

## Parallel plebiscite



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Big Apple took on tones of Puerto Rico during the "parallel plebiscite" last week. Many, including Aida Montilla, criticize the effort as so unorganized that it makes the results questionable.

...ence of credibility in the whole process. (It is said that a Puerto Rican reporter, extending her investigative report to a personal experience, was able to vote, without being qualified to do so, another example of the dubious practices characterizing the parallel plebiscite.)

...these same instances are repeated in other plebiscite events, scheduled for Orlando, Fla., on Oct. 31, or in Springfield, Mass., on Nov. 2, the whole process will not be worth the effort. The absence of credibility will have characterized what could have been a legitimate attempt to "let their voice be heard." In the literature received from the sponsors of the parallel plebiscite, nothing is actually most singular. The definitions of the three formulas exactly what will appear on our plebiscite ballot, but there is one in difference. There is a fourth option in the stateside plebiscite, one of the three options." This item not included on our ballot. One has to wonder if in the presence of a well-organized

campaign, where disinformation is the rule, how many voters would be inclined to vote for that fourth option. It also could be speculated if the low turnout in New York, where less than 10 percent of those expected to vote actually participated, is probably the result of lack of information on the whole process.

The truth is that the "Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States" which amounts to 2.7 million is so *enajenada* of what happens here, that in spite of the back and forth movement (*la guagua aérea*) and the attempts to preserve the Puerto Rican traits, they are living a marginal life, both here and there. Sociologists agree that this sort of life helps to build a low self-esteem and works against the definition process.

Perhaps the chaos in the parallel plebiscite is a part of this whole picture. The final numbers, no matter who wins, will be questionable, and have little influence on what will happen here on Nov. 14.

## A new approach in order for Navy base on Vieques

While the rest of the world attempts to move into a New World Order, the inhabitants of Vieques are faced with the Same Old Thing: bombs falling on their island.

The U.S. Navy occupation of Vieques has been a sore point ever since the military bought up roughly two-thirds of the island's 33,000 acres from the sugar



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barons in the 1940s to use for military maneuvers.

Many of the people of Vieques have made their anti-Navy attitude clear over the years, with countless protests, a riot or two and various attempts —

sometimes successful — to squat on a portion of Navy land long enough to call it their own.

But what about the inhabitants without a vote, or even a voice? Wildlife thrive in the area around the bombing region, including 15 threatened and endangered species such as the brown pelican, West Indian manatee and sea turtles.

This environmental issue became a major concern for the Navy when it signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 1983 after being taken to court by then-Gov. Romero Barceló. In what some Navy foes on the island view as a sell-out, Romero agreed to drop the case in exchange for the memorandum, which spends most of its eight pages prescribing how the environment — not the people — should be treated.

Since then, Navy officials have pinpointed for conservation much of the restricted area that borders the sea. And their confidence that their efforts would stand up to inspection was high enough that on Wednesday they gave me a tour of Navy land there, including the restricted "impact area," as the bombing site is known in military jargon.

"It takes some work trying to maintain the environment and do the exercises, but it can be done," said Lt. Elizabeth Jones, the Navy public affairs officer who went out of her way to accommodate my request to view a bombing test.

Jones and Land Use Manager Winston Martínez, one of 15 environmental employees focused on Vieques, escorted me around by pick-up truck, pointing out beaches with names of the rainbow as we crisscrossed the island, pausing to examine turtles' nests or watch a trio of brown pelicans fly by. Most of the beaches are open to the public except for a total of a few weeks a year, Jones said.

The tour was an astute move on their part, with my views shifting to take in the lush greenery on the west side, or the green scrub not unlike that in Guánica on the east side, instead of the patchy desert I had imagined.

Even the vegetation in the actual bombing area — which we drove through in what Jones called a "rare privilege" credited to the truck's shortcomings rather than any attributes on my part — looked

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## VIEWPOINT

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## Vieques

remarkably undamaged overall.

The view from the observation tower encompassed scrubby hills, with a few denuded areas serving as the impact site or an imitation enemy landing strip. The few "bombs" we saw hit the ground were imitation as well, 500 pounds of concrete in the shape of what the Navy euphemistically calls an "ordnance."

And along the way Martínez was describing some of the ways Navy employees, working with a few from the Department of Natural Resources, protect the natural environment:

■ Turtle eggs are either staked out or moved to a protected area, where they have a 72 percent chance of reaching the hatching stage, probably better odds than in the wild.

■ Cayo Conejo has been declared off-limits to everyone, except those scientists who can present a strong case for studying the brown pelican colony there.

■ Troops in the midst of maneuvers are warned not to bring vehicles into the vegetation.

Amphibious vehicles act like boats until they reach the shore, so they don't damage coral reefs, he said. And they were ordered not to use Yellow Beach last October after turtle eggs were found on it during "Ocean Venture," an exercise that involved 20,500 international troops on and around Vieques.

During Ocean Venture and other major exercises that come about once a year, planes, ships and amphibious vehicles converge upon Vieques, turning it into an imaginary enemy's territory.

After awhile, it starts to sound like a game — one sometimes played with fake bombs and guns that shoot light beams instead of bullets, with those soldiers whose electronic sensors label them "dead" heading off to snack on sandwiches.

But there were live bombs used also. As some members of the Vieques Committee for the Rescue and Development of Vieques pointed out, the Navy newsletter "El Navegante" gushes about using 20 tons of live bombs — and even napalm, for the first time in 10 years — on the island during the October "exercise."

This amounts to 80 bombs, which Jones said each contain 191 pounds of explosives. Using the estimate from Range Control Officer Ken DeAngelo that no more than 5 percent of the bombs miss their targets enough to fall into the sea, it means probably about four bombs exploded in the ocean — certainly no treat for marine life.

It's a serious strain for those who make their living from fishing, too, to have their prime hunting ground closed off for weeks at a time. This has led to clashes where the military crossed the line to violence, witnesses say.

Also, fishermen sometimes find objects they suspect are unexploded bombs, said Bob Rabin, a member of the Vieques development committee. In one case, their finding was shown to the press, only to disappear before a federal judge arrived on the scene. Rabin also charged that the Navy has cut the ropes of hundreds of fishing traps — which then sink to the bottom and become useless death traps — when fishermen neglect to collect their catch before a maneuver.

Rabin and the committee, some

members of whom were present during a visit to the island last week, want the Navy out of Vieques, with no ifs, ands or buts. He scoffed at the Navy's environmental efforts, saying "The Navy has actually given themselves prizes for conservation," in reference to a special recognition award the base received from the Secretary of the Navy three years ago.

The Navy's lingering ownership of the land — which it originally purchased for about \$1½ million — doesn't seem fair to many islanders, who maintain Vieques' economic development has been thwarted because they are "imprisoned" within the narrow confines of Navy land on the west for storing weapons and ammunition, and on the east for maneuvers and bombing practice.

The committee has launched a postcard campaign in President Clinton's direction. So far, members have collected some 3,500 signatures — the majority of the adult population on the island of 9,000 — of people who favor ousting the Navy. They expect to deliver them in November or December.

"This is the moment that offers more promise than any other time in the past 50 years," Rabin said, alluding in part to the anti-exploitation feelings sweeping much of the world. He noted that Kaho'olawe in Hawaii recently managed to get its land back from the U.S. military

after a struggle that began in the '60s.

These hopes clash with those of the Navy: Jones describes the Vieques base as a crucial part of the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Training Facility, which oversees 190,000 square miles of mostly open sea.

"This is the only place they can do it all together," she said of the exercises.

Besides the U.S. military, forces from South America and NATO also depend upon using the facility, she said. Troops trained on Vieques have been shipped out to Kuwait, Somalia, Bosnia and, most recently, Haiti.

All of these missions also involved U.N. forces, which raises another question: Is it really fair for the entire world — at least the supposed good guys — to use Vieques as their bomb dumping ground?

Islanders gain little from putting up with these maneuvers. Charlie Connelly, editor of The Vieques Times, estimates that Navy contracts on the island amount to only about \$1 million, compared to about \$51 million for the region around Vieques' sister base in Ceiba.

But providing more contracts would not placate Rabin and the committee members. And I can't really blame them; it's one thing to talk about "exercises" and "ordnances," it's another to live the disjointed reality of knowing your peaceful-looking island is really the

backdrop for many of the wars of the world. It's hard to hide from that truth while being bombarded with the sound of airplanes whooshing and bombs exploding.

There is an approach that is bound to please neither side, and thus could be worth considering if compromise beckons. And that is to take the military actions a step further along in the future to the peacekeeping, instead of war-making, efforts becoming more common under the New World Order.

Troops could practice dropping 500 pounds of food supplies instead of bombs, for instance. Then they wouldn't need to store all those weapons on the west side of the island, which is a beautiful area that receives more than twice as much rain as the east side. It could be freed up, very carefully, in a way that provides a serious advantage to current residents.

The island already houses so-called Construction Brigades, such as the ones who had planned to help reconstruct Haiti. (They abandoned the mission when it became clear that it would involve violence.) This type of work should be encouraged, as it reflects the growing urge for international intervention to restrict itself to peace-keeping missions.

Times are changing. And the Navy should, too, carrying the sentiment reflected in its growing concern for the environment to a peaceful conclusion.

## Navy supports 'living machine'

In a reflection of the Navy's attempt to be environmentally friendly, it will fund a \$20,000 study about constructing a "living machine" to treat waste on Vieques, said Lt. Com. Mike McCloskey.

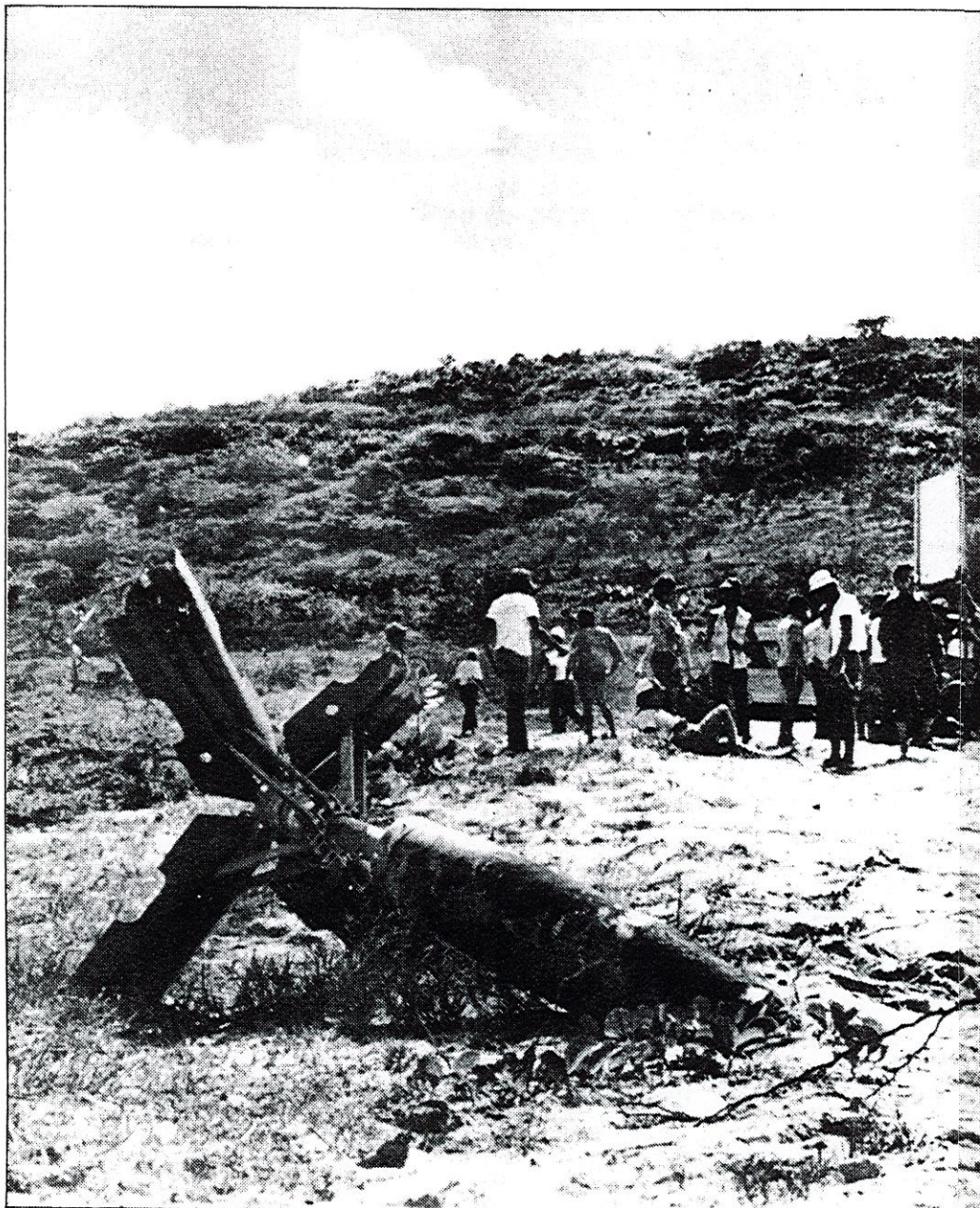
The money will go to John Todd, a water treatment specialist whose work was described in this column on Sept. 29. Todd uses various species of bacteria, plants and animals to produce a system that can provide tertiary wastewater treatment, removing some of the cancer-causing agents that are missed in the first two treatments.

McCloskey hopes that funding the study, with the money being funneled through the Department of Natural Resources, will eventually lead to the creation of a "living machine" to treat all of the water coming down the pipeline on Vieques.

Todd reportedly has funding sources in mind for the project, which McCloskey said might be applicable to Naval bases in California or other areas. The Navy uses a septic system on Vieques, he said, so is outside of the waste treatment loop.

Although the treated water would theoretically be suitable for drinking, laws prohibit recycling wastewater, so it will be dumped into the ocean.

This way, islanders won't have to worry about the heavy metals and cancer-causing organic chemicals returning to them via their sea food dinners. Fish and other marine animals tend to concentrate toxics, so their tissues may contain 10 times or more what is found in the surrounding ocean.



Residents of Vieques complain that unexploded bombs, such as this one found on Carrucho Beach in 1979, create hazards for the people and other living creatures on the island. The Navy appears to have been making efforts to protect the wildlife, but perhaps it's time for them to go a step further, Melanie Lenart argues here.

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