirtland Retention Task Force.

Bases were never given reasons for their selection, and communities had little time to convince the secretary of defense to save their local bases, McCorkle said. The Albuquerque task force assembled in a bipartisan effort by the state’s congressional delegation had less than 90 days to come up with a convincing argument.

The task force consisted of McCorkle, Hansen, Gen. Leo Marquez, Col. Charlie Thomas, John Vuksich and retired Kirtland commander Col. Bob Francis. Marquez, Thomas, and Francis have since passed.

With time limited, the six put their heads down and got to work. While juggling full-time jobs and family commitments — the majority didn’t earn a cent, save for Vuksich, a science adviser appointed to the task force by then-Gov. Gary Johnson.

What the group found was that the Air Force's numbers were off by hundreds of millions.

Department of Defense documents show the Pentagon estimated that closing Kirtland would save the federal government \$464 million over the next 20 years. The task force discovered that closing the base, reassigning missions and remediating the area would instead cost the government \$525.7 million over 20 years.

On June 3, 1995, news trickled down to the delegation that the base had been removed from the BRAC list. Six days later, and 30 years ago Monday, an official letter from Defense Secretary William Perry to the chairman of the BRAC Commission stated that the Air Force calculations were wrong and that closing Kirtland was not “financially or operationally sound.”

The base was saved, and airmen and civilians alike celebrated the news with a Fourth of July party, that both McCorkle and Hansen remember fondly.

“It has been a traumatic 90 days since that realignment plan was disclosed,” reads a Journal editorial from June 3, 1995. “Albuquerque is happy — and greatly relieved — that the errors in projections were disclosed and acknowledged, and that the Air Force is staying.”

The story is not only important to Albuquerque and New Mexico — Kirtland now has an annual economic impact of \$7.5 billion on the state — but at a time when the Trump Administration is cutting back on government across the board, it's important to remember that numbers matter and can ultimately make the most important difference.

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