

Culebra Action 1971

When students and colleagues ask me where I learned Spanish I laugh and say it's a long story . . . and at the end of it I often tell students that there are easier ways of achieving total immersion. I turned nineteen in April 1971 near the end of a three month sentence from a federal judge in San Juan (a Nixon appointee, Judge Toledo), with Luis Rivera Pagán, Rubén Berríos and eleven other Puerto Ricans at the “Oso Blanco,” the state penitentiary in Río Piedras. During that period I started to study Spanish (with the first and third books in a series published by the University of Puerto Rico) and listened to endless and very animated political discussions, learning enough to write and read a brief talk in Spanish to the huge crowd that gathered when we were released in early May 1971. The month and a half in Puerto Rico before the beginning of the prison time, and the quieter several months at the “Oso Blanco,” marked—no, changed—my life, and if I am a Latin Americanist now it was certainly because of the impact the experience in Puerto Rico had on me. Even now, more than thirty years later, I remember it as an intense,

transformative time. This article—so different from the literary criticism I usually publish—hopes to explain something of what led me to Culebra and the “Oso Blanco,” and what I think about that in retrospect.

In 2001 Luis Rivera Pagán and I organized a LASA session to reflect on the thirty years since the Culebra demonstrations and their relation to what was happening in Vieques; besides papers by Luis (read by his daughter Nina) and me, the session included talks by Phil Wheaton (involved in the Culebra actions in 1971 and more recently in Vieques), by my Iowa colleague Diana Vélez, who interviewed a number of participants in the Vieques demonstrations, and by William Fred Santiago, Jr., one of the crucial interlocutors my group had during its initial orientation sessions at the Seminario Evangélico in Río Piedras in January 1971, along with his brother Kelvin (both eminent academics by now). (Their father William Fred Santiago was one of our lawyers.) We were all struck that many of the same issues faced in Culebra were being revisited vis à vis Vieques, albeit with a lot more coverage this time around in the US and international press.

The events in Culebra in the early seventies included an unusual convergence of local (Culebran), national (Puerto Rican) and international (US) activists who worked together--however uneasy the relations were

sometimes¹--in what turned out to be a successful effort to get the US Navy out of Culebra. The Vieques actions of more recent years have similarly included US as well as Puerto Rican activism, as Phil Wheaton talked about that day at LASA; of course several of the US participants in the Vieques conflict were a lot more famous than any of the US participants in the Culebra events were in 1971. Another connection between the two events was Rubén Berríos, the president of the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), whose prison term for participation in the Vieques demonstrations was lengthened by the judge because of his participation in earlier actions of a similar kind--the Culebra demonstrations of 1971: this shows that even the federal judiciary recognizes a close link between the two events. Clearly also the greater intensity of military activities on Vieques since the mid-1970s is directly related to the Navy's decision to pull out of Culebra in 1975.

What was I doing in Puerto Rico in the first half of 1971--and what were others such as Maggie DeMarco, Shepherd Bliss, Bob Swann,¹ Bill Davidon, Ellen Deacon and Phil Wheaton doing there? And how did I--the youngest and surely the most naive member of my group--end up being

¹ Bob and Marjorie Swann were the leaders of the New England Committee for Nonviolent Action in Voluntown, Connecticut, and published the newsletter Direct Action, which published an article "Culebra Action" by Marjorie Swann.

chosen to stay in the bombing range after the judge's order?² Since the participation of the group that I was part of, AQAG (for A Quaker Action Group) is a bit hard to explain or understand, I think I'll start there.

AQAG was a radical pacifist group based in Philadelphia that operated on Quaker principles, though not all participants were members of the Religious Society of Friends. Its most famous action was the sending of a boat with medical supplies to Haiphong in violation of the "trading with the enemy" laws in force during the Vietnam War, but other actions included a march against chemical and biological weapons (in which Maggie DeMarco participated), demonstrations against the Fort Gulick School in Panama (later moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, and called the School of the Americas), a brief and symbolic demonstration against the Soviet invasion of Prague (by Bob Eaton), and a walk across Puerto Rico in protest against the continuing US military presence there.³ This last action brought the group to the attention of some antiwar activists in

² I was misidentified in Drew Middleton's March 1971 article in the New York Times as the leader of the Quaker group in Culebra. If that group had leaders (it operated by consensus) they were George Lakey and George Willoughby, both of whom stayed in Philadelphia during the Culebra actions; certainly Bob Swann and Bill Davidon were the most political experienced members of the group on the island, and Maggie DeMarco (who stayed as long as I did in Puerto Rico that year) had far more political experience—with AQAG and with other groups—than I did.

³ These actions are described in the AQAG publication Resistance in Latin America: The Pentagon, the Oligarchies & Nonviolent Action, published in March 1970, some six months before the beginning of the preparations for the Culebra Action.

Puerto Rico (including Tom Dorney and Bishop Antulio Parrilla), and eventually led to a visit by an eccentric former leader of the Diggers in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury (a rather unflattering portrait of whom is painted by Joan Didion in Slouching Toward Bethlehem), Arthur Lish, who visited Philadelphia in 1970; he and his family were then living in Culebra. A bit later, George Lakey visited Puerto Rico on behalf of the group and a strange alliance was forged: the PIP (Puerto Rican Independence Party, led by Rubén Berríos), a clergy and lay group led by Luis Rivera Pagán,⁴ AQAG and assorted Culebran activists (not, this time, including the mayor, Ramón Feliciano, a leader of the demonstrations against the Navy the previous year, but who had gotten scared this time round by the participation of the independence groups).

AQAG⁵ specialized in a particular kind of nonviolent direct action, then: high profile, high drama actions that were interventions in a struggle but by and large had little continuity. Going in and out of a place, AQAG

⁴ A publication that is representative of the thinking of the Puerto Rican religious groups involved in the Culebra events of 1971 is Culebra: confrontación al coloniaje, published by the Movimiento Estudiantil Cristiano de Puerto Rico (MEC), the Programa de Renovación e Investigación Social para Adiestramiento en la Misión (PRISA), the Comité Clérigos pro-rescate de Culebra (Rivera Pagán's group), and the Unión Latino Americana de Juventudes Evangélicas en Puerto Rico (ULAJE). It includes numerous clippings and photographs, and ends with two letters from Rivera Pagán in prison, one to his children, the other to his students at the Seminario Evangélico.

⁵ Extensive materials on AQAG and related radical pacifist activities were donated by Ann Morrisett Davidon to the Swarthmore College Library, and others are deposited at the Haverford College Library.

preserved itself from the political as it was invested in local struggles: I found this kind of dramatic action, with its aura of moral purity, very attractive at age sixteen, seventeen and eighteen, and AQAG's office in Philadelphia was a primary reason for my choice to go to Haverford in the fall of 1969 and then (after dropping out of college for what turned out to be two years, following the invasion of Cambodia and the huge demonstrations in Washington in the spring of 1970) to the Quaker Study Center of Pendle Hill (in Wallingford, Pennsylvania), in fall 1970. This model of a "quick" nonviolent direct action proved somewhat problematic in the case of Culebra (an inhabited island with a local population, and a factor in the ongoing struggle among the different political forces in Puerto Rico). In any case, while Maggie DeMarco and I were still in Puerto Rico in the spring of 1971 AQAG disbanded and many of its members recast themselves in a west Philadelphia group known as the Movement for a New Society. I am afraid that I was rather dismayed by the lack of follow-through after the Culebra demonstrations of 1971 and never joined the Movement for a New Society.

Let me say that I don't think George Lakey knew what he was getting us into. Information on Puerto Rico was rather scarce in the AQAG group, and there were few Spanish speakers--and no real Latin American

experts, at least until Phil Wheaton arrived. The conflict in Culebra looked from Philadelphia like a struggle between David--little Culebra, which at that point had only about 600 residents- and Goliath, the US military-industrial complex. The language of David and Goliath was used often in the AQAG publications on the issue (and was also used in the title of one of the New York Times articles on Culebra in 1970). Little was known--or understood--about the political situation in Puerto Rico that had led a Popular Democratic mayor to be a leader of the 1970 demonstrations--with strong PPD support for a departure by the Navy from Culebra--but caused a sudden switch of forces when Berríos's PIP and to a lesser extent Juan Mari Bras's MPI (later Puerto Rican Socialist Party) entered the scene. I know that I and most of my fellow participants had no knowledge of the subtleties of Puerto Rican political discourse when we arrived at the Seminario Evangélico on 4 January 1971: we were there to participate in a nonviolent direct action against the US Navy, and the array of allies we had acquired were new and unknown to us, since the relationship had been established only a couple of weeks before (after we had been chosen for the group, and long after the beginning of plans for the action). Of course great things can come from ignorance or from unexpected alliances: my favorite book in 1971 was Barbara Deming's

Prison Notes, an account of an anti-war march that unexpectedly found itself involved in the civil rights struggle in Albany, Georgia in 1964. (My first publication, an article in WIN magazine in 1971 on the Culebra events, was extracted from a long letter to Barbara Deming, whose example—as a committed intellectual, a brilliant writer, and a generous mentor—I remember fondly.)⁶ But I am not going to defend naiveté: when William Fred and Kelvin spoke to us at the Seminario, calling into question our understanding of the Puerto Rican situation, and when Héctor Estades spoke to us at the PIP headquarters a few days later, I remember that a feeling of surprise ran through the group, that we had landed--quite literally--in a highly charged political situation about which we knew almost nothing.⁷

In fact, we were in Puerto Rico because of our passionate commitment to ending the war in Vietnam: Culebra was an anti-Vietnam War demonstration by other means. I have spent thirty years overcoming my ignorance about Latin America and the Caribbean, but when I remember the young man I was in 1971--the year before I had publicly refused to register for the draft, like many others I moved from

⁶ Deming's papers are housed at the Radcliffe College Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A fine anthology of her writings is Prisons That Could Not Hold (1985).

⁷ A Puerto Rican who wrote extensively on the Culebra demonstrations for US pacifist publications was Iván Gutiérrez del Arroyo, who published in The Peacemaker (20 March 1971 and 10 April 1971) and in The Catholic Worker.

demonstration to leafletting session to meeting to demonstration, I expected a nonviolent revolution to happen any minute--I know that being in Puerto Rico from January to June 1971 was an accident in my life, the most fortunate accident I have experienced. The immense good fortune was to have gone from conversations with Bob Eaton and Barbara Deming and George Willoughby to a sudden position of listening--in English and in Spanish--to the equally passionate conversations of Rubén Berríos and Luis Rivera Pagán and Noel Colón and so many others, to emerge from the experience into the friendship of Ruth Reynolds and Manuel Alvarado Morales and Héctor Estades. It was a transforming event for me, and I think for others. And part of what was transforming about it was due to the complexity of the local situation and the human richness of the debates and commitments that were involved.

Perhaps I should add that my senses were alert to the fact that I was in a new and very different place from anywhere I had been before. I remember arriving at the dock in Culebra after a very rough ferry crossing from Fajardo. The sleepy little town--sleepy until the Navy bombs went off over the hill, which happened frequently in the next few days--was a bit of a mystery to us initially. The political divisions there, the passionate arguments among a small population of uncles and aunts and cousins, the

uncertainty among them about how to receive the little group of gringos (soon to be followed by much larger groups of PIP members), and the fact that a great political drama was unfolding--with a visit by John Chafee, then Secretary of the Navy, and the offer to the municipal authorities of a deal in exchange for their silence--was more than could be understood immediately. It was perhaps comfortable--and I have reread some of my diaries and notes from the time--to see everything in terms of that Biblical parable of David and Goliath, but I remember being quite surprised when I discovered that there were supporters of the Navy presence on Culebra, that everyone was not united in the struggle, and that there were considerable suspicions about what we were doing there. Real political action was turning out to have human complexities that I had only read about.

And then suddenly with the arrival of the large PIP group and of construction materials, we assembled the parts of a chapel that Bob Swann had designed (using elements of his earlier design of the headquarters of a pacifist institute based in Connecticut) and then took them over the hill to Playa Flamenco and suddenly--no doubt too suddenly for the Navy--had erected that chapel in the bombing range, in the

approximate site of a settlement that the Navy had destroyed in the late 1930s when it first began to use Culebra for military practice.

The several weeks' occupation of the bombing range were, I remember, a merry time, with Benjamín Pérez Vega and others from Culebra sneaking into remote areas of the range to set fires--to make the Navy think we were anywhere and everywhere, with large messages written in the sand of the beach so they could be read from "Big Mary," the Navy observation post, with the building of the chapel and then its rebuilding after it was pulled down one night by Navy Seals. The political and operational differences among the groups involved did not come out as much in the period of the occupation of the bombing range as just afterwards, during the trial and prison period. I should mention, among other issues, the differences between a verticalist political party organization (led by Berríos) and the more consensual decision-making of our little group (and also of Rivera Pagán's clergy group).⁸ I remember that Berríos was very unhappy when my letter/article to Barbara Deming came out in WIN Magazine (on 15 April 1971), not so much for its

⁸ Bob Swann alluded to these tensions—rather diplomatically—in an article in The Nation: "Like Gandhi. . . Berríos takes a strong hand in major decision making, which seems confined to three or four of the top strategists within the party. We were told, for instance, that only one member of the Quaker team should be arrested, and no opportunity for discussin this issue seemed permissible (although it's true we didn't argue it because, as it happens, we didn't disagree)" (265).

(innocuous and enthusiastic) content as because of the fact that I had not gotten prior approval from him first (an idea that would never have occurred to me, since my group was organized so differently). There were also significant differences between the PIP organization--sternly nonviolent in tactics, and verticalist in structure- and some of the young participants from Culebra (influenced as they were by Guevarist ideas of guerrilla focos). Somehow, though, it all worked: a united front was maintained in public, strategic decisions were adhered to at crucial moments, and the action was highly effective.

Though the 1971 demonstrations were not sufficient in themselves to push the Navy out of Culebra, they had made a strong and effective point about the use of a small inhabited island for ship-to-shore and aerial bombardment. By 1973 the Navy was preparing to leave, which they did in 1975. Luis Rivera Pagán has observed that victory for Culebra was a calamity for Vieques, which inherited a range of military practice maneuvers from Culebra (until then it had been used largely for practice in amphibious landing, but the end of the bombing of Culebra and its outlying keys meant that a greater range of maneuvers took place on Vieques). And though the issue of Vieques never disappeared, it took the accidental death of a guard there a few years ago to focus political

attention on the continuing scandal of its use in military practice (just as in Culebra the accidental fall of a bomb on the outskirts of Dewey--in a neighborhood nicknamed "Vietnam"--helped precipitate local opposition to the bombing, which had been going on for years). But perhaps the story is a bit more complicated, and the victory in Culebra in the 1970s laid the groundwork for a successful move against the military presence in Vieques thirty years later. No doubt there were missed opportunities along the way, but I suppose the lessons of history include that the time frame in which change takes place may be quite different from what observers expect at the time. Sometimes quicker and more dramatic, as with the sudden appearance of a wooden chapel on a bombing range, sometimes of much longer duration, as with the long struggle in Vieques.

Daniel Balderston

University of Iowa

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