

The value of Vieques

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ABSTRACT

In September, more than 2,000 protesters in Washington DC demanded an end to the US Navy presence in Vieques, a small island six miles off Puerto Rico that has been used as a Navy training ground and bombing range for almost 60 years. The protesters are part of a growing movement ignited by the death of David Sanes, a civilian security guard on the firing range who was killed in Apr 1999 by a bomb that missed its target.

FULL TEXT

In September of this year, over 2,000 protesters gathered outside the White House demanding an end to the U.S. Navy presence in Vieques, a small island six miles off Puerto Rico that has been used by the U.S. Navy's Atlantic Fleet as a training ground and bombing range for almost 60 years. Several dozen people were arrested, joining hundreds of others over the previous 19 months who committed civil disobedience to draw attention to the Navy's effects on Vieques and the rest of Puerto Rico.

The protesters are part of a growing movement ignited by the death of Vieques resident David Sanes. He was a civilian security guard on the Vieques Naval firing range who was killed in April, 1999 by a bomb, dropped by Navy planes, that missed its target. Sanes' death sparked massive protests in Vieques, the rest of Puerto Rico and in the United States, rekindling resistance to the U.S. military presence on Vieques since the Navy expropriated most of the island's 33,000 acres during World War II. In January of this year-against the will of Vieques residents-Puerto Rico's pro-statehood Governor Pedro Rosello agreed to President Clinton's executive order allowing bombing tests to resume in June. Protest intensified, spotlighting Puerto Rico's role for U.S. military strategy in the region. But Vieques was not the first Puerto Rican territory expropriated by the U.S. military. As far back as 1902, the island of Culebra housed Camp Roosevelt, which later became a Naval station. The takeover of Vieques in 1941 was part of the U.S. Navy's occupation of the Caribbean as defense against the Germans during World War II. Panama was the focus, and the occupation spread from Key West in Florida, through Guantanamo in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, the Virgin Islands, Trinidad and Puerto Rico.' Among the most important installations constructed during World War II was the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in La Ceiba, built to house the entire British Navy in case the Nazis invaded Great Britain.² Today it is the largest U.S. base outside the continental United States. Roosevelt Roads was instrumental in U.S. Cold War military strategy, both for its European deployments and for its numerous interventions, including Grenada and Panama in the 1980s Vieques is considered the key component of the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station; Pentagon officials see it as indispensable for U.S. national security.

Vieques is divided into three areas. In the middle reside the island's civilians, who have historically made their living by fishing. Today, they are surrounded by a major component of the Navy's Atlantic Fleet. On the west end lies a vast munitions storage facility, holding hundreds of tons of explosives. On the east end-where David Sanes was killed-the Navy has conducted regular experiments with new weapons systems. This is where extensive bombing, amphibious landings and other war games are conducted almost year round, and where many of the Navy's global missions are launched to other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America, or to the Middle East and Kosovo. The east end has also been the site of the main protest against the Navy over the past 19 months. Dozens

of "peace encampments" were erected here, and stood for over a year, until protesters were forcibly removed by U.S. marshals. "This is the premier range on the Atlantic fleet where they can bring all their warfare areas together," said Lieutenant Mike Arnis, the Atlantic Fleet's Inner-range Officer who coordinated the bombing tests in Vieques until 1998. "This is the only place that they can do an amphibious landing, giving naval surface to fire support,"³ The site is also used by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as by Latin American and Caribbean military forces. Recently it was discovered that the Navy was renting out part of the firing range to governments seeking to test new weapons systems. Many Vieques activists questioned whether any U.S. national security interest could possibly be served by renting the island to other countries.

In fact, argue protesters, Vieques is not necessary for U.S. national security under any circumstances. They note that the Navy went an entire year during the peace encampment protests without using the island for heavyweapons bombing tests or other strategic maneuvers. If it is possible to go a year without tests, why not find another site altogether? So if the United States does not really need the firing area for protection, what role does Vieques really play in overall U.S. strategy in the region?

With the implementation of the CarterTorrijos Treaty, which stipulated a U.S. withdrawal from Panama, and with the relinquishment of the Canal to Panamanian authorities, the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) was forced to leave Panama. As a result, Puerto Rico has become the new home of the U.S. Army South (USARSO) and Special Operations Command (SOC SOUTH), a joint service command. The joint commands are housed in the principal U.S. bases in Puerto Rico, with some training operations conducted at Camp Santiago, operated by the Puerto Rican Army National Guard.⁴ Though SOUTHCOM headquarters has moved from Panama to Miami, many of the military operations are carried out in Puerto Rico, making the island "the biggest player in the region," according to retired Army General Felix Santoni, deputy commander-in-chief for mobilization and reserves at SOUTHCOM in the early 1990s.⁵

Though many SOC SOUTH operations conducted at Roosevelt Roads are considered top secret, they are known to include Green Berets, Navy Seals and Marine Infantry Units that carry out all the special tasks under SOUTHCOM. Their mandate includes "anti-drug" and "anti-terrorist" operations, training regional military forces, and so-called humanitarian missions such as emergency relief.

Officially, SOC SOUTH's main function in Puerto Rico is to provide intelligence and logistical support for the 500-member U.S. teams in counterdrug installations on the Dutch-held islands of Curacao and Aruba, and for the controversial, U.S.-built "counternarcotics" airfield in Manta, Ecuador, just south of the Colombian border. These are Forward Operating Locations (FOLs), intended to support aerial counterdrug missions in Central America and the Andes. In November 1999, the United States and Ecuador signed a ten-year agreement allowing Manta to be used as an airfield for inter-agency counterdrug flights. The arrangement drew considerable opposition in Ecuador from people concerned about a growing U.S. military role in their country, and about the dangers of involving Ecuador in Colombia's conflicts

In March of this year, the United States signed a similar ten-year agreement with the Netherlands for the FOL on Aruba and Curacao, and with El Salvador for the use of Comalapa Air Base-also with considerable opposition from anti-interventionist forces there.' These agreements demonstrate that, with Panama no longer in the picture, Puerto Rico has become the essential coordination and communications component of this regional military infrastructure.

For example, SOUTHCOM operates at least 17 radar systems, ostensibly to track drug flights. Three such systems are in Peru, and another four are in Colombia. The rest are in undisclosed locations and come under the Air Force's Caribbean Basin Radar Network. Add to these installations the Navy's much-touted Relocatable Over the Horizon Radar, or ROTHROne in the south-central town of Juana Diaz and the other in Vieques-and the result is a complex radar network said to be capable of detecting aircraft in cocaine-producing jungles in the Amazon basin, and of giving fighter jets enough intelligence to intercept the drug-carrying planes.' So, despite the end of the Cold War, Puerto Rico's importance to the United States as a military center has not diminished.

"The drug war has become the justification of the United States to maintain this military presence, all the while

blurring the lines between civilian and military functions in law enforcement," says Jorge Rodriguez Beruf, a political scientist at the University of Puerto Rico.

He and others argue that U.S. strategy has shifted only rhetorically, from "fighting the Cold War" to "fighting the drug war." But the result is the same: U.S. military forces maintain a firm grip on the region to make the hemisphere safe for Washington's interests. Those interests often involve direct intervention, as with the growing U.S. role in Colombia's war.

And because nothing has fundamentally changed, peace and justice activists in Puerto Rico continue to mobilize. While their main demand is to get the Navy out of Vieques, they also hope to call attention to the military's negative impact on that island and on all of Puerto Rico. According to some observers, however, these activists will not get the U.S. military out unless they join with other anti-interventionists throughout the region, including movements concerned with the growing militarization of the drug war, and with burgeoning U.S. involvement in the Colombian conflict.

Footnote

Humberto Garcia Mu iz, "U.S. Military Installations in Puerto Rico: Controlling the Caribbean," in Edwin Melendez and Edgardo Melendez (eds.), *Colonial Dilemma: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Puerto Rico* (Boston: South End Press, 1993).

2. Garcia Muniz, "U.S. Military Installations," p. 55.

3. From author interview, which aired on the radio documentary "Puerto Rico: Reflections on the Oldest Colony," broadcast on Pacifica Radio, July 25, 1998. This sentiment was echoed repeatedly by numerous Navy and Pentagon officials, as well as lawmakers, such as Sen. James Inhofe, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Military Preparedness, during the controversy in the wake of the death of David Sanes.

4. From "Environmental Assessment for the Relocation of Special Operations Command, South and Selected U.S. Army South Elements from the Republic of Panama to U.S. Naval Station Roosevelt Roads and Other Locations," prepared for U.S. Army South and SOCSOUTH by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, December 1998.

5. "Puerto Rico Becoming a Military Hub for U.S.," *Miami Herald*, July 6, 1999.

6. "Miedo al contagio narco-guerrillero y a desplazados," *El Tiempo*, August 23, 2000.

7. "Counter-Drug Implications Of The U.S. Leaving Panama," testimony from Ana Maria Salazar, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Drug Enforcement Policy and Support, US House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources, June 9, 2000.

8. Carmelo Ruiz Marrero, "La Estructura Del Comando Sur," posted on the viequeslibre.org website, June 2, 2000; also, see "ROTHR: Un Radar Militar Que No Combate el Narcotr,fico," report issued by Frente Unido ProDefensa del Valle de Lajas, Lajas, Puerto Rico, 1998.

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DETAILS

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