



La lucha continúa: Challenges for a post-Navy Vieques

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the decades-long struggle to stop the U.S. Navy from bombing Vieques, Puerto Rico, end military occupation of most of the island, has made international headlines. However, concerns about Vieques's future once the bombings ceased and the bases closed have aroused less publicity. In the early 1990s some Vieques activists committed themselves to working on the island's greatest challenges, by advocating the "Four D's: Demilitarization, Decontamination, Devolution (return of lands), and (community-based, sustainable) Development." This article examines the new phase of the struggle for an economically, socially and ecologically healthy Vieques, and its implications for similar struggles elsewhere. [Key Words: Vieques, Puerto Rico, demilitarization, environmental justice, community control, gentrification, sustainable development]

In recent years the decades-long struggle to stop the U.S. Navy from bombing the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, and to end military occupation of three-quarters of the island, has made international headlines. This “David versus Goliath” story—replete with accounts of powerful, creative, and nonviolent resistance to the environmental and social degradation perpetrated by militarism—has attracted attention from environmental, peace and social justice activists and gathered support from religious, political and civic leaders in Puerto Rico, the United States and worldwide. The Vieques story has also provided material for hundreds of academic studies, many of which have recently been published.

Perhaps not surprisingly, questions regarding what might happen to the lands once the bombings ceased and the bases closed down have aroused less publicity than the more newsworthy struggle against the military presence. For years, local efforts to revive the island’s economy not only were opposed by the Navy and ignored by government and private interests, but also failed to rouse media interest or significant community support. Nonetheless, over the past decade persistent local activism that envisioned a post-Navy Vieques began to bear fruit.

In the early 1990s a number of Vieques activists formed the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CRDV) and continued protesting Navy activities in Vieques. In addition, they committed themselves to *la protesta con la propuesta* (the protest with the proposal) for the island’s biggest ecological, economic and social challenges, by advocating “the four D’s: Demilitarization, Decontamination, Devolution (return of lands) and (community-based, sustainable) Development.” In the Puerto Rican government-sponsored referendum of July 2001 on the Navy’s presence, over two-thirds of Vieques’ voters chose the option calling specifically for an immediate end to military practices, cleanup and return of all of the lands and community-controlled sustainable development. Finally, the Guidelines for the Sustainable Development of Vieques—compiled by Puerto Rican planners, scientists and economists at the request of the CRDV, and with the help of *viequenses* through dozens of community workshops over several years—played a significant role in creating the 2004 Master Plan for Sustainable Development of Vieques and Culebra, commissioned by the Puerto Rican government. Thus, the “four D’s” have come to represent the will of the people of Vieques, and have received some measure of governmental support; they also provide an appropriate framework for discussing the current situation.

May 1, 2003, represented a milestone in the struggle for demilitarization, when the U.S. Navy officially closed its base in the eastern half of Vieques, ending more than 60 years of military bombing, maneuvers and experiments. However, most close observers will agree that this “first D” has not been fully accomplished, let alone the other three. Recent publications on Vieques have offered historical, political and socioeconomic analyses of the anti-Navy campaigns (see, for example, Ayala 2000; Barreto 2002; Berman Santana 2003; McCaffrey 2002). This article focuses on considering some of the challenges activists must confront in this new phase—less colorful, perhaps, yet absolutely critical—of the struggle to achieve *una verdadera paz para Vieques* (real peace for Vieques), in other words an economically, socially and ecologically healthy island and society.¹

Demilitarization

The Naval Ammunition Supply Detachment (NASD), comprising 8,000 acres in western Vieques, officially closed on May 1, 2001, and Camp García (comprising over 14,000 acres in the eastern half of the island, including the bombing range) closed on May 1, 2003. However, the military continues to own and operate two facilities in Vieques: the ROTHr radar transmitter and the radio and communications complex atop Monte Pirata. Both facilities have historically been the focus of protests and concerns about health and environmental risks.

During the mid-1990’s activists in Vieques and Puerto Rico failed to stop the Navy from destroying a 25-acre mahogany forest in the southern part of the western lands, in order to make way for Raytheon Corporation’s Relocatable Over the Horizon Radar (ROTHR) transmitter. By bouncing radio frequency waves against the ionosphere, operators may detect objects beyond the horizon. While the Navy’s original proposal, environmental impact statement and subsequent press releases have insisted that the radar’s primary function is to detect vessels transporting illegal drugs throughout the Caribbean (U.S. Navy 1997), the military has also referred to its use for electronic warfare exercises.² The fact that the Vieques ROTHr transmitter is aimed at northern South America—with Puerto Rico as its “blind spot”—poses an obvious limitation on its effectiveness in detecting drug traffic into Puerto Rico. While allegations that the ROTHr’s chief function is connected with Plan Colombia cannot be confirmed, it is well known that electromagnetic manipulation of the ionosphere can alter global meteorological patterns—which is also a goal of similar military projects such as the High Frequency Active Aural Research Project (HAARP) (EQB 1997). The western lands transfer agreement of May 1, 2001, maintained the property occupied by the radar firmly in military hands; in addition, some 200 acres surrounding the area that was conveyed to the Municipality of Vieques were placed under a restrictive easement—in effect keeping the land under military occupation. This may possibly be due to the dangers represented by ROTHr; among other things, its operation regularly disrupts AM radio frequencies and electronic equipment in Vieques. Even more troubling, charred plastics and even animal remains have been found nearby after its use. During 2003 residents of the nearby community of La Hueca circulated a petition requesting a study of the health risks potentially posed by operation of the ROTHr radar; unfortunately, to date there has been no response.

The Navy also formally retained Monte Pirata, the island’s highest point, also located in the western part of Vieques. A guarded fence and signs warning of a “radio frequency radiation hazard” block access to the radio and communications towers-crowded peak; additionally, in 2004 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service blocked the access road at the base of the mountain. A number of federal agencies besides the Navy have used the facility, and at one point it was listed for sale (GSA 2004). In any event, demilitarization of the island is incomplete as long as the military still operates facilities there—its presence may also pose continuing health and environmental hazards.

Continued sightings of Navy war vessels close to Vieques’ coasts—such as two submarines that appeared during one August 2004 weekend—help contribute to a generalized suspicion among many *viequenses* that “la Marina no se ha ido”; in other words, they fear that Navy has not permanently left Vieques, and under certain circumstances could return to use the lands. It is important to note that while the “Clinton Directive” of January 31, 2000 (discussed below), specified that Vieques

would never again be used for military purposes, the section of the Fiscal Year 2001 National Defense Authorization Act regarding Vieques omitted that promise. While there is currently no reason to expect that the Navy would resume use of the island's lands, such a return would not be unprecedented—particularly if the lands are not cleaned and returned to civilian use.

It could also be argued that demilitarization will not be complete until all of the lands and waters contaminated by military use of Vieques are cleaned and rehabilitated for civilian use. This should include not only the lands of eastern and western Vieques, which were officially under military control; effective demilitarization should also include cleanup of the surrounding waters and the central “civilian area,” because they were also negatively impacted by military-induced pollution and pose health and environmental hazards.

Decontamination

Several recently published investigations bolster the argument that contamination generated by military activities are largely responsible for a greater—and rising—incidence of environmentally linked diseases in Vieques than in Puerto Rico as a whole, such as cancer, kidney failure and respiratory ailments. For example, a comparative study of mercury concentrations in reproductive-age women in Vieques, northeastern coastal Puerto Rico, and the east coast of the U.S. found that young women in rural, non-industrialized Vieques showed a much higher exposure to mercury than in the other, heavily industrialized areas. The study noted that the Environmental Protection Agency cited the Navy for over a hundred effluent water violations in Vieques, including discharge of mercury (EPA 1999), and that “no other source of mercury contamination has been identified in that island” (Ortiz Roque and López Rivera 2004: 756). Other studies found significant concentrations of heavy metals that form components of munitions in shallow-rooted cultivated plants in the civilian sector and fish and seafood commonly caught and eaten in Vieques (Massol Deyá and Díaz 2003; Acevedo 2004).

The Navy's standard response to environmental contamination and health concerns in Vieques (as well as in other communities affected by military contamination) has been to utilize its own contracted experts and federal agencies—particularly the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)—to bolster its claims that military activities are not the source of heavy metals contamination and higher incidences of disease (ATSDR 2003).³ Alternative explanations point to contamination from Vieques' virtually non-existent agricultural and manufacturing sectors, allege more unhealthy lifestyles or significant genetic differences between Vieques and Puerto Rico despite evidence to the contrary, and blame “naturally occurring” heavy metals even though the two islands are geologically quite similar. Moreover, such arguments ignore data compiled by the Puerto Rico Department of Health showing that Vieques registered lower than average incidences of cancer and other diseases until after the Navy intensified its bombing of Vieques with conventional (bombs, missiles, etc.) and nonconventional (depleted uranium, noxious biological warfare simulants, napalm, etc.) weapons in the 1970s (Nazario et al. 1998). None of this is surprising, however, since it is likely that any admission of responsibility by the Navy would enhance the possibility for success of several pending lawsuits, and increase pressure to spend more money on cleanup.

Some of the most pressing health issues in Vieques include the failure by the Puerto Rico Department of Health to provide results of epidemiological tests to

Vieques participants, and arrange for necessary health treatment in a timely manner. In addition, a lack of trained personnel to, for example, operate dialysis machines in the island's health center forces patients with kidney disease to travel to Fajardo at least three times per week—where, ironically, they are often cared for by nurses from Vieques who left home because they couldn't find work.

Nonetheless, even if health services were to dramatically improve in Vieques, incidences of serious diseases are likely to continue to climb for many years unless the island is thoroughly decontaminated of more than sixty years of poisoning from millions of tons of conventional explosives and nonconventional weapons such as depleted uranium and napalm. Moreover, a truly effective cleanup should not limit itself to the lands within the western and eastern military sectors, because military activities and resultant contamination also affected the central “civilian” sector. For example, the municipal landfills regularly received wastes from the bases; they even contain bombs that accidentally landed there—far from the bombing range—and have yet to be recovered. Vieques residents, including several who had jobs inside the bases, have reported clandestine dumps for toxic military residue in the area just north of the island's famous bioluminescent bay. The Navy has never confirmed local accounts of experimental spraying of mangroves near Media Luna Beach with Agent Orange in the early 1960s; nonetheless, it is well known and documented that various locations near civilian populations throughout Puerto Rico suffered environmental damage as part of that chemical weapon's development. The virtually lifeless condition of the area in question suggests that some catastrophic event occurred, which should be investigated. In fact, significant resources should be devoted to a thorough investigation of military-induced contamination in the civilian zones—including identifying and removing unexploded munitions, which are often discovered in heavily used areas.

During the second half of 2004 a virtual deluge of draft documents requiring public commentary within a limited time frame threatened to inundate Vieques activists, leaving precious little time for educating and organizing the community. Documents specifically related to the cleanup process included a draft charter to govern the new Restoration Advisory Board (RAB), the proposed designation of Vieques (and possibly Culebra) as a Superfund site, a Community Relations Plan for the EPA, and scoping for a land management plan to be developed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for the lands placed under its control. A brief review illustrates some of the challenges activists currently face.

Since the 1980s all federal government agencies have been instructed to seek the most effective ways of facilitating community participation in processes that are likely to affect them. Efforts by the Defense Department to clean up and rehabilitate formerly used military sites are included in this directive. At first the military would select community members to sit on a Technical Review Committee (TRC); however, community organizations largely rejected it as failing to promote adequate representation, provide sufficient information exchange on cleanup efforts or encourage broad community participation. Since the mid-1990s the Restoration Advisory Board (RAB) has largely replaced the TRC as a mechanism for formal community participation. Among other distinctions between the two entities, community members elect their own representatives, and all meetings are open to the public. In addition, although the EPA and the Defense Department jointly developed the framework and the military approves the first membership list, each RAB writes and approves its own operating charter—including determining its

own membership procedures. Some 200 RABs currently operate throughout the United States and its territories. While not perfect, experience shows that a self-directed and broadly representative RAB can provide an important tool for informing the community about cleanup issues and pressuring the military and regulatory agencies into responding to local issues and concerns.

After closing the NASD in 2001 the Navy formed a TRC in Vieques instead of a RAB; the military chose the members, decided on the TRC's technical advisors, and held meetings without informing or inviting the general public. In addition, all documents and meetings were in English, even though Spanish is the primary—and usually only—language of the overwhelming majority of viequeses. The language problem began to be resolved towards the end of the TRC's existence in 2004, when the Navy converted it into a RAB. Most of the charter members of the new RAB also belonged to the TRC; moreover, it appears that the draft charter proposed by the Navy at the first RAB meeting in August 2004 had been written and approved by the old TRC. Some of the new RAB members who had not belonged to the TRC have expressed concerns about possibly being marginalized by the more experienced ex-TRC majority. Some of the strongest criticisms of the old TRC were that its membership had not been representative of the Vieques community, and that it did not organize activities to inform the public during its nearly three years of meeting with the Navy regarding cleanup of the western lands. It remains to be seen whether the RAB will be able to broaden its representation and outreach and thus promote greater community input regarding the Navy's cleanup efforts. It is also important to note that the RAB addressed cleanup issues only in the western lands; however, even before Vieques was designated as a Superfund site the Navy had begun to include discussion of the more complex eastern lands (including the former bombing range) within the mandate of the same RAB—which may prove too burdensome for the RAB as currently constituted.

In May 2003 Puerto Rico Governor Sila M. Calderón petitioned the EPA to place Vieques and Culebra (both formerly part of the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility, or AFTWF) in the National Priorities List (NPL) for environmental cleanup (also popularly known as the Superfund List). If approved, Vieques would be considered to be among the 100 priority federal cleanup sites. Moreover, since the responsible polluter was the federal government, rather than a private company, Congress must appropriate funding for cleanup within the defense budget. By the summer of 2004 the proposal had passed all initial stages (at least for Vieques; inclusion of Culebra was delayed), and public commentary was invited. The EPA published notices in various media and informed members of its Vieques mailing list well in advance of the October 12, 2004, deadline; the arrival of more than two thousand letters from organizations and individuals from Puerto Rico, the United States and internationally in favor of the proposal was evidence of continuing interest and solidarity with the ongoing Vieques struggle. Since no serious opposition had developed, most observers expected approval of the proposal to include Vieques as a Superfund site. Final approval was announced in February 2005; among other things, the EPA is now expected to take a more active role in overseeing the cleanup process. The fact that the EPA has opened and staffed an office in Vieques indicates that the cleanup process is expected to be long and costly.

Nonetheless, it must be stressed that it is not Superfund status that determines the level of cleanup of a site, but rather its planned future use. The necessary level of cleanup is determined by expected risks to human health. For example, a site that

will be used for residences would imply more intensive human use than a wildlife refuge, and therefore would require more thorough cleanup. A report prepared by the Congressional Research Service during the summer of 2004 confirmed what many Vieques activists feared: that the Navy plans to use the current designation of half of the western lands and all of the eastern lands as wildlife refuge to argue that a budget of less than \$200 million would adequately fulfill its cleanup obligations (Bearden and Luther 2004). Vieques-based officials of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) have complained of problems getting enough community input for their Vieques National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan, a fifteen-year management plan that as of November 2004 did not yet exist. Part of the problem, no doubt, is that viequeses have often expressed resentment that the Navy transferred the lands to yet another federal agency; moreover, some traditional uses of the lands are now even more restricted than they were under the Navy, such as horseback riding, livestock grazing, crabbing and coconut gathering. While FWS argues that such activities amidst still-contaminated lands would endanger the public and interfere with wildlife protection, local residents respond that the restrictions violate long established cultural and economic practice in lands that have been inhabited for four thousand years. Designation of these lands as a nature refuge artificially excludes humans and provides a circular justification for not cleaning thoroughly, since restricted lands allegedly pose less risk to human health. Only an admission by the Navy that military contamination in the restricted areas migrates to and negatively impacts health in the civilian sector might force a more thorough cleanup of the lands under FWS control. This problem, among others, drives Vieques activists to seek the return of all of the lands to civilian control and balanced use for development as well as protection.

Devolution

Over the years viequeses have struggled to recover lands taken by the military in a variety of ways. For example, during the 1970s many took part in “land invasions” and set up homesteads on lands held by the Navy but essentially unused, particularly lands bordering the civilian sector (Rabin 1999; Giusti 1999). These “communities of resistance,” such as Villa Borinquen, were eventually transferred to the municipality of Vieques—though many residents still do not have title to their property. In addition, in 1994 the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques testified in Congress in favor of a bill to return the western lands to local control; two years later the Committee collaborated with Columbia University's Urban Technical Assistance Project to publish a western land use plan detailing residential, agricultural and conservation zones (UTAP and CRDV 1996). Even during the year between April 1999 and May 2000—when fourteen protest camps in the far eastern lands bombing range blocked the Navy from using it—protesters planted trees, built a church and school, and set up solar panels as they witnessed nature's own attempts to reclaim and restore lands after decades of military-induced environmental degradation. It was clear to most observers that a resolution to the political crisis between Puerto Rico and the United States provoked by the Vieques issue should address the future of the lands in question.

On January 31, 2000, President Clinton and Puerto Rico Governor Rosselló agreed to remove the protest camps and resume Navy training. Instead of issuing an executive order, Clinton issued a presidential directive, which would require legislation and therefore could be changed by Congress. Key points stipulated that,

firstly, bombing would resume for up to 90 days per year with “inert” (non-explosive) bombs. Secondly, viequeses would vote—on a date set by the Navy—between only two options: either Navy bombings could continue only until May 2003, in exchange for \$40 million dollars, or permanent live fire would resume, in exchange for an extra \$50 million. The most popular option—the immediate and permanent end to Navy training—was not included. Thirdly, Puerto Rico would police the area near the bases, and agree not to file lawsuits.

Finally, the western lands would be cleaned up, and—except for the military radar and radio complexes—would be transferred to Puerto Rico by December 31, 2000 (Clinton 2000).

The Navy officially accepted the directives. But its allies in Congress vowed to change them, since they did not guarantee indefinite and unlimited use of Vieques and included a civilian vote on military practices; meanwhile, in Puerto Rico activists denounced the plan as a fraud. Not surprisingly, in October 2000 an amendment (found in Sections 1503–1508) was added to the Fiscal year 2001 National Defense Authorizations Act, popularly known as the “Spence Act,” that changed the presidential directive. First, the Navy would not leave the western lands until May 2001, six months after the U.S. and Puerto Rico elections; moreover, instead of giving all those lands back to Puerto Rico for the benefit of Vieques, as the directives had stated, most of the lands would be split between the municipal government of Vieques and the U.S. Dept of the Interior. The land transfer was carried out in a hurried meeting in Washington, D.C, on April 30, 2001. The mayor of Vieques was not present, because—along with hundreds of others—he was in the bombing range impeding Navy exercises at the time.

Fourteen of the 17 toxic sites identified by the Navy are located in the lands given to the municipality; those areas would therefore remain under Navy control until a cleanup was completed. The Navy additionally restricted use of over 600 acres turned over to Vieques and the Interior Department but near the radar and radio complex sites, also retaining rights of way in civilian roads and ports. Worst of all: the law declared that if Vieques residents voted in the planned referendum to remove the Navy the eastern lands would be transferred completely to the Department of the Interior; in particular, the bombing range would be declared a “wilderness area”—even though it hardly qualifies under the Wilderness Act as an area “untrammeled by man” (U.S. Congress 1964)—and simply closed to the public, thus putting in doubt any meaningful cleanup. If carried out as written, this act would once again confine the viequeses between contaminated and restricted federal lands. Indeed, the Memorandum of Agreement of May 1, 2003, signed by the Navy and the Department of the Interior, arranged for an administrative transfer of the eastern lands to the latter precisely under the terms specified by the Spence Act. Again, a meaningful demilitarization of the lands should include adequate cleanup and rehabilitation for nonmilitary use, which the current law does not provide.

One of the arguments offered by congressional authors of the change to the Presidential directive regarding land disposition was that retaining federal control over the lands as a wildlife refuge would protect them from private developers and giant tourism projects. The fact that these congressional leaders were noted for their opposition to environmental legislation and had fiercely opposed an end to military use of Vieques—and made no attempt to hide their contempt for Puerto Ricans—cast doubt upon their alleged concern for the island’s ecological or economic well-being. Nonetheless, the wave of real estate speculation presently occurring in the

civilian sector indicates that it could also become a problem in lands not under FWS control (although even under FWS business concessions could be granted to outside interests). Should Vieques activists eventually succeed in their lobbying efforts to revise the Vieques-related sections of the Spence Law and achieve the transfer of federally controlled lands to Puerto Rican or municipal control, some mechanism to prevent land speculation must be enacted and enforced, in order to avoid “the Navy’s replacement by Hilton,” as more than one local activist has warned.

Development

In 1999 a large group of San Juan-based professionals responded to a call from Vieques activists for ongoing technical assistance. The Technical and Professional Support Group (known as GATP for its initials in Spanish) included planners, attorneys, health professionals, ecologists, economists and other individuals with the expertise needed to assist the viequeses in developing their own development and conservation plans. This group worked on a completely voluntary basis for over three years to flesh out the details of a community-directed, ecologically and socially sustainable land use and development plan; significantly, the work from the start included dozens of meetings and workshops in Vieques, in order to learn what the people themselves saw as their most pressing problems and possible solutions. Volume One of the *Guidelines for a Sustainable Development of Vieques* (known as “las Guías”) was completed during Summer 2000; it presented a detailed picture of present economic, social and environmental challenges, including analyses and suggestions given in dozens of community workshops. Volume Two, completed in 2002, detailed specific strategies for responsible and integrated land use planning and development in areas such as ecological and historical conservation, housing, community education, tourism, agriculture and fishing, manufacturing and services (GATP 2002). This document received quite a bit of publicity and was championed by the governor’s appointed Commissioner for Vieques and Culebra and the Mayor of Vieques, among others, as the basis for economic and land use planning.

On August 10, 2002, the Puerto Rican government enacted Law 153 to create a Special Economic Development Zone for the island municipalities of Vieques and Culebra. Among other things the law created an Interagency Committee—composed of the heads of government departments and agencies such as the Departments of Natural Resources and Agriculture, the Planning Board and the Tourism Company, and chaired by the Commissioner for Vieques and Culebra and the Secretary of Economic Development—to oversee the creation and implementation of an integrated, sustainable, and community-oriented development plan (Puerto Rico Legislature 2002). In January 2004 the Interagency Committee awarded a contract to create the master plan for implementation to EstudiosTécnicos, Inc., a San Juan-based firm that includes among its associates one of the coordinators of GATP. The firm was given just five months to complete the draft. During the month of March several public meetings were held in Vieques to hear the public’s concerns and suggestions regarding issues such as infrastructure, health care, job creation, transportation to and from Puerto Rico, housing, land use and protection from speculators and natural resources conservation. The draft was completed in July; all that remained was to hold a public hearing and approve the master plan for implementation.

Curiously, following its completion in July 2004 the draft master plan—about which the government had expressed such urgency—appeared to have

dropped from sight. Concerned that years of work might be lost in the heat of election-year politics, the CRDV and key Puerto Rico advisors held a press conference in September to call for the plan to be approved and put into action. The very next day the state government responded that it was merely awaiting a “harmonization” of the section of draft master plan regarding coastal zonification with the municipal land use plan that had been approved in 2000, which the current mayor had vowed to revise. Law 153 had specified that the municipal plan should be revised so as to “harmonize” with the master plan. However, it was not immediately clear whether the holdup had more to do with a turf struggle between state and municipal governments, or to possible lobbying by powerful interests to loosen the draft master plan’s proposed restrictions on large-scale, privatizing coastal development. Public hearings on the draft master plan were finally held during November 2004, and it received final approval the following month. The plan could potentially provide a powerful tool for guiding Vieques development for years to come—provided that Vieques community organizations are able to participate in a meaningful way in its implementation. Unfortunately, its potential effectiveness in halting the “gentrification”—or the progressive displacement of a poor native community by more affluent outsiders through rising property values and economic marginalization—of the central “civilian zone” is uncertain, since that process is already well under way.

For at least twenty years Vieques has been home to two distinct and nearly separate communities: the first is the larger, Spanish-speaking community of “viequenses” who are ethnically and historically Puerto Rican, while the second is a growing community of North Americans and others (Rivera Torres and Torres 1996). The latter group (whose estimates range between 1000–2000) includes ex-Marines, aging hippies and entrepreneurs who dominate the island’s tourism and real estate economic sectors, as well as part-time resident vacation homeowners. While some have integrated themselves into the larger community, the majority of “expatriates” (as they call themselves) maintains a separate, English-speaking enclave that is reminiscent of similar communities in the Caribbean. Their advertised business goals of helping to smooth out the “path to paradise” for prospective residents from northern climes treats Vieques as another “Fantasy Island” in much the same way as does the settler community of Hawai’i; at the same time their fictitious references to Vieques and Culebra as the “Spanish Virgin Islands” recall various proposals over the years by some U.S. government and private interests to politically detach the two island municipalities from Puerto Rico.⁴

One unintended consequence of the anti-military activism in Vieques during the past five years was that the increased international attention also attracted more outside interest in buying up the island and profiting from its resources. The Navy’s announcement of January 2003 that it would leave the island caused a business and real estate boom that was “like day and night,” according to some North American business owners (Dreyfuss 2004; Ruíz Marrero 2004). The English-speaking community, always economically powerful, began increasingly to flex its political muscles as well. For example, public hearings held in Vieques on January 22, 2004, to consider a proposal by the Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources to build modest cabins in the Sun Bay State Beach, attracted opposition from an unusually large and vocal contingent of “los gringos” (as most viequenses call them). They cited concerns about negative environmental impacts as prompting their opposition, as well as fears that the cabins would draw tourists away from their own establishments.

It is thus notable that they have not expressed significant opposition to another proposal, from a New York-based consortium called the SunBay Company, that plans to take over 500 acres of land in and around Sun Bay—including the local Fishing Association’s pier and planned center—for a tourism complex that would include upscale hotels, vacation condominiums, a luxury marina and a golf resort. The firm has sought most of its funding for the project from Puerto Rico government loans and incentives—in other words, from the Puerto Rican taxpayers; within ten years of completion of the project the properties would be sold off at a handsome profit (SunBay Company 1999). One might expect that such a far-reaching, large-scale proposal—by outsiders and for outsiders, and clearly speculative—would be more likely to have a greater negative environmental and economic impact than the much smaller, internal tourist-directed Puerto Rican proposal, and thus be largely opposed by the English-speaking community. On the contrary, many prominent members of this community have publicly expressed support for the project; significantly, they also strongly backed—and helped finance—the 2004 electoral campaign of the only candidate for mayor of Vieques who openly supported the SunBay development.⁵

There is indeed strong opposition to the SunBay Company project in Vieques; however, it comes almost exclusively from the larger community of viequenses, who also express concern about what they refer to as the “Hawaiiization” of their island. Viequenses are aggressively pursued both by real estate agents and visiting individuals, who offer previously unheard-of amounts of cash for their property—even when not titled—and some find such offers irresistible. Moreover, the brokers serve as promoters for exclusive new developments, such as a planned “gated community” along the north central coast asking half a million dollars per acre lot, that openly challenge Puerto Rico’s laws forbidding privatization of coastal lands.⁶

Meanwhile, within the larger community more than 600 working families cannot afford to buy or rent a home on their own island, and are forced to double up with relatives. Under such circumstances the sight of scores of locked, vacant vacation homes creates a tremendous amount of resentment, which could fuel an explosive social situation. Recognizing the seriousness of the problem, local officials and activists have been seeking effective mechanisms that might be employed to halt the “gentrification” of Vieques. For example, the municipal government decreed a moratorium on sales of untitled properties until their title status is resolved; however, real estate agents claim that their rights under a capitalist system allow them to continue to promote outside sales and price inflation—and sales of untitled land continues unabated.

Another idea, that of a Community Land Trust (CLT), may hold greater promise for slowing down the rate of land price inflation. Briefly: a CLT, whose members are permanent residents of a community, buys and holds land, while the buildings on the property can be bought and inherited by individuals. CLT’s have helped to slow down land appreciation in a number of low-income communities throughout the United States, while providing affordable local housing and offering some continuity for future generations. In Puerto Rico a model already exists: the Community Land Trust of Caño Martín Peña, located in a low-income area of San Juan. The Trust, enacted into law by the Puerto Rican legislature, offers a measure of protection from gentrifying pressures; ironically, it was inspired by the work of the Guidelines for Sustainable Development of Vieques, produced by GATP. This “coming full circle” of “la protesta con la propuesta” illustrates not only the importance of the Vieques experience for communities in the rest of Puerto Rico—as has been discussed by so

many Vieques activists from the “big island” (Berman Santana 2002)—but also demonstrates how that experience can further develop elsewhere and eventually return to benefit Vieques.

A myriad of other challenges, from providing reliable transportation to and from Puerto Rico and establishing post-secondary education and training, to improving health services and increasing employment options, face the Vieques activists. The island also suffers from serious social problems that frequently afflict poor communities but are also historic legacies of military occupation, such as teen pregnancy, domestic violence and drug abuse. The cessation of bombing may have also ended—or at least temporarily deactivated—the network of active supporters for the Vieques struggle, which could threaten those who continue to work daily on Vieques issues with “activist burnout.”

Yet each day that goes by without the roar of warplanes overhead drowning out conversations, or children crying because their classroom’s ceiling cracked from a 500-pound bomb’s impact a few miles away, reminds us that years of struggle and solidarity produced a miracle in Vieques: closing down an active U.S. military base in the midst of a worldwide wartime expansion. This successful campaign achieved a broad-based consensus and participation that is rare, not only for Puerto Rico but for any society. The current phase of the Vieques struggle represents the efforts of millions of communities throughout the world for a chance to participate actively in decisions that will affect their ability to live well in their own home territory, and pass on their knowledge of and love for that home to future generations. In Vieques, “la lucha continúa”—and its future holds great significance for us all.



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NOTES

¹ Sources of information for this article include published and unpublished documents (cited below), interviews and personal observation in Vieques over a span of more than twenty years, but particularly between 2000–2005.

² This Navy website—removed after receiving wide publicity shortly after the death of David Sanes, depicts the ROTHRA radar site in western Vieques as forming part of the Navy’s Electronic Warfare Simulation Range. The cancelled page may be viewed at <http://www.viequeslibre.addr.com/espanol/articulos/cancelada/cancelada.htm>.

³ A landmark report (Lewis et al. 1992) charged that the ATSDR and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) “routinely funded and conducted studies of effects of toxic pollution on public health which are inconclusive by design. These intentionally inconclusive studies have been used by polluters and government officials to mislead local citizens into believing that further measures to prevent toxic exposures are unnecessary” (Lewis et al. 1992: 3). This is particularly reinforced when a federal government department—such as the Navy—is the polluter.

⁴ See <http://www.enchanted-isle.com> for numerous references to Vieques as “Paradise” and a “Spanish Virgin Island.” The most recent proposal to detach Vieques from Puerto Rico circulated on Capitol Hill in 2001 during the most intense phase of the struggle against the bombing. According to the *Vieques Times* (March/April 2001), a U.S. Senator suggested to one Navy employee from Vieques that over 200 million dollars could be allocated for this new entity, in exchange for the employee’s leading a campaign to support continued military use of the island.

⁵ See, for example, a September 2004 letter soliciting campaign funds, found at <http://www.tikihutvieques.com/Page-Info.html>.

⁶ Information taken from the Summer 2004 handout of the real estate company Connections, as well as from its website listing as of November 10, 2004: http://viequesrealtor.elistados.com/details_es.php?results_listPage=3&cp_id=2361.

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