

Environmental Conflict and Cultural Solidarity: The Case of Vieques

Russell Baruffi

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Dr. Saleem H. Ali (saleem@alum.mit.edu)
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If you type *vieques* into the Google.com internet search engine, two links to two radically different websites will pop up on your screen. If you click on the link leading you to www.vieques-island.com, you can read about a beautiful tropical island with secluded bays and white sandy beaches, where the temperature rarely fluctuates above 90 or below 60 degrees Fahrenheit and the currency is the US Dollar. If you click on the other link, you will find www.viequeslibre.com, where you will read the terrible story about a tumultuous and painful struggle fought by the island's inhabitants against the world's most powerful Navy, which against the will of the people, owns and uses most of the little island for training exercises and target practice. The websites do not have links to one another, and each barely makes mention of the other's topic.

Both of these web-pages reflect coexisting realities on the tiny little island 6 miles off the Puerto Rican coast. Administratively, Vieques is a Puerto Rican municipality, but geographically, it could be a US Virgin Island.¹ It is approximately 20 miles long and 4.5 miles wide. With a surface area of 51 square miles, it is roughly twice the land mass of Manhattan. The United States Navy has been using the island for target practice since the mid-1970's, and environmental, economic and health problems proliferate on the island. The islanders want the Navy out, but the Navy claims that it cannot operate successfully without its current practices on the island.

Historical Context

The present situation cannot be understood apart from its tumultuous history, which can be traced back before the arrival of Columbus in the Americas. To summarize

the history as it pertains to the present conflict, I will start with the Spanish-American War and American expansionism.

The US had a vested interest in attaining islands in the Caribbean long before the Spanish-American war. Government officials were anxious to use the then Spanish islands of Puerto Rico and Cuba as military outposts and markets for American exports. The Monroe Doctrine, a foundation of American foreign policy during the era, held that US Military presence in the Caribbean (and Atlantic and Pacific Oceans) would buffer the contiguous United States against attacks.² The US lacked a legitimate reason to war with Spain to acquire the territories it coveted. On Feb 18 1898, the mysterious explosion of the battleship *Maine* in Havana's harbor served as rationale enough for the US to declare war against Spain, chanting the slogan "Remember the Maine!" all the way.³

Puerto Rico was already in the process of developing its own identity apart from the Spaniards and resented Spanish control when General Nelson Miles's American soldiers arrived on the island. The Americans met little resistance because the Puerto Rican people believed that that invasion would liberate them from the control of Spain- but independence would be elusive. By August of that year, the Treaty of Paris was signed, and Puerto Rico was officially transferred from Spain to the United States.⁴ Within two years, the US Congress passed the Foraker Act making Puerto Rican inhabitants citizens of Puerto Rico (not of the US), making Puerto Rico the first unincorporated territory of the United States, and giving the US president the power to select a governor for the island

Conditions on the island improved during the subsequent years as the wealthy US government invested millions of dollars in improving Puerto Rico's infrastructure.

Illiteracy, personal income and unemployment, however, saw little change.⁵

The Jones Act of 1917 established a Puerto Rican bicameral legislature and made Puerto Ricans, including residents of main island and the neighboring islands of Vieques and Culebra, into citizens of the United States. This citizenship, which continues to stand today, is a statutory rather than constitutional citizenship. Statutory citizenship, created by the Congress, can be revoked by the Congress because the US Constitution provides no premise for its existence. In addition, Puerto Ricans were given no representation in US government. While living on Puerto Rico, they are not allowed to vote for the President, nor do they have Congressional representation. They are vulnerable to "the draft", conscription by the US Military and can be called to serve in US wars even though they cannot vote for the president that will send them into that war. Many have suggested that the Jones Act of 1917 was solely a means of creating a "blood tax" on Puerto Rico and adding to the supply of available men to add to the World War I effort. The evolution of this Puerto Rican citizenship without representation in national politics plays an important role in the development of the situation in Vieques.

Towards the end of the 1930's, the US Navy began to aggressively acquire land on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. The Navy first purchased several sugar plantations that were in financial binds, and in 1941 began forcibly expropriating land from the native inhabitants. The private properties of locals were seized on the grounds of eminent domain and they were compensated minimally for their losses. In all, the Navy confiscated 21,100 acres at a price of \$1,041,500 – an average of about \$50 per acre.

Within the next few years, the Navy added 4,340 more acres of formerly private and public land to their stock at a price of \$520,400.⁶ These policies created thousands of landless, homeless peasants on the island. About 3000 viequenses relocated to St. Croix, many went to mainland Puerto Rico, and the rest remained in the civilian area designated by the Navy.⁷ Families who moved to the civilian area were denied the legal titles of their homes so that the military could readily relocate them if need be.⁸

Lucia Carambot, a Vieques native who experienced the appropriations of 1941 told her story during a Vieques solidarity meeting: “I can tell you that I may have a number of years on me, but I remember the expropriation as if it were yesterday, because I lived it. We suffered a lot and we continue to suffer up to now. They took people out of their homes and told them that they had to leave within 15 days, or else they would come back with bulldozers and tear down our homes. They threatened us with having to sleep on the street if we didn’t accept. And they even took out a woman who was pregnant and about to give birth and told her she had to leave.”

Another viequense, Ramon Rodriguez, saved the June 3 1943 letter that ordered him to leave his home. The letter read:

Vieques, Puerto Rico

The house and land which you occupy in the municipality of Vieques was acquired by the United States under judgment (sic) of the Federal Court which granted the right of immediate possession.

You will be required to vacate this property within ten days from the date of this notice.

Should you wish to move to another site on federal property you will be assigned a suitable area by the Officer-in-Charge of the project upon execution by you of an agreement setting forth the terms upon which your occupancy of the site is permitted.

Yours very truly,

For J.C. Gebhard

Captain (CEC) U.S.N.

Form VB (English)⁹

World War II justified Navy's creation of Roosevelt Roads Naval Station, which encompassed Vieques, Culebra, and Ceiba. Once World War II was over, the Cold War justified the continuing presence of the Navy. This justification became particularly acute during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when the status of Guantanamo and the permanence of the US Southern Command's headquarters in Panama seemed uncertain.¹⁰

Though the Navy expropriated the Vieques land in the 1940s, target practice did not begin until the 1970's. The Navy's testing of live ordnance has also included napalm and depleted uranium, substances which the Navy originally denied using on the island. In 1999, after years of vehement denial, the Navy finally admitted that it tested 24 napalm bombs on Vieques in 1993. Depleted-uranium (DU) tipped ammunition was first tested in Vieques in 1980, and sources estimate that somewhere between 300 and 800 tons of DU weapons were tested there during the Gulf War. DU is enormously toxic. Because of the high temperatures generated on impact, the uranium is released in a radioactive cloud. A single particle of DU can be lodged in the human lung, where it will give off 800 times the radiation considered safe by US regulations.¹¹ Evidence indicates that health effects of DU exposure include: reactive airway disease, neurological abnormalities, kidney stones, chronic kidney pain, rashes, vision degeneration, leukemia, lymphoma, birth defects, sexual dysfunction, and gastrointestinal problems.¹² Subsequent revelations of the Navy's use of DU, against the regulations of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and napalm has created a powerful distrust amongst the native inhabitants, and it is likely that the Navy's secret activities and tests on the island extend beyond the present sphere of public knowledge.

Over the years, the Navy has also had a number of accidents which fostered the distrust of the viequenses. An M16 misfired into a municipal bus in 1997, five bombs fell dangerously close to civilian areas in 1993, and an observation tower was accidentally destroyed in 1995.¹³ In 1999, 4 civilians were wounded and 1 was killed by an errant bomb.

Some of the most passionate antimilitary activists have been the fishermen on Vieques. The Navy's ships destroy their traps. "The ships' propellers destroy the buoys that indicate where the traps are" according to Carlos Zenon, the former President of the Fisherman Association. As a result of this the traps stay at the bottom of the sea for eight months to a year, trapping and killing many fish. This depletes the fish supply and destroys the livelihood of many fishermen.

Economy

The economic situation on Vieques is worse than that on mainland Puerto Rico. Seventy-three percent (73%) of viequenses live below the poverty line.¹⁴ The above-poverty twenty-seven percent (27%) figure includes wealthy American businesspeople who live on Vieques part of the year. The unemployment rate for males 16-19 is 54%, and it is estimated the the real unemployment rate for the people on Vieques is between 50 and 60%. Most people have given up their search for employment. Very few economic opportunities available on the island drive many of the younger people to seek work elsewhere, creating a brain drain of the most productive workers. Goods on Vieques are more expensive; prices are generally 15% more for food, 33% more for construction materials, and 22% more for gasoline than on mainland Puerto Rico. Many viequenses attribute this economic disparity to the presence of the Navy, which controls the most

fertile and beautiful two-thirds of the island, leaving the inhabitants with the most arid strip in the middle. Indeed, the underdevelopment tourism industry of Vieques, when considered in comparison to the heavily developed areas in the US and British Virgin Islands that are nearly geographically identical, is distinctly low. The Report of the Special Commission on Vieques, commissioned by navy apologist Governor Rosello in 1999, claims that after environmental damage, the restriction and stagnation of the island's economic development has been the greatest impact of the Navy upon the island.¹⁵

Environment

In 2001 and 2002, Casa Pueblo, a community organization based in Adjuntas, PR, in collaboration with scientists at the UPR-Mayaguez, published a series of findings with respect to the ecological health of Vieques. They measured concentrations of heavy metals in vegetables, human hair, and crab tissue samples and, for comparative reasons they completed many of these studies in Vieques civilian zone, Vieques military zone, and on the Puerto Rican mainland.^{16 17} Statistically significant and alarming figures emerged from these studies.

The results indicated that concentrations of Copper, Zinc, Nickel, Cobalt and Cadmium, were significantly higher in the tissues of Fiddler crabs collected in the firing range than those collected in the mainland control populations. The crabs were found to have up to 20 times the normal levels of Cadmium and Cobalt, both carcinogenic metals. These results present evidence of the transport and biomagnification of contaminants in the food chain. At least five species of birds are known to feed on the crab species studied. The entrance of these toxins into the food chain is problematic as a public health

concern. Human ingestion of cadmium, which is not readily digestible, may cause hypertension and/or cancer.¹⁸

More troublesome were the results from the vegetables studied in the Vieques civilian areas. In Squash, chili pepper, pigeon pea, pineapple, and yucca plants, Casa Pueblo found concentrations of lead and cadmium exceeding the critical values for human and animal consumption suggested by the FDA. These concentrations were significantly higher in the Vieques civilian area than they were on the mainland. Vegetation with shallow root systems such as pigeon peas and squash foliar had the most outrageous levels of toxins (10 times the concentrations on mainland PR) while plants with deeper root systems seemed less apt to contamination. According to Casa Pueblo, this data “is consistent with the thesis that heavy metals are deposited in the Civilian Area through air dispersion by windblown dust from the bombing zone.¹⁹ The explosions caused by the military target practice life dust clouds that can rise up to 3,000 feet above sea level.²⁰ The windblown dust is pushed by the powerful Trade Winds, which for centuries have blown east to west across the island. The Civilian Area lies directly downwind from the bombing area.

Environmental Health and Public Services

The medical services available on Vieques are severely limited. There is only one medical facility on the island, and though it is equipped with a laboratory and X-rays, they cannot be used due to a lack of qualified personnel. Viequenses must travel to mainland Puerto Rico for everything from chronic illnesses to childbirth. Data from 1995 indicate that while on the mainland there were 453 inhabitants per doctor, on Vieques

there were 1,798 inhabitants per doctor. As of July 2000, only seven (7) primary care physicians were at work on the island.²¹

Cancer rates on the island are off the charts. Both the incidence of cancer and the cancer mortality rate is greater on the little island. According to the government's most recently published health data (1995), the risk of dying from cancer on Vieques is 1.39 times higher than the risk on the Puerto Rican mainland.²² Similarly, the "incidence of cancer in Vieques during the last three five-year periods reported was higher than in Puerto Rico; in particular it was 26.9% greater in 1985-1989 and 17.4% greater in 1990-1994"²³

The November 1999 edition of Puerto Rico's Health Department's Cancer Registry showed cancer trends for Vieques and the mainland. Prior to 1979, cancer rates on Vieques were lower than those on the mainland, but subsequently increased. The standardized incidence ratios for the periods of 1985-1989 and 1990-1994 exceed alert levels adopted by the surveillance system of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (US Department of Health and Human Services).

According to the most recent contiguous data, the proportion of Viequenses women giving birth to underweight babies is on the rise (a 16.7% rise from 1990 to 1995). The likelihood of giving birth to an underweight baby is 65.3% greater on Vieques than on the mainland. In 1997, the Vieques general mortality rate was 47% higher than the mainland's mortality rate.

Levels of lead taken from goat hair samples on Vieques were 24-50 times higher than those on the mainland. Cadmium was 5-7 times higher, aluminum 5 times higher, and cobalt 6 times higher. In comparison to mainland Puerto Rico, significantly higher

concentrations of antimony, arsenic, cadmium, manganese, molybdenum, silver, and strontium have been found on Vieques.²⁴

The Navy owns 68% of the island and the Puerto Rican government owns 12%, leaving a measly 20% for development. According to Murrillo, this land is the most arid and unproductive on the island. The physical structures are in disrepair and the teachers are poorly paid. Additionally, “there is a lack of water- and sewage-treatment facilities on the island. The main aquifers are under Navy land, and most water is piped from the main island of Puerto Rico.”²⁵

In late 2000, the governing council of the American Public Health Association (APHA) adopted a policy statement advocating the discontinuation of the use of Vieques by the US Navy. The statement calling upon the president to cease all military exercises on the island and establish a clean-up program to mitigate the health effects that have already begun to take shape.²⁶

The United Nations Decolonization committee also addressed the grievances of Vieques in the July 2000 session. In the Committee’s resolution, they called for an immediate cessation of all military activities on the island, a return to “the people of Puerto Rico” lands occupied by the military, a thorough cleanup of the area, and an end of the persecution against the peaceful demonstrators. The UN Decolonization Committee, like much of the UN excepting the Security Council, has no power to enforce its decisions and recommendations, but this statement does have the power to make an ethical statement and publicly pressure the United States.

Needs of the Navy

The United States Navy performs three types of training exercises on Vieques: 1) Marine amphibious landings on Camp Garcia beaches, 2) naval surface fire support (NSFS) from Navy ships off the coast, and 3) air-to-ground (ATG) bombing from aircraft launched from carriers onto the Live Impact Area (LIA). Joint Task Force Exercises (JTFEX) combine all of these training components in large-scale virtual-war scenarios. In addition to the firing range on the island (the Inner Range), the Navy also uses nearly 200,000 square miles in the open ocean as firing range (the Outer Range).²⁷ During the last 2 decades, the Navy trained on Vieques an average of 180 days out of the year and dropped an average of 1,464 tons of bombs annually.²⁸

According to the US Navy spokespeople, Vieques is critical to the efficacy of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet. In a 1999 Congressional hearing, Vice-Admiral William Fallon called the base “absolutely critical to the readiness, training, and preparation of our forces prior to their deployment overseas.” In a study that same year, Fallon wrote in conjunction with General Peter Pace, Vieques was the “only place available to East Coast based forces for training in several warfare competencies which are essential to combat readiness; most importantly live ordnance arms training.”²⁹ The training area on Vieques is made optimal by the intersections of many characteristics. The location is away from commercial airline routes and shipping lanes. It is surrounded by very deep waters, so bigger warships can enter the area to practice. It has beaches where soldiers can practice amphibious landings- storming shore. These conditions provide the opportunity for simultaneous land, air and sea exercises.³⁰ According to the Atlantic Fleet’s innerrange officer, Lieutenant Mike Amis, who coordinated the bombing tests and training maneuvers on Vieques until 1998, “ This is the premier range on the Atlantic fleet where

they can bring all their warfare areas together... This is the only place they can do an amphibious landing, giving naval surface-to-fire support, where they can put that all together.”³¹

The Navy claims that Vieques is a unique location, and such a location is absolutely pertinent for the functioning of the Atlantic Fleet. However, the Navy’s Pacific fleet does not have an equivalent to Vieques. The Pacific fleet’s training at San Diego, Cap Pendleton, and Hawaii are “more than adequate to ensure a high level of readiness,” according to Rafael E Matos.³²

Puerto Rican Politics

The politics regarding the use of the Vieques are situated within the larger more tedious debate about the status of the Puerto Rican Commonwealth within the United States. The shaky disenfranchised citizenship position that Puerto Ricans occupy makes the island and the rights of its citizens vulnerable, yet provide financial incentives for cooperation and acquiescence. There three primary branches to Puerto Rican politics regarding the status-question.

The *independistas*, members of the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), hold that Puerto Rico is a nation in itself with its own unique cultural identity that is threatened by the invasion of the American cultural monolith. They view the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico as a roughly disguised colonial relationship where Puerto Rican people suffer and the United States reaps many benefits.

The *populares*, proponents of the present Free Associated State model, support the continuation of the commonwealth status, and they believe that it holds unique

advantages including the freedom of US citizenship. This position was embraced by the Popular Democratic Part (PPD).

The pro-statehood position holds that Puerto Rico should become a full-fledged state of the Union. This is the firm position of Pedro Rosello, the former governor of Puerto Rico. It was his strategy to placate the US Navy, hoping to air on the good side of the United States government and increase the chances for a statehood proposition. Rossello also sought to quell Puerto Rican discontent with the United States and promote Americanism. For this reason, he and his Party have often been accused of being Navy apologists.

The statehood position, when viewed from the context of the American political spectrum, is absolutely unrealistic for partisan reasons. If Puerto Rico were to become a state, it would have 2 Senators and 7 Representatives in the US Congress, giving it political power greater than 20 other states. This political representation, in conjunction with the 3 Puerto Rican Congressmen who already represent primarily Puerto Rican districts in New York City and Chicago, would form a tremendously powerful voting block. Furthermore, Puerto Ricans have historically voted heavily democratic, and it can be expected that their representation would reflect that. Republicans can be expected to avoid the invitation of a new powerful Democratic coalition into the American political spectrum, and of course bipartisan support would be necessary for the addition of another state into the Union. Though probably unrealistic in its aspirations, the pro-statehood forces have had a powerful force in shaping Puerto Rican politics and their continual placation of the military has allowed for growing negative sentiments towards the party and the United States government.

Political Voice and Puerto Rican Solidarity

Ultimately, the reason that the Navy has continued up until this point to train and bomb on Vieques is a direct result of the lack of Congressional representation of the citizens. Puerto Rican citizens when living in Puerto Rico can only elect their local government, and have no representation in Congress, nor are they given the right to elect the US president. In July of 2001, the Navy suggested moving its exercises from Vieques to South Padre Island in Texas, but representatives from South Padre's district threatened to have congressional hearings and block the move.³³ Because of this response, South Padre was no longer an option for the Navy. Few options exist in the United States where the inhabitants would not strictly oppose the introduction of live ordnance bombing. Vieques has become a scapegoat of least resistance- or rather weakest resistance. The NIMBY reaction may be strong, but the people- poor, Spanish-speaking, and disenfranchised- lack the political clout to manifest this opposition on the political stage. The death of David Sanes Rodriguez dramatically changed this.

On April 9, 1999, the pilots of two FA-18 Hornets missed their targets on the firing range and detonated their 500-lb Mark 82 bombs near an observation post on Camp Garcia. The explosion injured four Vieques civilians and killed security guard David Sanes Rodriguez. Nearly as angering as the death was the cold, unapologetic response from the military, which promised a closed-door investigation, creating the appearance of a cover-up.

The death of David Sanes Rodriguez was highly significant turning point in the resistance movement and is particularly interesting from the perspective of a conflict analysis. Before the death of David Sanes, the *indipendistas*, *populares*, and

annexationists were quite dissonant in their opinions towards the Vieques issue. The annexationists, being pro-statehood and interested in supplicating the US government, were usually apologists for the actions of the US Military. The death of David Sanes pushed the annexationists to side with the formerly “radical” protesters on Vieques, demanding an end to the bombing runs.³⁴

Furthermore, outside of Puerto Rico, the death had the effect of creating a powerful Puerto Rican trans-nationalism. It was a rallying call for the Puerto Rican Diaspora, who continued to maintain an powerful sense of national identity, even when living outside Puerto Rico. These Puerto Ricans, enfranchised and united, held political clout and their anger struck political chords in urban centers throughout the US.

This strengthening of Puerto Rican identity around the cause of Vieques has potentially reverberating effects for the US Navy. With 33 million Hispanic Americans presently residing in the United States- 12% of the population, the widespread perception that the Navy is racist and colonialist may hurt recruiting efforts. In this sense, the Navy has a vested interest in positive public opinion as solidarity around the Vieques issue intensifies.

The power of this electorate block can be seen by the adoption of the Vieques cause by the junior Senator from New York, Hilary Clinton, who entered the New York Senator’s race as a firm supporter of the Puerto Rican cause, and made her opposition to the military in Vieques loud and clear. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, who have historically had political ambitions and probably continue to do so, also took up the Vieques cause with enthusiasm. Puerto Rican Congressional Representatives Jose Serano

(D-NY), Luis Gutierrez (D-IL), and Nydia Velasquez (D-NY) all represented strong Puerto Rican voting blocks and brought their concerns to the US Congress.

The Special Commission on Vieques established by Rosello in response to the David Sanes incident determined that the Navy must leave Vieques and begin the transfer of lands back to the inhabitants. The Commission lacked teeth to enforce this decision and the Clinton announced that the Navy would resume bombing limited to 90 days out of the year, the following spring. The Navy was asked to consider leaving in five years.

Rosello rejected Clinton's proposal, and eventually, because of the political clout mustered within the United States and abroad, an agreement took shape. The Navy was verbally promised to leave on May 1 2003 and it would be allowed to train with only blank ammunition for 90 days out of the year, and the island received US\$40 million in development aid. The people of Vieques rallied behind the call of "Not a single bomb more" and felt betrayed by Rosello. The local church leaders called the proposition "an immoral act of power abuse" and accused the US of buying the dignity and health of the people. When Rosello's term ended in 2000, Puerto Ricans enthusiastically elected Sila Calderon, who has taken a firm stand that the military must leave Vieques.

In December of 2000, the Navy transferred the bulk of its property on the western half of the island to the US Department of the Interior, which in turn transferred the land to the municipality of Vieques. Much of the property has yet to be cleaned. The Eastern half of the property, about half of the island, where the bombing range is maintained, remains in the possession of the Navy.

Comparative

The Vieques conflict can benefit from an understanding of the US military history in other circumstances. The US ended its 96-year occupation of the Panama canal at the close of 1999, as agreed to by treaty. According to US officials, the military cleaned up 80% of the firing ranges in Panama, removing millions of pounds of scrap metal and unexploded ordnance. Before leaving, the military suggested that approximately 8,000 acres of the returned 360,240 acres be permanently closed to humans due to the presence of ordnance too difficult to retrieve.

Panama hired a team to assess the military's cleanup and ensure that the US had not been negligent in its cleanup responsibilities. The team produced a report that indicated unexploded mortar shells, grenades, rocket warheads, firing ranges in the areas that the US deemed ready for human habitation. Even some US officials agreed that the cleanup was superficial. Panama, in desperate need of the land for economic development and tourism, took its argument to the United Nations, but to this point little has been done to clean the area that the Navy left uninhabitable. Already eight military explosives have already been found in the zones the US claims to have cleared. Reports claim that the US also secretly tested Agent Orange and other toxic herbicides in Panama.³⁵ This situation in Panama calls into question the reliability of the US military as a keeper of its clean-up promises, even when bound by treaty. If the Navy even were to hold to its promise to leave Vieques in May of 2003, will the land ever be inhabitable?

Today

The events of September 11 2001 and the political and military turmoil that ensued brought additional complications into the already complex debate. Along with a renewed sense of national unity and American community came a rejection of any

political agendas that compromised that unity. The US Military was a topic of particular sensitivity as the wounded nation seemed to teeter on the edge of war. Protests immediately shut down both on and off the island and law-enforcement officials became particularly sensitive to anti-American activity in any capacity.

One month after 9-11, George Grayson wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal calling for the Congress to “quash plans to boot the Navy in 2003.” According to Grayson, the activities practiced on Vieques “may well prove crucial in this new era of war against Osama bin Laden and his radical disciples around the world.”³⁶ He argued that the Navy should revoke its May 2003 departure date in the interests of national security.

The events of 9-11, rather than a reason to maintain the Vieques status quo, can also be viewed as evidence of the changing nature of warfare. Eugene Carroll, a retired admiral who now serves as vice-president of the Center for Defense Information, believes that “the idea of putting ashore large numbers of troops under protective fire from warships is a relic of the Second World War, and is now irrelevant.” The last major amphibious operation executed by the US military happened in 1950, during the Korean War. Carroll contends that for financial cost reasons alone, this type of sea assault is unrealistic and outdated.³⁷ Vice-Admiral John Shanahan, a outspoken critic of the Navy’s presence on the island, agrees. In the conclusion of his issue brief which claims to examine whether Vieques is needed by the Navy for military reasons, Shanahan states “Because cross-beach amphibious operations and close-in naval fire are outmoded for naval warfare in this century, the Navy should abandon use of the Vieques Inner Range, and satisfy its minimal naval gunfire support and over-the-beach requirements

elsewhere.”³⁸ Shanahan also argues that close-in firing practice that is practiced on Vieques is outmoded. “In actual combat situations the Navy typically gets no closer than 30-50 miles from shore, because of the risk of mines.”³⁹

Though several criticisms of the necessity of amphibious landings and close fire practice, it is unlikely that the military would elect to not practice. It would not only be risky for individual pilots to enter into combat without the opportunity to practice, but it would compromise the efficacy of the Navy. Environmental lawyer Robert F Kennedy Jr., though a staunch advocate of the Navy’s withdrawal from Vieques, agrees to this. In an interview with CNN following his August 2001 prison term for protesting the Navy, Kennedy commented, “The Navy needs to find a place where we can give our troops adequate training, get them battle-ready. And everybody agrees we need live ordnance bombing. You can’t do that on Vieques because the population centers- there’s 9,300 people on that island. They are all sick. Many of them are sick from the bombing.”⁴⁰ Kennedy’s comment hits at the heart of the conflict- to achieve the military’s priorities, the bombing must happen, to maintain the basic human rights, the bombing must not happen on Vieques. What the military has assessed in terms of defense interests, Puerto Ricans assess in terms of human rights.

In the issue brief prepared by Vice-Admiral Shanahan is a list of possible alternatives for the Navy’s activities. During its one year bombing hiatus from April 1999 to May 2000, the Navy did not use the Vieques range and instead made use of various other facilities. Among those other options were Camp LeJeune and Cherry Point in North Carolina; Eglin Air Force Base in Florida; Capo Teulada in Sardinia, Italy; and Cape Wrath in Scotland. These bases have continuing availability to the Navy.

On September 16 of this year, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made comments suggesting that the military was wavering on the anticipated withdrawal date of May 2003. In response to this ambiguity, Puerto Rican Governor Sila Calderon immediately wrote to Secretary Rumsfeld and President George W. Bush, requesting that the public oral commitment to withdrawal be formalized by written commitment and stressing the need that a formal transition mechanism be put into place, as the May 2003 deadline approaches rapidly. This formal written commitment has yet to be fulfilled.⁴¹

The conflict has escalated over the course of the past 30 years from small-scale protests by Viequense fishermen whose commercial livelihoods were compromised, into full-scale antimilitary activism by Puerto Rican Senators and prominent US political figureheads and a solidarity of Puerto Rican consciousness. At one point, the conflict could have been mitigated perhaps by successful economic development efforts on the part of the Navy, a more rigorous safety consciousness, the employment of more viequenses, the avoidance of depleted uranium and napalm use- the list goes on. Trust, at one point, could have been cultivated. Each stage in the progression of the conflict created a more painful history that in itself acted as an issue. Today, the people of Vieques are united in their opposition to the Navy. In their minds, any trust that may have been fostered has been eliminated many times over- with the death of David Sanes, with the revelation of DU-testing, with the failure of economic assistance programs.

The culturally unified coalition that formed around the viequenses cause, bound together, confident and emphatic, in combination with a growing global consciousness on the issue, evidenced by the UN Decolonization Commission's statement, places the US

government in a difficult position. As May 2003 approaches, President Bush has tremendous political capital invested in removing the Navy from the island. This united opposition would be less serious of a threat of the enfranchised Puerto Rican Diaspora had not mobilized into consciousness on this issue. Puerto Ricans, almost across the board, reject the assertion that the use of Vieques is justifiable in the name of US security. The struggle for Vieques, has been made equivalent to the struggle for basic human and civil rights. It has evolved into an ideological struggle that is less apt to compromise than ever before.

Pertinent Images...











*images courtesy of www.viequeslibre.com

¹ Barreto, Amilcar Antonio. *Vieques, the Navy, and Puerto Rican Politics*. 2002. p 6.

² Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *Federalist Papers* p 87.

³ Murillo, Mario. *Islands of Resistance: Puerto Rico, Vieques, and US Policy*. 2001. p 24.

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- ⁴ Murillo, p 25.
- ⁵ Murillo, p 28.
- ⁶ Barreto, p 23.
- ⁷ <http://www.vieques-island.com/hisindx.shtml>
- ⁸ Barretto, p 23.
- ⁹ Murillo, p 53.
- ¹⁰ Barreto, p 25.
- ¹¹ Del Pilar Uribe Marin, Monica. "Not a Single Bomb More" The Ecologist v 30 no5 (July/Aug 2000) p 62-63.
- ¹² "Pentagon admits using chemical and biological agents (and related articles)" www.viequeslibre.com archives. May 24 2002.
- ¹³ Del Pilar Uribe Marin, Monica. "Not a Single Bomb More" The Ecologist v 30 no5 (July/Aug 2000) p 62-63
- ¹⁴ American Journal of Public Health May 2001. "What is the Public Health Crisis in Vieques" inset
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- ¹⁶ The Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques, p 9.
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