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“Ni Una Bomba Mas”

REFRAMING THE VIEQUES STRUGGLE



KATHERINE T. McCAFFREY AND SHERRIE L. BAVER

Introduction

For decades, residents of Vieques, Puerto Rico fought a David and Goliath battle against the U.S. Navy. Until 1999, however, few people in the United States had ever heard of Vieques and its problems. Vieques is a 51-square-mile island, roughly twice the size of Manhattan, where more than nine thousand people lived wedged between an ammunition depot and a live bombing range. Since the 1940s, when the Navy expropriated more than two thirds of the island, residents have struggled to make a life amid the thundering of bombs and the rumbling of weapons fire. The U.S. Navy contended that the Vieques installation played a crucial role in naval training and national defense. The civilian community of Vieques argued that the military control of land and live-fire exercises caused severe ecological destruction, cancer and other health problems, and overwhelming social and economic crises.

A grassroots movement against naval operations emerged in 1978 led by local fisherman whose livelihoods were disrupted by the naval training exercises. Although similar protests in the early 1970s forced the military out of nearby Culebra, the Vieques struggle died out. With the end of the Cold War, Viequenses began to organize again. However, the struggle became widely known only in the spring of 1999 when the death of a civilian security guard sparked a new wave of protest and placed Vieques on the international stage.

The aim of this article is to understand how a local struggle became a national and international *cause célèbre*. Our hypothesis is that reframing opposition to military training in terms of environment, health, and human rights concerns allowed a broad coalition to form that reached well beyond party lines both in Puerto Rico and on the mainland. This coalition built overwhelming support for an end to live bombing exercises on Vieques, the Navy’s immediate departure, and the return of federally controlled land to local authorities. In May 2003, activists achieved a major victory with the exit of the Navy from their

community. The struggle, however, is now in its second stage: seeking social and environmental justice for Vieques.

Theoretical Overview

Conflict in Vieques had its foundation in the material conditions of everyday life. Vieques is the poorest municipality in all of Puerto Rico, with 73 percent of the population living below the poverty line. It has among the highest rates of unemployment—almost half the adult population is without work (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). It has among the highest infant mortality rates, and a growing rate of cancer and other health problems that residents believe have been caused by weapons testing.¹ This socioeconomic and health crisis connected to the military presence on the island and has been at the heart of civilian grievances against the Navy.

Nonetheless, Vieques's struggle to evict the Navy was consistently mired in complex political issues that sidelined community concerns. The Navy's use of the island for live-fire exercises invariably raised the divisive issue of Puerto Rico's political status as a non-sovereign U.S. territory. While a majority of Puerto Ricans support continued political and economic association with the United States, they also maintain a strong sense of a separate Puerto Rican national identity (Barreto 2002; Dávila 1997; Duany 2000; Morris 1995). Live bombing exercises on this inhabited island suggested the second-class status of Puerto Rican citizenship and inspired charged debate over national identity, patriotism, and loyalty. Activists from Vieques and Puerto Rico who were concerned specifically about military actions became embroiled in debates over sovereignty. The U.S. Navy interpreted objections to military operations, however specific, as ideologically motivated and a threat to national defense. The Commonwealth government tried to avoid confrontations that could jeopardize its relationship with the United States, particularly as they affected ongoing debates about potential statehood or a modified form of association.

With the Cold War's end and before the beginning of the War on Terror, the political terrain shifted. Grievances against the Federal government, and the U.S. military specifically, could be aired without the aggrieved simply being tarred as "radical *independentistas*." Still, protestors had to pick their battles and their tactics with care to get a wide airing of their issues. By the mid-1990s, activists in Vieques framed their grievances in a way that allowed for broad, non-partisan support for a long-simmering just cause. Protest against the military, long embroiled in stifling debates over Puerto Rico's political status, became part of a nonpartisan movement for social justice. Humberto García-Muñiz, for example, suggests that activists' use of a human rights discourse allowed the Vieques protest to gain national and international allies (García-Muñiz 2001). Leading Protestant and Catholic clergy in Puerto Rico espoused Vieques's cause as a valiant struggle for peace and human rights.² In this chapter, we explore

how a focus on environmental and health concerns also played a key role in this political shift.

The argument set out here builds on the work of others who have studied the social construction of issue framing.³ Most relevant here is Margaret Keck's work on successful protests of the Acre Rubber Tappers' Movement in Brazil. Keck found that it is not necessarily easy to link social and environmental agendas, but those who can do it successfully combine "strategic acts of image making, alliance building, and the seizing of institutional opportunities."⁴ Specifically, it is useful to have a good story that blends both environmental and social justice components; successful "causal stories" involve one set of persons doing harm to another set. The joining of stories widens not only the potential pool of participants, but also the pool of public who will respond to one or another element in the story. While the rubber tappers in Acre and the residents of Vieques had reasonable environmental and equity complaints, Chico Mendes's murder in Brazil and David Sanes's accidental death in Vieques gave these stories a poignancy and urgency they might otherwise have lacked. In sum, reframing longstanding struggles for social justice in terms of environmental concerns allows disadvantaged people to expand their resources and strategies considerably.

The Navy's Arrival on Vieques

The U.S. Navy expropriated more than three quarters of Vieques Island in the 1940s. The military was impelled to take Vieques land first by the perceived German threat in the Caribbean during World War II, and later by mounting cold war tensions.

In 1941, declaring a national emergency, the Navy seized 6,680 acres of land in Ensenada Honda, on Puerto Rico's east coast, and 21,020 acres on Vieques, two-thirds of that island's land, to build Roosevelt Roads Naval Station, its most important operating base in the Caribbean. Roosevelt Roads was planned to rival Pearl Harbor in scale and significance. The base would stretch across the Vieques Sound to connect Ensenada Honda and Vieques. Roosevelt Roads would provide anchorage, docking, repair facilities, fuel, and supply sources for 60 percent of the U.S. Atlantic fleet. Furthermore, with the threat of a German invasion of Great Britain looming, naval planners saw the base as a potential point of supply, repair, and refuge for the entire British fleet. The plan was to excavate tons of rock from Vieques in order to build a sea wall between the island and a new homeport in Ensenada Honda. Huge magazines would be cut into the hills of Vieques, and a Marine camp established on the neighboring island of Culebra (Langley 1985, 271–75; Tugwell 1977, 68).

Vieques's stark social inequality and overwhelming poverty facilitated the military takeover. Vieques's economy was dominated by sugar cane monoculture. Ninety-five percent of the rural population, or two-thirds of the total population of 10,582, was landless, while two sugar corporations occupied 71 percent

of island land.⁵ The concentration of the land in the hands of two sugar corporations and a few wealthy farming families eased the transfer of two-thirds of the island from private to military control. The landless majority that lived on sugar land had little political clout with which to counter the U.S. Navy, and they were summarily removed from their homes.⁶

Any economic gain from the military presence proved elusive. While base construction initially created an economic boom, the work stopped almost as quickly as it had begun. Military priorities shifted to the Pacific when the United States entered the war, and the Navy scaled back its original plans. Construction of the breakwater from Puerto Rico to Vieques was suspended, and work on Roosevelt Roads slowed because of a shortage of supplies. By the time Roosevelt Roads was completed in 1943, naval planners had concluded that a major naval base in Puerto Rico was unnecessary. Roosevelt Roads was placed on maintenance status at the conclusion of World War II (Langley 1985, 272–73).

The abrupt halt of construction had a devastating effect on Vieques's economy. Without the military project, there was no work left on the island. The Navy's expropriations of land had effectively liquidated the sugar cane industry. Playa Grande's *central*, the last operating mill in Vieques, was dismantled and sold. Most sugar cane lands had become military property, part of either the base itself or the resettlement tracts where tenants were relocated. Though some small- and medium-sized independent farms remained, the farmers had no mill to which they could sell their harvest, and no access to transportation to ship their cane to the mainland to be ground. Residents were left languishing in squalid resettlement tracts without a clear sense of the future. They were assigned plots without title to the land and were not allowed to transfer lots. Residents were warned that they would be evicted if the Navy wanted to reclaim the land (U.S. House of Representatives 1981, 3).

The lack of title to the land had a number of damaging effects. It was impossible to secure loans to build decent homes. The lack of property rights left unanswered issues of inheritance, raising questions as to whether an individual's child would hold any rights to the house or land where he or she was raised. It is possible that the Navy saw residents as a valuable labor force during the frantic construction of the pier. But circumstances changed in 1947.

In 1947 the Navy drew up new strategic plans for Vieques. The Navy redesignated Roosevelt Roads as a Naval Operating Base for use as a training installation and fuel depot (Langley 1985, 273). Vieques would be converted into a training site, to be used for firing and amphibious landing practice by tens of thousands of sailors and marines. Because this new vision of the base required more land, the Navy planned to expropriate more than four thousand acres from eastern Vieques, displacing 130 families (*El Mundo*, 6 June 1947).

The second round of expropriations would wedge Vieques's population between an ammunition depot and a maneuver area. The Department of the Interior and the Insular government conducted closed-door meetings to address alternatives to squeezing the civilian residential community between the two in-

stallations. The Department of the Interior proposed resettling the population in St. Croix, just as the U.S. military had usurped Bikini Island the year before and deposited its inhabitants on a distant atoll.⁷ The Puerto Rican government managed to block the eviction of Viequenses from the island, but the naval expropriations prevailed. Wary of the spectacle of dislocated families dumped on the street, the Puerto Rican government agreed to build housing in a new resettlement tract. The only concession the island government won from the Navy was that the military would provide materials for this new construction. Another minor provision permitted continued cattle grazing on the western area of the military property used for ammunition storage. Since naval maneuvers would include launching live bombs, the rest of the island was too dangerous for civilian entry. The Navy justified its plans by pointing to a “changed international situation”—namely, the perceived threat of communist proliferation across the world (*El Mundo*, 16 October 1947).

With three-quarters of its land usurped, Vieques’s quality of life was severely debased and its economy crippled. Residents were sandwiched between an ammunition depot and a vast maneuver area. The municipality lost its tax base. The inhabitants of this arid tropical island lost access to major aquifers on military-controlled land. Although only six miles lay between Puerto Rico and Vieques, ferries were now forced to travel a circuitous twenty-two-mile route in rough waters to avoid the Navy danger zone. The military dismissed islanders’ worries, arguing that the economic benefit of spending by the troops would offset any economic problems. This prediction did not come to pass.

Though the Navy argued that the military installations in Vieques would provide work and opportunity to islanders, they brought instead ongoing unemployment and poverty. The number of troops permanently stationed on the island was not large enough to promote the development of a service economy. Vieques was used primarily for ammunition storage and maneuvers, and secondarily as a Marine base (1959–1978). Thousands of troops would pour onto the island in the 1950s and 1960s, but their visits were so sporadic and brief that they could not sustain the local economy. In the early 1960s, the Navy drafted secret plans to evict the entire civilian population and take over the island. An executive order from President Kennedy prevented the forced removal of residents, but underlying antagonism remained.

The History of the Vieques Struggle against the Navy

Stage I: The Struggle of the 1970s

In the late 1970s, the Navy intensified maneuvers on Vieques Island after a militant anti-colonial movement evicted the military from the neighboring Puerto Rican island of Culebra. In order to understand the protest movement that unfolded in Vieques, it is crucial to examine briefly the Culebra struggle and the way it defined protest against the military as anti-colonial in character.

Culebra and Vieques formed a strategic triangle with the Roosevelt Roads

Naval Station on the main island. The Navy launched amphibious assaults on Vieques and concentrated naval and aerial bombardments on Culebra. Heightened bombing and naval efforts in 1970 to evict Culebra residents to expand the bombing range sparked a protest movement there.

The Culebra movement erupted during a charged moment in Puerto Rican history. A wave of resentment against Puerto Rican conscription into the Vietnam War catalyzed the independence movement. Student protest against the draft and the war in Vietnam gripped the island. There were mass demonstrations on the streets of San Juan against the “slavery of the draft.” Clashes between *independentista* students and ROTC cadets at the University of Puerto Rico escalated into bloody riots. The naval presence in Culebra came to signify to the Puerto Rican Left the very essence of Puerto Rico’s colonial subjugation to the United States. While grievances were material, the battle of Culebra became defined in terms of Puerto Rican independence. The Puerto Rican Independence Party and the Puerto Rican Socialist Party led a spirited direct action campaign to evict the Navy from Culebra.⁸

The Culebra movement succeeded in removing the Navy from that island, but the military ultimately prevailed. The Navy simply shifted its bombing practices from Culebra to Vieques. The movement that erupted in Vieques was a direct response to heightened maneuvers after the Navy pulled out of Culebra. Vieques residents objected to the naval presence because of a discrete set of material grievances. Protesting the Navy presence, however, was widely perceived as communist-inspired and anti-colonial in character.

Fishermen emerged as key protagonists in Vieques’s struggle. The Navy’s intensified maneuvers created particular hardships for the island’s fishermen. Bombing caused great damage to coral reefs and fish populations in an already fragile marine environment. As ship traffic increased, Navy boats frequently severed buoy lines from the traps they marked, effectively destroying fishing gear and the financial investment the traps represented. Fishermen were prevented from entering waters they claimed were the best fishing grounds around the island. A newly organized fishing cooperative became a crucible of the anti-Navy movement. Fishermen launched a direct action campaign, interrupting international military maneuvers in ten-foot-long wooden fishing boats.

Fishermen created unity where there were divisions. Most people in Vieques were reluctant to confront the military since protest was commonly construed as anti-American. The valiant struggle of the fishermen, however, emphasized the economic nature of local grievances. It drew on evocative cultural imagery of Puerto Rican rural traditions in conflict with modern warships and weaponry. The fishermen’s struggle became the basis of a coalition movement. A group called the “Crusade to Rescue Vieques” formed to back and expand the fishermen’s war into a sustained movement to remove the Navy and reclaim the land. *Independentistas* in Puerto Rico and the United States found a new cause for their struggle.

The mobilization lasted for approximately five years. Vieques support

groups sprang up throughout Puerto Rico and the United States. Congress held hearings on the status of naval activities in Vieques. Yet unlike activists in Culebra, Vieques demonstrators were unable to evict the Navy. By 1979 the political climate had changed markedly. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. A wave of revolutionary movements swept Central America and the Caribbean Basin, heightening Washington's anxiety about the spread of communism and the growing influence of Cuba throughout the region. The Navy was determined to expand its presence in the Caribbean and maintain its Vieques installation.

Navy officials dealt with protestors with a heavy hand, arresting demonstrators who entered military land on trespassing charges and pushing Vieques's struggle into federal courts that were overtly sympathetic to the military. Protest came to be treated as a threat to national security. One protestor died under suspicious circumstances while serving a six-month sentence in federal prison on trespassing charges.⁹ The Navy also launched a public relations blitz, seeking to discredit the movement as communist-inspired and led by outside agitators. While fishermen had oriented the movement toward economic grievances, the Navy undermined unity by refocusing debate on issues of patriotism and political affiliation. Tensions erupted between fishermen, local activists, and *independentista* supporters in Puerto Rico over the leadership and character of the movement.

When Puerto Rican Governor Carlos Romero Barceló intervened in the conflict in 1983 to sign a memorandum of understanding with the Navy, he effectively defused the movement. Romero essentially extracted a "good neighbor" agreement from the military, in which the Navy agreed to bring jobs to the island and work to mitigate the negative environmental impact. Leading activists were furious, swearing that the governor had handed Vieques over to the Navy on a silver platter.

Yet after years of bitter struggle and divisiveness, many Viequenses embraced the accord as the resolution to a long, difficult conflict. By bringing the Navy to the bargaining table, the accord seemed to acknowledge the legitimacy of local claims and offer at least a symbolic victory. The Navy, which had long dismissed all local claims as unfounded and which had characterized the movement as a communist insurgency, now admitted that it had done wrong. The Navy promised to help the local economy and to make efforts to mitigate its damage to the environment. It recognized its obligations to be a good neighbor and to strive to improve the welfare of island residents. More than any other event, the accord contributed to bringing about an end to the local movement and the decline of political activism in Vieques.

Stage II: Rebuilding a Movement

By the 1990s, it was clear that the Romero accord was a failure. Though the Navy promised to bring full employment, unemployment rates had risen to levels higher than when the military signed the agreement. The Navy's environmental commitments seemed more rhetorical than real, aimed mainly at

improving the military's public image. While it brought an end to organized protest, the Romero accord did not dispel the core resentment that had motivated that movement. The Navy maintained control over the majority of island land and resources, and therefore over the future of Vieques.

Activists took advantage of a changed political climate in the early 1990s to try to rebuild a movement to reclaim land. The time seemed propitious. The Cold War was over and the Clinton administration announced formation of a Federal Commission on Base Closures, headed by Defense Secretary Les Aspin. In 1993, activists founded a group called "The Committee to Rescue and Develop Vieques" (El Comité pro-Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques/CRDV) that aimed to include Vieques in discussions of which bases to shut down.

The mobilization that began in 1993 differed from the one in the 1970s. Although the core of the new committee was *independentista* and leftist in political orientation, the 1993 activists strove to build bridges to more moderate, centrist constituencies. In addition, the group changed tactics, moving away from direct confrontations and adopting more mainstream political strategies such as lobbying public officials and searching for compromise. Finally, the 1993 Committee distinguished itself from the crusade of the 1970s by concretely focusing on Vieques's future development without the military. Puerto Rican and mainland planners were consulted to develop a blueprint for land use in which the majority of Viequenses, rather than wealthy, off-island developers or local speculators, would enjoy the fruits of development.

The moderate rhetoric and mainstream tactics paid off in support for the Committee from the municipal government of Vieques and the Puerto Rican legislature. Furthermore, the Committee's work caught the attention of Carlos Romero Barceló, now Puerto Rico's Resident Commissioner in Washington. Well aware of the failure of his 1983 agreement with the Navy, Romero attempted another compromise with Washington. In 1993, Romero submitted the "Vieques Land Transfer Act" to the U.S. House of Representatives, proposing the return of roughly 8,000 acres in western Vieques to the *municipio* for public purposes. The Navy would continue to use land on the eastern side of the island for weapons testing and maneuvers. This proposal was reasonable, since the land on the western side of Vieques was, in reality, a vast, empty tract checkered with more than a hundred ammunition magazines. According to the Navy, forty of these bunkers were inactive. This meant that sixty bunkers were monopolizing 8,000 acres—nearly one-third of Vieques Island. Romero's bill had the potential to act as a pressure valve, allowing the Navy to keep much of its holdings while appeasing local citizens.

The Navy, however, firmly opposed the bill, and its response in the spring of 1994 showed an utter disregard for local concerns. The end of the Cold War, argued the military, had only ushered in a new era of violent peace. In this new world order, Vieques would remain a vital training ground. The base would be essential to train for missions in the new Latin American drug wars, as well as interventions in the Caribbean, the Persian Gulf, and the Balkans. With the sup-

port of the pro-statehood Rosselló administration in San Juan, the Navy confidently announced plans to build a nine-million-dollar “Relocatable-Over-the-Horizon-Radar” (ROTHR) installation on Vieques. The ROTHR technology was originally developed during the Cold War to monitor Soviet fleets in the Pacific northwest. Now the sophisticated system would have a new purpose—to scan the Caribbean and Latin America for aircraft carrying illegal drugs to the United States.

The installation would consist of three parts: a transmitter located on Vieques, a receiver in Lajas, Puerto Rico, and an Operation Control Center in Norfolk, Virginia. The Vieques transmitter would include thirty-four vertical towers ranging in height from 71 to 125 feet; constructing this facility would require approximately one hundred acres of leveled land. Vieques activists were furious. Though the project was described as part of the War on Drugs, Committee members felt such a claim was a subterfuge for entrenching the military presence. After all, they reasoned, it was only in the midst of new efforts to recover western land that the Navy suddenly found new use for the land, which had lain idle for decades. The radar installation energized the Committee to offer a forceful response. For the first time in the long struggle against the military presence, activists framed their response with a focus on health: they would alert the public to the potential health dangers of the electromagnetic radiation the radar installation would emit.

Stage III: No Radar!

Anti-Navy activists tapped into the growing concern on Vieques regarding the health effects of the naval presence; such concerns dated back at least five years, to an article published in a Puerto Rican engineering journal about high concentrations of explosives in local drinking water (Cruz 1988). For more than five years, then, concern had been increasing on Vieques not only about contamination from military explosives, but also about reports of high levels of certain types of cancer in the community. The secretive nature of military activity and Viequeses’ lack of access to information understandably intensified fear and suspicion of the Navy.

Soon after the Navy’s announcement of its radar project, public hearings took place in Vieques City Hall. The Committee organized a demonstration outside the hearings to boycott the meeting, while inside, a handful of anxious local residents raised critical concerns including the aesthetic appearance of the facility on land that locals had hoped to conserve for ecotourism and the health effects of electromagnetic radiation. The local newspaper described the opposition to the project as composed of “sympathizers from all parties, various religious groups, municipal assemblypersons and even government employees, many not considered anti-Navy types” (*The Vieques Times* 1994). Clearly, the Committee had successfully surmounted locals’ fears of communist labels and had organized a demonstration that drew a diverse group of community residents. After weeks of reflection, the majority of Committee members decided that

emphasizing the public health and environmental consequences was the best way to defeat Goliath.

As a sign of the successful reframing of this issue, a new group joined the local coalition—the Vieques Conservation and Historic Trust (VCHT). The VCHT was the pet project of some wealthy North American seasonal residents who were concerned, in particular, about preserving Vieques’s bioluminescent bay. In the past, the Vieques Conservation and Historic Trust not only had refused to speak out against the Navy but were strongly supportive of the military presence. Therefore the Trust’s statement of unequivocal opposition to the radar station represented a remarkable change of heart.

Over the next year, Vieques activists merged with activists in Lajas, Puerto Rico, to fight against the Navy’s plans. In Lajas, radar opponents stressed the theme of agricultural land usurpation, while the Viequenses continued to emphasize health concerns. The crucial symbolic link between the two mobilizations was a group of Puerto Rican Vietnam veterans who focused attention on the issue of military contamination. In particular, one decorated veteran suffering from Agent Orange exposure served to undermine the moral credibility of the Navy’s claims about the safety of the proposed ROTHHR installation.

The Navy’s continued refusal to compromise, coupled with several public relations failures, led to the October 1995 protest in San Juan against the radar project. This event represented one of the largest mobilizations in recent Puerto Rican history. The struggle over ROTHHR continued over the next two years, including a brief moratorium on the project when the island’s Environmental Quality Board (EQB) demanded detailed information about the health and environmental implications of the facility. The Navy persisted, however, and in 1996 announced its intentions to go forward with the radar project. The response in Vieques was a well-attended local protest in February 1997. Importantly, in this “Walk for the Health of Vieques,” those organizing the protest were careful in the framing of their rhetoric. This mobilization was not to be seen as an anti-colonial action but rather an event to dramatize the community’s concern about perceived high cancer rates and other illnesses stemming from existing environmental contamination, as well as about future risks from electromagnetic radiation. Notwithstanding popular opposition, the Navy erected its ROTHHR project in 1998. Ironically, to erect the antennae on Vieques, the military razed one hundred acres of mahogany trees that it had once claimed as one of its own major contributions to the ecological rehabilitation of the island.

The most important legacy of the 1995–1997 struggle over the radar installation was that Viequenses became organized and forged a wide coalition by focusing on health and safety concerns. This experience laid the foundation for the dramatic mobilization that erupted in April 1999.

Stage IV: The Death of David Sanes

On April 19, 1999, David Sanes, a civilian security guard employed by the Navy, was patrolling the Vieques live impact range. At one point during

Sanes's shift, two F-18 jets involved in training exercises dropped their two 500-pound bombs, but they missed their mark by a mile and a half. The Navy's range control officer and three security guards inside the training observation post were injured. Sanes, standing outside the observation post, was knocked unconscious by the explosion of shattered glass and concrete and bled to death from his injuries.

The Sanes family, while wanting no part in politicizing David's death, agreed to enter military land with Vieques activists to erect a large white cross in his memory. After the ceremony, which included christening the spot "Monte David," a well-known, self-proclaimed "environmental warrior" from Vega Baja, Albert de Jesus (a.k.a. "Tito Kayak") stole the spotlight. He personally pledged to camp at the site and block the resumption of military maneuvers. Over the next year, thousands of supporters from Vieques, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. mainland set up camps on the target zone and brought further military maneuvers to a halt. In this way, the encampments moved the Vieques struggle out of the local arena and into the national and international political spotlight.

The success of this mobilization is in large measure a result of the ability of the Committee to Rescue and Develop Vieques to create a resonant cultural framework throughout Puerto Rico.¹⁰ Still another piece of the explanation is a continued focus on environmental and health concerns as the basis for the anti-Navy discourse. What was new in this stage of struggle was that the use of cultural and environmental/health frames drew support from large numbers of Puerto Ricans, regardless of partisan loyalties. This is a highly unusual state of affairs in Puerto Rico's political arena.¹¹ Also new to this stage was the large number of female participants—not only progressive feminists but also formerly apolitical women concerned about their community's well-being.¹² A third new element in this stage of the struggle was the active participation of major Puerto Rican religious institutions, who insisted on nonviolence as a tactic. All participants in the mobilization starting in 1999 were in firm agreement that no meaningful buffer zone could exist on a small, inhabited island like Vieques when the military tests weapons there.

The depth of support for Vieques in Puerto Rico forced Governor Rosselló in May 1999 to form a Special Commission on Vieques comprising members of all major political parties and a wide range of Puerto Rican civil society, including representatives of the Vieques community. The Commission's June 1999 report demanded the end of all military activity on Vieques as well as the end of military control of the land. By July 1999, the pro-statehood governor backed down from his previous, pro-Vieques position; he "dissolved the Special Commission on Vieques and created a working group to negotiate—behind the backs of the previously participating sectors—with White House and Defense Department officials" (García-Muñiz 2001).

Details of the Rosselló-Clinton Agreement

In late winter 2000, Governor Rosselló reached an agreement with the Clinton administration that would allow resumption of naval training exercises

on Vieques. Despite previous declarations that not one more bomb would fall on the island, the governor signed compromise legislation that allowed for limited bombing practice in exchange for a plebiscite. The plebiscite, scheduled for November 2001, would allow Viequenses to vote on one of two options: (1) that the Navy would cease all training no later than May 1, 2003; or (2) that training would continue and could include live fire exercises. No matter which option was chosen, the Clinton administration would request \$40 million from Congress to support community development efforts on Vieques. If local residents voted to continue Navy training, the federal government would provide an additional \$50 million.¹³

The Clinton-Rosselló agreement broke the rare consensus among Puerto Rico's political parties that bombing must end and had the distinct potential to derail the anti-Navy struggle. Significantly, the unity of the clergy in opposing continued bombing was essential in maintaining the mobilization at this point. In fact, Puerto Rico's religious leaders were responsible for what may have been the largest demonstration in the island's history when, on February 21, 2000, in San Juan, somewhere between 85,000 and 150,000 islanders protested a resumption of bombing. Nevertheless, the San Juan–Washington agreement signed by Governor Rosselló directed the Puerto Rican government to dismantle protestors' encampments on the Vieques target range. This would pave the way for a resumption of military maneuvers. In May 2000, the protestors were evicted from their year-long vigil on the bombing range. Yet the activists, who against all odds had created a nonpartisan movement, refused to accept the terms of the Clinton-Rosselló pact.

Indeed, Pedro Rosselló's perceived capitulation to Washington at least partly explains his statehood party's loss in the gubernatorial race of November 2000 to Sila Calderón, a *popular*, who pledged to get the Navy out of Vieques. Calderón not only rejected the Clinton-Rosselló agreement, but went further, saying that even three more years, until May 2003, was too long to wait for the Navy's exit. The statehooders also lost the mayoral race on Vieques and the new mayor, *popular* Damaso Serrano went to jail soon after his election for leading an act of civil disobedience on the bombing range.

One of Sila Calderón's first acts as governor was to remove the Commonwealth riot squads from Vieques on January 5, 2001, and leave only a group of local police to monitor the range. Also encouraging to the protestors was that on his last full day as president, Bill Clinton sent a directive to his Secretary of Defense requesting that the Navy find an alternative to Vieques.

In an introductory burst of goodwill, the incoming Bush administration agreed to postpone the March 2001 training exercises until various medical test results became available, although the military would not necessarily be restricted by the findings. At the time, island scientists were conducting health studies to see if there was a relationship between naval training and cancer, heart disease, and infant mortality among Viequenses.

Predictably, the Navy and the protestors would have different interpreta-

tions of findings on almost any health or environmental analysis. Governor Calderón characterized the new round of training exercises at the end of April 2001 as a betrayal of a January 2001 agreement she had signed with the U.S. Secretary of the Navy. That agreement called for the Navy to halt the bombing until the Department of Health and Human Services had reviewed a health study ordered by the Clinton administration in January 2001. By mid-April the Pentagon dismissed the health study on a variety of grounds and also dismissed the agreement with Governor Calderón, claiming that military readiness took precedence over other concerns.¹⁴

By April 2001, when the Navy planned to resume bombing, Vieques had turned into a national *cause célèbre*. New York Governor George Pataki traveled to the island to speak out against naval bombing exercises. Congressman Luis Gutiérrez, environmental lawyer Robert Kennedy Jr., Rev. Jesse Jackson's wife, Jacqueline Jackson, and New York political activist Rev. Al Sharpton were arrested and jailed for trespassing on Navy land there. Entertainers Marc Anthony, Ricky Martin, and José Feliciano, and athletes Tito Trinidad and Chichi Rodríguez signed an anti-bombing appeal to President Bush that appeared in the *New York Times* on April 26, 2001. Between April 1999 and April 2001 several hundred people were arrested for participating in protests, but in spring 2001 the numbers continued to grow with both prominent mainlanders and local Puerto Ricans spending time in jail (*San Juan Star* 2001.)

The great attention over Vieques is not hard to understand. New York politicians were jockeying for Latino votes in the 2001 mayoral race and the 2002 gubernatorial election. As even President George W. Bush, a former governor of Texas, understood, Vieques illuminated the growing national importance of Latinos as a political bloc. Vieques was not just a "Puerto Rican issue," but a struggle with salience for Latino voters throughout the United States. This understanding, no doubt, underlay Bush's dramatic June 14 announcement from Goteborg, Sweden that all bombing would stop by May 2003.

For the activists, though, two more years of naval training was too long, and the Vieques protests continued with the June 2001 resumption of maneuvers. Also, Governor Calderón organized a symbolic, non-binding referendum on July 29 of that year for Vieques residents. The local referendum produced a high turnout of eligible voters (80.6 percent), and the results were not surprising. Sixty-eight percent demanded an immediate exit by the Navy, while 30 percent voted to allow the Navy to stay indefinitely. The remainder (1.7 percent) opted for the Bush proposal allowing the military to remain until May 2003 (*New York Times* 2001).

On September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington dramatically changed the political landscape. The themes of military preparedness and security became national priorities. Vieques activists sensibly called a moratorium on protests and the Puerto Rican government, like numerous other governments worldwide, expressed condolences and support for U.S. anti-terrorism measures (*New York Times* 2001.) The protest moratorium was an expedient

strategy, since island activists found that their mainland support had evaporated, at least in the short term (*New York Times* 2001)

For more than a year after the September 11 attacks, it was not clear that President Bush would keep his pledge to have the Navy depart by May 2003. The issue became especially knotty in December 2002 when Congress voted to give the Navy and Marines the final decision on leaving Vieques and also cancelled a planned referendum for Viequenses to vote on the Navy's future on the island. Further, Congress ruled that the Navy had to certify that it had found a suitable alternative training site and that the federal government would retain the lands (15,000 acres comprising Camp García and other training grounds) rather than return it to the *municipio*. Still, President Bush continued to assure Governor Calderón that the U.S. military would leave as planned in May 2003; and in February 2002, Navy Secretary Gordon England wrote to the governor stating that he was personally opposed to continuing the Navy's presence beyond spring 2003.

Although the navy resumed training in April 2002, by August, twenty-two members of Congress were willing to separate the war on terrorism from Vieques and demanded that the president issue an explicit executive order. In September, Governor Calderón followed up with a letter to President Bush, and near the end of October Secretary England confirmed the Navy would leave; after sixty years, the U.S. Naval presence on Vieques ended on May 1, 2003. While the military's departure is viewed as a victory by most Viequenses, it is also seen as only the first success in the larger Vieques struggle. Activists refer to the three "Ds" in their present fight: decontamination, development, and devolution (return of the former military lands that were turned over to the Department of Interior, rather than to the *municipio*). It is to these interrelated issues that we now turn.

The Conversion and Cleanup of Vieques

On May 1, 2001, the Navy turned over 8,100 acres of land it had used on Vieques to various local and federal entities. President Clinton had issued an executive directive in January 2000 that instructed the Navy to return all 8,100 acres of the former Naval Ammunition Facility (NAF) on the western side of the island to the government of Puerto Rico. The debate over the nature of the western land transfer foreshadowed the larger debate over land use and cleanup that is occurring now, after the Navy's complete departure.

The agreement implemented on May 1, 2001 essentially achieved the objectives of the proposed "Vieques Land Transfer Act of 1994," originally submitted to Congress by then Resident Commissioner Carlos Romero Barceló. In the agreement concerning the 8,100 acres, 4,200 acres were given to the Vieques municipality, 3,100 acres were given to the U.S. Department of Interior, and 800 acres were given to the Puerto Rican Conservation Trust, a nonprofit group that maintains land in the public interest (Congressional Research Service 2004). The

Navy retained 263 acres for its radar facility as well as a 12.1-acre right-of-way. Before the May 1 transfer, some environmentalists urged the Vieques Mayor, Damaso Serrano, not to sign the agreement for his 4,200 acres because it had no provision for the massive remediation effort that would be necessary (*San Juan Star* 2001).

Mayor Serrano signed the land transfer agreement, and concerns over cleanup remain at the heart of efforts for present and future planning for Vieques. Detailing the different military uses of the western and eastern parts of Vieques will permit understanding the depth of the cleanup challenge that is the Navy's legacy.

Land on the western side of the island was used primarily for ammunition storage and was also the site of a small operational base. The western part of Vieques could be particularly valuable in the future because it represents the closest transportation point between Vieques and the main island. At present, though, the area needs serious environmental attention. Nearly two million pounds of military and industrial waste—oil, solvents, lead paint, and acid—and other refuse were dumped in mangroves and sensitive wetlands areas. Unexploded ordnance may also exist there.

In the transfer agreement, the Navy was charged with cleanup according to land use, but this is not a straightforward process. Indeed, part of the evolving struggle in western Vieques now centers on land use designations. Several land use categories exist, and land designated for residential use, for example, would have to be cleaned up much more thoroughly than land to be used for conservation purposes—land that would not be lived on.

Of the 8,100 western acres transferred in 2001, the U.S. EPA and the Puerto Rico Environmental Quality Board deemed seventeen sites in need of further study because of possible contamination. By May 2003, scientists had decided that nine of the seventeen sites were not seriously contaminated. The eight remaining sites remain under investigation (Atlantic Division, NAVFAC 2004). There is special concern about the former Open Burn/Open Detonation area, in the western part of the island. This site was used for disposing of leftover and defective ordnance; old munitions, bomb components, and flares were burned there in an open pit. The site was closed in 1970 after an accident involving three youths, but unexploded ordnance may still exist in this area (Márquez and Fernández 2000; UMET et al. 2000). Tests from the western side Resolución aquifer, however, show heavy metal contamination coming from the ordnance sites on the Interior Department land (*San Juan Star* 2001).

It is no surprise, then, that the 3,100 acres given to the Fish and Wildlife Service have become the first part of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge, thus barring Viequesens from much of the returned land and also sparing the Navy the expense and effort of a thorough cleanup. It is now a common practice throughout the United States for the Pentagon to transfer polluted former base land to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for use, paradoxically, as “wildlife preserves.”¹⁵

Although contaminated, the land in western Vieques has not suffered the severe ecological destruction from six decades of bombing that is the case in the east. A thorough cleanup of the eastern part of the island will be much more dramatic in scope than in the west. The eastern side of Vieques was used for bombing exercises and maneuvers from the 1940s to the time the Navy left in 2003. The cleanup of firing ranges has proven one of the most dangerous, expensive, and challenging tasks in the military base conversion process (Sorenson 1998). That is why the entire eastern side of Vieques, consisting of 14,699 acres, was transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when the Navy departed in May 2003.

According to the Navy, eastern Vieques has been bombed an average of 180 days per year. In 1998, the last year before protest interrupted maneuvers, the Navy dropped 23,000 bombs on the island, the majority of which contained live explosives (U.S. Navy 1999). The most intense destruction was in the Live Impact Area, which constituted 980 acres on the island's eastern tip. This has now become a National Wilderness Area with human presence prohibited. All 14,699 acres and the surrounding waters of eastern Vieques had been used as shooting ranges, amphibious landing sites, and toxic waste dumps since the 1940s. Coral reefs and aquatic plants sustained significant damage from bombing, sedimentation, and chemical contamination. Nitrates and explosives have contaminated the groundwater (Márquez and Fernández 2000; Rogers, Cintrón, and Goenaga 1978).

The cleanup of unexploded ordnance on land is a clear safety issue and would be a top priority. Of particular concern are revelations that the Navy has fired depleted uranium munitions on the range, because of the risks this may pose for the civilian population.¹⁶ Numerous unexploded bombs remain off the shores of Vieques; cleaning offshore must be part of the long-term cleanup effort.

At least three economic conversion and development plans already exist to promote Vieques's future, including plans for an environmentally sensitive, sustainable tourism industry (GAPT 2000; McIntyre and Dupuy 1996; Rivera Torres and Torres 1996). The obvious problem is that all future plans presume an island free of environmental hazards, a presumption that requires a major financial commitment and act of political will from the federal government. Indeed, the chances that the Navy and EPA under current statutes would be involved in a full cleanup of both the western and eastern parts of the island are slim at best.¹⁷

A major step forward in the Vieques struggle came in February 2005 when the EPA formally designated Vieques a Superfund site. The process had begun almost two years earlier when then Governor Sila Calderón had requested the island's inclusion on the National Priorities List (NPL) of most hazardous waste sites. Specifically, the NPL designation requires the Navy to remediate the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Area on eastern Vieques as well as waters and cays in and around the island. Although Governor Calderón also had requested inclusion of Culebra as part of the Superfund site, it is likely to be

cleaned up under another program (the Formerly Used Defense Sites) run by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Still, the cleanup will not be short. To understand the probable duration and extent of this environmental justice struggle, it is helpful to consider two relevant cases. After the Navy left Culebra in 1975, more than two decades elapsed before funds were allocated to clean up ordnance. This limbo period witnessed widespread land speculation, gentrification, and economic marginalization of the local community (Iranzo Berrocal 1994; Rivera Torres and Torres 1996). A second case is Kaho'olawe, Hawaii, where the Navy also had a live impact range. In 1990, President George H. W. Bush issued an executive order to end the bombing exercises on that uninhabited island, which lies seven miles off Maui. In 1993, Congress agreed to finance a ten-year, \$400 million cleanup effort for the forty-five-square-mile island. It took five years for the process even to begin, and rancor existed throughout between the Navy and Hawaiians. By 2000, the Navy had cleaned up only one-tenth of the island (Klein 2001). In April 2004, Kaho'olawe was turned over to the State of Hawaii with 77 percent of surface munitions and 9 percent of subsurface munitions cleaned; almost all of that island remains off-limits to civilian use. The failure of cleanup efforts in the state of Hawaii is particularly troubling because Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory, lacks the political leverage of one of the fifty states.

Finally, to put the Vieques struggle in a larger context, the long-term environmental cleanup of military bases is still highly contentious within the United States. For decades, the Department of Defense (DOD) has relied on national security concerns to argue for exemptions from environmental legislation. In the 1980s alone, the U.S. military was estimated to have generated 500,000 tons of toxic waste per year, more than the top five U.S. chemical companies combined. One report identified 20,000 sites at 1,800 military installations with varying levels of contamination. Nearly 100 of these sites would warrant placement on the National Priorities List of the Superfund cleanup effort (Renner 1994). It is notable that in the post-9/11 priority on security, the Pentagon has successfully argued for exemptions from parts of some environmental legislation.

Conclusion: Environmental Struggles and the Deepening of Democracy in Puerto Rico

The end of the Cold War opened a political space in which Vieques's long-simmering grievances against the Navy could be expressed. For decades, opposition to the military in Puerto Rico was perceived as anti-colonial and anti-American. Legitimate grievances about Vieques's stifled economy and environmental damage from bombing became mired in cold war politics. The collapse of the Soviet Union created a new context.

A focus on health, environmental protection, and human rights are key elements of the revitalized movement's efforts to expand and reach new constituencies. The Vieques struggle fits nicely into the environmental justice framework

that gained a degree of national legitimation and institutionalization in the 1990s.¹⁸ The basic theme of the environmental justice movement is that the poor and ethnic minorities suffer disproportionately the burden of environmental risks taken by industrial society. Environmental concerns thus expand beyond technical discussions to become issues of civil and human rights.

After the events of September 11, 2001, Vieques activists observed a moratorium on anti-Navy protests for a brief period given the nation's sense of mourning and the move to a war footing. Within a month, however, activists resumed their struggle, and by August 2002 major politicians were again able to embrace the issue.¹⁹

That the military exit became inevitable despite the U.S. war footing is testimony to the resilience of the Vieques movement. Now that the grassroots organization is in place and the struggle has been framed in terms of human rights and environmental justice, the health and environmental concerns that surfaced in the late 1990s will continue as issues even with the Navy's departure. The Vieques struggle has contributed to a deepening of democracy in Puerto Rico. We hope it will serve as a model for other grassroots environmental justice struggles in Puerto Rico, and will thus allow citizens to move beyond the paralyzing divisiveness of traditional party politics to participate on issues of significance in their daily lives. Such grassroots groups have strengthened civil society, a key to a smoothly functioning democracy. The Vieques struggle represents a quest to end a legitimate grievance without having to choose a status option; the large majority of Puerto Ricans clearly rejected what analyst Juan Manuel García Passalacqua called "cupones por megatonnes," or the federal government's policy of providing welfare benefits in exchange for holding naval maneuvers.²⁰

The environmental struggle in Vieques may also have contributed to incisive questions about the quality of democracy in the United States. Indeed, the issue of military responsibility for environmental contamination increasingly cuts to the question of civilian control over the military, a basic tenet of a democratic society. After decades of secrecy surrounding its activities, the military is emerging as the single largest polluter in the United States, having produced 27,000 toxic waste sites in this country (*Environmental News Service* 2001; Sorenson 1998, 78). The military, protected by the rhetoric of national security, has not been held fully accountable for its toxic legacy. Therefore, while an end of bombing on Vieques represents a clear victory for Viequesenses, activists will need organizational skill and perseverance to continue the struggle to clear the Navy's legacy of contamination.²¹ The next stage of the struggle for decontamination and development will not be brief, but it will enhance the quality of life and democracy in Vieques and Puerto Rico.

Notes

1. According to Carmen Ortíz Roque of the Puerto Rico Surgeons and Doctors Association, the infant mortality rate in Vieques has climbed in the past twenty years while

decreasing in Puerto Rico as a whole. Between 1990 and 1995 infant mortality rates were 50 percent higher in Vieques than in Puerto Rico as a whole (*El Nuevo Día*, 23 February 2000). Puerto Rican Governor Sila Calderón publicized a study that suggested that residents suffer from vibroacoustic disease, an unusual heart disorder associated with exposure to loud noises like jet engines or deep explosions (*New York Times*, 14 January 2001). The study was later challenged by Johns Hopkins researchers (*New York Times*, 15 July 2001).

2. See for example *National Catholic Reporter*, 21 March 2000.
3. The “framing” notion comes from Goffman 1986.
4. Keck’s focused analysis on Acre is found in Keck 1995. A more general discussion of this work is in Keck and Sikkink 1998.
5. Only two other Puerto Rican municipalities—San Isabel, dominated by the Aguirre Sugar Company, and Guanica, dominated by the South Porto Rico Sugar Company—had sharper inequalities of land ownership (Ayala 2001).
6. For further discussion of the effect of the military expropriation of land on Vieques residents see McCaffrey 2002, chaps. 1 and 2; and Ayala 2001.
7. For further discussion on the plight of the Bikini islanders see Delgado 1996; Dibblin 1988; Kiste 1974; Weisgall 1994.
8. For further discussion of the Culebra movement see Delgado Cintrón 1989 and McCaffrey 2002, chap. 3. For discussion of the growing militancy of the Puerto Rican independence movement and the struggle against the draft see Nieves Falcon, García Rodríguez, and Ojeda Reyes 1971.
9. Angel Rodríguez Cristóbal was found dead in his prison cell on November 11, 1979, two months into a six-month term. Prison officials declared the death a suicide, but an independent autopsy performed by the family concluded that he was beaten to death. Photos of the cadaver showed that the face was heavily bruised, inconsistent with a finding of suicide by strangulation.
10. See McCaffrey 2002, chap. 6.
11. The ability of environmental issues to rally Puerto Ricans regardless of partisan ties is documented in Baver 1993. Also, sociologist Myra Muñoz, for example, has examined at least one hundred struggles since the 1970s in which Puerto Ricans have crossed party lines and banded together on issues. See Muñoz 2001.
12. The large presence of women is common in environmental justice struggles in the United States. On this point see Harvey 1999, 153–85.
13. “Solution on Vieques Takes a Step Forward,” *New York Times*, 29 February 2000.
14. See “Navy Bombing is Betrayal, Puerto Rican Governor Says,” *New York Times*, 29 April 2001; the Navy’s position is found in Jack Spencer, “The Importance of Vieques for Military Readiness,” *The Heritage Foundation Background*, Washington, D.C. No. 1411, February 16, 2001.
15. Sorenson (1998, 82 n. 168) notes that most of the 50,000 acres of the most contaminated firing ranges have been transferred to the Department of Fish and Wildlife.
16. For a discussion of the depleted uranium controversy see links to depleted uranium on www.viequeslibre.org and visit the website of the Military Toxics Project at www.miltoxproj.org.
17. “2 Experts Testify on Cleanup of Vieques,” *San Juan Star*, 22 July 2001. In this article, the experts were a representative of the Center for Public Environmental Oversight and the former chief of the Army’s Environmental Law Division. Testimony was given before the Puerto Rican Senate’s Agriculture, Natural Resources, and

- Energy Committee, which was holding hearings on environmental issues in Vieques. See Also Shulman 1992. Quoted in Switzer 2001, 131 n. 27.
18. In 1994, for example, President Clinton issued an executive order stating that federal agencies must consider principles of environmental justice in their decision making. A useful discussion is in Harvey 1999, 153–85; or in Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003.
 19. E.g., “Vieques Issue Is Put on Hold in Response to Terrorism,” *New York Times*, 27 September 2001, reveals the early unwillingness of both protesters and politicians to push their demands, but by early 2002, at least island activists and politicians began to speak out again.
 20. García Passalacqua has used this phrase numerous times in recent years; one example is “Calderón Is Walking the High Wire on Vieques Issue,” *San Juan Star*, 25 March 2001.
 21. Viequesenses searching for models of community-based sustainable development might turn to the Salinas case as detailed in Berman-Santana 1996.