

The People of Vieques, Puerto Rico vs. the United States Navy

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David Brandishes a Slingshot

On April 19, 1999, two F-18 jets mistook the navy's red-and-white checked observation post on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico for a target, and dropped 500 pound bombs on it. Vieques resident David Sanes was working at the observation post as a security guard for the navy. He was killed almost instantly. Three other men from Vieques were seriously injured. Sanes' death sparked a wave of protest—civil disobedience, marches, petitions, resolutions, and lobbying—which resulted in the promise, made by then U.S. President Clinton and reiterated by his successor, that the navy will leave Vieques by May 2003. The navy says these plans will not be affected by war on Iraq. As veterans of earlier navy promises, the *Viequenses*, and the people of Puerto Rico, are wary.

That promise from a U.S. president represents an unprecedented victory for Puerto Rico. It is a victory not only over the Colossus of the North, to whom Puerto Rico is still in colonial thrall, but also over the perennial divisions created by the uncertainty about its relation to the United States and the rest of the world. To appreciate the significance of that victory, some history is necessary.

Vieques is a fifty-two-square-mile island about fifteen miles to the southeast of the main island of Puerto Rico. It has a population of 9,400 and is one of Puerto Rico's seventy-eight municipalities. According to the United States Supreme Court, Puerto Rico is legally an "unincorporated territory" which "belongs to, but is not part of" the United States. Under U.S. law, Puerto Rico is neither an independent nation, nor a state. Its official title "Estado Libre

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For current information and background on Vieques, information about joining or supporting the civil disobedience campaign and the efforts to decontaminate Vieques and create a sustainable plan for development in Vieques, contact: Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques. Tel: 787-741-0716. E-mail: <bieke@prdigital.com>. Also see <www.viequeslibre.org/>.