

# Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy

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**E**NVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS AND SCHOLARS HAVE FREQUENTLY CON-  
demned toxic capitalism's poisoning of communities of color as criminal  
in nature (Simon, 2000). However, rarely is their critique specifically  
directed at the United States military. Indeed, the military sees itself as the  
country's "oldest, largest, busiest, and most successful company," whose 588  
"plants" (bases) and \$270 billion in budget revenues during 1999 — growing to  
\$400 billion by 2003 — dwarfed all other U.S. corporate giants (Department of  
Defense, 2000). Patricia Hynes (1999: 49) observed that "the Pentagon is the  
largest sole consumer of energy in the United States, and very likely, worldwide."  
By its own admission, the military burns enough gas per day to drive a car 13,000  
times around the world, operates 550 public utilities, uses one-quarter of U.S.  
hydropower capacity, and generates most of the nuclear waste in the U.S.  
Moreover, the Defense Department's generation of over 750,000 tons of toxic  
waste per year dwarfs the combined toxic production of the top three chemical  
companies (St. Clair and Cockburn, 2001). It seems clear that the toxic legacy of  
this biggest of "big businesses" deserves much more attention.

Although the U.S. government has attempted to sanction some polluters, its  
preferential treatment of the worst polluters — the largest and most powerful  
corporations — reveals Washington's complicity in toxic capitalism. The mili-  
tary, as the largest corporation and most egregious polluter, has been subject to less  
oversight, regulation, and sanction than any other toxic criminal has. Before 1980,  
the military was not subject to any environmental regulations and rarely docu-  
mented toxic or hazardous waste disposal (Zito, 2002). Not until 1988, for  
example, was the military required to take into account how endangered species  
might be affected by its activities. In 1999, Congress shielded the military from

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requirements to pay fines for breaking environmental laws, but the Pentagon still complained that “encroachment” — the expanding protection of areas to benefit ecological or social health — was harming military readiness. Therefore, peace and justice activists were hardly surprised when the “war against terrorism” was invoked to justify a proposed total military exemption from environmental laws.

Among its many contradictions, the purported military mission to protect society is violated by its activities, which endanger human and environmental health. Moreover, as befits a rigidly hierarchical institution charged with assuring global dominance by the U.S. elite, these activities disproportionately threaten communities where peoples of color live and work: urban ghettos, tribal lands, and colonized countries. If corporate criminals all too often get off with a mere slap on the wrist, the military is literally getting away with murder. By contrast, resistance to such criminal abuses is criminalized; activists engaging in peaceful civil disobedience to block threatening military activities are often punished with stiff fines and prison sentences. If those who try to stop abuse of colonized and oppressed peoples and lands are punished, while the criminals go free, then the legal system is facilitating toxic capitalism in its most lethal form: militarism.

Anti-military movements among peoples of color, linked to struggles for environmental and social justice and self-determination, are growing stronger and building networks across the globe. The Pentagon has acknowledged its fear of a “domino” effect from such movements, which could restrict its hold on power — and corporate patrons’ dollars. Challenging militarism should be central to any critique of “toxic capitalism.” It is particularly helpful to study and support movements that articulate the criminal nature of U.S. military activities and the toxic nature of capitalism, while working toward community-controlled use and protection of resources. There is probably no clearer example than the grass-roots struggle to oblige the U.S. Navy to stop bombing Vieques, Puerto Rico, and clean up and return the lands for community directed, ecologically and socially sustainable use. A brief introduction to the land, the people, and the struggle illuminates militarism’s key role in toxic capitalism, while offering guidelines to help replace such destructive “dominoes” with life-affirming alternatives.

### **Vieques: The Land and the People**

The hilly island of Vieques, known affectionately as “*isla nena*” (little girl island), lies six miles off the southeastern coast of Puerto Rico and comprises some 33,000 acres. Its ecology is known for considerable diversity and its fertile soils have historically supported a wide variety of crops. Some of the earliest human remains found in the Caribbean — more than 4,000 years old — were discovered on Vieques. Although archaeologists believe that Vieques holds an important key to understanding Caribbean pre-Columbian history, the military occupation of the island has severely restricted its study (Rodríguez, 1999). At the time of Columbus, Arawak-speaking Taínos ruled Vieques (literally, “little island”). Although

the Spanish killed their leaders in battle and scattered the population, for centuries the “little island” resisted full Spanish control.

During the 19th century, Spain officially began settling Vieques, offering land to Spanish and other Europeans for agricultural development. The settlers brought workers — enslaved and free people of African descent — to provide labor in the expanding plantation economy. These laborers continued Vieques’ tradition of resistance by protesting poor working conditions. Though titled land ownership was concentrated in the hands of relatively few families, by law workers had inheritable usufruct rights over homes and lands; abundant fishing also lessened dependence upon the wealthy. By the early 20th century, more than 10,000 residents were counted, and several thousand more traveled to nearby islands to work — or escaped notice in many isolated settlements. After the U.S. invaded and occupied Puerto Rico in 1898, land concentration increased in sugar cane regions such as Vieques; by the 1930s, the local elite was joined by a U.S.-based corporation in owning 70% of the little island’s acreage. Existing race, class, and gender inequities were exacerbated by the new colonial regime and helped set the stage for the Navy’s occupation of the island (Ayala, 2001).

### **The Navy’s War Against Vieques**

Long before 1898, the U.S. Navy had been interested in establishing bases in Puerto Rico, including the strategically located islands of Vieques and Culebra (Berman Santana, 1998). The Navy began bombing practice in Culebra in 1901 and field maneuvers in Vieques as early as the 1920s. In 1938, Admiral William Leahy wrote the first draft of a bill that would allow the Navy to acquire land in the U.S. and its territories for new bases and training areas; the following year he was named governor of Puerto Rico. In March 1941, Congress approved a sweeping bill allowing military expropriation of vast expanses of land; another law, passed in August, allowed the Navy to take immediate possession of targeted lands in Vieques. In effect, Washington’s plan to build a giant base to shelter the British fleet plunged Vieques into World War II even before the United States was officially at war. Between 1941 and 1943, the Navy took over 21,000 of the island’s 33,000 acres. The entire western portion of the island — where most of the rural settlements were located — was expropriated, along with 10,000 acres in the sparsely settled eastern section, but the Navy takeover also included 2,500 acres in the central part of the island.

The two largest landowners were fairly well compensated, but dozens of small property owners — and thousands of residents who had use rights, but no title — were given scant hours’ notice, offered \$25 to \$100 for their belongings, and warned they would be bulldozed along with their homes if they didn’t move fast enough. The displaced were offered lots in the lands taken by the Navy in the island’s center, on condition that they sign a contract recognizing that they could be ordered to vacate “Navy property” on short notice. These lands were generally

rough brush lands lacking services or buildings; several women gave birth in the fields because there was no time to build shelters for them (Cordero Ventura, 2001). In time, people built homes in the parcels, but despite promises did not receive titles to those lands after the war. Over the years, community land invasions helped force the Navy to transfer these central lands to the local government. Even today, however, most Viequenses lack affordable access to title.

Organized opposition to the Navy was at first blunted by fear of political persecution, strong support for the Allied war effort, and the many jobs created to build the giant base. Work included constructing a giant pier that was to stretch all the way to Puerto Rico. Among the other projects were flattening and removing land and vegetation to make way for hundreds of underground bunkers and weapons storage facilities, operating rock and sand quarries for building materials, and building roads and bridges to accommodate tanks throughout the western end, including in sensitive mangroves and wetlands. However, by 1943 it became clear that the British Navy would not need the shelter and work on the base was abandoned. Not surprisingly, the first major anti-Navy protest took place in 1943, because Vieques would soon be left without land and jobs (Ayala, 2001: 36).

Opposition was also tempered by the expectation that after the war the lands would be returned. In 1945, the Navy leased thousands of acres to the Puerto Rican government, which began a series of agricultural projects that rehabilitated lands and created over 600 jobs (Bonnet Benítez, 1977: 121–126). In 1947, though, the Navy dropped another bombshell: they announced that they would retake the lands they had leased and expropriate over 4,000 additional acres. Although a local group called “Sons of Vieques” organized protests, the Navy ended up with 26,000 of Vieques’ 33,000 acres — over 76% of the island — with civilians squeezed in the middle, imprisoned in a reservation (Melendéz López, 1982).

The eastern half of Vieques became Camp García, a base that often housed thousands of U.S. Marines. Their “Eastern Maneuver Area” forms part of the Atlantic Fleet’s premier bombing, training, and weapons testing facility; it has also been used for joint maneuvers with NATO and OAS forces, and has been rented out to other countries and weapons manufacturers. In 1948, the Navy held its first large-scale war games in Vieques, in which 60 ships, 350 planes, and 50,000 troops from all branches of the U.S. military participated. The games displayed the racism underlying the Vieques occupation: invading forces (the U.S. troops, called “Blues” and given English names) attacked and conquered the island, which was defended by the Puerto Rico National Guard, called “Blacks” and given Spanish names (*Ibid.*: 78–79). The western lands housed the Naval Ammunitions Supply Depot (NASD), which stored all kinds of weapons and explosives. Open burning and detonation of munitions and other toxic substances has been a common practice, even without the required permits. Training over the years has included documented use of “non-conventional” (biological, chemical, nuclear) arms such

as “depleted” uranium and napalm (Lindsay-Poland and Berman Santana, 2001). Additionally, millions of hair-sized aluminum- or lead-covered glass fibers known as “chaff” are routinely dispersed during exercises.

The Navy proposed numerous times to remove the entire civilian population from Vieques, and even the dead from the cemetery in a plan known locally as “Plan Dracula.” Each time popular resistance defeated the plans. Unlike many military bases in the U.S., after the early 1940s the Navy was never a primary source of employment for Vieques. Even indirect economic activity, such as the proliferation of bars and laundry services, was offset by the loss of small businesses serving the needs of a shrinking civilian-focused society; moreover, the new businesses became flashpoints for alcohol- and sex-related conflicts (Ayala, 2001: 35). Tensions rose over the years, when military personnel — often thousands of Marines let loose in the civilian sector — engaged in sexual assaults on women and children and drunken brawls with local men. Although a number of Viequesens were killed in such altercations, as well as in accidents from explosives, no military personnel ever faced criminal charges. Local resistance grew to the extent that sailors and Marines were often attacked with bottles and stones; finally, in the early 1980s the military stopped allowing off-duty personnel to enter the civilian sector.

An intense round of anti-military activism in the 1970s forced the Navy out of Culebra, but not from Vieques. In fact, in 1979 several key leaders were given federal prison terms for holding a religious service in the restricted area. One, Angel Rodríguez Cristóbal, was murdered in prison (Meléndez López, 1982). After losing Culebra as a bombing range, the Navy intensified its use of Vieques for bombing, land maneuvers, and weapons testing. Interestingly, U.S. Marines were no longer stationed in large numbers in Camp García once destructive practices were intensified. When toxic contamination grew exponentially, many patrolling and security duties were contracted out to a firm that hired Viequesens.

Today, Vieques is an island and people fighting against extinction. Between 1983 and 1998, the Navy dropped 17,783 tons of bombs on Vieques.<sup>1</sup> The “Live Impact Area” — 900 acres at the eastern end of the island where ships and planes practice bombing — contains more craters per square inch than the moon does (Seguinot, 1994: 114). Parts of the rock substrata are damaged and much of the soil has been pulverized. Navy-contracted “experts” have minimized the importance of indigenous sites, and many have been destroyed. Far from demonstrating concern, a recent Navy document claimed that since bombing has destroyed so many of the cultural resources, little probably remained, so continued bombing would have no significant negative impact (U.S. Navy, 2001: 4.13–14). Around the bombing zone, key plants and animals in the local food chain show dangerous amounts of heavy metals, particularly components of weapons and targets such as arsenic, barium, cadmium, chromium, cobalt, copper, cyanide, lead, nickel, tin, vanadium, and zinc (Massol Deyá and Díaz, 2001). The prevailing easterly trade

winds carry contaminated dust from the impact area directly into the civilian zone, where the same contaminants show up in excessive amounts in vegetation and residents. Civilian water supplies have also shown traces of military explosives since at least the late 1970s. Cancer, heart disease, and kidney, reproductive, respiratory, and skin ailments linked to the same heavy metals have increased dramatically since the 1970s and now occur at higher rates in Vieques than in Puerto Rico, particularly among children (Nazario et al., 2002). If the higher than average mortality rate in Vieques cannot be explained by significant differences in age distribution or lifestyle — both of which are similar to other rural municipalities — then environmental contamination must be considered. Since so little polluting economic activity occurs in Vieques, the most obvious contamination source is the Navy.

Because the giant Roosevelt Roads Navy Base blocks the shortest sea route to Puerto Rico, people and goods must travel to Vieques from Fajardo, which is 17 miles and over an hour away. The local clinic has been so badly under-funded that most medical needs — including prenatal care and childbirth — must be met by going to the big island. Not surprisingly, the island suffers from higher rates of low birth weight and infant mortality than is the case in the rest of Puerto Rico. Fishing suffers from damage to marine habitats, which for years have evidenced degradation related to bombing and other military activities; the many days when Navy maneuvers severely limit fishing (more than half the year during the 1990s) also hurt the industry. For years, the Navy opposed attempts to strongly develop the tourism or manufacturing industries, preferring instead to limit traffic in and around Vieques. Over the years, thousands of Viequenses were forced to migrate in search of work, so that the population steadily declined to seven or eight thousand, and has only recently grown to just over nine thousand. The island's small tourism industry is dominated by a growing settler community of more than 1,000 white North Americans and Europeans, who drive up real estates prices (properties often advertised only among themselves), build walled villas and rental condos, disparage the locals, and dream of separating Vieques and Culebra from Puerto Rico to create the "Spanish Virgin Islands." Young people in Vieques have few alternatives to leaving; some take jobs that will allow them to retire early, hoping to return with a pension, but others never return. More than one Viequense has described their community as an "endangered species" and referred to the ongoing colonization as "Hawaii-zation."

### **Vieques Fights Back: Struggle for Peace and Justice**

Since the 1940s, local resistance has had its periods of organized activity, such as the broad-based campaign that prevented further military expropriations in the 1960s and the fishermen-led disruptions of Navy exercises during the 1970s. Such periods of open resistance were frequently followed by political buyouts or repression and a less active interlude. Besides grass-roots organizing to oppose the

Navy, the municipal assembly passed resolutions during each decade since the 1950s that called for the Navy to leave and return the lands to the people. In the early 1990s, activists in Vieques formed the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CRDV) and continued protesting Navy activities there. They also offered "*la protesta con la propuesta*" (the protest with the proposal) for the island's biggest ecological, economic, and social challenges, advocating "the four D's: Demilitarization, Decontamination, Devolution (of lands), and (community-based, sustainable) Development." In 1995, CRDV testified in the U.S. Congress in favor of a bill to return the western lands to Vieques' control; they also put forth an integrated land use plan that included some urban growth to ease overcrowding, integrated development of fishing, small-scale tourism and agriculture, and conservation of sensitive and historic sites. They also called for a "community land trust" to manage the returned lands and a "community extension program" for research, education, and training. Unfortunately, Congress shelved the bill and the land-use plan got little attention. Then on April 19, 1999, two 500-pound bombs killed a civilian guard named David Sanes, igniting a major anti-Navy movement that captured world attention.

Activism since 1999 has included rallies in Puerto Rico — such as a February 2000 march by over 150,000 people in San Juan — and wherever Puerto Ricans live, including major protests in New York and the 2000 Democratic Convention in Los Angeles. Fundraising efforts feature concerts, plays, and films, fueled by a Vieques-inspired cultural explosion. There have also been ongoing commitments from labor unions and other organizations. Regular efforts to educate and lobby Congress included a visit by hundreds of Viequeses and Puerto Ricans to Washington, D.C., during March 2001, when some legislators expressed surprise that Vieques was inhabited! By far, the most powerful activism has been militant, nonviolent civil disobedience. Two days after David Sanes was killed, Puerto Rican environmental activist Alberto de Jesús ("Tito Kayak") decided to stay on the bombing range to prevent more Navy bombing. Thousands of Puerto Ricans and others followed his example, and within a year, 14 protest camps had been established, representing teachers, fishermen, church groups, and others.

Since May 4, 2000 — when the U.S. government sent in federal marshals, the FBI, and the military to remove the protesters — over 1,500 people have been arrested for continuing to enter whenever the Navy sends its battle groups for bombing practice. Hundreds have served prison sentences of up to six months for the misdemeanor offense of trespassing. Well-known arrestees such as the Reverend Al Sharpton and Robert Kennedy, Jr., helped bring attention to the Vieques struggle, but ordinary people from all segments of Puerto Rican society, who risk their lives for peace, form the backbone. The Navy has failed to neutralize the movement through offers of base employment, cash payments, and other gifts, as well as a heavily financed public relations campaign. This was evidenced by a July 29, 2001, vote in which 70% of Viequeses voted for the Navy to leave. Not

even the repressive post-September 11 atmosphere, along with increasingly harsh treatment of protesters — including physical abuse of arrestees and indiscriminate tear-gassing of peaceful demonstrators on the civilian side — has dampened popular dedication to peace for Vieques. Finally, the Vieques struggle has linked up with a growing international network against U.S. militarism, featuring reciprocal visits and sharing of strategies with activists from Korea, Okinawa, Hawai'i, San Francisco's Bayview-Hunter's Point, and elsewhere.

No one can doubt the difficulty involved in challenging the world's most powerful military, but an even greater challenge is what will happen to Vieques after the Navy leaves. The exquisite beauty of the "*isla nena*" has attracted attention from numerous resort developers, who have cultivated connections to North American settlers and Puerto Rican politicians. Some of the Navy's strongest congressional allies have vowed never to let the lands leave federal hands. Accordingly, they have fought to ensure that, should the Navy leave Vieques, the lands would be transferred to the Department of the Interior, where they would be closed to the public as a "wilderness reserve" and left uncleaned.<sup>2</sup> If carried out, Viequenses would be punished for opposing the Navy by again squeezing them in their reservation between contaminated and restricted federal "conservation" lands.

Considering Puerto Rico's colonial political status, San Juan is obviously vulnerable to pressure from Washington. Nearly every governor has attempted to end the bombing of Vieques, only to end up making a deal. The pro-statehood government — in power from 1992 until the end of 2000 — allowed its Planning Board to work with the Navy on the Land Use Plan. In August 2000, the Planning Board held a required public hearing in Vieques on the first draft. Among its features were: building three new factories tied to the military, building a large new port for cruise ships and commercial traffic near the new resort and far from town, having the Navy run the local clinic, and attracting 10,000 new settlers to Vieques, mainly from military families. Despite limited availability, 35 members of Vieques community groups and supporting technical experts reviewed the draft and signed up to address the hearings. The hearings played to a packed house and lasted over six hours. Speaker after speaker denounced the plan in detail, and hundreds of Viequenses held a spirited protest outside. Finally, at midnight the mayor rejected the draft land-use plan.

The revised version, reviewed in November 2000, chose a "Navy-free Vieques" as the preferred option, but still contained serious problems (Puerto Rico Planning Board, 2000). For example, it was assumed that agriculture, fishing, and nonmilitary factories were not viable and that Vieques would have to depend almost entirely on foreign tourism. Second, all three land areas — the two military properties and the civilian sector in between — were treated as separate entities, instead of as one island. Third, it ignored the need to shorten travel time between Vieques and the big island — which must be between the closest points. Most



troubling was that there was nothing about land tenure or protection from outside speculation. Nonetheless, in January the new mayor of Vieques announced that he would work to revise the plan and incorporate proposals that activists had worked on for years.

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 in Spanish) includes planners, attorneys, health professionals, ecologists, economists, and other individuals with the expertise needed to assist the Viequeses in making their own development and conservation plans. This group has worked on a voluntary basis for over three years to flesh out the details of a community-directed, ecologically and socially sustainable land use and development plan. From the start, work has included dozens of meetings and workshops in Vieques to learn what the people themselves see as their most pressing problems and possible solutions. The first volume of their work, completed during summer 2000, presented a detailed picture of present economic, social, and environmental challenges, including analyses and suggestions given in dozens of community workshops. In the winter of 2001 to 2002, they worked on the community land-trust proposal; a second volume would detail specific strategies for responsible and integrated development, some of which received attention from the local government.

Recent declarations by high Navy officials that other training areas may better serve their needs indicate that they may be preparing a face-saving explanation for their expected departure from Vieques. Accordingly, some activists are attempting to shift their focus to the more contentious — and potentially more divisive — problems of cleanup and control of the lands. Whether they can successfully apply the experiences of the demilitarization phase (the “first D”) to the rest of the struggle remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the struggle has had a transformative effect, not only on Viequeses, but also on other Puerto Ricans, who see Vieques as a workshop for learning to successfully challenge powerful forces of division, domination, and exploitation that have long ruled this colonized Caribbean nation.

Vieques is a powerful case study of a life-affirming struggle that stood up to the world’s most powerful, violent, and destructive force and offered an alternate vision of security based on a culture of peace, cooperation, and community control. Environmental and social justice advocates everywhere can apply the “four D’s” — demilitarization, decontamination, devolution, and development — to their own struggles to protect their environments and sustain their communities. Support for this struggle against the world’s most serious environmental criminal, the U.S. military, is therefore vital. A victory for Vieques — and for Puerto Rico — will offer hope for the future of us all.

## NOTES

1. By comparison, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs dropped 12,500 and 22,000 tons, respectively.
2. The Floyd D. Spence National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2001 (P.L. 106-398) was signed by President Clinton on October 30, 2000. Sections 1503 to 1508 concern Vieques.

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