

Time to walk the walk: Vieques and civil disobedience in New York with Vicente “Panama” Alba

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The response of the Puerto Rican community to the Naval bombing of Vieques provided multiple opportunities to engage people in the street to publicly increase the pressure on political leaders to put an end to the abuse. In the diaspora this strategy mirrored in many ways the actions taken on the island: community education, press mobilization, lobbying and community action. The latter is a hallmark of Puerto Rican activism in the United States. Civil disobedience has always been an important element in the Puerto Rican nation's response to the Navy's presence in Vieques.

Panama Alba is a product of a period in U.S. history that placed a premium on street activism. His work in the '60s with the Young Lords Party created themes that are manifested in his current activism over police brutality and racial justice. "There is no such thing as a retirement plan for activists," he is wont to say when he cajoles the former core of street activists that he knew when he was in his early 20s. Linking former struggles with current ones, creating connections between veteran activists and young rebels, and setting the stage for multiracial, gender-balanced organizing in today's world are characteristics of Panama's current work.

Vieques and its struggle for self-determination in the face of the U.S. Navy onslaught was another chapter in this veteran activist's life. The vehicle for Panama's work in this area was the David Sanes Brigade: a group that comprised an array of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, African Americans, Asians, and Jews from various professional and other career tracks and from various religious denominations, determined to halt the operations of the United Nations, face arrest, and raise the public spotlight on Vieques. More than a hundred people were arrested at the United Nations since 1999. Few people in New York have the street credibility to call these people to action like Panama. This interview seeks to explore how his work developed and what he meant to accomplish.

Panama (second from right) with other demonstrators at Liberty Island after the take-over of the Statue of Liberty, November 5, 2000. Photographer Bolívar Arellano. © Bolívar Arellano Gallery. Reprinted, by permission, from Bolívar Arellano.

The interview took place on 20 April 2005 in New York City.

Juan Cartagena: The David Sanes Brigade was created after the killing of David Sanes Rodríguez, but tell us why the Brigade? What made it necessary and why didn't you just add your time and effort to other groups that were looking for ways to support the Vieques struggle?

Vicente "Panama" Alba: Micky Melendez and I went to a meeting in the early stages of this issue, and what we saw there was a repeat of the same thing that we've seen again and again: a lot of posturing, a lot of talk, and a lot of people trying to claim Vieques as their niche. And we knew exactly where it was going to go. We knew there was going to be very little action. One of the things we saw there was how people were trying to constrict the issue of Vieques into certain political ideologies. We knew that the people of Vieques would not respond to ideology, they were responding to life and death needs, and the people who were active in Vieques were using a broad political perspective to do the organizing. We didn't have the right to limit the support to the people of Vieques on the basis of ideology.

JC: Are you talking about ideology regarding the political status of the island?

VPA: Yes, status and the various schools of Marxism, socialism and all the rest of that. To do justice to the work we had to go at it broadly. The other thing was that the people who were more prone to engaging in the activities that were needed are people who were already socially active and involved in other things. So for us to duplicate things and create another organization was wrong. We wanted to do something realistic for the people, so what we came up with was a network. This way they can continue to be active in their political work and social life but also be part of a network that could respond. The talk needed to be backed up with action in this country, in the U.S. And the people of Vieques had been engaging in civil disobedience for a long time. So that was the next step for us here. It was not enough to go to radio stations or to talks or to mount demonstrations that didn't mean anything. We needed to up the ante and engage in more direct action.



Panama Alba (first from left) being arrested at Liberty Island, November 5, 2000. Photographer Bolívar Arellano. © Bolívar Arellano Gallery. Reprinted, by permission, from Bolívar Arellano.

The other important thing in our work reflects the beginning of my political involvement. Malcolm X taught us that the issues for us in this country are issues of human rights. It was clear that the human rights of the people of Vieques were violated. So for us here in New York City, with the United Nations right here, and with this country claiming that it supports human rights and all that other crap, we needed to take the issue of Vieques to the international arena as an issue of human rights. We put all that together to create the Brigade.

JC: What was your first act?

VPA: We saw the commemoration of Pearl Harbor Day as an opportunity. We know how Americans resent the fact that the country was bombed by the Japanese. We thought it would be a perfect date to start by saying, "You don't like to be bombed? We don't like to be bombed either." Our first action of civil disobedience was on December 7, 1999 at the United Nations.

JC: Who was involved?

VPA: Mickey was involved as well as Chegüí Torres, Juan Flores, Luis Garden Acosta. About 12 people. Because it was our first one it got some media attention.

JC: Who did you tap to help you create the Brigade besides Mickey Melendez and Samuel Sánchez? What kind of people were you looking for?

VPA: It takes a certain amount of social commitment for someone to be willing to put themselves in the hands of police. It's one thing for something to happen to you that gets you arrested. It's another thing for you to leave your house in the morning and say, "You know what? Today I'm going to jail. I'm going to make sure I go to jail because this is the way I'm going to make a political statement on behalf of humanity." Luckily I have been active for some 35 years and have come across a lot of good people. You have to think about who would be willing to do it, who do you trust, who will have a commitment to this particular case and understand the issue of Vieques. We went through that process and approached people to get it done.

JC: Did you organize any civil disobedience outside of the UN location?



Demonstrators in front of the United Nations (in foreground, on left Panama and [former] New York City Councilwoman Margarita López on right; background, center, Father Luis Barrios). Photographer Bolívar Arellano. © Bolívar Arellano Gallery. Reprinted, by permission, from Bolívar Arellano.

VPA: No. We decided to continue to carve away at the United Nations. I would say humbly that we inspired a lot of the civil disobedience that took place in this country on Vieques. People went to the U.S. Armed Forces site, people went to the Bull on Wall Street, people went to Yankee Stadium. But what I participated in outside of the UN that I believe had worldwide impact, and happened accidentally was the takeover of the Statue of Liberty for Vieques with Tito Kayak.

JC: What do you mean it was accidental?

VPA: [*Laughing*] I was not supposed to get arrested.



Luis Garden Acosta (second from right) and Father Luis Barrios (first from right) after their arrests at the United Nations. Photographer Bolívar Arellano. © Bolívar Arellano Gallery. Reprinted, by permission, from Bolívar Arellano.

JC: So that's what you mean.

VPA: I was approached by Tito because of my prior involvement in taking over the Statue of Liberty on the issue of the Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners. What I didn't realize until our meeting was that Tito had scheduled this for the next day! It was going to happen so whatever infrastructure we needed had to be done in 24 hours. I spent the evening trying to get a hold of some lawyers, some trusted media people, etc. The next morning I went as part of the support team. Once it happened the Parks Department tagged me as one of the people involved; even though technically I wasn't breaking any law, they grabbed me.

JC: And others were arrested too?

VPA: Yes. But I was proud of it because it turns out that I was the only person involved in both takeovers of the Statue of Liberty back in 1977 and now. Back then I couldn't get arrested because I was out on bail on the FALN thing, and this time I didn't want to get arrested but did.

JC: You know I went to the sentencing of Tito Kayak in federal court in New York for that action, and that was one of the most moving days I've had to see that brother stand in court, in front of a federal judge, and explain why he did what he did. It was heavy.

VPA: Tito was certainly one of the many inspirations that we had. And for many of us the inspiration comes from the unnamed, the heroes and heroines of Vieques, the fishermen using their little boats to confront the big Navy ships, the people who risked their lives by going on to the shooting ranges when the Navy was shooting in order to stop the military from doing what they were doing; those are the people that count. People like Néstor Guishard De Jesús, home grown from the neighborhood of Vieques who has given his life to that struggle. There are many people in Vieques who, in my opinion, represent a more grass roots approach to the struggle than the organized effort in Vieques. We get our inspiration from those people and not, I hate to say, from the movement.

JC: Let me ask you about the people you organized to be part of the civil disobedience actions at the UN because when I look back on them, they represented a good cross section of New York City in terms of age, race, and gender. But how much of that was in your head when you were planning this?

VPA: We wanted to internationalize the issue of Vieques, and we wanted also to raise the voices of the people of this country, which are not just Puerto Rican. It was about looking at those people that we have worked with in this country over the years, such as the African-American community, other Latinos, the Asian community, and people coming from multigenerations. I'm very blessed to work with people from a number of generations. You know very few of my peers are still active, but I continue to work with people of the younger generation who are activists fighting for global justice. And they wanted to add their voices to the cause of Vieques.

JC: What other work did the David Sanes Brigade do?

VPA: The Brigade is known for its direct action. And this comes from what I did with the Young Lords, and it was one of the things we did best. But the other thing we wanted to do was to engage in educational activities and broaden the understanding of Vieques to a larger number of people. We came across some information that for some reason the mainstream movement didn't really want to talk about. And that's because we need to look at history as a backdrop to this. It's simple to say that Vieques is a product of colonialism, and it's true. But there are some particulars about the history that led to Vieques being targeted long before

World War II. In fact, Vieques was targeted in the 1800s. And that sets the table so that when World War II comes about, they choose Vieques as the place for their military naval maneuvers.

JC: You're referring to the analysis in the Dávila book?

VPA: Exactly. Jesús Dávila wrote the book called the *Foxardo 1824 y el bombardeo ritual de Vieques*, and it is extremely important. And so is the issue of the contemporary politics of the military-industrial complex. People did not want to address that, but the Navy exposed itself after the 9/11 thing. But the historical piece is important. Few people know that Vieques was the northernmost point that the Libertador de las Américas, Simón Bolívar, stopped at in his quest to create La Gran Colombia. You have to understand that the concept of La Gran Colombia was the opposite of the conflicting effort by the United States because it was intended to create a unified Latin America. Simón Bolívar led that effort when the U.S. at the same time was establishing what the frontier was between North America and Latin America. Trying to do that for the U.S. in the Caribbean was a guy named Commodore David Potter. He was charged with that mandate, and he also was a bootlegger and all in the Caribbean. The long and short of it was that he got himself in a situation that was comparable to the Watergate scandal for his failure to take control of the Caribbean and for his illicit activities. He came from a Naval family, and they established the Naval Academy in Annapolis and the culture of the Academy. His family blamed Vieques for the scandal and believed that Vieques should always be punished by the Navy. According to the testimony of Commodore Potter, the people of Vieques were enemies of humanity. And anything that countered the interests of U.S. imperialism and its growing empire was against humanity.

JC: This was his testimony in his Court Martial?

VPA: Yes. And it sets the table for why Vieques was to become the shooting range for the U.S. Navy. And the Navy did it for the Atlantic Fleet and for the Pacific Fleet. The difference was that in the Hawaiian Islands they took an island that was mostly uninhabited and cleared it. But in the case of Vieques they chose to continue to use it even though people continued to inhabit it. And it speaks to their hatred of the people who inhabit that island, the *boricuas*, the *viequenses*. And that decision was easy to make because the population of Vieques had many Blacks. It was in line with the American racist culture as it's expressed in the expansionist thinking of the United States.

JC: Now what did you refer to before about the military-industrial complex?

VPA: During World War II the U.S. decides it needs a shooting range so it's logical that they think of Vieques. However, the armaments that they used soon after World War II became obsolete. They continued to argue that they had to do this because of national security. But in fact, if we look at the testimony of retired Admiral Eugene Carroll, he exposed it to be what it is. Vieques was the theater for the U.S. Congress, for the industrialists who manufacture obsolete equipment to continue to get money to manufacture more of the same. Right after September 11 it was the first time the Navy didn't stop in Vieques before going on to battle because it was not necessary. The munitions used and displayed at that point were the weapons that were guided by computers and those were not practiced in Vieques.

JC: Interesting that you raised these points. How did the Brigade convey this information to educate people.

VPA: We had a symposium where we brought retired Admiral Eugene Carroll to explain these points. It was interesting because there were *independentistas* who were adamant against this guy speaking at one of our forums. But again it's about being

open minded and learning to use everything at our disposal. We needed to expose the fallacy of the things they kept using to create sympathy for the continued bombing of Vieques.

JC: Is this what led to his paper "Does the Navy need Vieques?"

VPA: He had already finished it at the time, and we heard about it and invited him over.

JC: And how did you use the historical information that you talked about in Dávila's book?

VPA: We used it in our presentations. And we had Jesús Dávila come in for the same symposium with the Admiral at Columbia University. One of the things that was the trademark of the Brigade was that we constantly tried to step outside the box of how organizations functioned in disseminating the information, in developing mass politics for mass issues and in going beyond the talk to the time-honored tradition of civil disobedience. People talked about it but did nothing. We would go to rallies and hear speakers talk about the thousands of people who would be arrested and not one of them got arrested the whole time. They talked the talk, but it was time to walk the walk.

JC: Let's continue with civil disobedience, specifically. It was in 1999 that Sanes Rodríguez was killed. In the scheme of things you have been active in the City for many years, concentrating especially on racial violence and police brutality issues. But the murder of Amadou Diallo was afterwards, in 2000, a galvanizing event that attracted other sectors of New York to engage in civil disobedience at Police Plaza, with all the media and all the celebrities. It's not like in your head you could have pointed to an example of civil disobedience working in New York to galvanize people and get press attention. So what in your mind convinced you that civil disobedience might work in New York in the Vieques context?



A demonstrator is moved off UN grounds by United Nations' guards. Photographer Bolívar Arellano. © Bolívar Arellano Gallery. Reprinted, by permission, from Bolívar Arellano.

VPA: The people of Vieques, plain and simple. We had the fortune of dealing not only with U.S. politics but with Boricua politics. We saw how viequenses were using civil disobedience historically and willing to pay a much more higher price for it, let's make that clear. They paid a higher price than people here. Civil disobedience in Vieques is about challenging the federal government, and that's automatic time. It's about knowing they will take you to court and put you in jail. So it wasn't about looking at the political panorama here; it was about trying to take the lead of the people in Vieques and bringing it to life here.

JC: You know you and I were involved in what has become to be the largest trial in the history of New York State on a violation of law, not even a misdemeanor. And you remember all the resources the N.Y. County District Attorney's office invested to put us on trial for over a week; all that expense just to get us fined. Why did you urge the people to go through with a full trial?

VPA: At the end of the day we were guilty of nothing. We don't want to be a part of anything that criminalizes actions that we take to support humanity. What they did in pushing us in that direction was to give us a forum to raise the issues. So if you're dumb enough to give us a stage, well, let's put on a play then! It's as simple as that. If it's worth it to them to push the envelope and criminalize acts that we do for the well-being of all, then it's worth it to us to put out the message from the stage you set. That's what we tried to do with that trial.

JC: I agree with what you said before, that your actions with civil disobedience in New York inspired similar actions in other places: it clearly did that in New Jersey, and I know that personally. But Vieques was beginning to draw mainstream media attention. It was being featured in the *New York Times* as a small island that was galvanizing Hollywood into action, etc. How does that feed into this?

VPA: Let me tell you, the level of consciousness raising, when it came to Vieques, was dramatic. When the Puerto Rican political prisoners were released, for reasons that are reflective of our movement that are not in play here, it wound up that José Rivera and I were the ones who had to go to New York, on cable TV, to defend the political prisoners. At the interview I had just come from a meeting about Vieques and had some literature. And the world desk anchor, who is supposed to be up on all these issues, was grilling us about the release of the political prisoners, and I remember that interaction. He said, "But they are terrorists!" And I said to him, "No, no, this is terrorism, the bombing of Vieques!" And this guy turns and says "Vieques? What is a Vieques?" Two years prior to the killing of David Sanes, this guy who is supposed to be the anchorperson for international issues on New York had no clue about what Vieques was and what the issues were. Fast-forward, and everyone knew what the issue was. The American public was very misinformed and, of course, views Puerto Rico as a doormat. Whatever America needs Vieques is supposed to provide. In those few years the issue of Vieques came to the forefront and that came about because of the actions of the people, especially the people of Vieques and the inspiration that they gave to other people to stand up. If we grow politically to understand that we are all part of the human race with human rights, then we understand that we had no choice but to do what we had to do.

JC: Now, regarding your focus on international human rights, did you receive any reaction from people inside the UN?

VPA: The policies towards Vieques changed because of the demonstrations. The question of jurisdiction is very important. The authorities within the United Nations wanted to limit the impact of the demonstrations. One of our actions led

to an attempt to protest inside the UN grounds, not just at the gates, and the UN made sure that no arrests would happen within UN grounds. They would drag us out to the street and off the grounds because they didn't want to address the issues we were raising. Understand that the United States is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and the United Nations has not been as diligent and as responsible as it should have been on this issue. We communicated with all the delegations by sending the information that Admiral Eugene Carroll gave us, and I think that was helpful.

JC: Let's talk about assessment. You said you created a network as opposed to an organization. There are times when entities are created for a purpose, meet that



New York City police escorting the arrested demonstrator. Photographer Bolívar Arellano. © Bolívar Arellano Gallery. Reprinted, by permission, from Bolívar Arellano.

purpose, and should just end. And there are times when entities have to adapt or change with the times. In terms of the Brigade, how do you see it after the Navy pullout and how do you see it today?

VPA: There are a number of things here. The beauty of a network is that you can activate it or deactivate it at will. It's a network. You do outreach and see what comes back. After the May 1st pullout, there is a need to go back to the drawing board because the battleground has changed. And that's because the reality is that Puerto Rico is a colony, and the master of the slave is in Washington. Unfortunately, our movement has proved incapable of making these kinds of assessments and implementing something in response. Because of the people of Vieques we now know what to do. We need to use the experience of the political campaign, which led to the release of the Puerto Rican political prisoners, as an example of how we get issues addressed to some extent while not being a free nation. Manipulating the political landscape is precisely what we did on two occasions with the political prisoners—something that has not been done by any other group in this country. The issue of Vieques is the same situation. The Navy pulled out but that pullout was tentative; they reserve the right to return. There are many who believe, and I am one of them, that the Navy pullout was only partial because submarine bases had to be removed and that has not happened—there are nuclear submarine bases off the beaches of Vieques. The other demands raised by the campaign in Vieques have to be addressed: *Devolución*: the land has not been returned to the people of Vieques; it went to the Department of the Interior. *Decontaminación*: the U.S. government is refusing to even acknowledge that there is contamination despite the impact that it has had on the people of Vieques. *Desarrollo económico*: what's taking place right now in Vieques is heartbreaking; what you have is the infusion of capital into a very impoverished island municipality. People who have no jobs and difficulty in making ends meet are being asked to sell their property for what seems like large amounts of money but what is really peanuts compared to where this thing is going. What is missing is a real economic development plan that benefits the people of Vieques. The economic development that is happening is simply letting multinational hotels open business and letting the people of Vieques be the maids and porter boys of the hotels. And after all that the people of Vieques have gone through, it's not acceptable. Unfortunately, it seems that they are winning with a lot of people being bought out. The other demand that was not raised by the movement was the issue of reparations. You have many viequenses who were expatriated and now live in the Virgin Islands and in the United States, whose property was stolen and livelihood was stolen when they were forced out. The demands for reparations need to be looked in terms of these people. It's not just about those who remain but also about those who were forced out. We need to regroup. Now that some time has gone by after the Navy pullout, a lot of misinformation has been disseminated, and for many the Vieques struggle is over because the Navy stopped bombing. And that's false. The truth is that the romance has worn out, the romance about civil disobedience is going to take a long time to come back.

JC: The romance is gone, but the hard work remains.

VPA: Exactly. This is not about the romanticism of the revolution; it's about getting our people empowered until one day there are free. We need to stop beating ourselves on the chest and talk about being revolutionaries and actually do whatever fucking work it takes to get us there.

JC: Are there ideas to reactivate the network around some of the issues you've identified?

VPA: Absolutely. One of the issues we confront is the issue of sustainability for our movement and the people of Vieques. For example, the people of Vieques don't have health care. And yet they need it more than most. We are prepared to help establish a free health care clinic in Vieques to address issues of heavy metals and cancer. I need to convince people in the network to collectively take this on and raise money for it and address the issues of Vieques under new conditions.

JC: One of the things that I find most powerful when you talk about people taking the actions that you organized is also the visual element of the actions. The way you set up the cadre of people who were prepared to take civil disobedience, the way you created a space for the people who supported them to carry placards and then place them across the street from the disobedients—what you did, of course, in the most dramatic way with Tito Kayak and the like. In your head, when you think of the images of all the CDs you've organized, which ones come to mind? Which ones are powerful?

VPA: People ask me, Is it difficult for you to do the things that you do? And I say it's difficult for me not to do the things that I do. I feel privileged to make a little contribution along with a lot of other people because in the process I have gotten to meet some of the best human beings on the face of the earth. And that to me is powerful. It's powerful to be privileged to work with people like Camila Gelpi Acosta, Samuel Sánchez, and the Dávilas, Carmen Ana and Jesús, and to be next to Guishard and to Tito Kayak, you know. So those images keep coming back. I think about the take over of the Statue of Liberty with Tito Kayak, but what I remember vividly is the meeting at the diner the night before, you know. I remember telling Tito there's no way you're getting me on top of that Statue; I'll take a bullet, but I'm not going up there. To him it was natural. To him it wasn't a question. It was going to happen, it was meant to happen and he saw it that way. And different people bring different things to the table. Our challenge is to bring all those different things into the mix and make *tremendo sopón* [laughter].



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