

Struggles for Ex-Base Lands in Puerto Rico

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Community struggles against militarism do not end once they succeed in ending military occupation and closing down bases. In fact, such victories often signal the beginning of a potentially much more difficult struggle—that is, to ensure that the formerly militarized lands and resources will benefit the communities that were most impacted by the bases. Since military bases are usually built in highly desirable locations in terms of accessible coastlines, fertile lands, and abundant water resources, once closed, they often become targets for corporate and elite control.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Puerto Rico, a United States colony since 1898 with a continuing history of U.S. military occupation and corporate economic exploitation, as well as political domination by an entrenched local elite. The story of the sixty-year struggle of the people on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques against U.S. Navy occupation and bombing received international attention, while continuing efforts of that community to hold the Navy accountable for its toxic legacy have recently begun to receive more coverage. Yet the equally important struggle of the communities impacted by the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station—the huge naval complex to which Vieques belonged—is virtually unknown outside of Puerto Rico. This essay examines the important community struggle, based both on class and colonial resistance, to regain the lands that comprised the military base known as Roosevelt Roads for sixty years.

Roosevelt Roads Naval Station was named for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who, in 1919 as Assistant Navy Secretary, conceived the idea of a huge naval complex in eastern Puerto Rico, including the Puerto Rican islands of Vieques and Culebra. As president, he personally supervised naval exercises in the area during 1938 and 1939, which included temporarily removing residents from eastern Vieques for bombing practice. Following those exercises, Roosevelt named Admiral William Leahy as governor of Puerto Rico. Leahy was charged with designing the new base and preparing local and federal legislation to expropriate the lands, which began in 1942. The municipality

of Ceiba lost around 8,500 acres (almost half of its 18,083 acres) to the military base, including nearly its entire coastline. In effect, Ceiba became a coastal community without a coast. The base also occupied Ceiba's best agricultural lands and marine resources, as well as hundreds of acres of prime coastal land in the neighboring municipality of Naguabo. Over 4,000 of Ceiba's 18,000 residents were also forced to leave their homes due to the military expropriations to create the base.

The Roosevelt Roads Naval Station would eventually become the world's largest U.S. Navy base in terms of land mass, as it also included 26,000 acres in Vieques (close to three-quarters of that island). While close to 60 percent of the base was maintained as a buffer zone, the Navy built over 100 miles of interior roads, over a thousand buildings, the largest dry dock facilities, an airport with the longest runway in the Caribbean, extensive housing, and other facilities such as a golf course, all created exclusively for military use. The Navy obtained a franchise on large quantities of fresh water from the Río Blanco watershed, for which it never paid. The water issue was a source of resentment from neighboring municipalities, particularly since the Navy would often use enormous quantities to hose down its nuclear submarines in the bay. Essentially the base operated as an autonomous municipality, with its own energy generating facilities, hospital, schools, and stores. While some civilian employees were able to benefit, most of the resulting economic and social development took forms that are common to militarized poor communities. The local economy, for example, became oriented towards serving the thousands of military personnel who were stationed there—including a proliferation of bars and prostitution, with their accompanying social tensions. They did, however, provide jobs on the base and in the community, and stimulated small businesses and rental housing. Even the so-called "privileged" civilian workers and their families often suffered from the consequences of militarism. I, for example, spent part of my childhood living in and around Roosevelt Roads. My uncle was a civilian worker who handled war-related toxic materials. He was one of several base employees who died from rare diseases. While such deaths probably resulted from long-term exposure to contaminants on the base, to date no one has carried out scientific investigations to document this.

During its sixty years of existence, Roosevelt Roads housed more than thirty commands, including those from other military branches. Federal intelligence and security agencies also were established there; examples include a school run by the FBI that, during the 1980s, trained police from El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Costa Rica. The base's primary mission, however, was to support U.S. military campaigns throughout the Caribbean, as well as to manage naval exercises in and around Vieques. When, in 1999, protests against Navy occupation and the bombing of Vieques gained international attention and received Puerto Rican government

support, U.S. Senator James Inhofe threatened to close Roosevelt Roads should the Navy be forced to abandon Vieques. Then, in January 2004—barely six months after the Navy officially closed its Vieques base on May 1, 2003—the Navy announced that it would close Roosevelt Roads in March 2004, without waiting for the next round of base closures under the Defense Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC). About 12 percent of the base was soon claimed by other federal agencies, including the Army Reserve and the Department of Homeland Security.

In accordance with BRAC regulations, the U.S. government designated Puerto Rico's Department of Economic Development and Commerce as the Local Development Authority (LDA). In turn, in September 2004, the LDA established the Redevelopment Committee and assigned it the task of elaborating a base re-use plan. Besides Puerto Rican government officials and Navy representatives, the committee included the mayors of Ceiba and Naguabo, as well as three additional members to represent the communities. During 2004, three public hearings and dozens of smaller community meetings took place in both communities in order to comply with community participation requirements. In 2005, the Authority hired CSA Group to design a re-use and re-zoning plan, which, in October 2008, was unveiled as *Portal del Futuro* (Portal of the Future), the largest such project ever attempted in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico's Ports Authority expected to gain control of the airport and docks, which were key to implementing other facets of the redevelopment plan. A key point of dispute between the Puerto Rican government and the Navy was the latter's stated desire to offer most of the lands suitable for development in an auction to the highest bidder. The auction has been postponed several times due to multiple concerns, such as Navy dissatisfaction with the bids received, and disagreements with Puerto Rican government officials, businesses, and community leaders about which properties would be included in the auction. In, addition, changes in political control in both Washington and San Juan contributed to the delay.

Meanwhile, community activists from the Ceiba Alliance for Economic Development (APRODEC) and Naguabo's Daguao Social and Cultural Development Committee demanded that local and federal authorities seriously consider their proposals for integrating the former base lands and resources back into their original communities. In numerous public hearings, private meetings, and community events between March 2004 and June 2009, they questioned the government proposal's overemphasis on foreign tourism and external investment in high technology economic industries, while ignoring community proposals for smaller scale and worker-owned cooperative enterprises designed to stimulate local ownership of new economic resources. They also questioned the lack of plans to rehabilitate existing housing complexes within the base in order to help alleviate local housing shortages, and they criticized plans for a "special bilingual" school—which,

in Puerto Rico, is often code for private, expensive, and English-dominant education.

In light of the large amounts of water made unavailable to eastern Puerto Rico—where upland communities often go weeks without water service while newer, coastal luxury developments enjoy unlimited service—activists demanded information about what would happen to the Navy’s franchise on the water resources of the watershed. Local activists pointed out that the base’s sewage and water treatment system could be integrated into that of Naguabo at a much more reasonable cost than the present system of connecting Naguabo to the treatment plant in Fajardo, a municipality that shares no common borders with Naguabo, which is located on the north side of Ceiba. The lack of any apparent connection in the government’s plan between the existing and planned facilities on Ceiba and Naguabo base lands, however, led many activists to question whether the plan might permanently create the separation and loss of those lands from their original communities.

During a public hearing on June 12, 2009, one Naguabo resident openly challenged the government representatives who denied that plans to build an unbroken string of coastal luxury megaprojects would eventually isolate the common people of Puerto Rico from their coast, beaches, and fishing areas. Such accusations might seem fanciful were it not for a series of developments—both existing (Palmas del Mar in Humacao) and planned (Cotton Bay in Naguabo)—that have threatened or accomplished the gentrification of their coastlines. Adding to local dissatisfaction with many elements of the government’s plan was concern about the Navy’s latest proposed date, in August, to auction off most of the base lands, which would not only limit community proposals, but also the government’s plans. Accordingly, the Puerto Rican central government in San Juan called for the right of first refusal for purchase, while community activists favored proposed federal legislation that would mandate turning the lands over to the local governments and community organizations. Even without this legislation, however, funding could be made available through cooperative credit unions, which other community enterprises in Puerto Rico have used to establish themselves.

While certainly a major local issue, the struggle over Roosevelt Roads received little attention in the rest of Puerto Rico until Governor Luís Fortuño, leader of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party, made a surprise announcement less than a week after the last public hearing, on June 17. The “Portal del Futuro” plan had been developed by the previous administration of Governor Aníbal Acevedo Vilá, of the rival pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party. It probably should not have surprised anyone that the change in political leadership would also result in Puerto Rico’s largest-ever development project being discarded, particularly as the LDA had not met in nearly a year. What struck people in Ceiba and Naguabo, however, was that government officials who had attended the public hearings just days

earlier must have known that they were about to scrap “Portal del Futuro.” In the words of one activist from Ceiba, “While we were preparing critiques of the plan and suggestions for improvement, they were just laughing at us.” The governor announced that instead, his administration would promote a new project called “Riviera del Caribe,” consisting of a Monte Carlo–style luxury tourist complex of hotels, casinos, marinas, and facilities for yachts and cruise ships that would also connect to proposed luxury developments in Vieques.

If the former plan lacked sufficient integration with local communities, this latest idea provoked an immediate, explosive response. Community leaders publicly condemned the governor’s plan. They also began meeting with former Vieques activists to help plan possible acts of civil disobedience during July or August 2009, including takeovers of base lands and housing. Not only did they seek to place a major obstacle to block the Navy’s planned August auction of the lands, but they also hoped to ignite more massive Vieques-style public repudiation of government policy. Organizational issues, such as the short time-frame to gather expensive material support, eventually put civil disobedience ideas on hold; at the same time, the Navy again postponed the auction. Nonetheless, local activists were determined to organize some type of activity in order to generate publicity and to involve the community—and Puerto Ricans more widely. Help in publicizing the situation would soon come from an unexpected source.

Soon after taking office in January 2009, Governor Fortuño named his friend and campaign official Jaime González as executive director of Portal del Futuro. As part of his duties, González was supposed to call meetings of the LDA, but he never did. Instead, he announced a community meeting in Ceiba on July 15, where he presented, but would not discuss, the proposal. The meeting proved to be contentious. While the mayor hung his head in silence, ruling party members attempted to shout down community activists who wanted to challenge the exclusive nature of the “Riviera del Caribe” proposal. Finally, González outrageously declared, “Let’s get rid of some complexes too. That some stores have items that I can’t afford and that you can’t afford . . . well, such is life. Not everyone is so lucky. But there’s no exclusion here. Even someone who doesn’t have 50 cents to buy a *limber* (homemade frozen treat that many poor Puerto Ricans sell) at least can enjoy a free walk on these seaside boardwalks and see the cruise ships and watch people buying expensive things . . . and whoever has this complex, well I’m sorry for you, because life is like that . . . but keep playing the lottery or whatever, since maybe one of you will win and be able to buy a yacht . . . ”

González didn’t seem to care that a student videotaped the entire meeting. At a protest activity on August 9 outside one of the main gates to the base, a hundred or so residents of Ceiba, Naguabo, Vieques, and other eastern towns were shown the video and reacted with predictable indignation. Not long afterward, the student put the video on the Internet, where it was picked up by

all of the Puerto Rican newspapers and television stations. Throughout Puerto Rico, the “such is life” elitist attitude of the government was denounced, mocked, and generally taken apart, to such an extent that the governor fired González in hopes of limiting the political damage. Community activists, however, responded that they were grateful to González for expressing clearly how the elite really feel about ordinary people. Many Puerto Ricans are now pointing out that the government run by wealthy, privately educated, gated community-dwellers knows little and cares less about its implications of its policies. They responded to the financial crises by privatizing public resources and services, and eliminated the jobs of more than 20,000 public employees in less than four months. When people responded with unrest, the National Guard was mobilized.

As some Ceiba activists have pointed out, in this anachronistic colony, sometimes it is difficult to decide who is the greater enemy—the external colonizer, represented by the military and the corporations, or the local oppressor, represented by the politicians. Meanwhile, Ceiba held its first Annual Limber Festival on September 13, in front of the main gate to the base that blocks access to Ceiba’s still-forbidden lands. This time, many Ceiba residents, including people who have never participated in any activist activity, came to enjoy *limbers* and dominoes, music and camaraderie, and to demonstrate their support for their community’s just struggle to recover their lands after more than sixty years of military rule.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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