



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Puerto Ricans expel United States Navy from Culebra Island, 1970-1974

1970

to:

1974

**Country:** Puerto Rico

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** *Culebra and San Juan, Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.*

### Goals:

To prevent eviction of residents by U.S. navy; to remove U.S. navy training grounds from island; to halt live fire exercises on and in the vicinity of the island.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › demonstrations on the beach; protests at naval base in San Juan
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Using boats and human bodies to prevent ship-to-shore bombing

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 033. Fraternalization › Socialized with security force to prevent arrests and harassment of actionists
- 034. Vigils › At jail
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Students protesting at Puerto Rican Universities; rally outside court during trials
- 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse
- 168. Nonviolent raids › built a chapel on the site that had been used for military exercises
- 170. Nonviolent invasion › built a chapel on the site that had been used for military exercises

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › Cross attached to fence surrounding training site
- 016. Picketing › Protestors built a replica of the church they had built on the Culebra site in DC

### Methods in 4th segment:

**Methods in 5th segment:**

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Celebration of official agreement by U.S. navy to leave Culebra

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Environment

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Peace

**Group characterization:**

- Culebra and Puerto Rican citizens
- Environmentalists
- human rights activists
- international pacifists

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Puerto Rican Independence Party, Puerto Rican Socialist Party, Rescue Culebra Society

**Partners:**

Clergy Committee to Rescue Culebra, Sons of Culebra

**External allies:**

A Quaker Action Group

**Involvement of social elites:**

The Puerto Rican Senate supported a reevaluation of the U.S. Navy's use of Culebra

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Puerto Rican Independence Party
- Puerto Rican Senate
- Puerto Rican Socialist Party

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- A Quaker Action Group
- Clergy Committee to Rescue Culebra
- Rescue Culebra Committee
- Sons of Culebra

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 8 months*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

United States Navy

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Offering thirty-five jobs to citizens of Culebra. The navy also conducted a community relations program, distributing water to residents during the dry season and showing free movies on its base.

**Campaigner violence:**

Three Marines were burned in early 1971 when Molotov cocktails were thrown as the Navy tore down a chapel on its base on Culebra.

**Repressive Violence:**

Marines fired tear gas at protesters when attempting to tear down a chapel

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

2 points out of 3 points

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In 1970, Puerto Rico was a non-sovereign territory of the United States. Its residents were U.S. citizens but could not vote in presidential elections, nor did they have political representation in the U.S. Congress, although they could serve and be drafted in the U.S. armed forces. At the beginning of the 20th century, the U.S. Navy eliminated the principal town on the island of Culebra and evicted its residents so that a marine base could be built. In 1941, President Roosevelt claimed exclusive rights to the air space above Culebra as well as a three-mile wide radius around the island. The U.S. claimed that occupation of Puerto Rico was a key component of the U.S. armed forces presence in the Western Hemisphere. By 1950, the U.S. Navy had claimed 1,700 acres of the ten-square-mile island east of Puerto Rico and the civilian population had been reduced from 4,000 in 1900 to 580. The U.S. Navy owned 1/3 of the land and controlled all of the coastline and transport to and from the island. In the mid-1950s, the U.S. Navy proposed to evict all of Culebra's residents to expand the marine base, but the Puerto Rican government resisted, claiming that its Commonwealth status according to U.S. law guaranteed a popular vote to abolish the municipality of Culebra.

In 1970, the U.S. Navy tried again to forcibly remove the entire population of Culebra. The year before, Culebra had been hit by directed missiles for 228 days out of the year and live-fire exercises took place for more than 100 days. Citizens of Culebra and Puerto Rico were angered by the constant training exercises and shelling which were both a direct and an indirect threat to human and environmental health. Occasional misfires resulted in major damage to the island and its people. Culebra was riddled with craters, unexploded bombs, and toxic waste from military activity.

Citizens on the island responded to the Navy's second attempt at total eviction by demonstrating on the island's beaches in 1970. After a court reaffirmed the Navy's right to use Culebra as a military site, residents marched to a local command post and issued an ultimatum, warning that they would use direct action to force removal of the U.S. Navy. The Puerto Rican Senate also passed a resolution in which they asked President Nixon to reevaluate the Navy's presence on the island. This increased national attention on the issue and brought congressional support that would prove helpful later in the campaign. Congressional hearings and investigations continued throughout the summer to determine what could be done about the issue.

Throughout the summer, demonstrators protested at the naval base in San Juan. In June 1970, twenty Culebrans used their bodies as a human chain to block ship-to-shore missile fire. This was followed by a three-day long encampment organized by the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), which attracted 600 people. PIP, led by Ruben Berrios Martinez, pledged to follow a course of "pacific militancy". The Navy responded by offering thirty-five jobs, hoping to placate the people of Culebra. Instead, residents picketed at a proposed demolition site. One of the three boats used to picket the site had to be towed away by force at the last minute to avoid human casualties.

In early 1971, PIP organized a march to the entrance of the base. With the help of the Rescue Culebra Committee (RCC), the Clergy Committee to Rescue Culebra, and A Quaker Action Group, protesters attempted to construct a chapel on Flamenco Beach, a site within the bombing range of the Navy where a church had been demolished by military personnel. RCC coordinated this action in response to Operation Springboard, a training exercise that was scheduled to take place in February, involving eight countries and 60,000 troops. When actionists were blocked by the police and a barbed wire fence, protesters traveled by sea, carrying the wood and tools needed to build the chapel on the marine base. With the support of the U.S.-based A Quaker Action Group, services were held during target practice, forcing the Navy to halt exercises. Eventually, the chapel was torn down and the president of PIP and thirteen others were sent to federal prison for trespassing. The only violence seen in campaign occurred when protesters attempted to stop Navy personnel from tearing down the chapel; Marines used tear gas against the protesters, protesters threw several Molotov cocktails, and three Marines were burned. When the protesters were sentenced to jail, a student uprising began at the University of Puerto Rico and 1,000 demonstrators met the protesters after the sentencing and conducted daily vigils at the jail.

In January 1971, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Secretary of the Navy signed the Culebra Agreement. With the Culebra Agreement, the U.S. Navy agreed that it would locate another island for its military exercises by 1972 and would no longer use Culebra as a bombing site after 1975. Within a year, the U.S. Secretary of Defense revealed that it would maintain use of its military base on the island until at least 1985, if not indefinitely.

This reversal greatly upset Puerto Ricans, both on the mainland and on island of Culebra, who organized more acts of protest against the base. Demonstrations were conducted in Washington, D.C. and a replica of the chapel was built in front of the pentagon as well as several of the embassies of countries that were participating in Operation Springboard. A cross was attached to the fence where the chapel had been constructed with the following slogan: "You tore down a chapel but you can't destroy the spirit that builds it ever again". Political parties, including PIP and the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), as well as Puerto Rican Mayor Ramon Feliciano, united in their opposition to the military presence. The Sons of Culebra marched under the American flag and called for peace, tranquility and the removal of U.S. armed forces.

Finally, in 1974, President Nixon ordered the Navy to leave the island by 1975 and to relocate its base and shelling activities to another location.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

Success in removing the U.S. Navy from Culebra inspired greater efforts to remove the U.S. marine base from Vieques, another Puerto Rican island (see "Puerto Ricans protest United States Navy presence on Vieques Island, 1977-1983" and

"Puerto Ricans force United States Navy out of Vieques Island, 1999-2003"). (2)

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**Additional Notes:**

Unfortunately for the people of Vieques, an island south of Culebra, the U.S. navy relocated its shelling and training exercises to its Marine base there. For more information, view the database entries for campaigns against the U.S. Navy presence in the early 1970s and late 1990s in Vieques. In 2005, Culebra was added to the U.S. Superfund list, which allocates funds for clean up of toxic waste. Debate and tension continues as Culebrans became more aware of the impact of U.S. military activity on the island.

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**

Nathalie Schils, 06/07/2011

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