The Decision to Stop Military Exercises

On June 14, 2001 President George W. Bush announced that the U.S. Navy would end its use of Vieques to practice bombing by May 2003, but would continue to practice there until that date. President Bush was convinced to end the bombing by his top political adviser Karl Rove who believed the issue was costing Bush important Hispanic votes. Gordon England, the Secretary of the Navy, agreed with the decision. The President took action shortly after a meeting with New York Governor Pataki, who was strongly opposed to the bombing. The President decided that after May 2003 the uninhabitable land would be handed over to the Department of Interior which would then decide how to dispose of it.

Two referenda were planned for late 2001, one by the Puerto Rican government to determine whether the public wanted the Navy out, and one by the Navy. The President’s decision was thought at the time to be a means of eliminating both referenda. Interestingly, it also created tensions between the U.S. and Japan because there were no plans for training exercises held on the island of Okinawa to be stopped. The military was not unanimous in its support of the President. Lt. Cmdr. Greg Smith said “There are no alternatives. If we had an alternative we would have been out of Vieques by now”.

Shortly after his decision, President George W. Bush stated at a U.N. summit in Sweden: “My attitude is that the Navy ought to find somewhere else to conduct these exercises. There has been some harm done in the past. Second, these people are our friends and neighbors and they don’t want us there”. (The Independent [London], June 15 2001) Despite his seemingly principled stand, Bush was losing support in the Hispanic community because of the issue. The House Hispanic Caucus met in June 2001, after publication of the reports of mistreatment of protestors, including Rep. Luis Guitierrez. The caucus was not happy with the Bush decision because they wanted the Navy out of Vieques immediately, not in two years.

Despite the planned bombing halt, the Puerto Rican Governor Sila Calderon still planned to hold a referendum on July 29th, 2001. In response to the Bush decision Governor Calderon stated “The situation does not leave me with any alternative but to continue with my actions to get the Navy to leave before 2003 (The Boston Globe, June 15, 2001).” The referendum would have no legal effect on the Navy (NY Times, June 15, 2001, Late Edition). Carlos Zenon, a Vieques fisherman and a leader in the protests said that the civil disobedience would continue until the bombing stopped (The Boston Globe, June 15, 2001). While the President faced opposition to continued bombing, he also found himself under severe criticism from conservative Republicans who claimed that American lives would be lost if the Navy were not trained properly (The Seattle Times, June 15, 2001).
Navy Secretary Gordon England was a proponent of the decision to stop using Vieques for training. While he agreed that Vieques was the “crowning jewel” of training grounds, he thought its functions could be replaced with other facilities: “My approach is to find a suitable alternative. A suitable alternative can be other means and techniques, using more than one base, for example, incorporating technology (The Washington Post, June 16, 2001).”

The Making of A Lose-Lose Political Issue

How did the President end up in the no-win situation that emerged in Vieques? Where and what is Vieques and how did it become a political hot-potato?

Vieques is a 33,000-acre Puerto Rican island with 9,400 inhabitants. The U.S. Navy owns approximately two-thirds of the land, and has used it as a bombing range since 1941. In recent years local public health experts have reported that Vieques has Puerto Rico’s highest cancer, heart disease, and vibroacoustic disease rates.

In April of 1999, a security guard was killed during a bombing exercise, and four other civilians were injured. This resulted in a severe increase in political interest in the issue. Since then more than 600 people have been arrested for holding rallies and vigils on the Navy base. Under the Clinton administration the Navy and the Puerto Rican government, led by then Governor Pedro Rossello, reached an agreement that called for a referendum on November 6, 2001, which would decide whether the Navy would continue training exercises on the island. They also agreed that dummy ammunition could be used on the Vieques range until the referendum was held. In November 2000, Sila M. Calderon was elected as governor of the Puerto Rican Commonwealth on a platform that strongly opposed the Navy presence in Vieques. She refused to acknowledge the agreement between the Navy and her predecessor Governor Rossello.

On April 25, 2001 a federal judge in Washington declined to issue the temporary restraining order requested by the Puerto Rican government, to halt the bombing. This resulted in a series of protests once the bombing, albeit with dummy bombs, resumed. The Navy claimed, at that time that Vieques was the only location on the Atlantic where joint training is possible for water, air, and ship bombardment. On April 29, 2001 environmental activist and lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and the actor Edward James Olmos were arrested after sneaking onto the base in an attempt to stop the Naval bomb exercises.

On May 24, 2001 Rev. Al Sharpton was sentenced to 90 days, and three New York politicians (City Councilman Adolfo Carrion Jr., State Assemblyman Jose Rivera, and former state legislator Romero Ramirez) were each sentenced to 40 days in jail for protesting the Navy’s resumption of bombing in Vieques. They were among 180 protesters arrested at that time. The demonstration lasted twenty minutes during which “the Vieques Four” climbed through a hole in the fence surrounding Camp Garcia, and were then surrounded by Military personnel. They were incarcerated in a federal
detention center in Brooklyn. While in jail the Rev. Sharpton focused media attention on the issue and for several weeks held a hunger strike.

On May 30, 2001, the U.S. navy announced plans to begin another round of bombing practice on June 13th. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit denied requests for the “Vieques Four” to be freed on bail. A federal lawsuit brought by residents of Vieques and environmentalist leaders accused the Navy of “causing more damage than any other single actor in the history of Puerto Rico.” The suit claimed that the eastern portion of the island, the site of the exercises, had been contaminated by toxic substances from bombs and the use of Agent Orange, napalm, and depleted uranium. Toxic levels of heavy metals have been found in several species of fish. According to Puerto Rican officials, Vieques has the highest cancer rate, infant mortality rate, and overall mortality rate of any municipality in the Puerto Rico commonwealth. On June 18, 2001, 14 protestors were arrested after slipping into the Vieques firing range. The Rev. Jesse Jackson’s wife, Jackie Jackson, was among those arrested. Eight more protestors were arrested on June 19th.

In late June, 2001, Texas officials unveiled a plan to use Laguna Madre, a sparsely inhabited area of Texas, as a bombing range, an alternative to Vieques. Kenedy County, where Laguna Madre is located, was seen as a good alternative because it possesses the requirements of “limited population, an area outside major air corridors, deep water ship access, and beaches suitable for practicing sea assaults.” Nevertheless, in mid-July the Navy rejected this proposal to the relief of the local Sierra Club.

On June 27, 2001 -Jacqueline Jackson was released from a federal jail in Puerto Rico. She spent 10 days there, refusing to post the $3,000 bail. She was placed in solitary confinement after refusing to undergo a strip search. The Rev. Jesse Jackson said that she would return to Vieques for further protests. On June 30, 2001, New York City Councilman Adolfo Carrion Jr., Bronx County Democratic chairman Roberto Ramirez, and State Assemblyman Jose Rivera were released after spending 40 days in the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. Upon release, Mr. Ramirez observed that: “Until Rev. Al Sharpton comes home, until every one of the individuals that has engaged in civil disobedience in the island of Vieques goes home, and until the U.S. navy stops the bombing in Vieques, we will not be free (NY Times, June 30, 2001).”

On July 6, 2001, former New York governor Mario Cuomo represented Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Dennis Rivera, the labor leader at their sentencing hearing. Judge Laffitte sentenced Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Rivera, to 30 days in jail each. Governor Cuomo stated that he was satisfied with the treatment of his clients.

**The Issue in the Summer of 2001**

In mid-July 2001 the President faced continued and highly visible opposition to the to continue military exercises on Vieques. He also faced high-powered opposition from within his own party to the decision to end these exercises in two years. He and his advisors hoped the issue would fade with time. Certainly as 2003 drew closer, they
expected that opposition would decline. Nevertheless, the President was under great political pressure on the one hand, to speed the Navy’s departure from the Island, and on the other hand, to find a viable alternative site or set of sites for continued training exercises.

New York politics, including a governor’s race in 2002 guaranteed continued political attention to the issue. The crusading rhetoric and media savvy of the Reverend Al Sharpton would also assure that the spotlight would continue to shine on the military’s presence on this tiny tropical island.

As summer wore on, the President and his advisors very likely began to realize that their hope that the issue would soon fade away was probably unrealistic. The question remained: Should the President attempt to speed the Navy’s departure? Could an alternative be found more rapidly that would not compromise military readiness? What should the President do?