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Delegación a Vieques

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Boricua College

Picture taken by Ricardo Alcaraz
Verde luz de monte y mar,
isla virgen del coral,

On many occasions, during my childhood years Vieques came up as a topic of conversation since my neighbor Don Bauta had been a horse trader in the Isla Nena where Goyo Merced, his son, was stationed as a policeman. (Goyo later stayed in Vieques after his retirement).

Throughout my adult years I kept reading and accumulating knowledge about Vieques. As a Puerto Rican History teacher I brought a group of students from New York to Vieques as part of a summer seminar course held in Puerto Rico in 1978.

Having attended the 1999 National Puerto Rican Coalition’s (NPRC) convention “Un Encuentro Entre Familia.” Boricua College President and founder Dr. Victor G. Alicea was invited to join other coalition board members to visit Vieques in a fact finding trip. As soon as he returned to Boricua College, Dr. Alicea extended an invitation to my colleague, Jose Antonio Irizarry and myself to join him in this research trip sponsored by the NPRC.

As we shared our ideas around the trip, Professor Irizarry and myself understood the magnitude of such a historical event. The National Puerto Rican Coalition, the most important and all encompassing umbrella organization of Puerto Ricans residing in the United States, representing more than 400 organizations, was going to Vieques to show support and solidarity in their struggle to end the abuses to which the United States Navy has submitted them for the past 60 years. We were going to bear witness to it. Civic and professional organizations, labor unions, religious groups, athletes and artists. Personalities representing the different sectors of Puerto Rican society had expressed their support on Vieques. The Puerto Rican government had established the total support to Vieques as its official policy. Even the New York City Council approved a resolution in support of Vieques. The Vieques consensus kept expanding throughout the whole United States of America. If Vieques was to become a major presidential campaign issue this could be a big kick to it.

si me ausento de tus playas rumorosas,
si me alejo de tus palmas silenciosas,
quiero volver, quiero volver.

Regardless of how long a borincano has been away from the island, going back is always a highly charged emotional venture. The trip from J.F.K. to San Juan was no exception; silence prevailed, so as to give ourselves a space to dwell on our own private thoughts. My last visit to the island had been in 1994 to attend my mother’s funeral. Professor Irizarry had not been to the island in 16 years. Having known Irizarry for many years, I knew he had grown distant from his political party (PIP). This trip to him promised an opportunity to meet with Rubén Berrios and patch up their long friendship. As the airbus descended, the San Juan early evening lights brought us back from our thoughts.

A sentir la tibia arena
Y perderme en tus riberas,

We rushed to the dinner briefing where we met with the rest of the National Puerto Rican Coalition delegation. Ms. Lydia Placencia from New Jersey’s Congreso Boricua, Ms. Betty Paugh Ortiz from De Paul University of Chicago, Ms. Minerva Casañas from the South Florida Puerto Rican / Latino Coalition and Mr. Manuel Mirabal the president of the Coalition who presented to us a very busy schedule for the next day.

The delegation was ready to work and engage in conversation with as broad spectrum of Puerto Rican society as possible when Mr. Nuno Diaz, an assistant to the Speaker of the Puerto Rican House of Representatives and a candidate in the primaries to represent San Juan’s Electoral District I, joined us. The exchange with Mr. Diaz, a jovial conversationalist, proved to be very informative as to the position of the New Progressive Party (PNP) around the Vieques issue. He presented the issue of Vieques as a violation of their rights as American citizens and as such they are trying to get redress from the Federal government. We also clarified certain concepts around the Puerto Rican community residing in the United States of America. Mr. Diaz sees the Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora as the realization of the American Dream since we have achieved success as full American citizens residing in a particular state while the Puerto Ricans on the island hold a second class American citizenship due to the island’s colonial status. He could not understand the concept of Puerto Rican nationhood and the Puerto Ricans in the United States as members of that unique and distinct nation. Surprisingly, such a risky and divisive topic of discussion among Puerto Ricans developed in a very civil and courteous manner. We parted in a very friendly note.

At the hotel that night we made a brief stop at the bar where the sound of the breaking waves called my attention. I went to the terrace and spent a few moments listening to the sea bathing the Condado shore. My thoughts wandered to my undergraduate years at the University of Puerto Rico when we used to travel all the way from Aguas Buenas to bathe in those warm salty waters while taunting the strong undertow. It is always good to be home.

Isla mia, flor cautiva,
Para ti quiero tener

Saturday’s events began early in the morning with a press conference held at the Isla Grande Airport prior to our departure to Vieques. Gerardo Rivera’s crew joined us. They were going to film a documentary on Vieques. In the early years of our mass migration, the Isla Grande Airport was the point of departure, it was also the point of no return for many.

Watching the imposing presence of the 3532 feet of El Yunque dominating the Northeastern section of the island, we flew in a small plane to the Isla Nena while viewing the muddy rivers flowing down the mountains to the Coastal Plains of Luquillo, Fajardo, and later on Ceiba with its huge naval base of Roosevelt Roads.

Upon our arrival, we were greeted by Vieques’ Mayor, the honorable Ms. Manuela Santiago and Vieques native son and Boricua College Board member Mr. Damaso Emeric who has retired to his island after a long stay in New York City where he worked for many years for the betterment of the Puerto Rican/ Latino community. The Vieques municipal government provided transportation to El Malecón in the southern section of the island where we boarded a boat called La Garata that brought us to the easternmost section of La Isla Nena where the civil disobedience encampments are located. The area’s access has been restricted by the United States Navy since this is where firing practices using live ammunition have been carried on for the past 60 years.

Libre tu suelo
sola tu estrella,
Isla doncella, quiero tener

As we visited the Partido Independiente Puertorriqueño (PIP) encampment at Playa Gilberto Concepción de Gracia we
were informed about the United States Navy’s presence in Vieques and its disastrous consequences to the ecology of the island. Eight months ago, in the late spring, when the PIP civil disobedience encampment was established the landscape was scorched. After the bombing stopped, the effect of the rainy season and the warm tropical sun has made the vegetation grow again, verdant and lush. Although a good sign for ecological restoration, this new vegetation creates a dangerous situation because it hides the unexploded bombs scattered around the campsite. We had to keep our eyes open, be careful, and stay within the small trails around the area.

Right under a Puerto Rican flag waving to the trade winds against the bluest sky one can imagine, we finally met with Puerto Rican Senator Rubén Berrios who has maintained a constant presence on that beach since the accidental death of David Sanes in April 1999. In a very touching moment two old independentista warriors, Rubén and Irizarry embraced, patching up their differences, with Vieques as a backdrop. “Si me arrestan pierden y si no me arrestan yo gano” stated Rubén in a very sure and tranquil voice, with the tranquillity and sureness in the voice of a leader who knows that he is complying with his role and duty.

"Violar la ley del imperio, es cumplir la ley de la patria " Rubén had stated in a previous occasion when he was jailed for three months during the Culebra’s struggle. He had gone to Vieques to serve as a protective shield, to use his prestige as a leader of the Independentista sector and as an Honorary President of the Socialist International to prevent the United States Navy from resuming the bombing practices. He had become the spear of the Puerto Rican Nation in its struggle to force the United States Navy out of Vieques.

After the meeting with Rubén we then took a tour with a couple of Puerto Rican environmental scientists Dr. Jorge Fernández Porto and Lirio Márquez who have conducted research in the area around the ecological damages caused by the naval bombing practices. They called our attention to the destruction of two lagoons that the U.S. Navy had sealed the entrance by constructing a road where the sea water entered the lagoons replenishing the nutrients and maintaining a salinity level that allowed life to be sustained. Today those two lagoons are environmentally dead, compliments of the U.S. Navy.

According to a report prepared by the Program Management Company of Pennsylvania for the United States Navy in March 1999 in a four hundred acre section located in Barrio La Hueca half a mile to the south of the Vieques airport and 3 miles to the west of the Isabel Segunda township 39 unknown chemical substances were found. It has not been possible to determine how dangerous to human life these substances could be. The interesting fact is that this sector is located in the western part of the island while the bombing practices are carried at the other end of the island in the easternmost sector. Nobody knows what is in there. The United States Navy has admitted that “by error” radioactive uranium has been used in the bombing practices carried on at the beginning of the current year 1999. Neither uranium nor its components have been included in the list of the 39 unknown chemical substances.

As the tour continued we noticed the “adornments” left by the invading forces of the United States Navy. Empty shell casings, exploded and unexploded ammunition of several sizes ranging from six inches to several feet long, Jeeps, trucks, tanks, airplanes that had been used as targets had been left abandoned. Some of the equipment was marked in English, another bore German lettering. We learned that the United States Navy rented the space to other nations for their bombing practices. Wetlands in the area had been destroyed, bomb craters several feet wide dotted the landscape, and water-purifying equipment was left to rot.

A myriad of contradictory feelings engulfed us. Awed by the breath-taking beauty of Playa Gilberto Concepción de Gracia and Cayo La Yayi we were overwhelmed by an intense burning rage aimed at those brigands who in their arrogance and wickedness displayed total disregard and contempt to us and our beloved national territory.

When I left New York for Vieques there had been a big question dangling in my mind, the support for Vieques was coming from all sectors...What was the basis for this sudden consensus of support around Vieques that had developed throughout the Puerto Rican Nation which included all political parties regardless of their position around the political status? That short tour crossing the island of Vieques from the south shore to the north shore gave me the answer. That intense, burning rage answered my question. The noted Puerto Rican poet Antonio Cabán Vale, El Topo, once wrote a song dedicated to Antonia Martínez, a college student killed by the police. In the song El Topo wrote:

Antonia, Tu nombre suena historia
de un pueblo que se busca y se ha
encontrado en ti.
Antonia, tu nombre es como un alba
los pájaros desatan la luz del
porvenir.
Antonia, los pueblos no perdonan
un día esta ley se ha de cumplir.
Aquellos que un día derramaron
sus pétalos de sangre, no sabían
que así echaban las semillas en el
aire y a la vista del pueblo
había de surgir.
Tu muerte la juventud la canta
es bandera en sus labios y es bala
de fusil.
Antonia aquí estamos presentes
para mostrarte al mundo la luz
que nace en ti.
Antonia los pueblos no perdonan
un día esa ley se ha de cumplir.

Yesterday it was Antonia, today it is Vieques that sounds like the history of a people in search of itself. It is Vieques that unleashes the light of the future. Those who in their arrogant wickedness destroy Vieques with their bombing practices and their uranium coated shell casings have not yet realized that they are sowing the seeds that one day will grow into a future of peace without their unwelcome presence.

The poet, in his creative wisdom ends his song with a very important maxim. The people do not forgive, one day this law will be fulfilled. Puerto Rico will not be exempt from this law. As I returned to New York I remembered Rubén Berrios last words to us, “What ever we do in this beach, its success depends in great measure to what the 2.8 million Puerto Ricans residing in the United States will do in support of the Vieques struggle.” Not one more single shot! Peace for Vieques.