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TYPE: Article CC:CCL

JOURNAL TITLE: Environmental justice

USER JOURNAL TITLE: Environmental Justice (19394071)

ARTICLE TITLE: A Brief History of Environmental Inequity and Military Colonialism on the Isle of Vieques, Puerto Rico.

ARTICLE AUTHOR: Yelin, Joel C.,

VOLUME: 2

ISSUE: 3

MONTH: 09

YEAR: 2009

PAGES: 153-159

ISSN: 1939-4071

OCLC #:

Processed by RapidX: 5/24/2021 12:57:47 PM

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# A Brief History of Environmental Inequity and Military Colonialism on the Isle of Vieques, Puerto Rico

Joel C. Yelin and DeMond S. Miller

## ABSTRACT

Puerto Rico has a long history of battling colonialism, first by Spain then by the United States. As a result of United States' possession of the island, Puerto Rico was thrust into a new battle between colonial status and keeping its identity despite colonial control. At the center of this fight, Vieques, a small island off the coast of Puerto Rico, represents a smaller model of colonialism due to the former presence of a military installation established by the U.S. Navy that claimed the majority of the small island in 1941, resulting in its citizens being moved from their homes to the center of the island near bombing ranges and ammunition stock houses. Landscapes that were once home to military installations and host to military activities are now often dangerous, contaminated, and changed in dramatic ways due to the introduction of munitions, bombs, fuels, and nuclear contaminants. Years after the U.S. Navy's military evacuation, environmental, physical, and mental health concerns were recognized, including the environmental damage due to toxic contamination and its effect on the communities currently residing on the island. This article documents the impact of years of environmental polluting and the destruction of the environment as a lingering vestige of military colonialism in Puerto Rico.

*The Indians [shall] live in community with the Christians of the island and go among them, by which means they will help each other to cultivate, settle and reap the fruits of the island and extract the fold which may be there, and bring profit to my Kingdom and my subjects.*

Queen Isabella to Nicolas de Ovando, December 20, 1503<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

THE WRITTEN HISTORY of Puerto Rico is an expression of colonial powers leaving their imprint on its landscape and its people.<sup>2</sup> Puerto Rico has a long history of

fighting against colonial rule from two world powers, first Spain for four centuries then the United States for the past one. The militaries of Spain and the United States have both shaped and, in the case of the United States, influenced the landscape and environment of the island. "For the past five centuries Puerto Rico, the scenic tropical island, has also been a fortress."<sup>3</sup> Vieques, an island six miles off the coast of Puerto Rico, at the time of Christopher Columbus, was inhabited by an Arawak-speaking group of Taino, whose name for the island literally translated to "little island." Currently, the 33,000-acre

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<sup>1</sup>As cited in Franklin Knight. *The Caribbean: The Genesis of a Fragmented Nationalism*, 2nd Edition. (Oxford University Press, 1990). 27.

<sup>2</sup>The U.S. Navy's accounts of the expropriations generally emphasize that most of the land was acquired from a handful of owners. Of the 21,000 acres, 10,000 acres were acquired from Juan Tio, owner of Playa Grande that were mill and sugarcane lands in the western, central, and eastern sectors. Another substantial portion, approximately 8,000 acres, was acquired from Eastern Sugar Associates, who had owned and operated the Esperanza sugar mill and lands in the east central sector.

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Lands of two other major families, Benitez and Rieckehoff, brought the total to more than 19,000 acres, or 90% of this first series of acquisitions (Department of the Navy, 1979, as cited in Raymon Bosque-Perez and Jose Javier Colon Morera. *Puerto Rico Under Colonial Rule: Political Persecution and the Quest for Human Rights*. (SUNY Press 2006, 214).

<sup>3</sup>Amilcar Antonio Barreto. *Vieques, the Navy, and Puerto Rican Politics*. (University Press of Florida, 2002). 1.

island is affectionately referred to as “*isla nena*” (little girl) and is known for its ecological diversity and fertile soils, which support a variety of crops.<sup>4</sup> Also, some of the earliest human remains, more than 4,000 years old, have been discovered on the island.<sup>5</sup> Along with a rich cultural history, the island also has a history of political struggle against foreign control.

The most recent of these struggles is against the U.S. Navy’s occupation of the island of Vieques. According to Santana, “[t]here is probably no clearer example than the grass-roots struggle to oblige the U.S. Navy to stop bombing Vieques, Puerto Rico, and clean up and return the lands for community directed, ecologically and socially sustainable use.”<sup>6</sup> Under Spanish colonialization, Vieques was cultivated for agriculture by mostly free or enslaved people of African descent, who were imported to work the farms; they would frequently protest against the local elite concerning the poor working conditions.<sup>7</sup> By the time of the U.S. possession of Puerto Rico in 1898, agricultural production was primarily focused on sugar cane production; by the 1930s, local elites and U.S.-based corporations owned 70% of the land.<sup>8</sup>

#### VIEQUES’ AWKWARD STATUS

“Vieques is an island municipality of the Commonwealth 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.”<sup>9</sup> The awkward status of the residents of Puerto Rico has made their protest efforts of the U.S. Navy’s presence in Vieques extremely difficult. Prior to 2003, Vieques Island was a premier site for one of the navy’s key military installations in the western hemisphere; it simultaneously served as home for nearly 10,000 American citizens.<sup>10</sup> Civilians of the 51-square-mile island, roughly twice the size of Manhattan, live wedged between an ammunition depot and a maneuver area because the U.S. Navy has taken control of two-thirds of the land, squeezing a civilian residential community into the island’s center.<sup>11</sup> Civilians living in close proximity to military installations is not unique to Vieques; however, the status of the people of Vieques (and Puerto Rico in general) makes this particular situation unique.

Between 1941 and 1943, the Navy took over 21,000 of the island’s 33,000 acres. The entire western portion of the island—where most of the rural settlements were located—was expropriated, along with 10,000 acres in the sparsely settled eastern section, but the Navy takeover also included 2,500 acres in the central part of the island.<sup>12</sup>

The status of Vieques’ citizens, like all Puerto Rico’s residents, represents the paradox of having American citizenship but little say in American political matters. The military presence in Vieques cements this notion. “The main influence of the military is its presence, which stabilizes the political scene and makes any attempt at violent overthrow of the government appear suicidal....

Independence advocates, naturally, feel that U.S. soldiers are foreign ‘intruders.’”<sup>13</sup> On the island, the U.S. Navy’s presence has discouraged the opportunity for agriculture or social growth. “Because more than 70 percent of the land is held by the U.S. government, agriculture and tourism have been discouraged and the population has held steady at fewer than 8,000. Some sugarcane is exported to the main island, but Vieques’ main export is its people, who have migrated to Puerto Rico, to the American mainland, or to nearby St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands.”<sup>14</sup> The U.S. Navy plays the role of colonizer, controlling the majority of the land of Vieques, which dictates how the civilians live within their own homeland. Memmi’s work on the notion of the colonizer explains:

He finds himself on one side of a scale, the other side of which bears the colonized man. If his living standards are high, it is because those of the colonized are low; if he can benefit from plentiful and undemanding labor and servants, it is because the colonized can be exploited at will and are not protected by the laws of the colony; if he can easily obtain administrative positions, it is because they are reserved for him and the colonized are excluded from them; the more freely he breathes, the more the colonized are choked.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of the United States as colonizer is not as foreign as it was at its inception as a colonized possession. “The U.S. began its history as a colonial possession of Great Britain and then fought off two other colonial powers (France and Spain) for control of the territory; all done while ‘patriots’ brutally colonized Native Americans.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the military-industrial complex prevented citizens from living normal lives for decades.

<sup>4</sup>Deborah Berman Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy.” *Social Justice*. Vol. 29, No. ½. (2002): 37–48.

<sup>5</sup>Rodriguez, 1999; Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” XX.

<sup>6</sup>Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” 38.

<sup>7</sup>Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” 39.

<sup>8</sup>Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” 39.

<sup>9</sup>Katherine T. McCaffrey. *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico*. (Rutgers University Press, 2002). 2.

<sup>10</sup>McCaffrey, *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico*, 2.

<sup>11</sup>McCaffrey, *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico*, 3.

<sup>12</sup>Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” 39.

<sup>13</sup>Karl Wagenheim. *Puerto Rico, A Profile*. (Prager Publishers, 1975). 145.

<sup>14</sup>Karl Wagenheim, *Puerto Rico, A Profile*, 33.

<sup>15</sup>Albert Memmi. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. (Beacon Press, 1965). 8.

<sup>16</sup>Amy E. Gould, “Katrina and Colonialism: The Sins of Our Forefathers Perpetuated?” *Administrative Theory & Praxis*. Vol. 29, No. 4 (2007): 516.

### THE MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX AND COLONIALISM ON VIEQUES

The military-industrial complex describes the relationship between the military and industry for results benefiting both parties. The military is becoming a decisive force in economic matters, employing industrial corporations to take advantage of natural resources for strategic and economic purposes. As Martino-Taylor discusses:

C. Wright Mills (1956:215) discussed “great structural shift of modern American capitalism toward a permanent war economy,”<sup>17</sup> highlighted by the early days of the military industrial complex. ... Mills identified the strong links between the military, the state, and corporate America as one huge entity—the military-industrial complex.<sup>18</sup>

The military-industrial complex in Vieques was established through American laws with American leaders that allowed a military takeover of the land. “In 1938, Admiral William Leahy wrote the first draft of a bill that would allow the Navy to acquire land in the U.S. and its territories for new bases and training areas; the following year he was named governor of Puerto Rico.”<sup>19</sup> The bill and Leahy’s appointment as governor allowed the U.S. Navy to take the land they wanted for military purposes with no opposition from the people of Vieques. “In March 1941, Congress approved a sweeping bill allowing military expropriation of vast expanses of land; another law, passed in August, allowed the Navy to take immediate possession of targeted lands in Vieques.”<sup>20</sup> This rapid military takeover was spurred by World War II before the United States was involved. “In effect, Washington’s plan to build a giant base to shelter the British fleet plunged Vieques into World War II even before the United States was officially at war.”<sup>21</sup> The military-industrial complex operates with disregard of the environmental and political consequences.

The military-industrial complex, both in general and as it pertains to Vieques, is focused on the opportunity to prosper from war. “War, or the threat of war, is the ultimate economic stimulus. It’s capitalism on steroids. Prolonged use creates unprecedented growth, but the upside isn’t worth the risks.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, the U.S. Navy gave little compensation or notice to the residents of the land they had expropriated. “The two largest landowners were fairly well compensated, but dozens of small property owners—and thousands of residents who had use rights, but no title—were given scant hour’s notice, offered \$25 to \$100 for their belongings and warned they would be bulldozed along with their homes if they didn’t move fast enough.”<sup>23</sup> The people became expendable in regards to the military-industrial complex and were given land in the island’s center on the condition that “... they sign a contract recognizing that they could be ordered to vacate ‘Navy property’ on short notice.”<sup>24</sup>

### THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

The situation in Vieques represents a struggle for environmental justice that has lasted several decades but only gained any real ground recently. Since the beginning of the U.S. Navy’s presence on Vieques, there have been

demonstrations protesting the U.S. Navy’s occupation and military base establishment on the island.<sup>25</sup> The political atmosphere caused these concerns to go relatively unheard and with little or no support. “Through the following decades (sixties, seventies, and eighties) there were numerous protests—not only about Vieques, but also the overall colonial situation. However, the political ambience in Puerto Rico was not a fertile soil for such voices to be heard.”<sup>26</sup> At that time, the prevailing voice in Puerto Rico was of the pro-United States political parties, which gave no support to concerns regarding the military occupation of most of the island. In fact, “[t]hese parties’ political agendas did not include entering into anything that could appear antagonistic to U.S. colonial power. On the contrary, they strived to strengthen the U.S.-Puerto Rican relationship.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, the concerns of the U.S. Navy presence in Vieques went largely unheard for many decades.

The U.S. Navy’s presence in Vieques had little economic effect on the Puerto Rican economy despite the fact that it disrupted the small island’s sugar cane economy, which attracted thousands of workers from the main island of Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands as well.<sup>28</sup> Aside from the brief increase in construction jobs, the military presence offered little in the way of employment and visits to Vieques by the troops were sporadic and brief and could not sustain a local service economy.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Vieques’ economy experienced a dramatic decline from which it still has not recovered. In response, more than 30,000 people were forced to emigrate; to this day, the small island has the highest unemployment rate in Puerto Rico.<sup>30</sup> As a result of the lingering effects of the U.S.

<sup>17</sup>C. Wright Mills. *The Power Elite*. (Oxford University Press, 1956). As cited in Lisa Martino-Taylor. “The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex and a New Social Autism.” *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2008): 37–52.

<sup>18</sup>Martino-Taylor. “The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex and a New Social Autism,” 38.

<sup>19</sup>Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” 39.

<sup>20</sup>Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” 39.

<sup>21</sup>Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” 39.

<sup>22</sup>Michael Fitzgerald, “Militarism: A Way of Life.” *The Humanist*, Vol. 64, No. 6 (2004): 26–34, 28.

<sup>23</sup>Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” 39.

<sup>24</sup>Santana, “Resisting Toxic Militarism: Vieques Versus the U.S. Navy,” 39.

<sup>25</sup>Victor M. Torres-Velez. *The Hidden Wounds of Vieques: A Political Ecology of Disease and Collective Actions in a Militarized Landscape*. A dissertation submitted to Michigan State University. (2007): 59.

<sup>26</sup>Torres-Velez. *The Hidden Wounds of Vieques: A Political Ecology of Disease and Collective Actions in a Militarized Landscape*, 59.

<sup>27</sup>Torres-Velez. *The Hidden Wounds of Vieques: A Political Ecology of Disease and Collective Actions in a Militarized Landscape*, 59.

<sup>28</sup>Torres-Velez. *The Hidden Wounds of Vieques: A Political Ecology of Disease and Collective Actions in a Militarized Landscape*, 93.

<sup>29</sup>Sherrie L. Bayer. “Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing’: The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle.” *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 33. (2006): 104.

<sup>30</sup>Torres-Velez, *The Hidden Wounds of Vieques: A Political Ecology of Disease and Collective Actions in a Militarized Landscape*, 93.

Navy's occupation, much of the Vieques population lives in poverty.

The U.S. Navy's presence in Vieques was the result of a necessary military presence in the area. "Prompted by the perceived German threat in the Caribbean, the U.S. military, which had been training on Culebra Island since 1902, expropriated nearly three-quarters of Vieques in the early years of World War II. The navy held onto its bombing range there for the next several decades as cold-war tensions mounted."<sup>31</sup> After the war the navy still maintained their bombing range on the island of Culebra. In the midst of the Vietnam War, naval planners intended to expand the bombing range and evict the residents to create the necessary space.<sup>32</sup> This sparked numerous protests as well as popular support from the independence movement and concluded with the U.S. Navy's withdrawal from the island. However, "[a]s a result of its eviction from Culebra in 1971, the navy shifted its bombing practice to Vieques."<sup>33</sup> From Vietnam to the Cold War, the U.S. Navy had been able to maintain its presence in Vieques with relatively little opposition while continuing to conduct military exercises.

The U.S. Navy used the island of Vieques for a wide range of exercises, including air, land, and sea bombings, firing live ammunition (napalm and shaft), and mining training areas with explosives.<sup>34</sup> In addition, activists discovered in 2000 that the U.S. Navy had secretly used depleted uranium bombs.<sup>35</sup> However, Vieques was more than just a large target to the military. "In Vieques, the navy rehearses amphibious landing exercises, parachute drops, and submarine maneuvers."<sup>36</sup> The U.S. Navy claims Vieques is important because it "... provides a unique venue for the realistic training of U.S. troops, one of the few places where different naval units on the East Coast can come together to prepare for combat."<sup>37</sup> They use the island to train troops for potential interventions through the use of "war games."

Furthermore, the navy argues that Vieques is crucial not only to the battle readiness of its Atlantic Fleet but to the training of U.S., NATO, South American, and Caribbean allied forces. Thousands of U.S. and allied troops invade Vieques during large-scale maneuvers, or "war games." Since 1992 alone, the U.S. military has rehearsed [for] interventions in the Balkans, Haiti, Iraq, and Somalia in Vieques.<sup>38</sup>

Prior to those rehearsals, Vieques was used as a staging point for military exercises.

Vieques was also used as a training facility in several noteworthy episodes in Latin America: the overthrow of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, the Cuban Bay of Pigs operation in 1961, the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965, the overthrow of Chilean President Salvador Allende in 1973, the invasion of Grenada in 1983, and the invasion of Panama in 1989.

The U.S. Navy has made extensive use of the shores and interior parts of Vieques; however, it has been at the expense of the residents of the island.

The everyday life of the people of Vieques during the occupation was often filled with the sounds of gunfire and explosions. The U.S. Navy owned two-thirds of the island, which it used to conduct its military exercises, leaving only one-third of the island, in between the parts

owned by the U.S. Navy, for the people to live. In addition to the close proximity to the population, the U.S. Navy's exercises were conducted 280 days out of the year.<sup>39</sup>

This meant that on an everyday basis, *Viequesenses* had to withstand not only having thousands of soldiers shooting live ammunition but also having air, land, and sea bombs literally dropped in their backyards. For them to live in Vieques was to live in a war zone: feeling the floors shaking under their feet, watching dark clouds covering the houses, feeling their heart beating faster after every new explosion, fearing that the next bomb could be the last one for them.<sup>40</sup>

For decades, constant explosions and black smoke in the sky had been the norm. The detrimental health effects were not felt until later.<sup>41</sup> "... [I]t was not until the early 1980s that residents started to notice that more and more people were becoming sick in their community."<sup>42</sup> Seeking answers, the communities pushed for studies to analyze the sudden increase in health risks.<sup>43</sup> A study of the

<sup>31</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing: The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 103.

<sup>32</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing: The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 104.

<sup>33</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing: The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 104.

<sup>34</sup>Torres-Velez, *The Hidden Wounds of Vieques: A Political Ecology of Disease and Collective Actions in a Militarized Landscape*, 98.

<sup>35</sup>Torres-Velez, *The Hidden Wounds of Vieques: A Political Ecology of Disease and Collective Actions in a Militarized Landscape*, 68.

<sup>36</sup>McCaffrey, "Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico," 3.

<sup>37</sup>McCaffrey, "Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico," 3.

<sup>38</sup>McCaffrey, "Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico," 3.

<sup>39</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing: The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 97.

<sup>40</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing: The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 97.

<sup>41</sup>Bombing and military maneuvers change a landscape in ways that linger long after the activities have ceased. From battlefields in Serbia and Iraq to nuclear testing sites in the Marshall Islands, Nevada, and Kazakhstan, to large operational bases in Guam and the central Indian Ocean, to the numerous recently closed bases across the U.S. there are a large number of spaces profoundly affected by military actions." (Jeffrey S. Davis, Jessica Hayes-Conroy, and Victoria Jones, "Military pollution and natural purity: seeing nature and knowing contamination in Vieques, Puerto Rico." *GeoJournal*. Vol. 69 (2007): 166).

<sup>42</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing: The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 67.

<sup>43</sup>In 1995, Vieques had the highest mortality rate among Puerto Rico's 78 municipalities (J. Wilcox, "Vieques, Puerto Rico: An Island Under Siege." *American Journal of Public Health*. Vol. 91, No. 5 (2001): 695-698). The likelihood that a pregnant woman will give birth to an underweight infant is 65% greater on Vieques than in the rest of Puerto Rico (Wilcox, "Vieques, Puerto Rico: An Island Under Siege," 695-698). In 1995, population-based government health data indicated that the risk of dying from cancer was 1.39 times higher on Vieques than on the main island (Wilcox, "Vieques, Puerto Rico: An Island Under Siege," XX). Researchers have also found that the risk of cancer in Vieques has been increasing steadily in statistically significant proportions since the early 1970s (<<http://www.forusa.org/programs/puertorico/viequesupdate0602.html>> (Last accessed on October 8, 2006). Also see Davis et al., "Military pollution and natural purity: seeing nature and knowing contamination in Vieques, Puerto Rico," 174.

ecology found high concentrations of copper, zinc, nickel, cobalt, lead, and cadmium in the surrounding animal population and soil.<sup>44</sup> Ecological studies of the region have found that the people of Vieques had a 27% higher risk of getting cancer, a 40% higher mortality rate, and a 70% higher risk of dying from diabetes mellitus than the inhabitants of the mainland of Puerto Rico.<sup>45</sup> "In 1998, the crude death rate from heart disease in Vieques was 251.6 per 100,000, compared to 157.5 in Puerto Rico. Vieques has no long-term or heavily contaminating industries, except for the military."<sup>46</sup> Comparatively, "[o]ther towns in Puerto Rico with evident environmental contamination or with limited access to health care experienced lower mortality rates from heart disease during that year."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the list of both environmental and health issues in Vieques as a result of the military occupation has become both long and varied over the years.

For almost seven decades, Vieques residents experienced a reduction in the fishing industry—their main source of employment; high levels of psychosocial stress induced by constant bombing; disruption of family and social ties owing to out-migration; high rates of health problems, such as cancer, arising from environmental degradation and contamination; and the depletion of natural resources that had previously sustained the community.<sup>48</sup>

The citizens report that their everyday life on Vieques during the occupation was likened to living in a war zone.

In the post-cold war era, the political atmosphere soon made room for these concerns to be heard. "... [A]ctivist Vieques residents were able to enunciate their legitimate concerns against the military without immediate accusations of anti-Americanism. Also, the protest organizers of the 1990s chose to moderate their rhetoric and tactics in a way that would allow for broad, nonpartisan support."<sup>49</sup> After a lull in protests, the struggle of the people of Vieques gained ground as their voices were finally heard and taken seriously. "By the early 1990s, as the Vieques struggle re-emerged, issues of health and contamination as well as human rights and cultural destruction were essential to the movement's reframing and its ultimate success in expelling the Navy in 2003."<sup>50</sup> However, there was some time between the wide acceptance of the Vieques protests and when the U.S. Navy actually left. Despite the end of the Cold War, the U.S. Navy found several reasons to maintain their position in Vieques, including the Latin American drug wars, activities in the Balkans and in the Middle East, and the installation of a \$9 million radar system to monitor the skies for aircraft bound for the United States carrying illegal drugs.<sup>51</sup> It seemed, then, that the U.S. Navy could hold their position in Vieques for several strategic reasons.

Although the voices of the Vieques population were being heard, the U.S. Navy was not leaving and little progress was being made until an unfortunate incident acted as a catalyst for the environmental justice movement to make serious progress toward the removal of the U.S. Navy from the island. "This incident was the accidental death in April 1999 of David Sanes, a civilian who worked for the navy as a security guard, when during

training exercises two F-18s dropped 500-pound bombs that missed their mark by a mile and a half."<sup>52</sup> This unifying incident brought the citizenry, environmentalists, and human rights activists together and provided them and the rest of the world "... a visceral example of the injustice of holding large-scale, live-fire military training exercises on a small, ecologically fragile island with over nine-thousand inhabitants."<sup>53</sup> Finally, negotiations for the removal of the naval facilities from Vieques were discussed, which resulted in the U.S. Navy relinquishing control of the land on the island, as per Public Law 106-398 (Floyd D. Spence National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2001).<sup>54</sup> Studies were conducted to ascertain the severity of the negative effects on the

<sup>44</sup>Russell Baruffi. "Environmental Conflict and Cultural Solidarity: The Case of Vieques." Paper prepared as a part of a seminar on Environmental Conflict Resolution. Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Providence, RI (2002). Also, according to a *Grupo de Apoyo tecnico y Profesional* 2000 study, the ecological consequences of the war exercises on the totality of natural resources are devastating. The Viequesese suffers have a 27% greater incidence of cancer as evidence in a causal relationship between the navy's military activities and the unusual incidence of certain illnesses. An analysis of the hair of 29 people from Vieques performed by Dr. Carmen Colon de Jorge revealed that many patients have concentrations above a standard deviation of the normal average aluminum (90%), antimony (69%), cadmium (69%), arsenic (69%), tin (66%), lead (52%), molybdenum (48%), boron (48%), bismuth (41%), mercury (38%), vanadium (38%), manganese (31%), nickel (28%), zinc (21%), cobalt (14%), and barium (14%) (as cited in Bosque-Perez and Morera, "Puerto Rico Under Colonial Rule: Political Persecution and the Quest for Human Rights," 214). For example, the highest concentrations for some of these elements were from 57% above the norm for barium, 182% above for mercury, 553% above for cadmium, and up to 5,300% more for antimony. Hair analysis of 18 other patients in Vieques performed by Dr. Carmen Ortiz Roque revealed that 44% have higher than normal levels of mercury, and some also have abnormal levels of lead, partially confirming Dr. Colon de Jorge's findings. Fecal analysis of seven individuals from Vieques, also performed by Dr. Colon de Jorge, revealed elevated concentrations of aluminum, cadmium, mercury, and nickel and the presence of uranium, tungsten, thallium, platinum, copper, bismuth, beryllium, arsenic, antimony, and aluminum (Grupo de Apoyo tecnico y Profesional, 2000, as cited in Bosque-Perez and Morera, "Puerto Rico Under Colonial Rule: Political Persecution and the Quest for Human Rights," 214).

<sup>45</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing": The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 98.

<sup>46</sup>Cruz Maria Nazario, John Lindsay-Poland, and Deborah Santana, "Health in Vieques: A Crisis and Its Causes." *Fellowship of Reconciliation: Vieques Issue Brief*. (2002): 1.

<sup>47</sup>Nazario et al., "Health in Vieques: A Crisis and its Causes," 1.

<sup>48</sup>Maria Idalf Torres, "Organizing, Educating, and Advocating for Health and Human Rights in Vieques, Puerto Rico." *American Journal of Public Health*. Vol. 95, No. 1. (2005): 10.

<sup>49</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing": The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 104.

<sup>50</sup>Sherrie L. Baver, "Environmental justice and the cleanup of Vieques." *Centro Journal*. Vol. 18. No. 1 (2006): 95.

<sup>51</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing": The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 105.

<sup>52</sup>Baver, "Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing": The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle," 105.

<sup>53</sup>Baver, "Environmental justice and the cleanup of Vieques," 96.

<sup>54</sup><<http://www.defenselink.mil/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=3798>> (Last accessed April 11, 2009).

environment after the U.S. Navy's withdrawal. "The results of the 2001 land transfer presaged the complexities of future Navy-Vieques relations, especially the cleanup of the much larger and more contaminated eastern side of the island."<sup>55</sup> With the U.S. Navy on its way out of Vieques, studies could be conducted to determine the extent of environmental damage to the island. "The landscape that is left after the Navy's departure is very different from the one it took over in the 1940s. Most of the vestiges of the past agricultural uses of the island are gone."<sup>56</sup>

It is the U.S. Navy's responsibility, as per the land exchange agreement, to clean up the environmental degradation as a result of their exercises. However, the nature of the Floyd D. Spence National Defense Authorization Act, which ended the U.S. Navy's presence, presented an issue. "The problem for the activists was that the agreement required the Navy [emphasis added] 'to clean up the site according to land use,' but this is not a straightforward process."<sup>57</sup> Land intended for residential areas requires a more thorough clean up than most other areas to be remediated within the parameters of safe and acceptable use, based on the contaminants. Some areas were affected more by the U.S. Navy's live ammunitions exercises than others. For example:

On the western land, called "the clean side" by local residents and a place with future potential for housing construction, the navy had mainly stored ammunition. Yet a fifty-acre area, where open burning and open detonation had occurred, was cited by EPA in the transfer agreement as dangerous enough to be placed under a non-Superfund provision of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) for study and possible remediation. By mid-2004, fifteen of the sites had been studied and the Navy considered six as potential candidates for environmental remediation.<sup>58</sup>

Although the land transfer in 2001 was a victory for the environmental protesters, the process of the Navy actually leaving Vieques encountered roadblocks. In fact, "[t]he process that seemed all but certain after President George W. Bush's announcement in Goteburg, Sweden, in June 2001 became much more uncertain after the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent preoccupation with national security."<sup>59</sup> However, the intentions of the Bush administration to finally leave the island became clear by the end of 2002.<sup>60</sup> With the U.S. Navy officially withdrawn from the island, Vieques could begin the process of remediating the environment.

### IN THE FINAL FRAME

The history of military colonialism on the island of Vieques is an experience rooted in inequity. "The situation in Vieques is illustrative of the emotional distress, social fracturing, and contentious politics that are often seen in communities that have been labeled 'contaminated.'"<sup>61</sup> Environmental justice provides a framework for focusing on the "...interaction of emerging social movements, technological advances in geographical information systems and spatial statistics, and a growing number of policy maker[s] intent in disproportionately affected

communities,"<sup>62</sup> and is becoming more concerned with the question: why do some racial, ethnic, and lower-socioeconomic status communities suffer the brunt of more environmental danger than other communities?<sup>63</sup> These places become zones of sacrifice, thus relegating the people who reside in these areas "to being disconnected from the enjoyment of the rights normally associated with the dignity of being a citizen..."<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, citizens of zones of sacrifice are often overlooked, unrepresented, and marginalized and "...their marginality becomes tantamount to statelessness."<sup>65</sup> Bullard describes these zones as "...the plantation system exploited not by humans but the land, the south has always been thought of as a sacrifice zone, a sort of dump for the rest of the nation's toxic waste."<sup>66</sup> In essence, Vieques represents a zone of sacrifice, leaving the Puerto Rican citizens on that island and the island's communities suffering the brunt of the lingering effects of military colonialism nearly a decade after the U.S. Navy's formal end of operations. With "...[w]hat is left now in the landscape of Vieques is a paradoxical mix of bombed-out moonscape, visually unspoiled land and an unknown amount of mostly unseen contamination from 60 years of military activity."<sup>67</sup> The island has been transformed into an island of various contradictions. As Davis et al. contend, with the influx of North American tourists who view the island as a wildlife refuge, many overlook the

<sup>55</sup>Baver, "Environmental justice and the cleanup of Vieques," 96.

<sup>56</sup>Davis et al., "Military Pollution and Natural Purity: Seeing Nature and Knowing Contamination in Vieques, Puerto Rico," 169.

<sup>57</sup>Baver, "Environmental justice and the cleanup of Vieques," 96.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>61</sup>G. Barnes, B. Staples, J. Baxter, J., and A. Litva, "The social and psychological impact of the chemical contamination incident in Weston Village, UK: A qualitative analysis." *Social Science and Medicine*. Vol. 55 (2002): 2227-2241; J. S. Davis, "Representing place: 'Deserted isles' and the reproduction of Bikini Atoll." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. 95 (2005): 607-625; Davis et al., "Military pollution and natural purity: seeing nature and knowing contamination in Vieques, Puerto Rico," 178.

<sup>62</sup>M. Pastor, R. D., Bullard, J. K., Boyce, A., Fothergill, R., Morello-Frosch, and B. Wright. *In the Wake of the Storm: Environment, Disaster, and Race after Katrina*. (Russell Sage Foundation, 2006). 1.

<sup>63</sup>Jason D. Rivera and DeMond Miller, "Continually Neglected: Situating Natural Disasters in the African American Experience." *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 37 (2007): 502-522.

<sup>64</sup>F. M. Deng, "Divided nations: The paradox of national protection." *ANNALS American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol. 603 (2006): 219.

<sup>65</sup>Deng, "Divided nations: The paradox of national protection," 219.

<sup>66</sup>R. D. Bullard. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality*. (Westview, 1990); R. D. Bullard, "Ecological Inequalities and the New South: Black Communities Under Siege." *Journal of Ethnic Studies*. Vol. 17 (1990): 101-115; R. D. Bullard. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class and Environmental Quality*. 3rd ed. (Westview, 2000), as cited in Pastor et al., "In the Wake of the Storm: Environment, Disaster, and Race After Katrina," 3.

<sup>67</sup>Davis et al., "Military pollution and natural purity: seeing nature and knowing contamination in Vieques, Puerto Rico," 166.

gentrification<sup>68</sup> that glosses over the history of sacrifices by adults and children as expressed in the form of higher risks of cancer and other health risks when compared to inhabitants of mainland Puerto Rico—all in the name of national security. This contaminated, bomb-abused landscape and its 2005 superfund designation represents the hope for building a “new normal” based on just environmental principles and respect for all people that builds trust among citizens and government agencies<sup>69</sup> and with lands that are deemed safe and restored in the hands of the people of Vieques.

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<sup>68</sup>“Many Viequenses are now priced out of the housing market as average home prices in many areas of the island in 2006 hovered above \$500,000. With the increase in home prices has come the inevitable increase in rent Viequenses end up paying to absentee North American landlords. Furthermore, the gentrification process on Vieques is not just a class issue but has also created dramatic racial, linguistic and cultural change. Not only are the newcomers to Vieques wealthier than most current

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residents, they are generally Caucasian, North American, and English speaking and they tend to not integrate themselves into the larger Spanish speaking community either culturally or economically” (Davis et al., “Military pollution and natural purity: seeing nature and knowing contamination in Vieques,” 172).

<sup>69</sup>DeMond Miller and Jason Rivera. *Hurricane Katrina and the Redefinition of Landscape*. (Lexington Books, 2006). 106–125.

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