"Peace Is More Than the End of Bombing"

The Second Stage of the Vieques Struggle

by
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The nature of colonialism in Puerto Rico has caused most political issues to be viewed within the framework of status politics. In the first stage of the struggle to expel the U.S. Navy from the island (1999–2003), civil society in Puerto Rico united when the issues were reframed with links not to status politics but to human rights and social justice. Viequenses symbolized for Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico, on the mainland, and in the world at large the costs of military colonialism. In the second stage of the struggle, since the military's departure, Viequenses have struggled to control the future development of their community as well as to clean up the toxic legacy of six decades of military maneuvers. The important question with regard to this stage is whether civil society can again rise above the institutionalized structure of colonial status politics to advocate for social and environmental justice. Viewing the Vieques case within the larger context of Puerto Rico's dependent relationship on the United States suggests that the struggle not only strengthened Puerto Ricans' capacity to determine their own future but also may have changed the calculus of colonialism from Washington's vantage point.

Keywords: *Vieques, U.S. Navy, military colonialism, development, decontamination*

For over 500 years, Puerto Rico has served as a colonial outpost and garrison, first for Spain and then, since 1898, for the United States. From the early 1940s until recently, Vieques, a 51-square-mile island off the east coast of the main island, served as a military base and a bombing range for the U.S. Navy and Marines. Meanwhile, some 9,000–10,000 Viequenses were forced to

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share this tiny island with their military neighbor. Residents had been struggling since the 1970s to force the navy out without success. In the 1990s, however, the struggle gained new momentum partly because of the end of the cold war and partly because of a reframing of the issues. By this time, organizers had moved away from the radical tactics and the rhetoric of imperialist exploitation that had appealed to only a small part of the citizenry. With this more moderate reframing, virtually all Puerto Ricans came to view the Vieques struggle as one of social and environmental injustice, human rights, continuing colonialism, and the disdain of federal officials (e.g., Barreto, 2002), and Viequenses succeeded in reclaiming their island in May 2003. The coalition built within Puerto Rico, on the U.S. mainland, and internationally was unprecedented. A concern in this article is whether this coalition can be maintained for the next phase of the struggle, one aimed at ensuring decontamination, devolution, improvement in health care, and sustainable community development. This concern for the goals of the second stage provides a mantra for Vieques activists: "Peace is more than the end of bombing."

While my focus is on the future of Vieques, the case cannot be fully understood apart from the context of Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States.[1] The expulsion of the navy in May 2003 marked a significant step in the growing capacity of Puerto Rican civil society and hence the deepening of participatory democracy on the island. The momentum of the Vieques victory has helped citizens to demand more than a continuation of the stalemate in status politics on the island. This essay first provides an overview of the early decades of the struggle, the movement's reactivation in the 1990s, and the eventual expulsion of the navy in 2003. It goes on to highlight the specifics of the second stage of the struggle and then to raise concerns about the danger of movement fragmentation, a common occurrence in the poor communities in which struggles for environmental justice take place.

THE NAVY ON VIEQUES: A BRIEF HISTORY

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. The takeover was facilitated by the community's poverty. Two sugar corporations controlled 71 percent of the land, while a few wealthy families owned the rest. The degree of land concentration eased the transfer of much of the island from private to federal government control (Ayala, 2001). Construction of training facilities on Vieques proceeded by

fits and starts linked with changing construction patterns at Roosevelt Roads, the huge naval base being built on the main island east of Fajardo. In 1947 military planners reconfigured their designs for Roosevelt Roads and Vieques to meet America's new, postwar needs (Langley, 1985). More land would now be needed on Vieques, and there was a second expropriation involving over 4,000 acres in the eastern part of the island. After the initial rise in construction jobs, the military presence in Vieques provided little employment for desperate islanders. Troop visits to Vieques were too sporadic and brief to sustain a local service economy. Meager incomes were supplemented by migrating for other work opportunities or fishing.

In 1970, in the midst of the Vietnam War, naval planners intensified their bombing practice on Culebra and sought to evict residents to expand that bombing range. This sparked a well-organized, militant, and ultimately successful protest conceived as anticolonial struggle; the Culebra protest was given much support by members of Puerto Rico's independence movement and its parties, the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Independence party—PIP) and Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Socialist party—PSP). At least some of the energy mobilizing the Culebra protesters came from resentment over conscription into the war (McCaffrey, 2002).

As a result of its eviction from Culebra in 1971, the navy shifted its bombing practice to Vieques. While a few environmentalists warned of harm to local coral reefs and coastal habitats in this fragile marine environment, fishermen emerged as the key figures in this stage of the struggle. The bombing caused serious damage to coral reefs and the fish that swam in the area, and the increased numbers of navy vessels during training exercises frequently severed buoy lines from traps, destroying fishing gear. Finally, on many days of the year fishing was prohibited in waters that locals considered the best fishing grounds around the island. Although these Viequenses tried valiantly to stress the economic nature of their grievances, the navy, determined to hold onto its range, was successful in casting the protesters as unpatriotic at best and procommunist at worst. In 1983 Governor Carlos Romero Barceló signed a memorandum of understanding with the navy to bring jobs to Vieques and to mitigate the negative environmental impact of its training operations, thus effectively stalling the movement for a decade.

The end of the cold war shifted the political terrain and offered new space for organizing and issue framing. In this new historical space, activist 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. Leaders considered it

important to stress the creation of a blueprint for future land use on Vieques without the military. The idea was to show islanders a future in which local residents rather than wealthy off-island developers or real estate speculators would control and benefit from the fruits of development.

The event that reenergized Vieques's antinavy movement occurred in 1993, when the Clinton administration formed a federal commission on base closures under Secretary of Defense Les Aspin. In response, Puerto Rican activists created the Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques (CRDV) with the goal of having Vieques included in discussions of the facilities to be closed. Former Governor Carlos Romero Barceló, Puerto Rico's resident commissioner in Washington, recalling his failed efforts in 1983 and recognizing the new moderation of Viequenses' rhetoric and tactics, was helpful at this stage.

The new focus of the movement on health and the environment was not a surprising shift, since the negative health effects of the navy's presence on Vieques had been a local concern for years. A 1988 article in a Puerto Rican engineering journal had documented the high concentrations of explosives in the local drinking water (Cruz Pérez, 1988), and there was growing concern about the frequency of certain types of cancer in the community.

However, military training on Vieques did not end in 1993. Although the cold war was over, the navy did not lack an argument for remaining on the island. The base was now judged essential for training for the Latin American drug wars and activities in the Balkans and in the Middle East, and it was designated as the site of a $9-million radar installation to monitor the skies for aircraft bound for the United States with illegal drugs. It was the struggle over this proposal that laid the groundwork for the mobilization that finally evicted the navy. While the first objections to the project were based both on aesthetic grounds and on the possible health effects of electromagnetic radiation, the health concerns proved to be the best way to mobilize a diverse group of community residents. In 1994, when the navy announced its plans, Vieques activists enhanced their political clout by joining with activists in Lajas, which was also to have a radar installation. The Lajas protesters stressed expropriation of agricultural land instead of health concerns. The navy's promotion of its project in the face of broad Puerto Rican opposition led to one of the largest protests in recent Puerto Rican history in October 1995, but the navy completed the radar installation in 1998.

As often happens in collective action, a specific incident catalyzed years of underlying tension and slow organizational movement. 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. His

death provided Puerto Rican human rights activists, peace activists, environmentalists, and the citizenry at large with a visceral example of the injustice of holding large-scale, live-fire military training exercises on a small, ecologically fragile island with more than 9,000 inhabitants. It served to galvanize public support regardless of partisan loyalties for expelling the navy from Vieques (Baver, 1993; Bliss, 2001). The ensuing protest became a relentless civil disobedience campaign in which Puerto Rican activists and their allies camped on military land for a year. Many progressive church groups (e.g., the Puerto Rican National Ecumenical Movement) were involved in the struggle, and even the mainstream religious denominations on the island, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, supported the protesters against Washington's policies (Prats, 2003). In the United States, too, in addition to pacifist religious groups such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the American Friends Service Committee, the United Church of Christ and the Methodists gave support to the Vieques protesters.

After months of negotiations aimed at ending the Vieques demonstrations, the White House agreed to withdraw the navy from the western side of the island. President Bill Clinton issued an order in January 2000 to return the entire area of the naval ammunition facility to civilian use, and on May 1, 2001, as part of the agreement, the navy returned 8,100 acres of land to local and federal entities: 4,300 acres to the Municipality of Vieques, 3,000 acres to the U.S. Department of the Interior (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), and 800 acres to the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust, a nonprofit group that maintains land in the public interest.

It took two more years for activists to expel the navy from Vieques, a process that was slowed by the events of September 11, 2001, and the federal government's subsequent preoccupation with national security. It was not until the end of 2002 that it became clear the Bush administration would honor its commitment, made by the president on June 14, 2001, in Gothenburg, Sweden, to have the navy leave Vieques entirely in 2003 (Gonzalez, 2001; García Passalacqua, 2002). However, on May 1, 2003, residents of Vieques celebrated the navy's departure from their island.

Specifically, what was transferred on that date to various entities was 14,669 acres on the eastern end of the island, including Camp García and the 900-acre bombing range. The bombing range was declared a "wilderness area," which means that public access is prohibited indefinitely because of the real danger of unexploded ordnance (Congressional Research Service, 2004). Therefore, though the navy has ended its operations, about three-fourths of the island remains under federal agency control. Not unlike other decommissioned U.S. military facilities, most of this land has gone to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to become a wildlife refuge. The National

Defense Authorization Act of October 9, 1997 (P.L. 105–57), and its various amendments, known informally as the Spense Act, permits former military land to be used for conservation purposes but allows it to be reclaimed “if necessary to facilitate military preparedness.” Vieques residents’ joy was tempered by the awareness that they had to plan rapidly for the future development of the community and the concern that the coalition that had risen above partisan politics might not be able to maintain such unanimity of purpose in the second stage of the struggle. Also important and unclear was whether the Vieques activists could remain in the public eye for the less dramatic and more technical battles to follow.

STAGE 2 OF THE STRUGGLE: CLEANUP AND DEVELOPMENT

Stage 2 of the struggle represents contestation over several issues. First is the return, or devolution, of all lands from federal control to the municipal or commonwealth government. Linked to this are the issues of decontamination, addressing the perceived health crisis on the island, and controlling the future development trajectory. For residents, it is apparent that the community cannot be healed without progress on all of these issues.

DEVOLUTION AND DECONTAMINATION

The return of all lands held by the federal government to either the municipality or the commonwealth was promised by President Clinton in his January 2000 directive (García Muñiz, 2001). The CRDV is also seeking an amendment of the Spense Act to stipulate that the former live-impact area will never again be used for bombing practice.

The issue of cleanup is fundamental to Vieques’s future development. The 2001 transfer agreement charged the navy with the “cleanup of the site according to land use,” but this is not a straightforward process. Indeed, part of the contention over western Vieques and, since 2003, over eastern Vieques as well has centered on land-use designations. Land designated for residential use, for example, must be much more thoroughly cleaned up than land intended for conservation purposes. On the western land, called “the clean side” by local residents, roughly 15 potentially hazardous sites had been studied by mid-2005, but the navy considered only 6 as probable candidates for environmental remediation. Other than fencing in potential cleanup sites, no remediation had actually taken place. The acreage given to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Conservation Trust had been only minimally

remediated and, ironically (because of its potential contamination), had become part of the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge.

The local community wants the land decontaminated to a level that would allow recreational, farming, and other civilian uses for future generations (Rivera and Cotto, 2002: Chap. 12). For example, unexploded ordnance would have to be removed to a depth of 4 feet for land to be used for farming and 10 feet for residential or commercial purposes (Colón, 2005). Since the first land transfer in May 2001, local residents have demanded that the cleanup standards should be determined by the Vieques community's desired land use, not the use decreed by the federal government. To push for this goal, on November 24, 2002, the CRDV established an advisory committee on environmental affairs made up of environmental lawyers, scientists, and members of the community. It also called for help from established activist networks in the United States that work with communities affected by military contamination such as the Center for Public Environmental Oversight, the Military Toxics Project, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which had worked on decommissioned U.S. military bases in Panama.

As the primary strategy for decontamination, the CRDV and the commonwealth government of Sila Calderón sought Superfund status for Vieques as early as December 2002. Ultimately, Vieques and the waters surrounding Vieques and Culebra were designated as a Superfund site in February 2005. Culebra will likely be cleaned up by the army under another federal program. Even with the Superfund designation, the cleanup could easily take a decade (McPhaul, 2004). One knowledgeable EPA official has characterized the Vieques remediation as "very complex"(interview, September 14, 2004).

HEALTH CARE

One reason the Vieques cause became so compelling to a wide range of activists is the presence of significant health problems among long-time residents (CRDV, 2005a), including several types of cancer with rates significantly higher than on the main island and high rates of asthma, skin problems, kidney failure, and heart abnormalities. Several academic studies have revealed high levels of heavy metals in flora, fauna, and humans. From the viewpoint of Viequenses, it is the six decades of military activities that has left the heavy-metals residue on their island, caused the high cancer rate, and contributed to the other problems (Fernández Colón, 2005; Colón, 2005, Berman Santana, 2006). Vieques residents and their advocates have expended much time and energy in the last several years trying to prove a direct link between illness and the navy's activities while the navy denies responsibility.

Part of the problem is at the level of paradigm. The navy employs a notion of quantitative risk assessment that "transforms disputes over values and politics into scientific disputes that are inaccessible to many citizens and may be particularly inaccessible for communities of color and lower incomes" (Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss, 2001: 18). In this system, scientific findings will always be contentious because the methods of data collection and findings are rarely acceptable to both sides. Politics rather than science will continue to be the key for resolving these disputes (see Beck, 1992; Wynne, 1996; Fischer, 2000). Residents' lifestyles are often blamed for the elevated rates of specific diseases, and equally often the studies of the environmental arm of the Centers for Disease Control, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), conclude that there is "no apparent public health hazard." Regarding Vieques, the ATSDR position has been that if the Puerto Rican Cancer Registry had been updated when the navy withdrew in 2003, the case for navy culpability for the illnesses would have been stronger. In general, and not surprisingly, after undertaking numerous studies the agency has found little evidence of contamination from navy activities in the air, soil, or groundwater of Vieques (ATSDR, 2004).

There is little chance of agreement on an objective truth in environmental justice struggles such as the one taking place on Vieques. A partial solution to the problem is to improve health care on Vieques, and this has begun to occur. It remains unclear whether the navy will pay compensation for past and present health conditions linked to its activities. The matter may ultimately be resolved in court, since many longtime residents are involved in a class action lawsuit against the U.S. Navy (Masri, 2005).

DEVELOPMENT

Because of its history as a bombing range, Vieques is unique in the Caribbean in its relative lack of development. Since the navy's departure, though, the struggle over development on the island has come to parallel those going on throughout the region. Here are small, densely populated islands, rich in tropical rain forests, biodiversity, and prime beachfront real estate, where land is a fiercely contested resource. The CRDV has a vision that it calls "sustainable, community-controlled development," but defining it is at the heart of the development struggle. Viequenses are considering contending futures for the island in terms of three related questions: Who will control Vieques's development, outsiders or the local community? Will tourism be the large-scale enterprise common throughout the region or a smaller-scale, ecologically and culturally more sensitive version that would provide more benefits to long-time residents? How "green" will Vieques be in the future? While the

CRDV, for example, wants smaller-scale development than perhaps the island government or off-island resort promoters, it may support more development than do many ecologists and nature tourists, who see the National Wildlife Refuge and six decades of nondevelopment as an unintended conservation gift from the U.S. military that makes Vieques unique among Caribbean tourism destinations (Todd, 2003). While the CRDV supports ecotourism, the return of much of the land that is now controlled by the federal government remains a long-term goal (CRDV, 2005b). Since the navy's pullout, stopping rampant land speculation has become an immediate issue in Vieques. Real estate prices jumped dramatically after May 2003 as outsiders looked for homes and businesses; it is not at all clear that longtime residents have benefited from the boom.

Viequenses have at their disposal a comprehensive planning document compiled between 1999 and 2002 by a group of Puerto Rican university researchers and other professionals (Rivera and Cotto, 2002), but having a planning document on paper does not guarantee its implementation. For example, in the first months after the navy's departure the municipality allowed the development of a quarry, a project inappropriate both ecologically and aesthetically for an island trying to preserve its "paradise status." At the same time, however, Vieques's mayor and the town council began to exert some control over events. Several neighborhoods that had been "rescued" by locals years earlier were formally taken over by the municipality as a way of safeguarding them. The local assembly passed a law against the sale of public land that carried a $10,000 fine and possible jail time. Local officials also began to transfer property titles for a dollar to people whose land had been expropriated in the 1940s. Importantly, in December 2004 the commonwealth government ratified a master plan for Vieques's future development that supported the notion of sustainable community control (Estudios Técnicos, 2004; Berman Santana, 2006). Still, as the CRDV grapples with implementing the goals of the 2002 and 2004 plans, real estate speculation continues.

In the time since the navy's departure, business has improved markedly for local merchants, guesthouse owners, and restaurateurs. In addition, the commonwealth government has set up a program called Renacer Vieques, a multisectoral strategy for addressing the island's socioeconomic problems that involves a pledge of $65 million for improving services and infrastructure and paying for land titles. Separate initiatives involve improving health facilities, promoting agricultural programs for hydroponics cultivation, expanding the fishing industry, rehabilitating housing, and improving electrification.

At present, three specific plans for Vieques funded by the commonwealth government have been a source of contention in the community. The first involves a recreational village for moderate-income Puerto Ricans. The CRDV supports this project, but it has its opponents. One basis for opposition is ecological— that the project would endanger turtles and bird sanctuaries. More subtle but inherently elitist opponents argue that similar villages on Puerto Rico's main island have brought noise and drugs to small communities. Finally, some opponents prefer a mega-project proposed by outside developers at Sun Bay Beach instead. A second plan involves a fisherman's wharf that would use nature-reserve land for an industrial fish-processing complex and would include a pier and a gas station. Vieques residents have protested that the stench and pollution would negatively impact tourism in the town of Esperanza, and alternative sites have been suggested. A third plan has already been implemented—the Wyndham Martineau Bay Resort, Vieques' first chain hotel, which opened in 2003 with a $40 million subsidy from the commonwealth government. This is precisely the kind of project opposed by the CRDV, which has called for the funding of locally owned guesthouses and the renovation of potential heritage tourism sites. The tragic loss of the rundown Frenchman's House historic site in August 2005 underlines the urgency of renovation funds.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

The exclusion felt by Viequenses may even have been more palpable than that perceived by other Puerto Ricans because they have long lived at the center of military colonialism. Still, the navy's departure in 2003 was a clear victory for all Puerto Ricans, who gained a heightened sense of nationalism and anticolonialism through this struggle. As Barreto (2002: 86) has noted that the Vieques crusade to get the navy out "galvanized public awareness and collective action to a degree previously unseen in Puerto Rico. Solidarity on this scale alarmed federal policy-makers accustomed to dealing with a society deeply divided over political affairs. Nationalism, albeit in its cultural variant, flourished to an unprecedented degree." The concern now is that having achieved the first goal of demilitarization, Vieques activists may not be able to maintain sufficient support to achieve their just demands for decontamination, devolution, health care, and sustainable community development.

The unanswered questions involve the degree of support for the second stage of the struggle, the length and extent of the cleanup process, the possibility of devolution, and the control of future development. Activists are continuing their press releases and occasional protests. At the end of May 2004,

the CRDV demonstrated "to dramatize the urgent necessity for decontamination and the return of Vieques's lands to its people," and in May 2005 many Viequenses rallied on the former bombing range against the open burning and detonations being used to remove unexploded ordnance. Mostly, the CRDV and other community groups are commenting on technical reports issued by federal agencies. While such activity is essential for cleaning and developing the island, it is unlikely to attract the 1999–2003 level of national and international media attention.

The cleanup is likely to be long and slow. Various analysts point to Kaho'olawe, Hawaii (an uninhabited island that the navy once used as a live-impact range), as an appropriate comparison for estimating the time and extent of the Vieques cleanup (Klein, 2001). On Kaho'olawe, the remediation took over a decade, and the project was declared finished without a complete cleanup. If the comparison is apt, then, at least in the short term, a full cleanup with devolution to the municipal or commonwealth government is highly unlikely. Washington will not return land that contains toxic and hazardous substances and unexploded ordnance. Additionally, given its present concern with national security, the federal government is unlikely to give up the option for military training on the island in the future. Therefore, most of the former military lands that now comprise the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge will probably remain in federal hands.

CONCLUSION

In Puerto Rico, social and political institutions and strategies are a mix of traditions from the United States and from Latin America and the Caribbean. Thus, in its struggle to gain control over the future of the community the Vieques movement has borrowed and continues to borrow from both traditions. Environmental justice movements in Latin America and the Caribbean typically link environmental issues to other concerns—most generally, international dependency or the negative aspects of economic globalization. Especially in the Caribbean, environmental movements contest the use of natural spaces for private, typically foreign tourism development and especially access to land on the coast (Lynch, 2006). The struggle over Vieques's tourism sector is typical of the contentious politics of development throughout the Caribbean. In the United States, environmental justice activists are especially concerned with cleanup and public health issues and focus on remedies relying on civil rights legislation and class action lawsuits.

Vieques residents continue to need help from sympathetic activists in Puerto Rico, on the mainland, and abroad. The challenge for the CRDV and

other activists is to keep visible in this second stage, in which the issues are much more technical than before and its undramatic labors are unlikely to receive much media coverage. Viequenses must maintain their links to the large community of activists in progressive networks that helped in stage 1. In linking the Vieques situation to the larger context of Puerto Rico’s colonialism, the continuing struggle has strengthened civil society on the island. The number of protests and strikes in Puerto Rico in 2005, for example, suggests that citizens have lost patience with their stalemated, divided government and view the traditional political parties as increasingly irrelevant to the island’s present reality. The Vieques struggle, which ended military colonialism on the island, has not only strengthened Puerto Ricans’ capacity to determine their own future but also changed the calculus of colonialism from Washington’s vantage point.

NOTE

1. Residents of Puerto Rico do not vote in presidential elections, have one nonvoting resident commissioner representing them in Congress, and are not fully covered by several federal social welfare programs.

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