

# **Social Struggle Against the U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico**

## **Two Movements in History**

*by*

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*The grassroots struggle against the U.S. Navy in Vieques transcended highly divisive colonial politics to build unprecedented political solidarity in Puerto Rico. The success of the recent Vieques movement in shutting down a U.S. Navy live-fire training facility contrasts with the experience of an earlier grassroots struggle in the 1970s. Whereas cold-war politics impeded the earlier activists from forging the alliances and formulating the vision that might advance their cause, a changed political context in the 1990s opened up a new space for protest to develop. Activists' new focus on peace was crucial to strengthening, expanding, and internationalizing the Vieques movement.*

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In May 2003 the U.S. Navy shut down its live-fire training ground on the Puerto Rican island municipality of Vieques. The base closure marked the victory of a grassroots movement against the world's most powerful military. Since World War II the navy had maintained a major training installation on this 51-square-mile island, located six miles off the southeast coast of Puerto Rico. Its retreat came after four years of mass mobilization, thousands of arrests for civil disobedience, and international media attention to the struggle to halt live bombing exercises on the island. While Vieques was the site of one of the navy's key military installations in the Western Hemisphere, it was also home to 10,000 U.S. citizens, who lived sandwiched between an ammunition depot and a maneuver area. The expansion of the base and the intensification of weapons testing and maneuvers had created an environment that was incompatible with a viable residential community. This article examines the way the grassroots struggle against the navy overcame highly divisive

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colonial politics to build unprecedented political solidarity in Puerto Rico. It analyzes the success of the Vieques movement in relation to a less successful grassroots struggle that unfolded on the island in the late 1970s and focuses on the framing of opposition to the U.S. military at different historic moments.

The catalyst for the recent protest was the accidental death of a civilian employee on the base. 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.

Within days of Sanes's death, waves of protesters positioned themselves as human shields on the bombing range, bringing military maneuvers to a halt. Scaling fences or arriving by fishing boat, activists poured onto the bombing range, building over a dozen encampments on the target zone. Thousands of supporters from Vieques, Puerto Rico, and the United States visited the campsites to express their solidarity. Puerto Rico's governor, Pedro Rosselló, a loyal ally of the U.S. government and military, called for an immediate halt to the bombing. The support of Puerto Ricans on the main island, the diaspora, and international allies helped to create a powerful movement that eventually caused the navy to abandon its "crown jewel" in the Western Hemisphere.

The Vieques movement points to the power of locally based social movements that are linked to broader goals, visions, and alliances. In the past two decades theorists have analyzed and debated the significance of small-scale popular movements in Latin America (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Eckstein, 1989; Escobar and Alvarez, 1992; Fox and Starn, 1997). Rather than seeking total social transformation, these small movements focus on more specific, concrete, everyday concerns and grievances. Hellman (1997) cautions, however, that unless locally based social movements are connected to broad-based visions and goals and forge wider alliances, they risk political insignificance. In Vieques, a key aspect of expanding the struggle was finding a meaningful framework that would build wider solidarity while sidestepping the volatile issue of Puerto Rican sovereignty.

In the late 1970s, cold-war politics impeded activists from forging the alliances and formulating the vision that might advance their cause. A focus on local fishermen and their grievances against the navy appealed to the

economic and cultural nationalist dimensions of the struggle, but it ultimately narrowed the movement, which succumbed to political pressure and navy strong-arm tactics. In the 1990s, the political climate beyond Vieques's shores shifted dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war. The threat of communism in Latin America that had justified U.S. military actions in Vieques suddenly disappeared. The changed political context opened up a new space for protest to develop. Activists' new focus on peace was crucial to strengthening, expanding, and internationalizing the Vieques movement.

The article first considers the way material grievances in Vieques are complicated by broader political forces emanating from Puerto Rico's colonial status. It then outlines the roots of the conflict in the history of military control over the island. Its central concern is to examine the mobilizations against the navy in the 1970s and the 1990s through historical analysis and comparison of their politics and discourse.

### COLONIAL CITIZENS

Much recent analysis of conflict around military bases assumes that nationalist ideology is a central motivating factor (Smith, 2000). In Vieques, however, conflict had its foundation in the material conditions of everyday life. Vieques is the poorest municipality in Puerto Rico, with 73 percent of the population living below the poverty line. It has among the highest rates of unemployment, with almost half the adult population lacking work according to the 1990 census. It has among the highest infant mortality rates in Puerto Rico and a growing rate of cancer and other health problems that residents believe are caused by weapons testing. Although military bases are commonly assumed to provide jobs and economic growth for surrounding communities, the military's legacy in Vieques has been poverty and stagnation. What the recent mobilization in Vieques made clear was that the material harm caused by the military—the destruction of the ecology, the health effects of weapons testing, the squelching of economic development, the dislocation of civilians and the navy's antagonism toward them—was the basis of protest.

Vieques's local grievances became enmeshed, however, in broader political controversies connected to the geopolitical interests of the U.S. military and the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. Vieques is a municipality of Puerto Rico, a nonsovereign territory of the United States. Its residents are U.S. citizens who serve in the U.S. armed forces and can be drafted to fight in times of war but who have neither

political representation in Congress nor the right to vote for president. As Ayala (2003) notes, U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico operates through a combination of coercion and consent. The predicament of Vieques, an inhabited bombing range, illustrates the more naked forms of domination: the usurpation of national territory and the exercise of power in the face of widespread discontent. But colonialism is also maintained through consent. The extension of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917 effectively silenced more vigorous protest by offering individuals the rights of citizenship even while denying Puerto Rico a place in the American polity. Puerto Rican citizens have freedom of movement to the United States and privileged access to the labor market denied their Latin American neighbors. They have high rates of participation in the U.S. military and live on an island with a strong presence of U.S. armed forces and bases. Political debate in Puerto Rico is shaped primarily by autonomism, the struggle to advance local interests within the colonial framework. A vocal minority advocates independence, radicalizing political discourse and tapping into widespread cultural nationalism (Ayala, 2003: 217), but the large majority of the Puerto Rican population is politically moderate, preferring continued political and economic ties to the United States even while maintaining a profound sense of Puerto Rican identity (Dávila, 1997; Duany, 2000; 2002; Morris, 1995).

Conflict with the 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. What is peculiar about Vieques's struggle is the way residents have struggled to assert specific material grievances that are a fundamental consequence of Puerto Rico's political domination by the United States and its armed forces while avoiding the delicate issue of sovereignty.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The U.S. Navy usurped three-quarters of Vieques Island in a series of land expropriations during and after World War II.<sup>1</sup> The rise of German fascism and the outbreak of war in Europe had raised U.S. anxiety about the security of the Caribbean region and the Panama Canal. Declaring a national emergency, the navy expropriated 6,680 acres of land in eastern Puerto Rico and 21,020 acres of Vieques, two-thirds of that island's land, to build the Roosevelt

Roads Naval Station, which was intended to rival Pearl Harbor in scale and significance.

At the time of the military occupation in the early 1940s, Vieques Island was devoted to sugarcane cultivation. Two large estates, one U.S.-controlled and the other Puerto Rican-owned, dominated the local economy and controlled most of the land. Stark social inequality and overwhelming poverty facilitated the military takeover. The landless majority who lived on the expropriated acres had little political clout, and thousands were evicted from their homes and deposited in razed cane fields that the navy declared “resettlement tracts.”

Initially, the base created a construction boom that provided employment and filled residents with hope. The construction of the base, however, stopped almost as quickly as it had begun. Military priorities shifted to the Pacific when the United States entered the war, and the navy scaled back its original plans. The devastation at Pearl Harbor challenged the wisdom of concentrating a fleet at one massive installation (Tugwell, 1976: 68). The construction of the massive stone and cement breakwater from Puerto Rico to Vieques was suspended, and work on Roosevelt Roads slowed because of a shortage of supplies. The abrupt halt of construction had a disastrous effect on Vieques’s economy.

In 1947 the navy drew up new strategic plans for Vieques. It redesignated Roosevelt Roads as a naval training installation and fuel depot (Langley, 1985: 273). Vieques was to be used for firing practice and amphibious landings by tens of thousands of sailors and marines. Because this new vision of the base required more land, the navy expropriated over 4,000 acres from eastern Vieques, displacing 130 families. With three-quarters of its land usurped, Vieques found its quality of life severely debased and its economy crippled.

Although the United States was officially at peace, Vieques became a hostage of the cold war. Despite growing social tensions and repeated calls for the return of the land, the military remained entrenched on the island. After the Korean War, U.S. rivalry with the Soviet Union intensified. The Soviets’ testing of the guided missile gave the United States new impetus to compete for technological superiority. Roosevelt Roads assumed new strategic significance as a place to test missiles, and Vieques was the perfect bull’s-eye (Langley, 1985). The Cuban Revolution of 1959 jolted the U.S. military, which feared the rise of communism in a crucial strategic position in the region. That year the navy activated a marine base on Vieques, Camp García. With the fear of a “communist menace” in Latin America, Vieques took on an increasing importance as a staging ground for interventions, as in, for example,

Guatemala in 1954 and the Dominican Republic in 1965. When the Bay of Pigs invasion failed in 1961, the surviving forces gathered in Vieques.

Although the navy maintained no formal jurisdiction over the civilian sector, in reality it controlled the fate of the entire island. It controlled the majority of the land, water, and air surrounding Vieques. It controlled nautical routes, flight paths, aquifers, and zoning laws in civilian territory. It blocked developers from establishing a resort on the island. It held title to the resettlement tracts in the civilian sector, where the majority of the island's population lived under constant threat of eviction. In 1961 it drafted secret plans to remove the entire civilian population of 8,000 from the island; even the dead were to be dug up and removed from their graves (Fernández, 1996). The plan would have allowed the navy to expand the base without interference. Governor Luis Muñoz Marín intervened and a presidential order from President John F. Kennedy eventually blocked the navy from carrying out its plans, but the tension between the military and civilian population persisted.

Vieques's plight dramatically exposed Puerto Rico's lack of sovereignty and subordinate status within the U.S. orbit of power. Although President Harry Truman had proclaimed Puerto Rico's colonial status resolved in 1952 with the conferral of "commonwealth status," its newly conceived political relationship with the United States did not confer self-determination. Ultimate power lay not in the hands of islanders but in the U.S. Congress. Puerto Ricans continued to hold U.S. citizenship but had no representation in federal government. They paid no federal taxes but were subject to the military draft. Foreign policy matters were in the hands of the United States. Nowhere was the contradiction between internal autonomy and external control over "foreign policy" so vividly expressed as in Vieques, where U.S. national security directly impinged upon the community's internal affairs.

Despite Puerto Rico's heralded commonwealth status, the U.S. navy continued to function as a colonial power in Vieques. Nationalists and advocates of Puerto Rican independence long viewed Vieques as a rallying point for opposition to U.S. imperialism. In the 1940s, the nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos denounced the U.S. occupation of Vieques as the "vivisection of the Puerto Rican nation." Despite the apparent clarity of the injustice—the virtual stranglehold the navy held on the island and its antagonism toward the resident civilian population—residents' understanding of the navy and the nature of their dilemma was ambivalent and divided. This ambivalence expressed itself in the protest movement that unfolded in 1978.

### COLD-WAR SOCIAL STRUGGLES

In the late 1970s, protest erupted in Vieques in response to the intensification of maneuvers and live-fire exercises on the island. When a militant anticolonial movement opposing live-fire exercises emerged on the neighboring island of Culebra, the navy transferred bombing to Vieques, and the heightened bombing and stepped-up maneuvers pushed Vieques's conflict over the edge.<sup>2</sup> For approximately five years, 1978–1983, fishermen led a dramatic grassroots struggle against the military presence in Vieques. Positioning themselves in the direct line of missile fire, they succeeded in interrupting international military maneuvers. Pickets, demonstrations, and a campaign of civil disobedience put Vieques's grievances on an international stage. The U.S. Congress held hearings on naval activities on the island and recommended that the navy leave Vieques (U.S. House, 1981). Geraldo Rivera traveled to the island with his film crew. The fisherman leader Carlos Zenón spoke before the UN decolonization committee on Vieques's crisis. Daily papers in Puerto Rico tracked the conflict. Thousands of islanders and supporters were mobilized in Vieques, Puerto Rico, and the United States.

Despite winning several important concessions from the navy and broadcasting Vieques's plight to the world, the movement was ultimately unsuccessful in its goal of evicting the navy and recovering land. Three major factors were responsible for its failure. First, activists emphasized local economic grievances rather than the broader political or human rights aspects of the case. Second, they were ambivalent in the alliances they formed with a broader network of supporters, emphasizing a hierarchical structure with local leadership and control of the movement. Finally, they contested the navy at a moment of increased military entrenchment.

Both the fisherman-led movement of the 1970s and the more recent mobilization emerged from the grass roots in response to military incursions. Both evoked discourse that sidestepped charged debates over Puerto Rican sovereignty. The earlier movement, however, erupted at a time of heightened cold-war tensions that constrained its effectiveness. In 1979 Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan, a wave of revolutionary movements swept Central America and the Caribbean basin, and the U.S. public consciousness was shaped by grim images of hostages in Iran. The United States dramatically expanded its economic and military presence in the Caribbean, intervening in regional conflicts and arming and training security forces in the basin. This polarized political climate shaped the movement's expression and, ultimately, its outcome.

Vieques activists resisted framing their grievances in broad political terms that would confront the issue of Puerto Rican sovereignty and thus raise



potentially divisive questions of loyalty, patriotism, and national identity. Although the movement emerged in direct response to the intensification of maneuvers and the shifting of bombing exercises from Culebra to Vieques, activists did not address the broader human rights aspects of the conflict. Instead, they emphasized that the local movement was 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. Discourse focused on the struggle of the fishermen: the destruction of traps and fishing gear by navy boats on maneuvers and the restrictions on the use of prime fishing grounds. There were several motivations for narrowing the focus. First, compared with the recent Culebra mobilization, which was spearheaded and sustained by the Puerto Rican Independence party, the Vieques movement emerged from a community with a prostatehood majority and mayor. 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 cause of Puerto Rican independence or a tool of political interests. 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.

The fisherman-led mobilization fused highly confrontational tactics with moderate politics. Fishermen in 18-foot boats positioned themselves in the direct line of missile fire, halting warfare training at sea. They became key protagonists on an island where residents were vehemently opposed to military practices that stifled the economy and impinged upon their freedom. Fishermen, furthermore, talked not about imperialism but about the damage that ships caused to their traps. They argued not for Puerto Rican independence but for their individual rights as U.S. citizens to make a living. They served as cultural icons evocative of the island’s rural past and harnessed cultural nationalist sentiment and a strong local identity for resistance against the military.

There were strategic weaknesses, however, in framing grievances in local economic terms and in emphasizing the fishermen’s leadership of the grassroots movement. The David-and-Goliath imagery of fishermen in wooden boats confronting battleships at sea was evocative and built international sympathy for Vieques’s cause, but the movement’s failure to highlight the live bombing of an inhabited island was a lost opportunity for building broader support. The Vieques solidarity network in Puerto Rico and the United States, while militant and committed, emanated almost entirely from the political left (McCaffrey, 1998). This contrasted significantly with the



more recent movement, in which solidarity was extremely broad and cut across class, religion, and political affiliation. Puerto Rico- and U.S.-based supporters perceived the anticolonial dimensions of the case but were discouraged by local activists from developing the political dimensions of the struggle. Tensions erupted over questions of leadership, with local Viequense activists asserting the right to frame the terms and direction of the struggle. When Puerto Rico-based supporters burned an American flag at a demonstration at the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Ceiba, fractures developed in the movement, with some members arguing that outside forces were attempting to hijack the struggle as a platform for the independence movement.

On a local level, 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 on lecture circuits, or rise to leadership positions. Circumscribing the participation of half of the population limited potential sources of creativity and solidarity. 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."

The movement's failure can in large part be attributed to a broader political context that was hostile to Vieques's cause. The navy made clear its determination to hold onto Vieques and sought to squelch the movement by dividing it.<sup>3</sup> The military attempted to build a civilian constituency on the island by hiring 100 residents to work on the base as civilian security guards. It hired a community-relations official to organize a militant pronavy support group that held promilitary counterdemonstrations calling the protesters' patriotism into question. By focusing the debate on politics, the group aimed to drive a wedge between local residents and Puerto Rican leftist supporters. Increasingly, the navy and its support group sought to undermine the movement by depicting it as a communist insurgency run by outside agitators. It arrested demonstrators for trespassing on navy land and moved the conflict into the federal court system, which was largely sympathetic to its position. In court, protest was treated as a threat to national security and, again, the protesters' patriotism was called into question.

One particular case marked a turning point for the movement. When a Puerto Rican social activist arrested for trespassing on federal property died under suspicious circumstances in a federal prison, a veil of violence and

terror descended upon Vieques's struggle.<sup>4</sup> The following month, clandestine factions of the Puerto Rican independence movement issued a response. On December 4, 1979, gunmen ambushed a busload of navy personnel in Sabana Seca, killing two sailors and wounding ten others. Several radical groups claimed responsibility for the attack, calling it retaliation for the death of Rodríguez and two young *independentistas* murdered at Cerro Maravilla. The incident sent shock waves across Puerto Rico and the United States and caused horror in Vieques.<sup>5</sup> Under the shadow of this violence, and with deep divisions within the Vieques movement, Governor Carlos Romero Barceló intervened, signing a good-neighbor agreement with the navy (the Fortín accord of 1983) that effectively diffused protest.

### FORMATION OF A NEW MOVEMENT

For five decades Vieques languished as a cold-war hostage. The island suffered direct material harm as a consequence of U.S. military expansion and rivalry with the Soviets. To protest these conditions, however, was deemed anti-American and subversive. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 changed the contours of debate. The end of the cold war changed the political climate in Puerto Rico, diminishing the intensity of the anticommunist sentiment that had long constrained political expression. Geopolitical shifts triggered a reevaluation and restructuring of the U.S. military. In this context, local activists launched new grassroots efforts to build consensus for a withdrawal of the military from Vieques. The military's resistance to moderate efforts at political change was the catalyst for protest.

Because the United States was reassessing its military installations after the cold war, activists initially sought to have Vieques included on the federal list of military facilities to be closed. By drawing in a mix of citizens of different ages, classes, partisan political affiliation, and history of participation, they aimed to form a new group that would lobby for change. After collecting hundreds of signatures and traveling to Washington to advance their cause, activists were dismayed when Carlos Romero Barceló, now Puerto Rican resident commissioner in Washington, intervened with compromise legislation. Romero proposed leaving the eastern bombing range under military control but recovering 8,000 acres of land in the west that was being used for ammunition storage and was of questionable value for national defense. While activists were skeptical of Romero's motives, his intervention suggested a shifting political context. The advocacy of a member of the Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progress party—PNP, prostatehood), which was

widely regarded in Puerto Rico as the most pro–United States party, conferred legitimacy on the new movement.

The navy moved to thwart Romero’s proposal. In the midst of efforts to reclaim land, it announced plans to erect a “relocatable-over-the-horizon-radar” (ROTHR) station on some of the western land under consideration for civilian use. Developed by the Raytheon Company during the cold war to monitor Soviet fleets in the Pacific Northwest, this sophisticated radar system now had a new purpose: to scan the Caribbean and Latin America for aircraft carrying drugs to and from the United States. Governor Pedro Rosselló hailed it as an important contribution to the war against drug trafficking, and it gave the navy a new reason to hold onto 8,000 acres of land.

In Vieques, the perceived health threat of the radar became a rallying point for new opposition to the navy. Residents were increasingly concerned about contamination from military explosives and reports of high levels of certain kinds of cancer in the community. The secretive nature of military activity and the community’s lack of access to information intensified fear and suspicion. The navy’s determination to build the cluster of 34 towers, ranging in height from 71 to 125 feet, despite local health concerns and the uncertainty of scientific evidence, inflamed passions. The movement against the radar system expanded to Puerto Rico, where a sister station was to be erected in Lajas.

The opposition developed into a coalition movement with fronts in Vieques and Lajas. While in Vieques the focus was mainly on the health and environmental consequences of the radar facility, in Lajas protesters resisted the seizure of agricultural land in the Puerto Rican heartland. The emphasis on defending the land was reminiscent of struggles against strip mining and the privatization of Puerto Rican beaches in the 1960s (Nieves Falcón, García Rodríguez, and Ojeda Reyes, 1971). By 1995 there was mass support for the struggle. In October tens of thousands of demonstrators converged on the streets of San Juan in one of the largest mobilizations in Puerto Rico in years. Delegations from Lajas and Vieques had effectively mobilized both cultural nationalist sentiment about the land and fear of electromagnetic radiation. Confrontation over military expansion and encroachment had been channeled into discussion about the environment and health.

The coalition that Vieques and Lajas activists forged was a fundamental aspect of the broad-based antinavy movement that emerged in Vieques in 1999. The radar mobilization renewed the solidarity network between activists in Vieques and in Puerto Rico. In contrast to the 1970s movement, in which Viequesens were wary of losing control of the movement to outsiders, the radar struggle was waged as a common struggle against military imposition.

Significantly, the Catholic Church lent its support to the Viequenses' struggle for health.

The antiradar mobilization pointed to a shifting political climate in Puerto Rico as a whole. Three years later, the island was gripped by a massive general strike in response to the Rosselló administration's plan to sell the state-owned telephone company to the U.S.-based GTE Corporation. The battle over the telephone company evolved into a broader struggle against privatization and U.S. imposition. For 48 hours in early July 1998, more than half a million workers and students shut down most government offices, universities, the ports, public buses, taxis, and numerous private businesses (Gonzalez, 1998). With a broad coalition of labor, student, environmental, community, cultural, political, and religious groups standing behind the telephone workers' unions, the strike was christened "the People's Strike." All over the island, thousands of Puerto Rican flags symbolized support for the telephone company and the nation. The struggle signaled a new militancy and consensus on the island and became an important precedent for the struggle that unfolded in Vieques.

### MOBILIZING FOR PEACE

David Sanes's death opened a new chapter in a decades-long story of conflict between the U.S. Navy and the residents of Vieques Island. From a short-term perspective, the movement was built on six years of grassroots organizing and coalition building. Viewed more broadly, however, it was an expression of a shift in the Puerto Rican political landscape. Hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans throughout Puerto Rico and the diaspora put aside political and religious differences to rally behind the cause of Vieques. Puerto Rican celebrities such as Ricky Martin spoke out on behalf of the island's cause. In New York, the Puerto Rican Day parade, long a symbol of ethnic pride that shied away from politics, embraced the cause of Vieques. U.S.-based politicians traveled to Vieques, viewing their support of the struggle there as important to their electoral ambitions back home. Vieques not only captured the daily headlines of Puerto Rican newspapers but entered the mainstream debate in the United States, with President Bill Clinton publicly expressing regret over David Sanes's death.

The Vieques movement evolved from a local struggle over military encroachment into a mass mobilization with international support. A key factor in the movement's expansion was the strategic decision to frame grievances in more universal terms, as a struggle for peace. The framework of peace appealed to a wide constituency. While in North America and Europe

pacifism has been viewed as morally suspect, in Puerto Rico peace offered a broad discourse that sidestepped partisan debate over colonialism. The discourse initially emanated from the Catholic Church and drew on both traditional religious ideology and more progressive notions of social justice. The struggle for peace, however, also linked Vieques's cause to the international peace movement, nonviolent resistance, and opposition to militarism. The broad discourse drew in a multiclass constituency of veteran activists, women, youth, the elderly, and the formerly unaffiliated in Vieques. In Puerto Rico and the United States, it attracted university students, the labor movement, the religious sector, the political left, and the average citizen.

Peace functioned as a broad ideology that was interpreted in different ways by the coalition movement. From the earliest days of the mobilization, mainstream religious institutions supported Vieques's cause as a struggle against militarism, war, and violence. The Catholic Bishop of Caguas, Alvaro Corrado del Río, traveled to Vieques to officiate at Sanes's funeral mass, signaling concern for the case at the very highest level of the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico. Corrado called for the immediate exit of the navy, the liberation of Puerto Rico from military domination, and the practice of civil disobedience to stop the bombing (*El Nuevo Día*, May 23, 1999). He was backed by the archbishop of San Juan, Roberto González Nieves, who traveled to New York calling for peace and justice for Vieques. Corrado launched a campaign of "white flags for peace," and Vieques was soon awash in white flags hung from doorposts, clotheslines, windowboxes, and car antennas all over the island.

The newly formed Vieques Women's Alliance also decided to adopt the symbolism of peace in its organizing efforts. Despite initial organizational meetings in which Vieques women expressed concern about cancer and health, activists elected to emphasize women's concerns for peace in their rhetoric and imagery. It was hard to prove that the navy caused cancer on the island, one activist explained, whereas peace was a universally recognized basic human right. The Women's Alliance attached white ribbons to the chain-link fence of Camp García as a testament to Viequeses' desire for peace and encouraged supporters to wear white ribbons as a symbol of that desire. "Everyone loves the ribbons," noted a leading activist. "We in Puerto Rico operate on symbols. On the surface, the white ribbon seems so 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."

Activists from the political left used peace as a discourse to internationalize their claims—to link Vieques's struggle to global problems of inequality, war, and militarism. They traveled to peace conferences in India, Hawaii,

Okinawa, and Korea. Nobel Peace Prizewinners—the Dalai Lama and Rigoberta Menchú—spoke out on behalf of peace for Vieques, while Oscar Arias traveled to Vieques from Costa Rica. In New York, where organized support for the Vieques cause emanated from the political left, activists combined the call for peace with more militant rhetoric. The Puerto Rican Day parade of 2000 was devoted both to the struggle for peace in Vieques and to the memory of the nationalist hero Pedro Albizu Campos.

Peace informed not only discourse but tactics. The movement was strongly committed to nonviolence, a reflection of the moral support and ideological influence of religious actors in defining and directing the struggle. Protestant and Catholic leaders emphasized peace and nonviolence not only through sermons and prayers but through training programs in civil disobedience. All of the participants in the Catholic encampment on the bombing range, for example, received training in nonviolence and catechism. Activists took their protest directly to the bombing range to block naval exercises. They chained the gates of the base shut and blocked access with church pews on which elderly protesters sat vigil and said the rosary. They marched, picketed, and clanged pots and pans in the street. Their militancy was tempered, however, by the commitment to nonviolence that gave discipline and focus to the movement.

The solid backing of the religious sector gave Vieques's struggle a new legitimacy and moral authority.<sup>6</sup> Church involvement helped change the cold-war framework that depicted protest as anti-American or communist-inspired. With priests and ministers throughout Vieques and Puerto Rico celebrating its work for peace, the movement expanded. Conservative denominations such as the Baptist church in Vieques spoke out against the "sinful" naval bombing exercises. Individuals who had never felt comfortable participating in demonstrations joined prayer vigils for peace. What was particularly interesting was Catholics' ability to form a coalition with mainline Protestant and Pentecostal churches. Tensions between Catholicism and Protestantism in Puerto Rico extended back to the U.S. occupation of 1898, when the United States encouraged Protestant missionaries to convert, "civilize," and "Americanize" the largely Roman Catholic island. The arrival in 1916 of Pentecostalism with its fundamentalism and socially conservative morality further polarized the religious denominations on the island (McGrath, 2000). The struggle to halt the bombing in Vieques brought together Catholics, Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, United Evangelicals, and even Pentecostals.

The unity of the religious sector was important on two levels. First, it formed a very dramatic model of consensus building on an island deeply divided along religious and political lines. Second, the coalition formed by

the different religious denominations emerged as a powerful alternative to the government when the Rosselló administration retreated from Vieques's cause. In the days after Sanes's death, Governor Rosselló had called for a halt to bombing in Vieques. His willingness to oppose the navy was a dramatic departure from a position of seemingly unconditional support for all things American and military.<sup>7</sup> He championed Vieques for a period of nine months, convening commissions on the impact of live bombing exercises on the island that called for an immediate end to the bombing, cleanup of the contaminated land, the withdrawal of the navy, and the return of the land to the islanders. Ultimately, however, he gave in to a plan pressed on Puerto Rico by the Clinton administration that would allow for continued bombing of the island, and his doing so threatened to fragment the unprecedented consensus.

The ecumenical coalition played a crucial role in maintaining the movement's momentum. Leaders rejected the compromise, upset that the pact did not include an option to halt all bombing immediately and that the navy would be allowed to resume bombing exercises at least temporarily. They denounced cash incentives to continue the bombing as immoral. Bishop Corrado del Río declared that "there is no bomb sufficiently small to be morally acceptable." In the face of angry denunciations by the governor, religious leaders convened the *Marcha para la Paz de Vieques*, and on February 21, 2000, 150,000 demonstrators carrying white flags and demanding peace for Vieques massed in the streets of San Juan. The silent march of tens of thousands of white-clad demonstrators, arguably the largest mass demonstration in Puerto Rican history, marked a public repudiation of the compromise agreement. Organized with the help of the *Coordinadora Todo Puerto Rico con Vieques*, a civic group connected to labor and activist networks, the demonstration asserted the public will when the weak colonial state faltered. The massive march infused the Vieques movement with energy and foreshadowed the movement's ultimate success.

## CONCLUSION

In the 1990s, in the aftermath of the cold war, there was a wave of mass demonstrations in Puerto Rico that marked a rise in activism, militancy, and unprecedented political consensus building on the island. The struggle to halt the installation of the radar system in Vieques and Lajas, the telephone strike, and the Vieques movement demonstrated successful coalition building across party, class, religious, and territorial lines in a new political climate. A key aspect of the recent Vieques movement's success was the broad framework of peace that activists employed to advance their cause. Compared with



the more circumscribed ideology developed in the 1970s, the discourse of peace allowed local activists to build a broad coalition and cultivate consensus and international solidarity. The movement's victory can be viewed as the product not only of different strategies but of new political possibilities in the post-cold-war world.

Vieques can be understood in relation to the recent wave of mobilizations that pursue radical social change without seeking state power. Like the Zapatista uprising and the Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization, the Vieques movement can be seen as part of a more widespread effort to block intrusions of state power and capitalism (see Falk, 1993; Holloway, 2002). By focusing on a concrete, achievable objective—the halt to live bombing exercises—the Vieques movement was able to achieve measurable success. As in the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, activists connected a vision of world peace to a specific, winnable battle.

After more than 100 years of domination by the U.S. military, in Vieques Puerto Ricans for the first time exercised veto power (Rodríguez Beruff, 2001). By mobilizing to stop the naval bombing exercises, they challenged the structures of power that had long controlled their island. Victor Rodríguez Domínguez (2000) notes that in the history of U.S.–Puerto Rico relations all of the major milestones have been set by the United States. The Vieques mobilization marks a “refusal to accept” (Holloway, 2002) injustices of state power.

## NOTES

1. Data in this section are drawn from McCaffrey (2002) and are the product of ethnographic, documentary, and archival research.

2. For further discussion of the Culebra movement, see McCaffrey (2002) and Delgado Cintrón (1989).

3. Vice Admiral G. E. R. Kinnear II testified that Vieques was crucial to maintaining the U.S. edge in the balance of power with the Soviet Union: “The essential element that provides the U.S. Navy its advantage over the Soviets is our ability to deploy high performance aircraft, that is, carrier aviation. They have us outnumbered in submarines and surface ships. Only in the area of high performance aircraft at sea do we have the edge. The Roosevelt Roads training complex, of which Vieques is an integral part, is absolutely essential in enabling us to maintain that margin” (quoted in Langley, 1985: 274).

4. Angel Rodríguez Cristóbal was found dead in his prison cell two months into a six-month jail term on trespassing charges. Prison officials declared his death a suicide, but an independent autopsy concluded that he had been beaten to death.

5. The incident and the subsequent government cover-up shook the foundations of the Puerto Rican political system. For further discussion, see Aponte Pérez (1995) and Suárez (1987).

6. The Catholic Church's advocacy for social justice and an end to the bombing in Vieques marked a new development in Puerto Rico. Historically, the Church has acted as a conservative force in Puerto Rican society. In the 1960s, when liberation theology swept across Latin America, it remained focused on doctrine, protesting not social injustice but birth control. Protestant churches as well shied away from political involvement. During Vieques's movement in the 1970s, the Catholic Church and the religious sector in general were absent from the struggle with two exceptions; Bishop Antulio Parrilla was a strong supporter of efforts to remove the navy and participated in civil disobedience on the island, and the U.S.-based American Friends Service Committee also supported the movement.

7. During Rosselló's administration, the National Guard took over public housing complexes as part of a very visible, militarized campaign against drug trafficking. Rosselló supported the ROTH program and opposed Romero's efforts to return empty land in western Vieques to civilian control.

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