



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Puerto Ricans protest United States Navy presence on Vieques Island, 1977-1983

1977

to:

1983

Country: Puerto Rico

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Vieques and San Juan, Puerto Rico*

Goals:

To protect the economic interest of fishermen on Vieques; To reclaim land expropriated by the U.S. navy in 1938; To return control of surrounding seas to Vieques

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 013. Deputations
- 016. Picketing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › fish-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 016. Picketing
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 026. Paint as protest › Painted over license plates of navy ships
- 029. Symbolic reclamations
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 168. Nonviolent raids
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › fish-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 013. Deputations › To speak with politicians in Washington, D.C. and San Juan, Puerto Rico
- 020. Prayer and worship › Mass held on beach next to training and bombing site
- 050. Teach-ins

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 170. Nonviolent invasion

Notes on Methods:

Nonviolent action in later segments was overshadowed by increased violence in Puerto Rico

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Environment

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Vieques residents
- environmental activists
- fishermen
- pro-independence activists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Vieques Fishermen's Association (VFA)

Partners:

Viequenses United, Crusade to Rescue Vieques

External allies:

National Committee in Defense of Vieques, Vieques Solidarity Network

Involvement of social elites:

U.S. Congress supported the removal of the U.S. Navy from Vieques

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Crusade to Rescue Vieques
- National Committee in Defense of Vieques
- Viequenses United
- Vieques Fishermen's Association
- Vieques Solidarity Network

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 14 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

United States Navy

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

The U.S. navy hired a community-relations official and 100 residents to work as civilian security guards. They also organized the Pro-Navy Vanguard, a pro-navy support group that organized counter-demonstrations, claiming that the protesters were unpatriotic radicals that were a threat to national security.

Campaigner violence:

Frustration at the continued presence of the U.S. navy led to acts of violence, especially after the May 1979 arrest of the Vieques 21. This violence was not supported by the leaders of the campaign and marked a hijacking of the campaign by pro-Puerto Rican independence activists.

Repressive Violence:

Claims were made by demonstrators at the May 1970 beach rallies of excessive violence (using high pressure hoses, etc) being used by security forces as they arrested protesters.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

2 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Vieques is a fifty-two square-mile island located eight miles off the east coast of Puerto Rico. Home to 10,000 citizens, it is a part of Puerto Rico and therefore a non-sovereign territory of the United States. This status grants American citizenship to its residents and allows them to serve and be drafted into the armed forces, but does not give them political representation in the U.S. Senate or allow them to vote in presidential elections. Since 1938, the U.S. Navy has used Vieques as a military training ground and weapons depot, conducting live shelling and war games on the island and in the waters around it. After a successful campaign to remove the U.S. Navy from the island of Culebra in 1974 (see "[Puerto Ricans expel United States Navy from Culebra Island, 1970-1974](#) [3]"), Vieques was subjected to increased shelling and military activity.

In the late 1970s, anger and frustration with the presence of the U.S. Navy on Vieques reached new heights as bombing and training exercises increased. Independence activists had fought a sometimes-violent struggle for Puerto Rican independence in the 1960s and popular discontent was high, although the residents of Vieques were hesitant to link their campaign to the wider fight for independence. The U.S. General Services Administration and the local government in San Juan were working on a deal that would greatly increase aviation and activity over the south coast of Vieques in exchange for the resettlement of a small piece of land. Frustrated by the dwindling economy and their lack of control over land use and development, the Vieques Fishermen's Association (VFA) became the leader of the opposition to the U.S. Navy's presence on the island. Members of the VFA relied on fishing for their livelihoods and felt threatened by military activity that was impacting the marine-life. Naval activity damaged coral reefs and severed the buoy lines connected to traps.

In response to an announcement about the proposed agreement between San Juan and the U.S. Navy in 1977, a rally was held in front of the gates to Camp Garcia in Vieques. Speeches were made by leaders of various political parties in which they stated their refusal to support the sale and called for resistance from the citizens of Vieques. Politicians also traveled to San Juan to lobby against the agreement. Although Vieques United was founded at this time, the group was not very successful in the long run because of the division felt in the Vieques population about Puerto Rican independence. In February 1978, fishermen used their fishing boats to force a ceasefire from warships participating in an international training program. The fishermen called their blockade a "fish-in" and the media portrayed their struggle as a battle between David and Goliath. In May, prayer vigils were conducted on the beaches, which prevented the Navy from conducting ship-to-shore firing. Additionally, the fishermen conducted demonstrations and picketed on the beach and at the gates of the two naval bases on the island. A leader in the VFA, Carlos Zenon, spoke before the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization.

The Crusade to Rescue Vieques was founded after the initial fishermen's blockade in 1978. The Crusade was more inclusive than the VFA, bringing together teachers, workers, and merchants, and focusing on land expropriation in addition to control of the seas. Over the course of the campaign, the VFA conducted dozens of "fish-ins", each one halting naval activity. The presence of international media made it difficult for the U.S. Navy to respond to the much weaker Vieques forces. Organized by the Crusade, protesters also picketed and organized demonstrations on land. More than 100 residents camped out on the southern coast of the island and planted coconut palms to symbolize the trees that had been destroyed by naval activity. The Crusade also organized rallies with singing and dancing in support of the fishermen. While conducting fish-ins, the VFA painted over the license numbers displayed on Navy boats and used slingshots to throw small stones at the boat motors. Members of the Crusade also camped alongside a group of marines and sang "La Borinquena", a nationalist anthem.

While protesters conducted acts of nonviolent opposition, the VFA and the Puerto Rican governor took the battle to the courts, focusing on claims of environmental harm. Wider Puerto Rican support came from the National Committee in Defense of Vieques, which coordinated several smaller groups located throughout Puerto Rico. The Vieques Solidarity Network was formed as a coalition of support groups in the United States. The National Committee increased awareness about the Vieques struggle by holding press conferences, speaking to the media and organizing conferences in universities. Protesters picketed and held demonstrations on the main island of Puerto Rico and lobbied to get the case in front of the U.S. Congress and the United Nations Decolonization Committee. The National Committee was also helpful in training activists to more effectively use sound equipment, propaganda and the media. While the VFA and Vieques-based protesters focused more on the environmental and economic effects of the Navy's presence, the National Committee had broader goals of Puerto Rican independence. In early 1979, protesters at a National Committee demonstration burned an American flag, an act that not only alienated some of the Vieques residents but also brought national criticism to the Vieques struggle.

A major turning point took place in May 1979 when federal marshals arrested the "Vieques 21", a group of Vieques residents that were among 150 trespassers who entered U.S. Navy territory to force a halt in naval activity. The protesters at sea were joined by activists on land that conducted demonstrations on the beach and held a Catholic Mass. The "Vieques 21" were fined \$500 and sentenced to serve six months in federal prison in Tennessee. One of the protesters, Angel Rodriguez Cristobal, was found dead two months later. Although his death was ruled a suicide by U.S. authorities, his family and friends claimed that he was assassinated. An autopsy revealed that he had suffered severe beatings, which heightened suspicion surrounding his death.

Cristobal's death was followed by a violent outbreak in Vieques. A revolutionary organization known as the Macheteros attacked a Navy bus and killed two service men and wounded ten others. This created deep division within the movement, which had previously employed only nonviolent tactics. Other radical groups conducted violent acts in 1980. With tensions already high because of the Cold War, international support dropped drastically as the media highlighted the communist ties of radical organizations and the campaign was portrayed as a threat to national security. The U.S. Navy hired civil security guards on the island and created the Pro-Navy Vanguard, an organization that held counter-demonstrations and questioned the patriotism of the Vieques fishermen.

In response to earlier requests by the Puerto Rican governor, the U.S. Congress continued to hold hearings and investigate the Navy's presence on the island. In 1981, Congress even recommended that the Navy leave the island, but the Navy continued to claim that Vieques was a key strategic location for military activity in the Caribbean. Residents of Vieques pointed to other islands under United States' ownership that were uninhabited but the U.S. Navy refused to relocate to these territories for various reasons. However, because of the mounting violence against Navy personnel and increased activity from organizations that called for Puerto Rican independence, Governor Carlos Romero Barcelo was forced to sign the Fortin Accord, a good-neighbor agreement which effectively ended protest in 1983 and stated that the U.S. Navy would maintain its presence on Vieques indefinitely. In exchange for the dropped lawsuit against the Navy, the U.S. agreed to bring industry to the island, but actionists were angered and protested at the official signing ceremony in Vieques. The campaign had been successful in closing Camp Garcia's Marine installation and in forcing the return of some of the expropriated land but the Navy largely maintained its presence on the island.

Research Notes

Influences:

The 1977-1983 Vieques campaign was influenced by a successful campaign to evict the U.S. Navy from the neighboring island of Culebra (see "Puerto Ricans expel United States Navy from Culebra Island, 1970-1974"). (1)

Although unsuccessful, the Vieques campaign (and the lessons learned from it about the dangers of violence) inspired a campaign at the turn of the 21st century that successfully led to the withdrawal of the U.S. Navy (see "Puerto Ricans force United States Navy out of Vieques Island, 1999-2003"). (2)

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A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

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