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Pueblo's Columbus Statue Debate Is A Collision Of Politics, Heritage and Long-Standing Injustices



By Bente Birkeland · Sep. 3, 2020, 4:00 am

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Pueblo's bust of Columbus is the last memorial of its kind standing in the state, but after months of protests, its future is uncertain.

Months after protests started with the aim of bringing it down, Pueblo's bronze-topped Christopher Columbus statue still stands prominently in the center of the city, the last monument of its kind in the state.

Protestors [tore down Denver's Columbus statue in June](#), but so far no one has vandalized the statue in Pueblo, and its fate is the talk of the city. Activists who want the statue to go are at odds with some Democratic leaders, who are trying to find ways to de-escalate the tension. The Columbus statue has been the site of regular weekly protests since the death of George Floyd in May.

"On Saturdays, we're on this side, and on Sundays, we're actually in the street and it's completely barricaded off," said an 18-year-old activist who goes by the name Curly — she said she recently changed her public identity because she fears for her safety after facing threats and harassment for her involvement in the protests against colonialism, genocide, racism and police violence. She leads the recently formed group Young Blood Advocacy.

"I think the youth is often looked at as uneducated and kind of destructive, and we're here to show them that we are interested in being here on the front lines and to show them that we're here to vote."



Bente Birkeland/CPR News

A protest organizer who goes by the name Curly looks at the memorial wall that accompanies the Columbus monument; many of Pueblo's prominent leaders and families are included on it.

The protests and demonstrations over the last three months have been peaceful, and in-person opposition has been rare, but people on all sides say the situation is volatile. According to the Pueblo mayor's office, as of Aug. 23, the police have spent roughly \$90,000 dealing with the protests. The city has also spent thousands of additional dollars on mediation to try to reach an agreement on the statue.

Statue opponents cite current concerns

One reason for the tension is that the movement to reject the 569-year-old Italian who paved the way for European colonization of the Americas is tied up with anger over modern problems in the city.

crossroads,” said Theresa M. Trujillo, the Southern Colorado director at the Colorado Progressive Coalition and lead negotiator on statue discussions on behalf of the indigenous community. “People are protesting a multiplicity of issues — from abolishing ICE to justice for Breonna Taylor, from wanting to defund the Pueblo police department and invest that money elsewhere in our community... What does this statue, this Christopher Columbus monument in the middle of Pueblo, Colorado, have to do with all of these issues? It comes down to white supremacy.”

The effort to remove the statue is also connected with groups angry about the shooting death of 20-year-old Jesse Cedillo by a sheriff’s deputy. Pueblo County District Attorney Jeff Chostner decided [he would not prosecute the case and determined the shooting justified](#), which provoked protests outside his home and the home of the deputy who shot Cedillo. The issue came up at a recent city meeting on the fate of the Columbus statue.

“Our community has let my brother and my family down from this case. You dismiss his murderer,” Jesse Cedillo’s older sister Jaelyn told Pueblo’s city council. “And that’s exactly what Columbus has made: this culture for us, and why we need to take the statue down.”

City leaders [rejected a proposal to ask voters whether to relocate the statue](#) at the meeting. They decided an up-or-down vote would be too divisive and instead opted to continue mediated discussions between supporters and opponents about the possibility of creating an outdoor museum at the site.

The statue debate has intensified divisions within the Democratic Party. While local activists want it removed, other Democratic leaders still hope to find a middle ground.

A long history in the city

Italian immigrants installed Pueblo’s bronze bust in 1905, the same year the national Sons of Italy organization formed to provide support for Italian Americans. Over the years it’s become more than just a memorial for Columbus; a brick wall next to the bust includes names honoring members of Pueblo’s large Italian American community. The

among the local leaders honored on the wall.

“I want to keep it up,” said Mary Beth Corsentino, the chair of the Democratic Party in Pueblo. Members of her own family are also listed as part of the monument. “My grandfather, he immigrated here in about 1910. So the statute was already up when he got here, but he became a member of the [National Italian American] Federation right away. So it's family and it's personal and it's what it is. It's part of who I am.”

Mayor Nick Gradisar, a Democrat, said he won't defend Columbus, but he also doesn't blame him for all of the ills that exist in America.

“When I hear people talking about a truth and reconciliation process, I'm wondering, are we going to put Christopher Columbus on trial? Is that what we want to do? Is that how we want to spend our time? Trying somebody that died 500 years ago?” said Gradisar. “How about we spend our time trying to better the lives of the poor people, indigenous people, black and brown people in our community and around the country?”

Gradisar thinks most people in Pueblo don't care what happens to the statue, yet he understands it's deeply personal for the Indigenous community who “loathe” Columbus, and, on the opposite side, for some Italian Americans who want to honor their ancestors.

“But I've never believed that we were prisoners of our past or that our destiny is determined by what happened to our ancestors or what they did,” Gradisar said at the city council meeting.

Old wounds and current affairs

The fight over the statue is occurring at the same time that politics, in general, are heating up in Pueblo. The city is likely to be a campaign hotspot as Republicans try to cement recent gains here and Democrats hope to reverse course.

Pueblo, which is about half Latino, was long a Democratic stronghold, with a tradition of organized labor born from the region's coal mines and steel mill. It still has more

[for President Donald Trump.](#)



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Democratic politicians across the nation have generally been in favor of rethinking the honors given to historical figures, but there's more resistance to that idea in Pueblo. When state lawmakers voted to [change Colorado's Columbus Day holiday to Mother Cabrini Day](#), two Democrats representing parts of Pueblo county broke with their party to side with Republicans against the measure.

For Republicans, the issue is more clear-cut.

"I don't like the idea that they're trying to take down anything that's already existing. Our history is our history. Whether we agree with what happened, the fact is we overcame that, and we are in a better place now," said Sara Rosales, while holding a Latinos For Trump sign after a recent campaign event in Pueblo.

Regina Maestri, who also attended the event, said she doubts protestors would be satisfied even if the statue were removed, and she fears protests over its future could turn violent. Maestri said she attended a counter-protest in early July and recalled some of the opponents of the statue saying vile things to her.



Bente Birkeland/CPR News

Regina Maestri is a Trump supporter who says she was targeted with hateful and threatening language while attending a counter-protest at the statue in July.

“My belief is that without law and order in this country, we cannot survive. And so I always want to protect law and order. I want to protect and preserve our constitutional rights, our freedoms,” she said.

On the other side, Vicente Martinez Ortega, a Democratic community organizer whose mother has led efforts to remove the statue of Columbus for decades, finds the current impasse frustrating.

He said the Chicano movement was huge in Pueblo in the ‘70s and ‘80s, and he thinks a lot of people have been waiting to see that kind of focus on social justice come back around. To him, the statue’s removal is long overdue, that Pueblo needs to take a stand against the systemic racism he believes Christopher Columbus embodies.