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# Because Vieques Is Our Home: Defend It!

## Women Resisting Militarization in Vieques, Puerto Rico

KATHERINE T. McCAFFREY

The women of the Alliance have decided that Vieques is our house and therefore we will defend it. For too long, our house, Vieques, has been raped, robbed, burned, mutilated, mistreated by military forces, which brought damage to the population for 60 years. This is why we are determined and unafraid to put our house in order. I want to [invite] all of you women who hear this message to unite in one voice, to unite your voices with ours, because the only requirement that you need to belong to the Alliance, to be part of this blessed struggle, is to be a woman, to have the desire to be free and above all to want to live in peace. For this, in the name of all the women of Vieques, thank you, thank you very much. We move forward together declaring in unison: Ni un tiro más, ni una bomba más para Vieques! (Not one more shot, not one more bomb for Vieques!) (Sobá 2000, n.p.)

Vieques is a fifty-one-square-mile island municipality of Puerto Rico, located six miles off its southeast coast. For roughly six decades the U.S. Navy controlled more than two-thirds of the island's land and used Vieques for live-fire practice, air-to-ground bombing, shelling, artillery fire, ship-to-shore bombing, and maneuvers. Conflict simmered between the U.S. Navy and the 10,000 island residents, who lived wedged between an ammunition depot and a maneuver area. After years of tension and periodic protest, a social movement coalesced when a stray bomb killed a civilian security guard. Four years of mass mobilization, thousands of arrests for civil disobedience, and international political pressure and media attention halted live-bombing exercises on Vieques Island in 2003.

Women emerged as new leaders in the Vieques protest, organizing behind the banner of the Vieques Women's Alliance (Alianza de Mujeres Viequenses). This organization rallied opposition to the live-bombing exercises by emphasizing

the health and security threat that military forces and training practices represented to islanders. Although conflict between Vieques residents and the U.S. Navy extended back to the 1940s, and protest spanned decades, it was only in 1999 that women first organized along gender lines and asserted a distinct female voice in protest.

In this chapter I explore why Vieques women decided to organize as women to resist militarization. Baldez notes that “women do not inevitably organize as women simply because they are women,” but when “women mobilize as women, they tap into common knowledge about gender norms that portray men and women as categorically different” (2002, 15). Vieques Women’s Alliance activists embraced an ideology that celebrated women’s roles as housewives as they struggled for a Vieques “clean” of the navy. Banging pots and pans, distributing white ribbons for peace, and demonstrating with megaphones at the gates to the base, Vieques women declared that they were acting in defense of their homes: “Vieques is our home, we want it clean, we want it neat, we want it in peace. . . . Navy get out!”

Mobilizing along lines of gender requires a common vision of what it means to be female. On the surface, the vision of women’s identity embraced by the Vieques Women’s Alliance seemed to emanate from conservative, even essentialist, notions of women’s roles and potential: the woman as housewife. But the Vieques Women’s Alliance cannot neatly be dismissed as a “feminine” mobilization, concerned only with defending women’s roles as mothers and wives rather than resisting inequality. The Vieques women’s movement follows a path of Latin American grassroots feminism that collapses the difference between “feminine” and feminist agendas, mobilizing “traditional” roles while forging new political spaces and collective identities for women (see, e.g., Schirmer 1993; Stephen 1997, 2005). The Vieques Women’s Alliance suggests the fluidity between so-called feminine and feminist movements, and the diversity of perspectives within grassroots mobilizations. The movement also demonstrates how women’s participation can expand and contribute to the success of social mobilization. The Alliance succeeded in rallying new segments of the Vieques population to take political action and contributed to the dramatic expansion of Vieques’ movement to end military occupation and destruction of the island.

In this chapter I consider first how women’s protest in Vieques was rooted in subsistence struggles. I then briefly explore the history of the conflict between Vieques residents and the navy, and how the intensification of weapons testing sparked protest. The decision to organize along gender lines was in part a strategy to assert the primacy of bread-and-butter issues and avoid more complicated debates over Puerto Rican sovereignty. Women’s identification as homemakers created a space in which they could contest military policy without appearing politically subversive or embroiling themselves in controversies over colonialism. The Women’s Alliance emerged in the context of the resurgence and

broadening of the antinavy movement in a post-cold war context. Women brought new energy and vision to the struggle and helped mobilize new sectors to protest. “Feminine” rhetoric fused with fiery sentiment to establish women as a forceful presence in the limelight of Vieques’ ongoing struggle.

### Women’s Protest and the Material Basis of Discontent

Conflict in Vieques has its foundation in the material conditions of everyday life. The U.S. Navy has had an overwhelmingly negative effect on the island’s economy, social life, and ecology. The municipality of Vieques is one of the poorest in all of Puerto Rico, with 65 percent of the population living below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Health indicators are poor, with high rates of cancer and infant mortality as compared to the rest of Puerto Rico. In 2001, the Puerto Rican Department of Health reported that death rates from cardiac illness, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, strokes, hypertension, liver disease, and cancer were substantially higher than on the main island of Puerto Rico (*Caribbean Business* 2004). A 1999 special commission to the governor of Puerto Rico concluded that the navy’s control of land, water, and island resources caused high unemployment and economic stagnation on the island (Special Commission for Vieques 1999).

Scholars have noted that women are often radicalized by threats to subsistence (Corcoran-Nantes 1990, 1993; Kaplan 1982; Moser 1987; Safa 1990; Susser 1992; Nash 1990). Indeed, men and women in Vieques historically have mobilized around issues of subsistence, environment, and health. A protest movement in the 1970s crystallized around the claims of local fishermen. Intensified naval maneuvers had damaged coral reefs and fish in an already fragile marine environment. Increased ship traffic was severing buoy lines from the traps they marked, effectively destroying fishing gear and the financial investment the traps represented. Fishermen rallied against the navy’s encroachment into prime fishing grounds and the destruction of traps. Women were involved in this mobilization, but their leadership on a local level was circumscribed, and their participation was largely auxiliary to men.

In 1999, however, Vieques women for the first time formed a separate women’s organization to challenge military occupation and live-bombing practices. Baldez argues that gender-based protest is politically strategic: “Mobilizing as women provides a rhetorical frame that permits women with diverse substantive interests to engage in collective action to pursue their ends under the rubric of having access to political decision making” (2002, 15). Organizing specifically along gender lines, the Vieques Women’s Alliance developed a grassroots coalition among longtime female activists and previously apolitical Vieques women from varying backgrounds—teachers, housewives, secretaries, and retired grandmothers. On an island deeply divided by partisan politics, the Alliance transcended political divisions and united women from different political affiliations.

The Vieques Women's Alliance allowed women to assume new leadership in social mobilization and contribute to shaping the ideology and tactics of the broader Vieques movement.

Embracing an ideology of domesticity was important to claiming a public voice. It allowed women to confront military authority while shielding themselves from accusations of subversion by claiming for themselves a "traditional" woman's role. This strategy echoes other women's mobilizations against military power, such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who defied the military dictatorship while identifying themselves as concerned mothers (Bouvard 1994). In the United States more recently, Cindy Sheehan emerged as one of the most powerful critics of the Bush administration and the Iraq War by mobilizing her status as the grieving mother of a fallen soldier.

In Puerto Rico, confronting the military is often regarded as subversive and anti-American. Puerto Rico's status as a nonsovereign U.S. territory complicates political debate. Although a vocal minority advocates independence by radicalizing political discourse and tapping into widespread cultural nationalism (Ayala 2003, 217), the large majority of the Puerto Rican population is politically moderate, preferring continued political and economic ties with the United States even while maintaining a profound sense of Puerto Rican identity (Dávila 1997; Duany 2000, 2002; Morris 1995).

Conflict with the U.S. military exposes the ambivalence about citizenship, sovereignty, and national identity that are at the heart of Puerto Rican society (see Flores 2000; Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997). As both a potent symbol of American influence and a powerful actor in island affairs, the U.S. military evokes charged debates over loyalty and identity. In general, opposition to the military is viewed as part of the anticolonial movement. The dilemma in Vieques is that the navy is not only a symbol of colonial power but also a very real actor that has caused material harm to the community.

Protest in Vieques is framed by this tension. Viequenses object to the military on material grounds, citing restrictions on economic opportunity, denial of access to natural resources, destruction of the environment, and degradation of public health. Merely raising these grievances is a highly charged political act. The navy interprets criticism as a threat to national security. The commonwealth government avoids confrontations that could jeopardize its relationship with the United States, particularly as they affect ongoing debates about potential statehood or a modified form of association. Activists from Vieques and Puerto Rico who are concerned specifically about military actions become embroiled in debates over sovereignty. Thus, what is peculiar about Vieques' struggle is the way residents have struggled to assert specific material grievances resulting from Puerto Rico's political domination by the United States and its armed forces while avoiding the delicate issue of sovereignty.

By rallying behind a collective identity as homemakers, Vieques women side-stepped complicated questions of national identity and loyalty, and approached

the problem of the navy from an elemental female identity. This strategy legitimized women's activism and created a space for women's politicization and protest outside of paralyzing debates over Puerto Rican sovereignty.

### **Background: Growing Threat of Military Exercises**

During and after World War II, the U.S. Navy expropriated three-quarters of Vieques Island to establish a major military installation in the Caribbean. Over time, this base evolved into one of the key U.S. naval training installations in the Western Hemisphere. A resident civilian population of about 10,000 ended up wedged between an ammunition depot and a maneuver area. The navy's control of land, air, and water resources set up fundamental obstacles to stable civilian life. The sugar industry that once completely dominated the local economy was liquidated by the military. The island's development as an ammunition depot and theater for war games failed to generate regular employment, and the military was overtly hostile to the development of Vieques' civilian economy. Huge maneuvers were periodically scheduled on the island, and tens of thousands of sailors would flood the small town on pass, drinking and carousing, looking for women. Most of the year, however, residents struggled to survive, always anxious that the navy would seek to usurp the entire island and evict the remaining residents.

Culebra, a ten-square-mile island municipality of Puerto Rico to the north of Vieques, also existed under the grip of the U.S. Navy. Culebra and Vieques formed a strategic triangle with the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station on the eastern coast of the Puerto Rican main island. The navy launched amphibious assaults on Vieques and concentrated naval and aerial bombardments on Culebra. The U.S. military's shift to missile technology in the late 1950s intensified the bombardment of Culebra and pushed tensions over the edge in both Culebra and Vieques.

Recognizing the incompatibility of civilians living at the center of territory used mainly for live-fire practice, the navy secretly took steps in the 1960s to forcibly remove and relocate the civilian populations of Culebra and Vieques. The Puerto Rican government resisted, and ultimately President Kennedy intervened to block the navy from evicting the residents (see Fernández 1996; Meléndez López 1989). The navy continued its maneuvers, with nearly 600 residents of Culebra and 9,000 residents of Vieques captive to increasingly overwhelming military exercises.

Culebrenses, in particular, lived under a surreal set of circumstances. The U.S. Navy owned one-third of the ten-square-mile island and its entire coastline. A bombing range and bomb-laden harbor circled the civilian sector. Low-flying helicopters and planes and extensive firing practice besieged residents. In a single year, 1969, Culebra was under fire by naval gunnery for 123 days and pounded by direct missiles for 228 days. Planes made between 35,000 and 40,000 target runs

on the island that year. There were a series of misfires and wild shots, with bombs landing yards from private homes and mortar rounds sweeping waters where children frolicked in the surf (Schemmer and Cossaboom 1970; Schemmer et al. 1970).

By the late 1960s, a militant antinavy movement led by the Puerto Rican independence movement emerged (see Delgado Cintrón 1989; McCaffrey 2002). In the context of struggles against the Vietnam War and the strengthened anticolonial movement in Puerto Rico, Culebra became the cause célèbre of the Puerto Rican independence movement. The Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) and the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) were instrumental in leading a direct action campaign against the naval presence. The PIP defined the battle as one of “pacific militancy” and organized demonstrations on beaches used for target practice, blocking ship-to-shore missile fire with human chains of protesters. Ultimately, Culebra activists were successful in halting military exercises and forcing the navy off the island. Culebra’s success, however, became Vieques’ problem.

Although the navy was instructed to find an alternative training site to Culebra, and Congress authorized funds for the transfer, the navy simply shifted its bombardments to existing facilities in Vieques (U.S. Congress 1994). By the midseventies, it was apparent that Vieques had received the brunt of the Culebra “solution” in the form of increased bombing, maneuvers, and restrictions, which sparked a confrontation with local fishermen. Emphasizing concerns about livelihood—the destruction of traps and fishing gear by navy boats on maneuvers and the restrictions on the use of prime fishing grounds—fishermen led a grassroots community movement. Positioning themselves in the direct line of missile fire, local fishermen succeeded in interrupting international military maneuvers. Pickets, demonstrations, and a campaign of civil disobedience put Vieques’ grievances on an international stage.

But by the late 1970s, when the Vieques protest erupted, the political setting was dramatically different from that of Culebra. Cold war tensions peaked with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua. The Puerto Rican anticolonial movement had weakened, and local Vieques activists were reluctant to link their specific grievances against the navy with an unwinnable battle against U.S. colonialism.

Vieques’ fishermen-led movement emphasized that their concerns were not about politics but about the “authentic” problems of the Vieques people—the concrete, material needs of the people that seemed to be ignored by the maneuverings of politicians and activists with broader agendas. Fishermen were important to the success of the movement because they characterized it as based on issues of quality of life and economic opportunity as opposed to broader anticolonial concerns. A focus on local grievances was effective in building consensus in a politically conservative populace. It was also a way of keeping Viequense leadership at the helm and preventing the movement from becoming merely a platform for the embattled cause of Puerto Rican independence or a tool of political interests.

On a local level, however, the focus on fishermen and male leadership limited women's participation in the movement. Vieques women were involved in the mobilization, but their participation was often auxiliary. They picketed, demonstrated, wrote pamphlets, and cooked rice and beans for protesters but did not give press conferences, travel lecture circuits, or rise to leadership positions. Circumscribing the participation of half of the population limited potential sources of creativity and solidarity in that women often play instrumental roles in community-based mobilizations, especially when they perceive threats to their internalized domestic or caretaking roles (Kaplan 1982, 1990). The focus on fishing traps rather than live-bombing exercises, however, inhibited the growth of what Temma Kaplan (1982) has called "female consciousness."

Vieques' fishermen-led movement won several important concessions from the navy but ultimately did not succeed in shutting down the base. Heightened cold-war tensions constrained the effectiveness of the movement (see McCaffrey 2006). For the next fifteen years, the community lived with military exercises. In the 1980s and 1990s, the navy trained an average of 180 days per year and dropped or fired an average of 1,464 tons of bombs and explosives annually on Vieques (Shanahan and Lindsay-Poland 2002, 2). In 1998, the last year before protests interrupted maneuvers, the navy dropped 23,000 bombs on the island, the majority of which contained live explosives (Fallon and Pace 1999).

Shifts in technology meant that risk to the civilian population from bombing practice was greatly magnified. High-speed jets flew from increasingly high altitudes, magnifying the probability of a fatal error. A pilot's miscalculation of ten seconds could land a bomb dead center on Vieques' capital. In fact, a string of training errors raised residents' anxieties. In October 1993, an FA/18 Hornet flying at 1,300 mph dropped five 500-pound bombs one mile from Vieques' capital. Then, in 1995, two bombs destroyed military installations on the firing range. In 1996, bombs fell near fishermen off the southern coast of Vieques. Finally, in 1997, a National Guard unit strafed a school bus and a police car parked near the town dump with M-16 bullets (Giusti-Cordero 2000).

In addition to the growing threat of training errors during military exercises, residents became increasingly concerned about contamination from military practices. A study in the late 1980s documented high levels of residual explosives in Vieques' drinking water. Because Vieques' water is piped in from Puerto Rico, the study hypothesized that significant bomb residues were airborne and were traveling downwind to the civilian population (Cruz Pérez 1988). Residents began to recognize what studies later confirmed: the island's cancer rate was soaring.<sup>1</sup> Within the small island's tightly knit community, everyone had a friend, relative, or neighbor with cancer.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s created a new political space in which renewed protest could develop. As U.S. military priorities shifted and dozens of bases were closed, activists in Vieques rallied to seek the closure of their base. They mobilized local support by emphasizing the health and security



threat that the military installation represented. Also, grassroots organizers galvanized concern about the sudden surge in cancer rates among the island population and linked the cancer increases to the intensification of military training on the island. When a civilian employee was killed on base by a misplaced bomb, residents' fears of the navy threat were confirmed. A new movement was catalyzed.

On April 19, 1999, during a routine training mission, two navy jets missed their mark by a mile and a half. Flying between 500 and 1,300 miles per hour, they dropped two 500-pound bombs not on the live-impact range but on the barbed-wire-ringed observation post from which the navy surveyed the shelling. The navy's range control officer and three security guards inside the observation post were injured by fragments of shattered glass and concrete. David Sanes Rodríguez, a thirty-five-year-old civilian security guard on patrol outside, was knocked unconscious by the explosion and bled to death from his injuries.

Sanes's death sparked a new movement to remove the navy from Vieques. In the days following his death, demonstrators entered the heart of the base, erecting tents on the live-impact range. They staked crosses to commemorate Sanes's death and those of residents who had died of cancer. Protesters built settlements to fortify their claims to the land and to block bombing exercises. They positioned themselves as human shields on the navy's bombing range and halted military training exercises for over one year.

In 1999, a proliferation of groups rallied behind the Vieques cause: church and ecumenical groups, independence organizations, students, horseback riders, federal employees, as well as various Puerto Rican regional associations. Puerto Ricans in the diaspora and U.S.-based politicians rallied behind Vieques' cause. This revitalized movement of 1999 had a much wider base than the mobilization of the 1970s, with a symbolic framework broader in scope. Rather than a hierarchical movement controlled by fishermen and run by the political left, this new movement operated as a coalition, with power distributed horizontally rather than vertically.<sup>2</sup> The broadening of the Vieques movement coincided with the emergence of the first women's organization to back the struggle, the Vieques Women's Alliance.

### **The Founding of the Vieques Women's Alliance**

"We decided to organize a group for women because we were concerned about the lack of voice for women in the movement," explained Judith Conde, thirty-two years old and cofounder with Gladys Rivera of the Vieques Women's Alliance.<sup>3</sup> The women's campaign emerged on the Vieques political landscape a month after the death of David Sanes. Conde, a home economist at the agricultural extension, and Rivera, a forty-two-year-old social worker, wanted to contribute to the burgeoning movement and provide a space for women to articulate their concerns. Both Conde and Rivera worked with women in Vieques at the

grassroots level and worried that neither their own voices and experiences, nor those of the other women, were represented in existing organizations. Conde and Rivera wanted to join the movement and project a “women’s perspective”: “The men tend to emphasize the economic and political aspects [of the military presence]. We [emphasize] the emotional and psychological aspects. How we are affected on the individual level as wives and mothers trying to raise families. It’s a more sentimental, emotional approach,” Conde explained.

Rivera remarked that her own work in the community had demonstrated to her the profound emotional damage the military had inflicted on children and adults. She described the pictures that children drew of navy boats and fighter jets, superimposed over images of Vieques dripping with blood. Conde and Rivera wanted to create a forum where women could express how the military presence affected them as wives and mothers trying to raise families on Vieques and to mobilize women from that shared experience. They organized a meeting one evening in mid-May. “We issued an invitation to women to come to a meeting. It was a simple letter that said the following: Vieques is our home. We want it clean. We want it neat. We want it in peace. Let us women meet at 7:00 PM at the Fortin Conde de Mirasol” (Suárez Toro 1999, n.p.). Twenty-five women turned out.

This first gathering brought together long-term activists with women who had never before been politically involved. Some of the women were the wives of leading male activists and had participated in rallies and pickets, written letters, helped produce leaflets, boarded visitors in their homes, and provided demonstrators with food and drink, but they had never risen to positions of leadership themselves. “The women were interested in expressing themselves and were looking for an opportunity to speak,” remembered Rivera. Women were attracted to a supportive environment in which their voices were heard. “I felt called to join as a woman and as a Viequense,” remembered Miriam Sobá, a thirty-nine-year-old teacher and founding member of the Women’s Alliance. “I felt called as a woman, one among others, to join with the struggle. We feel like ‘little fish in the water.’ [Here] someone was going to let us talk, someone was going to listen to us.” Sobá characterized this first gathering as “an oasis, a space for relaxation. This was a therapy session.”

The overriding concern women expressed at the first meeting involved health, in particular, the island’s soaring cancer rate. Conde and Rivera listened to the women’s concerns about cancer and the health of their families and suggested new ways of thinking about Vieques’ health problems. “We told them that just as we want our homes clean and safe to raise our children, we want the same for Vieques,” explained Conde. Conde and Rivera believed women would be able to connect and relate to metaphors of domesticity. Cleaning house, as Conde and Rivera conceptualized it, meant confronting the major power broker on the island, the U.S. Navy. This challenge, however, was not one of political defiance but domestic necessity. “Obviously, the navy has to go since they are causing damage,” Conde asserted. She emphasized to the women that the navy was a

menace to community health and that military training exercises negatively affected the women's families.

Although women were motivated by concerns about cancer and the danger that the navy posed to the community, they were initially hesitant to speak out. They were afraid that they might lose their food stamps or that they would jeopardize their own or their husbands' jobs. "Many women were afraid that the municipal government would block them from working," Conde noted. These concerns were not ill founded: in Puerto Rico, partisan politics are fierce, and in Vieques, politics are local. Moreover, in Vieques and throughout Puerto Rico, the government sector is a major source of employment. Taking a minority political position can have concrete ramifications: a pothole in front of your house is not repaired; your job application is "misplaced"; you are let go from your office job at the public school. Organizing women to confront the navy meant overcoming working-class women's reluctance to risk their economic security.

The surging cancer rates and a series of military mishaps and accidents, including the accidental bombing that killed David Sanes, contributed to a climate of overwhelming insecurity on Vieques Island. Painstaking grassroots organizing over the course of six years transformed these grievances into the basis for a social movement. The activists' focus on the threat of bombing exercises and military contamination encouraged women to risk speaking out against the navy's live-fire exercises. Conde was heartened by the transformation of women who initially had hesitated to mobilize against military bombing exercises.

### **Taking to the Streets**

The sentiment of the woman, of the mother, is what brings us to the street, is what gets us involved. We have a sixth sense when it comes to danger. The woman gets involved to defend her family and other women see her and she creates a network and the idea that this is something partisan disappears and they unite and they are going to create consciousness. (Sobá 2000, n.p.)

The Vieques Women's Alliance organized its first public action in June 1999, roughly two months after protesters entered the bombing range and set up a civil disobedience encampment. "The navy said it would resume bombing in June," explained Conde; "we convoked a caravan—over a hundred cars came." The caravan traveled all over the island before stopping in front of the gates of Camp García, the main entrance to the navy's eastern maneuver area. The protesters, mostly women and children, blocked traffic and banged on pots and pans. They sang antinavy songs and attached white ribbons to the chain-link fence demarcating military terrain. Conde announced that the group would continue to attach white ribbons to the fence until it was completely covered as a testament to Viequenses' desire for peace. "The caravan was a great success," she assessed.

“We were newly formed and didn’t expect many people would turn out. We saw that we had the power to convoke a meeting and involve people who would never have participated in the struggle before.”

The response to the ribbons was so great that the Women’s Alliance started distributing white ribbons and encouraging supporters to wear them as a symbol that “Vieques wants peace.” The Women’s Alliance encouraged people to continue to tie white ribbons onto the chain-link gates of Camp García as a petition for peace and an end to the bombing. So many people tied white ribbons to each honeycomb of chain link that the fence soon appeared as a tattered white sheet, dancing in the wind.

On July 4, 1999, the Women’s Alliance sent a contingent to demonstrate in front of the gates of Roosevelt Roads in Ceiba, Puerto Rico. Roosevelt Roads, the heart of naval operations in Puerto Rico, was more physically intimidating than Vieques’ decommissioned Camp García. To protest the navy on the main island took greater courage and a commitment to travel there. The women held a spirited demonstration. Conde noted that the same women who had expressed reluctance to protest now marched with placards in front of the base.

The reality is that they are at the front lines. I feel so happy. Women who told me they didn’t want to get involved are picketing in front of the base at Ceiba. They say, “I’m raising my child in Vieques, so all of this affects me.” Now they say they are going to the target range, that they are prepared to be arrested. (Laughing) I have created a monster!

The newly formed Vieques Women’s Alliance not only put women on the front lines of protest but also encouraged them to ascend the ranks. Carmen Valencia, a fifty-nine-year-old retired schoolteacher, assumed new leadership in the Alliance. Valencia had long been active in the movement to evict the navy but in the past her role had been largely supportive: she had cooked for demonstrations; she had taken care of leading activist Ismael Guadalupe’s children.

Through her involvement in the Women’s Alliance, however, Valencia moved from the sidelines into the limelight. In February 2000, Valencia traveled to Washington, D.C., to take part in a Capitol Hill press conference followed by a noisy demonstration outside of the White House. In March 2000, she traveled to Springfield, Massachusetts, to meet with a support group and promote solidarity for Vieques’ struggle for peace. In May 2000, she visited the office of Vermont senator Patrick Leahy in an effort to promote solidarity with a senator who had “played a role in fighting for world peace.” Valencia had speaking engagements at Dartmouth College, and participated in public forums in Burlington and Montpelier, Vermont. She carried with her photos of a little girl who was dying of brain cancer to dramatize islanders’ concerns about rising cancer rates. In this way she demonstrated the Alliance’s particular approach of emphasizing the personal, the individual story, the struggle women faced to raise their children on the island, and the health risks the navy caused. Yet while “defending her house,

Vieques,” she had traveled far from home to advance the struggle, away from the kitchen and into the center of political action. Her photo appeared on the front page of regional newspapers, and she was quoted extensively by the press.

Conde reflected on the emergence of women’s leadership: “Look how far we’ve come. It’s not a movement of supporting husbands, backing husbands, cooking meals. The women are on the frontlines. They are doing projects, going to conferences, coordinating activities. We don’t have a particular ideology; it’s the experience of living here that motivates participation.”

### **Women’s Contributions to Grassroots Mobilization**

The work of the Alliance made ripples throughout the varying groups that comprised Vieques’ movement. Although the white ribbon campaign was well received, Conde noted that a number of men had problems with women’s leadership. Still, the Women’s Alliance forced other grassroots organizations, such as the Committee to Rescue and Develop Vieques (Comité pro Rescate y Desarrollo de Vieques or CPRDV), to focus on the role of women within the movement. The CPRDV started shifting public attention away from leading male activists, to emphasize the voice of Nilda Medina in press conferences and press releases. It began to highlight women’s lead in various demonstrations and activities. In fact, women had a slight majority in the Vieques movement, but it was the Alliance that gave them greater voice.

One of the most significant, if unplanned, contributions of the Alliance was to develop a community presence at the gates to Camp García. With its pot-and-pan protest and ribbon campaign at the gates to base, the Alliance effectively opened another front in the battle and broadened Vieques’ struggle. “Not everyone can be so macho, not everyone can be out at the bombing range,” Conde noted. She felt that male leaders valorized the initial strategy of setting up encampments on the bombing range. Living for days, weeks, even months on a no-man’s-land of scorching sun, with no access to food and water, and thousands of unexploded bombs, was a dramatic but extreme strategy that most community members were not prepared to emulate.<sup>4</sup> The Alliance focused attention on another space where protest could develop, a site that was more accessible to a broader range of people.

This presence was institutionalized in December 1999 when demonstrators locked the gates to the Camp García and planted themselves squarely at the entrance. They built an encampment they christened the Peace and Justice Camp. This camp would prove crucial to the expansion and continuity of the movement. “The Peace and Justice Camp became like the center of town for those of us who couldn’t be on the bombing range,” reflected Myrna Pagán, a Vieques resident who participated in Alliance events. Many elderly people, who could not handle the arduous journey and terrain of the bombing range, took up regular positions at the gates. Women with small children and residents who could not leave their jobs or family passed through the encampment. Importantly, the

Catholic Church, which shared with the Women's Alliance a common vision of Vieques' movement as a grassroots struggle for peace, started holding Saturday night prayer vigils at the gates. Activists rented a house across the street from the encampment, and tapped into electric and water lines to maintain the camp. Miriam Sobá reflects on the significance of the encampment:

The Peace and Justice Camp, which is located in front of the gates to Camp García, the civil disobedience camp, has earned the title "The Women's Camp" because of our active participation. This blessed camp teaches us, not only the women but all of our people, that there are no chains that can hold back Viequenses who struggle. Not a people who have decided to be free. It is teaching us that we can struggle without limits, that there is no difference between men and women in struggle. (2000, n.p.)

After protesters were evicted from the bombing range in May 2000 and the Peace and Justice Camp was dismantled by the navy, protest simply shifted across the street from Camp García. The house that had provided electricity and water became the command center, with computers, phone lines, and fax machines broadcasting Vieques' struggle to the world. New structures were erected, banners were strung from fences, and tents were staked on the hill. The prayer vigils, the meals of rice and beans, the domino games, the music and pickets continued in the face of a wall of riot police. The Peace and Justice Camp allowed the Vieques movement to continue, even after it lost the encampments that had focused and defined the movement for over a year.

Again, the Peace and Justice encampment was not specifically the project of the Women's Alliance, although members of the Alliance participated in activities and prayer vigils held outside the gates to Camp García. Rather, the camp demonstrated the way in which the work of the Women's Alliance contributed to the expansion and continuity of the Vieques struggle.

### **Mobilizing Women: Ideologies and Tactics**

In life, there are things that we learn only when we women experience them. We have learned a lot about what fear is, sadness, misery and suffering through the death of our loved ones because of cancer. We ourselves suffer from cancer in our bodies. We have seen our sons and daughters leave for the big island, as we affectionately call it, and to other countries because there are no opportunities to study or work in Vieques. We feel the pain of not being able to give birth in our beautiful "Little Girl Island." Most importantly, we long for the right to live in peace and the liberty which belongs to us and our loved ones. (Sobá 2000, n.p.)

Judith Conde, an avowed *independentista* and feminist, contends that most members of the Alliance would not identify themselves as feminist: "There are

some *compañeras* [fellow activists] who aren't comfortable with the Alliance calling itself feminist, because the perception still exists that feminists are lesbians. They would prefer to belong to a group of women that works for women's issues, but is not feminist." Interviews with Alliance members and participant observation at Alliance-sponsored events, however, suggested a complex reality both in terms of how women viewed themselves and the militancy with which they championed their cause.

For example, some Alliance members saw no contradiction between feminist principles and their domestic identities. When asked if she would consider herself a feminist, fifty-five-year-old Alliance activist Zaidy Torres responded:

Of course! I was raised by a single mother. I believe women have to be strong. I'm not a feminist in the sense that I'm a radical extremist. But in terms of believing that women can get ahead, that they don't need a man to survive, sure I'm a feminist. I believe we are strong, we know how to administrate; we know how to take charge. We can do a lot of things; it doesn't have to be a man in charge.

It was precisely Zaidy Torres's confidence in the private, domestic sphere that made it natural for her to assume leadership in a women's mobilization: "If we can run a house, of course we can run a movement," she explained. Torres was motivated to join the Alliance to bring about social change for her grandchildren. A retired nurse, Torres had never before joined grassroots struggle against the navy. Torres's husband worked as a plumber for the navy on Camp García for twenty-seven years, which bought her silence, she explained, for over twenty years. In 1997, however, Torres lost her seventeen-year-old daughter to leukemia after a difficult two-year battle. In Vieques, residents largely accept that cancer is the unquestionable consequence of over sixty years of military practices, but the death of her child inspired Torres to speak out against the navy. "I want changes for my grandchildren," she explained. "It's my obligation to the memory of my daughter. For over twenty years I kept quiet, and didn't get involved before because of my husband's job. Now I think of my four grandchildren and realize I want to do more. I'm going to defend my family." Torres clearly felt justified in speaking out. As a grieving mother, she was unconcerned with charges of radicalism or extremism. She was acting as a mother, to fight for her daughter's memory. As a woman who knew how to manage a household and job, she was fully confident in her leadership abilities. The Alliance allowed Torres to draw on these dual aspects of her female identity, grieving mother and competent manager, as she spoke out against the naval presence.

Lynn Stephen (2005) argues that it is important to distinguish between the public face and the internal dynamics of grassroots organizations. To gain support from outsiders, the Women's Alliance needed to craft a message that would appeal to popular sensibilities in Puerto Rico about women's role and place. Nonetheless, "the political necessity of projecting 'sameness' does not . . . explain

how a movement operates, what it means to those involved, or what it is able to accomplish. It is also not evidence of shared consciousness or identity” (Stephen 2005, 66).

Miriam Sobá clearly distinguished between her own feelings and the outward symbolism of the Women’s Alliance. The white ribbon campaign, one of the Alliance’s most successful aspects, promoted the imagery of pretty white ribbons, of women as defenders of the domestic and as emotional, sentimental protectors of peace. Sobá rolled her eyes when asked about the campaign. “Everyone *loves* the ribbons,” she moaned. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she explained, “We in Puerto Rico operate on symbols. On the surface, the white ribbon seems innocent, feminine, and nice. It’s appealing. Everyone says, ‘Give me a ribbon. I’ll wear that.’ But the more people see the ribbons, the more they think of Vieques. It raises consciousness.”

Alliance organizers had a clear sense of the strategic utility of mobilizing certain symbols and identities. As much as Conde and Rivera struggled to find appropriate symbols and rhetoric to connect to the women, they also consciously manipulated symbols and maintained a somewhat ironic perspective on their import. For instance, despite the initial meeting at which women expressed their concerns about health issues and cancer, Conde and Rivera elected to emphasize women’s concerns for peace in their rhetoric and imagery. Proving that the navy caused cancer on the island was more difficult, Rivera explained, whereas peace was a universally recognized basic human right.

When asked if the women’s group contributed something unique to the mobilization of Vieques, Zaidy Torres was absolute: yes. She felt this difference was most apparent on the lecture circuit:

There’s a big difference when a woman speaks and when a man speaks. When the men spoke, the audience gave them their attention. When the women spoke, they made the presentation very different. They drew on their own personal experience in the family. They presented their perspective as mothers, wives, and all the effects the navy has had on our families. People understand that more.

In Philadelphia, we went to a workshop. What we said wasn’t different from the men. But we expressed it with more emotion. When women speak of their experience as wife and mother, people feel the experience more. It’s more from the heart than the head. We speak of the same issues, but the emotion we bring is different.

In a sense, what women brought to the Vieques mobilization was *testimonio*, a Latin American literary tradition of bearing testimony, particularly in relation to human rights abuses and injustice. Latin American women such as Carolina María de Jesus, Domitila Barrios de Chungara, and Nobel Prize-winning Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchú exemplify this tradition. George Yúdice defines *testimonio* as



an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g. war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history. (Yúdice as quoted in Gugelberger and Kearney 1991, 4)

Alliance activists tended to highlight their personal experiences as women and mothers living on an island dominated by military forces. “Our work is not only [about] the political action to get them out. We are organizing to bring attention to the social and psychological effects of the presence of the navy here,” explained Judith Conde (Suárez Toro 1999, n.p.). In practice, this meant that at speaking engagements, when male activists chronicled the history of Vieques’ domination by the U.S. Navy and the island’s subjugation to broader political forces, women activists gave highly emotional presentations about their suffering and abuse at the hands of the navy, and about their struggles to keep their families intact, healthy, and functioning. When Miriam Sobá spoke at a conference at the University of Puerto Rico, she was both vehement and emotional:

How do the children feel, how do they perform in the classroom, how do they respond day by day? How did the women feel when 2000 Americans came to town and you had to protect your house, you couldn’t go out because it was dangerous, you could lose your life and your dignity as a woman . . . and many did and many kept quiet. I believe that the situation in the town was that [the marines] believed it belonged to them, the Americans thought it was theirs, they thought the people of Vieques belonged to them and they could do and destroy whatever they wanted. It is the woman who carries all of these experiences, because it is we who keep in our hearts the feeling that, in a certain sense, our privacy and our liberty were violated, our peace. It’s an incredible indignation. (Sobá 2000, n.p.)

The organization of the Women’s Alliance and its symbolic framework allowed room for the expression of fiery sentiment and provided space for the emergence of women’s leadership in a way that non-gender-based organizations did not. At a July 4, 2000, rally at the gates of Camp García, women picketed in front of a human wall of Puerto Rican police in riot gear. Tensions were high. Federal marshals had dislodged protesters from the bombing range after a year of civil disobedience. Residents were angry that the governor had ordered heavily armed Puerto Rican police to guard navy boundaries.

Yet the women were not deterred. Conde rallied protesters with a bullhorn. She read a declaration of U.S. hypocrisy in which she pointed out that the United

States was celebrating its independence while Puerto Rico languished as its colony. She iterated demands for freedom and justice. Women marched in a lively picket line, interrupted only when bursts of tear gas were inexplicably fired on them.

By embracing the idea of woman as housewife and defender of the home, the Alliance was able to allow the emergence of strong female leadership and involvement in the movement. The rhetoric of women protecting their homes legitimized women's participation in protest and sidestepped partisan politics and the specter of anticolonialism. The Vieques Women's Alliance celebrated women's domestic roles while asserting a public voice for women and challenging one of the most powerful expressions of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico—the U.S. military. The Women's Alliance successfully avoided the issue of Puerto Rican sovereignty, while implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, challenging colonial domination by the United States.

### Conclusion

The women of Vieques embraced private, domestic identities to assert a powerful public voice in protest of the navy's sixty-year occupation of Vieques Island. Joining a coalition movement united by the theme of peace and tactics of non-violent civil disobedience, the Vieques Women's Alliance mobilized new sectors of the public and expanded the vision of the movement. Women's new participation and leadership in grassroots struggle were crucial elements in the shutting down of military operations on Vieques Island. The Vieques movement succeeded in halting live-bombing exercises and forcing the military to withdraw, although the navy's toxic legacy remains very much a problem on the island.<sup>5</sup> The Vieques movement points to the power of locally based social movements that are linked to broader goals, visions, and alliances. Rather than seeking total social transformation, these small movements focus on more specific, concrete, everyday concerns and grievances. The Vieques mobilization marks a "refusal to accept" (Holloway 2002) injustices of state power. By organizing as a coalition movement and by accepting a multiplicity of voices rather than asserting the primacy of a particular, dominant voice, the movement expanded. The reconstituted Vieques mobilization of 1999 allowed for the participation of new sectors of the population and the emergence of new leadership.

The work and history of the Vieques Women's Alliance offer implications for broader social movement theory on the nature of women's participation in protest. Vieques follows a pattern of women mobilizing around subsistence issues by drawing on their identities as mothers, wives, and homemakers to rally support for their cause. What the Vieques case makes clear is that women's organizing framework—in this case, the defense of the domestic sphere—does not necessarily limit the scope or aspirations of participants. In fact, in Vieques, it was through asserting their domestic role that women were able to assume

leadership and assert themselves forcefully in the public sphere. The agenda of the Women's Alliance influenced the tactics and priorities of the broader movement as a whole. Ideologies of domesticity and women's traditional place allowed women to envision themselves as part of a social movement that had often been identified with fishermen's struggles and land rescues, or what Conde described as the "macho" tactics of men. The Women's Alliance also created a space for protest that sidestepped paralyzing debates on colonialism, dramatically expanding Vieques' grassroots mobilization. In sum, by drawing on gender-based experience, women in Vieques demonstrated that women everywhere have the potential to broaden bases of social protest and strengthen the effectiveness of movements for social change.

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#### NOTES

1. Dr. Cruz María Nazario Delgado, principal investigator of the Epidemiological Study of Cancer in Vieques, sponsored by the Puerto Rican legislature, analyzed the 2005 Puerto Rican Health Department statistics. Dr. Nazario concluded that the average incidence of cancer in Vieques for the five-year period of 1980–1984 was 266 per 100,000. During 1995–1999 the cancer incidence was 359 per 100,000. The risk of developing cancer in Vieques was approximately 1.35 times greater in 1995–1999, compared with the risk in 1980–1984 (Nazario 2005).
2. In this way, Vieques' revitalized movement follows the pattern of social movement organizing, seen in Seattle in 1999, in which the structure is one of a decentralized, non-hierarchical network of antiglobalization activists.
3. Judith Conde, Gladys Rivera, Miriam Sobá, Carmen Valencia, Myrna Pagán, and Zaidy Torres are quoted throughout this chapter. If a citation is not given for a quotation, the reader should assume the statement comes from the interviews I conducted with these women in Vieques during the summers of 1999, 2000, and 2006.
4. One of the major challenges of the movement was sustaining the activists who were living out on the encampments. Fishing boats made daily trips to bring water and food to the protesters camping on the bombing range.
5. See *Centro Journal* (2006), a special issue partially devoted to Vieques' current struggles for demilitarization, decontamination, development, and return of military-controlled land.

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