

## Editorial

### Taos Plaza cross should stay

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'We live by symbols,' wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., a U.S. Supreme Court justice, in the late 1800s.

We indeed love our symbols, whether they are secular, such as flags, or religious, such as a cross or a menorah.

But some symbols become flash points over whether or not they violate the U.S. Constitution's prohibition on any law favoring one religion over another or preventing Americans from freely practicing their faith.

A decades-old cross in Taos Plaza that is part of a war memorial is one of the symbols sparking controversy, at least from an outside group.

In the past year, members of a Wisconsin group have sent letters to town of Taos officials asking that the tall cross in the downtown historic Plaza be removed because they think it violates the First Amendment, which prohibits the "establishment of religion."

It's a similar argument used in a case in Bloomfield, New Mexico, where a group wants a statue of the Ten Commandments removed from in front of city hall, and Belen, where some people have complained about a Christmas Nativity scene in a public park. *Taos News* reporter Cody Hooks explores the history and debate over these situations and the Taos Plaza cross in this week's edition.

Year after year, communities debate whether or not Nativity scenes, the Ten Commandments and other religious symbols should be allowed in public places.

New Mexico has many such symbols in public places.

Crosses dot public highways and interstates — the

*descansos* residents have set up at the sites where their loved ones lost their lives in accidents. The city of Santa Fe has a statue of St. Francis surrounded by prairie dogs near city hall. Any of these symbols could be seen as religious.

The cross in Taos Plaza is part of a war memorial built in 1960 — in honor of the Taos men from Battery H, 200th Coast Artillery who fought in the Philippines during WWII. Those soldiers who survived were captured and forced on the arduous Bataan Death March to a prisoner-of-war camp, where they spent 3 1/2 years in brutal captivity. One of the last Bataan Death March survivors, Taos Pueblo elder Tony Reyna, passed away in December.

In 1995, the memorial was expanded to honor all those from Taos who had served in wars from World War I to the Persian Gulf War.

The cross doesn't prevent others from practicing their faiths at the Plaza. Instead, the cross, as part of the war memorial, stands as a symbol to remind residents and visitors alike of the sacrifices made by Taosenos. Most of them were Catholic and Protestant, steeped in their faith both by choice and tradition.

The way we see it, the Taos War Memorial should stay, cross and all. More than half a century after its installation, the cross is part of Taos history and is as secular as it is religious. But perhaps it also is time for someone to design a peace memorial for the Plaza, one that honors the many faiths of all people who make up this diverse and unique community.

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