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From Freedom Fighters to Patriots: The Successful Campaign to Release The FALN Political Prisoners, 1980–1999

MARGARET POWER

ABSTRACT

This article explores why President Clinton sanctioned the release of the Puerto Rican political prisoners in 1999 given that nineteen years earlier, the U.S. government, media, public opinion, and even some of the pro-independence Left had excoriated them as terrorists. To explain Clinton's decision and the shift in much of public opinion, this article traces the political contours and development of the campaign to release the prisoners. It divides the campaign into two phases. From 1980 to 1990, the campaign argued that a state of war existed between Puerto Rico and the United States, defined the prisoners as prisoners of war, and linked support for the prisoners to the FALN and armed struggle. From 1990 to 1999, it framed the prisoners' release as a fundamental human rights issue and called on Puerto Ricans to embrace the prisoners as part of the Puerto Rican family and nation. This change allowed the campaign to become broader, more inclusive, and successful. [Key words: FALN, campaign, political prisoners, solidarity movements, pro-independence politics]

The author (power@iit.edu) is a Professor of History at the Illinois Institute of Technology. She is the author of *Right-Wing Women in Chile: Feminine Power and the Struggle against Allende, 1964–1973* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002) and co-editor of *Right-Wing Women around the World: From Conservatives to Extremists* (Routledge, 2002) and *New Perspectives on the Transnational Right* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). She is currently working on a study of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party.

On april 4, 1980, eleven puerto ricans were arrested in evanston, illinois.[1] **the eleven—haydée beltrán, elizam escobar, ricardo jiménez, adolfo matos, dylcia pagán, alicia rodríguez, ida luz (lucy) rodríguez, luis rosa, carlos alberto torres, and carmen valentín—were accused of being members of the fuerzas armadas de liberación nacional (faln; armed forces of national liberation), a pro-independence clandestine organization that carried out armed actions in the united states.** Triumphant headlines in the *Chicago Tribune* proclaimed, "11 FALN terror suspects seized with arsenal here; Suburb cops grab 'most wanted' man" (1980: 5 April). Over the next few years, four more Puerto Ricans —Oscar López in 1981 and Edwin Cortés, Alberto Rodríguez, and Alejandrina Torres in 1983—were arrested and accused of being members of the FALN. Tried and convicted of various charges, they were given lengthy sentences and incarcerated in prisons scattered across the U.S.

In August 1999, President Bill Clinton granted twelve of the pro-independence activists conditional clemency.[2] Clinton did not extend the offer to either Carlos Alberto Torres, the "most wanted man" cited in the *Chicago Tribune* headline above, or Haydée Beltrán (Susler 2006: 127). He said he would commute Oscar López's sentence if he served an additional ten years in jail. López rejected the offer, primarily because it did not include all the prisoners. López is still in prison today. He was denied parole in 2011 and his current release date is 2023. Why did President Clinton sanction the release of these Puerto Rican political prisoners in 1999 who, nineteen years earlier, the U.S. media, government, public opinion, and even some of the pro-independence Left had excoriated as terrorists?

To answer this question, this article examines four key factors that defined the campaign to secure the prisoners' release and contributed to its success. First, the captured Puerto Ricans won respect and support by maintaining that they were political prisoners, not terrorists. They consistently conducted themselves in "a manner above reproach, in the face of constant provocation, adversity, punitive measures, and isolation" during their decades in prison. This, combined with their unwavering "political integrity," provided the campaign with a strong foundation on which to generate support for the prisoners (Susler 2011).

Second, a solid core of Puerto Rican activists, principally in Chicago, New York City, and on the island, along with a number of North Americans, successfully overcame

the fear and rejection that initially characterized many people's response to the FALN prisoners and mobilized solidarity with them. In addition, progressive attorneys worked with the prisoners and activists to develop legal arguments that simultaneously defended the prisoners' political positions and justified their release. These various expressions of advocacy galvanized increasingly broader sectors of both the Puerto Rican and North American public to work for the freedom of the Puerto Rican political prisoners.

Third, in the early 1990s, the campaign reframed the release of the prisoners as an issue of human rights, which allowed activists to obtain greater support for the prisoners' release in Puerto Rico, the U.S., and internationally. For example, important U.S. and global personalities, such as Coretta Scott King and Nobel Peace Prize winners South African Desmond Tutu and Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú Tum, signed ads and petitions calling for freedom for the prisoners. At the same time, the campaign defined the struggle for the prisoners' freedom as a cause that all Puerto Ricans could and should support, linking the release of the prisoners to the affirmation of *Puertorriqueñidad*, or Puertoricanness. The success of this association placed the issue of the prisoners' release at the forefront of many Puerto Ricans' political agenda. The growing clamor among Puerto Ricans to "bring the prisoners home" convinced Puerto Rican politicians across the entire political spectrum, from the independence movement to the pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party (PPD) to the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP), that they should respond to their constituents. This was a cause they could and should back.

Fourth, Puerto Ricans united as Puerto Ricans to call for the freedom of the prisoners. They responded to what they perceived to be an injustice committed against their compatriots. Their demand for the release of the prisoners represents an expression of nationalist sentiments, however inchoate or nebulous.[3]

To illustrate these four points, this article traces the political contours and development of the campaign and analyzes the different elements and forces that led to the release of the majority of the Puerto Rican political prisoners by 1999.

Puerto Rico, the United States, and Puerto Rican Identity

Puerto Rico is a U.S. colony and has been since 1898, when the U.S. took the island after winning the "Spanish-American War." In 1917, the U.S. government passed the Jones Act, which unilaterally imposed citizenship on Puerto Ricans. The conferring of citizenship through "collective naturalization" accomplished several goals simultaneously (Trías Monge 1997: 76). It undermined the independence movement and tied Puerto Rico more closely to the U.S. It deferred if not precluded Puerto Rico's subsequent incorporation as a state.[4] And it spared the U.S. the

potential embarrassment of Puerto Ricans rejecting citizenship (Baldoz and Ayala: 2013). Although citizenship meant that the U.S. could—and did—draft Puerto Rican men into the U.S. military, it did not confer the right to vote in federal elections on Puerto Ricans living on the island, an anomalous interpretation of the significance of citizenship that persists to this day. However, it did mean that Puerto Ricans could freely travel between the island and the mainland; and once in the U.S., they obtained full voting rights.

As a result of their status, hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans have migrated to the mainland, dividing the population between the two locations. The Puerto Rican population has grown steadily, so much so that in 1980 (the year the Puerto Rican *independentistas* were arrested in Evanston, Illinois), roughly 2,005,000 Puerto Ricans lived in the U.S. and about 3,200,000 lived in Puerto Rico; by 2000, some 3,400,000 lived in the U.S. and 3,800,000 in Puerto Rico (Falcón 1991: 174, 612; Guzmán 2001; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000, 2008).[5] By 2010, more Puerto Ricans lived in the U.S. than in Puerto Rico. The majority of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are concentrated in New York City and other urban centers on the East Coast, Chicago, and, since the 1990s, Florida (Duany and Silver 2010: 5–8).

Both in the mainland and on the island, Puerto Ricans have a long history of struggling to secure their needs and rights as Puerto Ricans.[6] Two tangible outcomes of their efforts have been the plethora of Puerto Rican organizations that has developed in the U.S. and the growing number of Puerto Rican elected officials, from the municipal to the federal level.[7] The substantial presence of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. has also meant that many Puerto Ricans, including many of the former political prisoners (see Table 1), grew up in the U.S. and enjoy deep roots in their communities, supportive families and friends, and extensive social networks.[8] These resources were essential to the campaign to free the prisoners.

Even as they built new lives for themselves on the mainland, life in the U.S. heightened some Puerto Ricans' sense of nationalism. Unlike other immigrants, Puerto Ricans do not emigrate from a sovereign nation. Instead they come from one of the last existing colonies in the world. This reality, combined with the high levels of poverty, racist attitudes, and political marginalization that many Puerto Ricans experienced and experience in the U.S. have contributed to the appeal of nationalism to some Puerto Ricans. It is notable, for example, that Puerto Ricans refer to themselves as Puerto Ricans, not as Puerto Rican-Americans (Thomas 2010: 3). Indeed, the very development of the FALN reflects the strength of nationalist sentiment among Puerto Ricans living in the U.S., just as the widespread demand for the release of the political prisoners reveals a shared Puerto Rican identity.

TABLE 1. FALN PRISONERS

NAME	BIRTHPLACE	WHERE GREW UP	DATE/PLACE OF ARREST	SENTENCE* AND CHARGES	RELEASE DATE
Haydée Beltrán	Chicago, IL	Chicago, IL	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	Life; murder	April 14, 2009
Edwin Cortés	Chicago, IL	Chicago, IL	June 29, 1983, Chicago, IL	35 Years; seditious conspiracy and other charges	September 10, 1999
*Elizam Escobar	Ponce, PR	Ponce, PR	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	68 years; seditious conspiracy and other charges	September 10, 1999
Ricardo Jiménez	San Sebastián, PR	Chicago, IL	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	98 years; seditious conspiracy and other charges	September 10, 1999
Oscar López	San Sebastián, PR	Puerto Rico; Chicago, IL	May 29, 1981, Chicago, IL	55 years; seditious conspiracy; 1988, 15 more years	Still in prison in Terre Haute, IN
Adolfo Matos Antogiorgi	Lajas, PR	Lajas, PR; New York City	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	78 years; seditious conspiracy and other charges	September 10, 1999
Dylcia Pagán	New York City	New York City	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	63 years; seditious conspiracy and other charges	September 10, 1999
Alberto Rodríguez	Bronx, NY	Chicago, IL	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	35 years and 5 years probation; seditious conspiracy	September 10, 1999
Alicia Rodríguez	Chicago, IL	Chicago, IL	June 29, 1983, Chicago, IL	85 years; seditious conspiracy and other charges	September 10, 1999
Ida Luz Rodríguez	Las Marias, PR	Chicago, IL	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	83 years; seditious conspiracy	September 10, 1999
Luis Rosa	Chicago, IL	Chicago, IL	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	105 years; criminal charges and seditious conspiracys	September 10, 1999
Alejandrina Torres	San Lorenzo, PR	San Lorenzo, PR; New York City	June 29, 1983, Chicago, IL	35 years and 5 years probation; seditious conspiracy	September 10, 1999
Carlos Alberto Torres	Ponce, PR	Carolina, PR; New York City; Oak Park, IL	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	78 years; seditious conspiracy	July 26, 2010
Carmen Valentín	Arecibo, PR	Arecibo; Chicago, IL	April 4, 1980, Evanston, IL	98 years; seditious conspiracys	September 10, 1999

Sources: *Can't Jail the Spirit* (1992); *Paralitici* (2004); *Susler* (1995).

* The lengths listed below include both the federal charges of seditious conspiracy and the various state charges the prisoners received.

1974–1980: Puerto Rican Independence and the FALN

The FALN emerged in 1974 with coordinated bombings at U.S. corporations in New York City.[9] To explain the bombings, the FALN issued a communiqué stating that the targeted corporations "are an integral part of Yanki monopoly capitalism and are responsible for the murderous policies of the Yanki government in Puerto Rico, Latin America, and against workers, peasants and *Indios* throughout the world." The FALN also called for "the release of the five Puerto Rican political prisoners, the longest-held political prisoners in the hemisphere" (*New York Times* 1974a; Sojourner Truth Organization 1979: 58–9).[10]

Between October 1974 and 1980, the year the eleven Puerto Rican activists were arrested in Illinois, the FALN bombed a variety of targets in the U.S., most of which dealt directly with U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico. The most controversial action undertaken by the FALN was the 1975 bombing of Fraunces Tavern in Manhattan, in which four people were killed.[11] According to a FALN communiqué, the organization carried out the bombing "in retaliation for the CIA-ordered bomb that murdered Angel Luis Charbonier and Eddie Román Torres, two innocent young workers who supported Puerto Rican independence" (Sojourner Truth Organization 1979: 61).[12]

However, an action that targeted people proved to be the exception, not the rule.[13] Indeed, FALN actions can best be characterized as acts of armed propaganda. As Ronald Fernández notes, "the bombings were generally 'symbolic,' they focused on property," (1994: 207).[14] Their actions manifested the group's determination to rid their nation of U.S. government, military, and corporate control by bringing their fight to the U.S. itself.[15]

One of the most pressing and consistent FALN demands from 1974 to 1979, when President Carter released them, was freedom for the five Nationalist prisoners (Sojourner Truth Organization 1979).[16] For example, following the October 1974 bombings in New York City, two people who identified themselves as members of the FALN called the Associated Press to direct the reporters to "a telephone booth at Broadway and 73rd Street" where they would find "a statement from the F.A.L.N." The "pair" ended the call saying, "Free all Puerto Rican political prisoners" (*New York Times* 1974a).

There was nothing capricious about the timing of the FALN's first bombings; they occurred the day before the massive pro-independence rally held on October 27, 1974, in Madison Square Garden, New York City, and three days before hearings held on the status of Puerto Rico by the Special Committee on Decolonization at the United Nations (*New York Times* 1974c). As a FALN communiqué stated, "the FALN supports the demonstration at Madison Square Garden... in support of the independence of Puerto Rico. We view this as a significant step in the formation of an anti-imperialist front in the United States, which will support and fight for the national liberation of Puerto Rico,

and educate the American people to the murderous and genocidal policies of the Yanki capitalists throughout the world" (Sojourner Truth Organization 1979: 59).

The emergence of the FALN in 1974 coincided with a growing sense of anti-colonialism and heightened demands for Puerto Rican independence in Puerto Rico and among U.S.-based Puerto Ricans and anti-imperialist North Americans. During the 1960s, pro-independence sentiment and organization grew on the island, galvanized by the Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI; Movement for Independence), which began in 1959. The increasing calls for independence in Puerto Rico mirrored and were supported by the hemispheric-wide shift to the left, which in turn was fueled by the successful 1959 Cuban revolution (Ayala and Bernabe 2007: 226–7; Torres 1998: 3–5). The fact that Puerto Rican men were drafted to fight in Vietnam, when they could not even vote in U.S. federal elections, further heightened anti-colonial sentiment on the island.[17] In 1971, the MPI organized one of the largest pro-independence demonstrations in recent Puerto Rican history when 20,000–30,000 people marched through the streets of San Juan to protest the U.S. governor's conference being held in Puerto Rico. That same year, the MPI defined itself as Marxist-Leninist and "reconstituted itself as the Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño" (PSP; Puerto Rican Socialist Party, PSP) (Ayala and Bernabe 2007: 227).

Support for Puerto Rican independence also gained more adherents in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s. For Puerto Ricans, as was true for many young people in the U.S., the draft and the Vietnam War heightened opposition to the government. The fact that Puerto Rican men were drafted to fight another colonized people intensified their awareness of their own oppressed condition.

As the Vietnam War ended, the struggle to gain independence for Puerto Rico and to free the Nationalist prisoners moved to the top of much of the U.S. Left's political agenda. During the 1970s, pro-independence Puerto Ricans in the U.S. were active in a variety of political organizations, community-based struggles, and the work to free the five Puerto Rican Nationalists and their colonized nation. They, along with different North American groups, joined together to sponsor what would be the largest pro-independence rally in the U.S. On October 27, 1974, some 20,000 people gathered in Madison Square Garden in support of Puerto Rican independence ("A Call to a National Demonstration"; People's Press 1977: 164–6; Velázquez 1998: 53–4). The speakers included Juan Mari Brás, secretary general of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party; Jane Fonda, the actress; Angela Davis, the Black activist and Communist leader; Geraldo Rivera, then a television newsman; and the Puerto Rican author, Piri Thomas. When asked by the media what he thought of the FALN bombings that had occurred the day before the rally, Mari Brás "disclaimed knowledge of the sponsors of Saturday's bomb-

ing" and added, "I do not condemn it," a statement with which, according to the *New York Times* (1974b), the other speakers agreed.

Indeed, the emergence of the FALN and the group's decision to carry out armed actions in the U.S. elicited a variety of responses from both the Puerto Rican independence movement and the North American solidarity movement. The Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), which had chapters and members in Puerto Rican communities in the U.S. as well as across Puerto Rico, did not support the FALN's tactics and condemned the bombing at Fraunces Tavern (Velázquez 1998: 347, n. 12).

As part of its efforts to build support in the U.S. for Puerto Rican independence, the PSP sponsored the development of the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee (PRSC) in 1975.[18] The PRSC was "a national anti-imperialist organization...with the goal of building support within the United States for the full independence of Puerto Rico and the self-determination of the Puerto Rican people" (Puerto Rican Solidarity Committee). By December 1976, the PRSC was a national organization "with chapters in twenty cities" and plans to hold its Second National Conference in Chicago in February 1977 (Borenstein 1976). Since the PSP both "initiated and led" the PRSC, it had a substantial political influence over it (Gosse 1996: 134). As a result, the PSP's opposition to the Fraunces Tavern bombing specifically and the FALN's armed actions in general shaped the thinking of many in the North American solidarity movement.

Political tensions that had been simmering among Puerto Rican activists and within the solidarity movement boiled over at the February 1977 conference. The main point of dispute related to support for or disagreement with the actions of the FALN.[19] The Chicago-based March 1 Bloc (which included both Puerto Rican and North American organizations) argued that the independence and solidarity movements should support the armed struggle then being waged by the FALN in the U.S.[20] As José López, at the time a member of the March 1 Bloc, recalls, "the argument that we in the March 1 Bloc made was that a solidarity movement does not have the right to decide the strategies of a people. Those people have the right to self-determination and the right to use any means necessary to liberate themselves" (López 2010). The intensity of these differences led to a division in the solidarity movement; the New Movement in Solidarity with Puerto Rican Independence (henceforth New Movement), which supported the FALN, emerged and "the PRSC steadily declined after 1977" (Gosse 1996: 317). The organizational and political antagonisms, and many activists' condemnation of the FALN's actions as terroristic, explain the weak response and lack of solidarity from much of the Puerto Rican independence movement and North American Left to the arrest of the eleven FALN activists in 1980.

1980s–1990s: The Solidarity Campaign with the FALN Prisoners, Phase One

The campaign to release the prisoners can be divided into two phases. The first phase is from 1980 to the early 1990s. During this period, the campaign followed the lead of the prisoners who argued that a state of war existed between Puerto Rico and the U.S., defined themselves as prisoners of war, and called for support for the FALN and armed struggle. The slogan that best captures this phase of the campaign is, "They are freedom fighters, not terrorists!" As a result, participation in the movement rarely reached beyond people who shared this political perspective, which included family members, friends of the prisoners, and a limited number of Puerto Ricans and North Americans. Phase two positioned the release of the prisoners as a fundamental human rights issue, which allowed the campaign to became broader, more inclusive, and, ultimately, successful. In an appeal to nationalist sentiment, the main slogan of Phase Two became, "They are patriots, bring them home," a demand that called on Puerto Ricans to embrace the prisoners as part of the larger Puerto Rican family and nation.

As would be true throughout their incarceration, the captured Puerto Ricans clearly and forcefully articulated their political beliefs and positions. Following their arrest in 1980, the eleven defined themselves as prisoners of war and refused to recognize the right of the U.S. government to try them.[21] As Carlos Alberto Torres, one of the eleven, wrote, they considered themselves prisoners of war because they rejected "colonial and yankee imperialist legality.... Our position of POW is an example of our faith in the capacity that our people, and its patriotic organizations, have in carrying out their role as protagonists in bringing about justice for all Puerto Ricans" (Prisoners of Conscience Project 1992: 142). Consistent with this politic, they refused to participate in their trials or defend themselves in court.

Initial support for the prisoners came from family members, friends, and political allies. Upon hearing of their arrest, family members met and planned how to defend the prisoners. Josefina (Fifo) Rodríguez is the mother of Lucy and Alicia Rodríguez, two of the eleven Puerto Ricans arrested in Evanston, Illinois, on April 4, 1980. At first, Rodríguez knew that one of her daughters, Lucy, was among those arrested, but she had no idea that her daughter Alicia was also involved. In fact, Josefina Rodríguez thought, "she [Alicia] was away camping for the weekend." The day they were detained, Fifo received a hand-delivered message telling her to come to a discussion about the arrests at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago. Family members of other arrested independentistas and supporters also attended the meeting. They shared with each other what information they had about who had been arrested and what their conditions were and planned a picket for the next day in front of the Evanston Police Station, where the prisoners were being held (Rodríguez 2010; López 2010). Shortly thereafter, fam-

ily members and other activists formed the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War, which became the central Puerto Rican organization in the U.S. to mobilize in support of the prisoners during the 1980s.[22] Their ongoing support remained constant during the nineteen years the FALN prisoners were in jail.[23] Their visits and campaigns were critical to maintaining the morale of the prisoners and to inspiring the work of other activists and supporters, just as the love and efforts of family members of political prisoners throughout Latin America (and elsewhere) have been critical to them and the efforts to free them (Power 2008).

A small group of progressive attorneys in the Chicago area lent their legal skills to the prisoners. Michael Deutsch, a member of the National Lawyers Guild, a progressive lawyers' organization, was the first North American attorney to visit and then advocate for the five Nationalist prisoners, jailed in the U.S. since the 1950s. At the time

Juan Antonio Corretjer, friends, and family visit Alicia and Lucy Rodríguez in Dwight Correctional Center, Dwight, Illinois, 1984. Reprinted, by permission, from Alejandro Molina and the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Political prisoners.

of the arrest of the FALN eleven, he was in Puerto Rico, but he immediately flew back to Chicago and visited them as soon as possible. As would be true for activists in the campaign for their release, Deutsch both accepted their position and found it a challenging one to defend. As he explained to me,

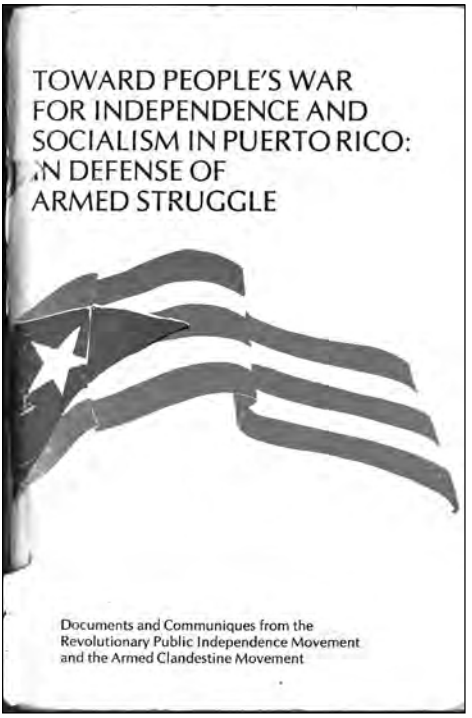
> **My orientation as a political lawyer was to try and implement the politics of the client. I've always said that was a fundamental principle. So when they said they wanted to take that position [that they were prisoners of war], I thought of how I could best explain that position to the court and to the public. It made political sense to me that they shouldn't be treated as common criminals. I must say that a lot of my colleagues in the bar thought they were crazy and I was crazy for implementing that decision. Many [fellow attorneys] said, "they should defend themselves." (Deutsch 2010)**

Jan Susler is an attorney who has worked in solidarity with the prisoners since 1980. She was a Professor of Law at the Southern Illinois University Law School and a member of the National Lawyers Guild when Michael Deutsch called her in August 1980 and asked her to visit two of the Puerto Rican prisoners who were imprisoned near her (Deutsch 2010). She did and since then she has worked to defend the human rights of, oppose the punitive conditions imposed on, and secure the release of all the Puerto Rican political prisoners.

Susler has written extensively about the legal meanings and ramifications of the case of the FALN prisoners. In one of her writings, she notes that the FALN case served as "an open forum for the government's political agenda." It allowed the government to use the word "*terrorist*" while banning the defense's "use of terms such as *colonialism*" [italics in original]." The U.S. government also "conven[ed] anonymous juries and cut[] back on traditional limitations on state power, particularly on the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures" (Susler 2006: 122). Although evidence linking most of the Puerto Ricans arrested to specific crimes was slight to nonexistent, the prisoners' refusal to offer a defense allowed the government to convict them of criminal charges, such as armed robbery, and the more overtly political charge of seditious conspiracy, or conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government by force.[24] Their convictions resulted in disproportionately high sentences, as Susler points out. "In 1981, the year most of the political prisoners were sentenced, the average federal sentence for murder was 10.3 years. Puerto Rican political prisoners—who were not convicted of hurting or killing anyone—were sentenced to an average of 65.4 years—six times longer than the average" (Susler 2006: 123). This unjust sentencing would subsequently be used as part of the argument to President Clinton as to why he should release the prisoners.

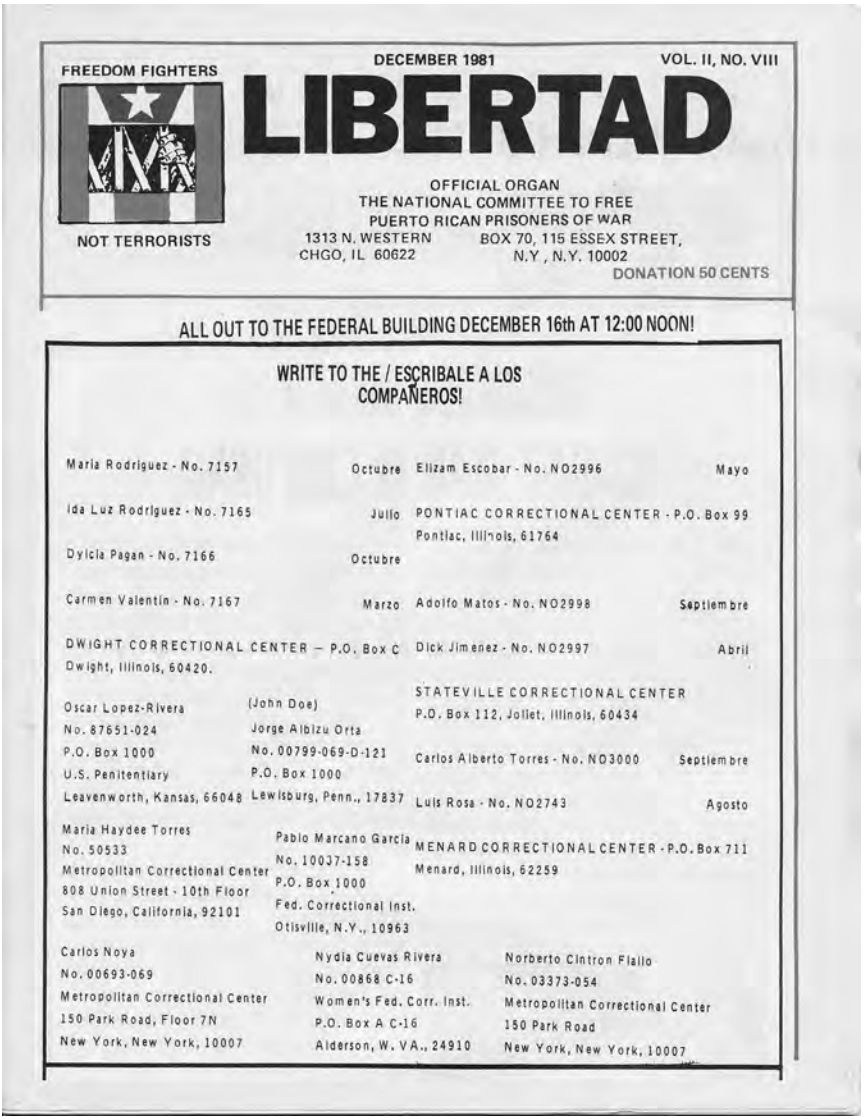
The New Movement, the group that emerged as a result of political differences with the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee, joined family members, activists, and the legal team to support the prisoners. Initially, many of the members of the New Movement belonged to or were affiliated with either Prairie Fire Organizing Committee (PFOC), May 19th Communist Organization (May 19th), or Sojourner Truth Organization (STO).[25] By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, activists previously unaffiliated with any of these organizations joined the New Movement and worked with it to free the prisoners and promote Puerto Rican independence.

The New Movement was strongest in San Francisco, Chicago, and New York City, where PFOC, May 19th, and STO were based. But it also carried out work in other cities across the country where these groups had supporters. For example, when speakers came from Puerto Rico, STO co-sponsored events with the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (MLN; Movement of National Liberation) in Chicago and also set up programs in Kansas City, Denver, or Portland, where branches of STO existed (Staudenmaier 2010: 164). It worked closely with and under the leadership of the MLN (Starr 2010: 145–6).[26]



Booklet published and distributed by Sojourner Truth Organization, May 19th Communist Organization, Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, and the New Movement in Solidarity with Puerto Rican Independence.

The April 1980 *Bulletin* of the New Movement illustrates the political perspective the organization used in its efforts to win support for the prisoners. The cover is emblazoned with the logo of the FALN and the following slogans: "Long Live the FALN; Free the Eleven!; Free all Puerto Rican Prisoners of War!; Support the Armed Struggle!; and No to Statehood-Free Puerto Rico!" The *Bulletin* stated that, "The Eleven are courageous freedom fighters who have put their lives in jeopardy for their land and people. They must be supported on that basis. Because colonialism in Puerto Rico is a national and international issue, so too is the case of the POW's" (1980: 4).



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DECEMBER 1981 VOL. II, NO. VIII

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December 1981 issue of Libertad. *Reprinted, by permission, from Alejandro Molina and the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Political prisoners.*

The MLN and the New Movement sponsored the first national tour of former Nationalist Party prisoner Lolita Lebrón in May and June of 1980. One goal of the tour was to build support for the "Eleven P.O.W.'s," a demand that all the recently released

Nationalist prisoners firmly endorsed.[27] In San Francisco, Lebrón spoke to a crowd of hundreds at the Women's Building. As she stood at the podium, a huge banner hung behind her with a drawing of her with her fist raised in front of an undulating Puerto Rican flag. One of the slogans painted on the banner said Free Puerto Rico!, while another read "Long Live the Heroic F.A.L.N. Free the 11 [FALN prisoners]!"[28]

Many of the Puerto Rican prisoners came from Chicago, the city that had one of the strongest committees advocating for their release. The National Committee to Free the Puerto Rican Prisoners of War began in Chicago and from there spread to other U.S. cities, including New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, among others. Much of the National Committee's work in Chicago took place in the Puerto Rican community of West Town. The committees' journal, *Libertad* (Freedom), was published there. Every Saturday in the 1980s, regardless of the weather, activists stood on street corners or went door-to-door in the community selling *Libertad*, talking to people about the prisoners and the colonial situation of Puerto Rico, asking people to sign petitions and send letters, and raising money for the prisoners' commissary. Their efforts simultaneously generated support for the prisoners, fostered a sense of community, generated a deeper awareness of the colonial status of Puerto Rico, and heightened ties between Puerto Ricans in Chicago and on the island, thus increasing a nationalist identity. Activists conducted this work at the same time that they maintained and built community institutions, such as the Pedro Albizu Campos High School (which some of the prisoners had founded), a practice that was highly demanding in terms of resources and people's energy, but ultimately rewarding in terms of stimulating awareness, community cohesion, and a shared Puerto Rican identity.[29]

At the same time as activists in the National Committee were conducting their political work, the New Movement worked to educate North Americans about colonialism in Puerto Rico, create support for the FALN prisoners, and raise money for the MLN, the prisoners, and itself. Members of the Chicago chapter developed a slide show that discussed the prisoners in the context of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico, which they showed at public events or on university campuses in Chicago and throughout the Midwest. They published articles and a newsletter to inform people about the prisoners and U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico, their ongoing work, and ways to get involved. The group held bake sales or issued direct appeals to raise money to help finance the prison visits of family members or for commissary funds for the prisoners. New Movement members were also active in protests and demonstrations, either organized in conjunction with the MLN or on their own. In addition, they worked with other coalitions and groups to help generate awareness of Puerto Rico and the prisoners.[30]

Both the Puerto Rican independence and solidarity movements looked to the

international arena for legal arguments regarding the prisoners and for support. In addition to Michael Deutsch, mentioned earlier, Dennis Cunningham, Brian Glick, Melinda Power, Mara Siegal, and Jan Susler represented the prisoners.[31] Realizing that the team needed to develop a legal argument to buttress the prisoners' position that they were prisoners of war and that the U.S. government had no right to try them, Deutsch (2010) recalls,

> **I set about researching what international law said about colonialism and what rights dependent or colonized people have to resist colonialism. I fairly quickly saw that the United Nations had passed numerous resolutions saying colonialism was a crime and that people had the right to resist by any means necessary. There was a whole series of resolutions that were passed, particularly in regard to the Algerian struggle and then for the struggle in Africa of Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Angola, where the United Nations had supported the right of the people to use armed struggle and prohibited captured anti-colonial combatants from being tried as criminals. So, with help of other lawyers, we began to develop a brief on that issue that we could present not only to the U.S. courts but also to the international courts.**

Although the U.S. courts did not accept this argument, the National Committee pursued it within the U.S. and internationally. In 1985, Josefina Rodríguez, the mother of two of the women FALN prisoners and a member of the National Committee, traveled to Montevideo, Uruguay, to attend the continent-wide meeting of the Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos (Latin American Federation of Associations of Families of the Disappeared). Although the delegates were eager to learn about the imprisonment of political prisoners in the U.S., ultimately they determined that the National Committee could not affiliate with the organization since the prisoners were in jail, not disappeared (Rodríguez 2010).

In addition to attending international conferences, the independence movement and solidarity activists prioritized work at the United Nations. Beginning in 1972, the U.N. Committee on Decolonization held hearings on the status of Puerto Rico; since 1977, it "reaffirmed the inalienable right of the people of Puerto Rico to self-determination and independence."[32] Believing the U.N. to be an important forum in which to garner support for the prisoners, advocates both spoke before the committee in their defense and mobilized people to march to the U.N. calling for the independence of Puerto Rico and the release of the prisoners. For example, in August 1988, five hundred "activists marched 70 blocks from the Puerto Rican neighborhood, 'El Barrio,' to the U.N. to deliver their message" (*Libertad* 1988).

However, despite the sustained efforts to support the prisoners, as the 1980s drew to a close, they remained in jail. Their continued incarceration led to a reassessment of the work of the last decade, including an adaptation of the campaign's politics to confront reality and secure their release.

1990–1999: Solidarity Campaign, Phase Two

As the 1990s opened, it was clear that much had changed in the last ten years. The U.S. was more conservative. Ronald Reagan had been president during most of the 1980s and Vice-President George H. W. Bush succeeded him in 1989. The FALN had last carried out an action in the early 1980s. And in 1990 most of the Puerto Rican prisoners had been in jail for ten years. It was increasingly apparent that in order to secure their release, a broader, more inclusive, political campaign that emphasized human rights and appealed to Puerto Rican's nationalist identity would have to be developed.

Poster produced by the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War and Political Prisoners, with pictures of the political prisoners. Reprinted, by permission, from Alejandro Molina and the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Political prisoners.

In Puerto Rico, sociologist and author Luis Nieves Falcón helped to spearhead this phase of the campaign. He first became involved with the case when "Juan Antonio Corretjer, Secretary General of the Liga Socialista Puertorriqueña, asked me to go to Alejandrina [Torres's] trial to make a statement on the colonial situation of Puerto Rico" (Nieves Falcón 2010). The judge refused to let him speak, but while he was at the trial, he "observed so many irregularities" that he decided to study law. As an attorney, he visited the prisoners and decided to dedicate his work to the "causa imposible" [securing their release] (Nieves Falcón 2010).

Nieves Falcón actively promoted a new approach to the campaign. Attorney Jan Susler remembers the context in which this change took place. "After they [the Puerto Rican prisoners] had served about ten years, it really was time to move the campaign from one of advocating for them in terms of their prison conditions and their position [as POWs] to trying to get them out" (2010). Nineteen ninety-two was a good year to obtain broader support since it was "the five-hundred-year anniversary of Spanish colonialism." As a result, "there was a lot of political activity around [the issue of colonialism] in Puerto Rico and the U.S." (Nieves Falcón 2010).

Luis Nieves Falcón initially traveled to New York City to head up the campaign, called Ofensiva '92. However, he came to believe that "The prisoners were prisoners for Puerto Rico so the work needed to come from Puerto Rico" (2010). He returned to the island and dedicated the next nine years of his life to securing the release of the prisoners. Attorney Jan Susler recalls that Ofensiva '92 began with "the understanding that we would move beyond what had historically been the basis for their support to more of a question of human rights." Henceforth, the campaign would emphasize that "they were prisoners for fighting for the independence of Puerto Rico, their imprisonment was unjust, and their sentences were disproportionate. It was a way to honor who they were and at the same time amplify the amount, quality, and nature of support for them" (Susler 2010). This new emphasis marks the beginning of what I have termed Phase Two of the campaign.

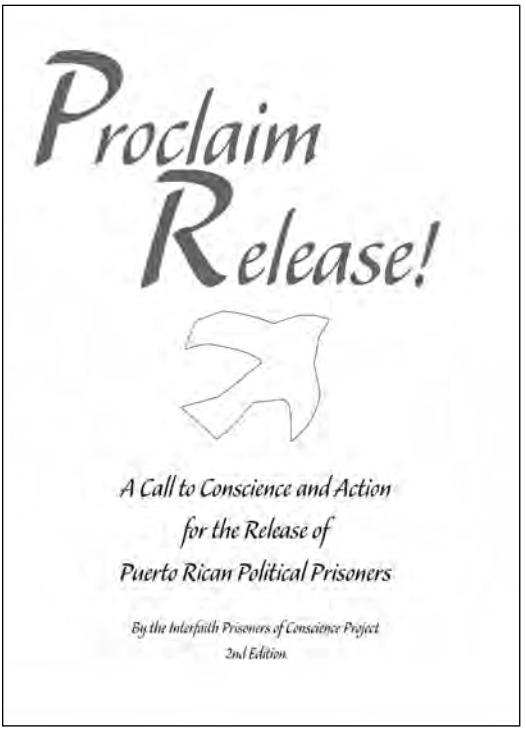
Ofensiva '92 increasingly identified the prisoners as national heroes and patriots. Although both the prisoners and their supporters continued to define themselves/them as captured combatants and prisoners of war, as the 1990s progressed, the projection of the prisoners as national symbols unjustly imprisoned in U.S. jails came to dominate the language of those who were attempting to obtain their release. This difference represented a shift from a more limited, political appeal to the independence movement and the Left to a broader, more humanitarian appeal to a range of Puerto Ricans and North Americans. In short, the campaign replaced a call for Left support with an appeal to nationalist sentiment and humanitarian understanding and solidarity.

In order to channel these sentiments and understandings toward the release of the prisoners, Ofensiva '92, under the leadership of Nieves Falcón, spoke directly to the people of Puerto Rico. He described the campaign's tactics. "We went door to door in all seventy-eight municipalities in Puerto Rico." Ofensiva '92 relied on volunteers to do the work. Before they went out to talk to people, the volunteers received three days training, "during which time we gave them basic information [about the prisoners] about knocking on doors." The volunteers also made a point of going to churches to gather signatures calling for the priosoners' release. Nieves Falcón remembers that one Sunday the campaigners were in front of a church in Las Marías, a small town in the interior of Puerto Rico. "The priest came out and asked us what we were doing. We explained and he [the priest] spoke about them [the prisoners] in the church and after the service a lot of people came out and signed." The parents of Elizam Escobar, one of the eleven prisoners, were part of the group of volunteers collecting signatures (Nieves Falcón 2010). Their participation demonstrated their concern for their son and the other prisoners and served to emphasize the familial bonds that linked the prisoners to Puerto Rico.

In this phase of the campaign, the concept of family gained greater prominence. The campaign used a dualistic understanding of family as both the nuclear family and a symbol of the Puerto Rican people/nation. By emphasizing the prisoners' ties to their children, parents, and other family members, the campaign appealed to humanitarian concerns to make the family whole again by restoring the prisoners to their families. It evoked the image of the prisoners as members of the larger Puerto Rican family who should return to Puerto Rico, their home, where they belonged. Two examples capture this projection of the prisoners. Headlines in *Libertad*, the newsletter of the National Committee, read "18 Years Later: They are Patriots, not Terrorists! It's Time to Bring them Home!" (*Libertad* 1998a). And in August 1999, shortly after President Clinton announced "his offer to commute their sentences on the condition they serve the equivalent on parole once released" (Susler, 2011), family members gathered to demand their loved ones be granted freedom without conditions. To both humanize the prisoners and emphasize their familial ties, they all carried pictures of their imprisoned family members, with descriptions of who they were and what they had accomplished while in jail (*EXITO* 1999).[33]

In keeping with the shift in focus, members of the campaign sought to work with a broader array of forces than they had done so far. Ofensiva '92 pushed for a stronger emphasis on the international aspects of the work, as well as greater efforts to include diverse sectors of the Puerto Rican population. As part of Ofensiva '92, the U.S.-based National Committee worked to involve new forces or to reinforce their work with groups they had previously engaged with, such as politicians and the religious community.[34]

As a result of these decisions, the campaign to free the prisoners gained momentum in the 1990s. One clear indicator of this was the "Open Letter to President Clinton" published in the *New York Times*. The letter called on Clinton to "free Puerto Rican political prisoners," and was signed by Puerto Rican "citizens engaged in business, industry, civic activities and as Puerto Rican leaders." What was most notable is that the list of signatories included politicians from all the political parties in Puerto Rico, including the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP), the Popular Democratic Party (PPD), and the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), as well as the Executive Committee of the Puerto Rican Federation of Labor (AFL-CIO), the Puerto Rican Manufacturers Association, present and past presidents of the Puerto Rican Bar Association, and eleven elected officials in the U.S., including the three Puerto Rican Congressional Representatives, José Serrano (NY), Nydia Velázquez (NY), and Luis Gutiérrez (IL). Clearly, support for the prisoners had expanded beyond the independence movement to include representatives of many sectors of Puerto Rico and politicians with widely divergent views. The case of the prisoners had become a matter of national dignity and identity in Puerto Rico (*New York Times* 1994).



Publication of the Interfaith Prisoners of Conscience Project. Reprinted, by permission, from Freedom Archives.

Defining the imprisonment and treatment of the political prisoners as a violation of their human rights led to growing support for their release within the North American religious community. According to Reverend Nozomi Ikuta, "The Interfaith Prisoners of Conscience Project (IPOC), founded and directed by an Episcopal priest, the Rev. Dr. S. Michael Yasutake, pioneered this effort" (2010).[35] IPOC was "an interfaith organization dedicated to ministry with political prisoners in the USA" that "belonged to the National Council of Churches' Racial

Justice Working Group. The working group, modeled after the World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism that developed ecumenical support for the battle against apartheid in South Africa, consisted of both grassroots racial justice movement groups and representatives of denominational offices" (Ikuta 2010).

Reverend Yasutake had been interned during World War Two along with other Japanese-Americans. As a result, he "knew injustice firsthand" and used his knowledge to "help others he considers 'political prisoners'"(Ikuta 2010). Josefina Rodríguez, the mother of two prisoners, and Irma Romero, a Mexican woman who was a long-time advocate for the prisoners, were board members of the Interfaith Project. Together, they worked within the religious community to organize people to see the prisoners as human beings, not terrorists. As Yasutake said, "They [the prisoners] are people who acted upon their beliefs and were imprisoned. I support them in their beliefs. The U.S. is in violation of their civil rights" (*Chicago Tribune* 1997).

Support for the prisoners was especially strong among members of the United Church of Christ (UCC). Reverend José Torres, husband of political prisoner Alejandrina Torres and father of political prisoner Carlos Alberto Torres, was a respected member of the Church. A long-time supporter of Puerto Rican independence and justice, he had been one of the few Puerto Rican ministers to participate in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. From his pulpit and within the church, he advocated for the release of his family members and all the prisoners.

Top leaders of the UCC backed freedom for the prisoners. In 1995, the Rev. Dr. Paul Sherry, president of the UCC, led a delegation that also included the Rev. Dr. Thomas Dipko, head of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, and Linda Jaramillo, president of the Council for Hispanic Ministries, to visit the women political prisoners in the Federal Correctional Institution in Dublin, California. In an interview, Sherry noted that the visit ended "with a prayer." He also wanted to assure the prisoners that "they have not been forgotten by the Church and we are committed to working for their freedom" (*Libertad* 1995).

In general, support for the prisoners was stronger among sectors of the Protestant churches in the U.S. than among Catholic ones (Rodríguez 2010).[36] Nonetheless, a few members of the Catholic hierarchy actively campaigned for their release. In 1998, Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit visited Dylcia Pagán, Alicia Rodríguez, Lucy Rodríguez, and Carmen Valentín in Dublin, California. When he left, he declared he "was completely moved by the visit. How can they imprison these four women?" He also observed, "they were honest, and very clear about their commitment, and ready to pay such a high price. An unfair price!" Gumbleton promised to write a letter to President Clinton, "which he hoped he would be able to deliver personally" upon his

return from Iraq where he was headed to "witness the suffering caused by the sanctions" (*Libertad* 1998b).

The faith-based community played an important role in obtaining the prisoners' release. Millions of people in the U.S. belonged to one of the many churches affiliated with the National Council of Churches or the World Council of Churches. Organizations like the Interfaith Project worked diligently to educate diverse congregations about the prisoners. They offered the faith-based communities a religious and moral basis on which to call for their release. For example, Reverend Michael Yasutake opened his call for the prisoners' release with a quote from the Bible. "He is the One who has to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and release to the captives and freedom to the oppressed [Luke 4:16-20]" ("18vo Desfile del Pueblo" 1995).

The involvement of the churches allowed the campaign to reach beyond the Left and the Puerto Rican community to address large numbers of white North Americans, some of whom knew elected officials. As one Puerto Rican member of the Democratic Party who was active in securing the prisoners' release explained to me, "Politicians in this country don't care enough about Puerto Rico or Puerto Ricans to pay attention to what they say. No one hears you. It's when you reach out to the churches and the white members in them who went to school with congressmen or senators or know them or people who know them, then you have an impact. Then it matters" (Anonymous 2010).

One other sector critical to securing the release of the prisoners was elected officials. In the 1990s, there were three Puerto Rican Democratic U.S. Congressmen and one of them, Luis Gutiérrez, had known some of the prisoners for decades. Gutiérrez was instrumental in obtaining the backing of other elected officials to press for the release of the prisoners. José Rivera, a member of the New York City Council, wrote to President Carter (who had commuted the sentences of the Nationalist prisoners in 1999) urging him to join the growing number of dignitaries seeking freedom of the prisoners (*Libertad* 1995). Not too long afterwards, President Carter agreed to Rivera's request. The director of the Carter Center, Division on Human Rights, wrote to President Clinton saying, "since he [Carter] had been willing to release the Nationalists, then he, President Clinton, should follow the same policy regarding the Puerto Rican political prisoners" (*Libertad* 1996).

President Carter joined a growing list of international dignitaries and Nobel Prize winners who called for an end to imprisonment for the Puerto Rican prisoners. This list was the fruit of years of work by Puerto Rican and North American supporters (Meyer 2008: 338–9). Rafael Cancel Miranda and Lolita Lebrón, two of the Nationalist prisoners who had served twenty-five years in U.S. jails prior to their 1979 release,

spoke frequently in Puerto Rico, the U.S., and Latin America about the prisoners. Not only did they have a tremendous amount of moral and political capital, especially in Puerto Rico and the rest of Latin America, they were also "very persuasive speakers" (Deutsch 2010). In 1996, 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú Tum (Guatemala) and 1974 Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel (Argentina) joined with other Nobel Peace Prize winners to issue an "International Call to Conscience" calling on President Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno to release the prisoners (*Washington Post* 1996).[37]

To bolster global knowledge of and support for the prisoners, representatives of the campaign participated in international forums and sponsored tribunals in the U.S. For example, in 1989, they presented the case of Puerto Rico and the prisoners to the Russell Tribunal in Barcelona, Spain. The Tribunal was made up of representatives from Belgium (Francois Rigaux), Algeria (Amar Bentoumi), Japan (Makoto Oda), Chile (Armando Uribe), the U.S. (George Wald), South Africa (Ruth First), and Italy (Gianni Tognoni). After hearing testimony and listening to speakers, the representatives urged the U.S. government to "acknowledge the political prisoner status of those Puerto Ricans incarcerated due to their work and militancy in favor of Puerto Rico's independence," among other requests (Permanent People's Tribunal 1989: 29).

To build on the momentum generated by the 1989 tribunal, activists held the "International Tribunal on Indigenous Peoples and Oppressed Nations in the United States," in San Francisco, California in 1992. Judges at the Tribunal hailed from Spain, Canada, and the Philippines, as well as Hawaii, Native nations, and from across the U.S. Francis Boyle, Professor of International Law at the University of Illinois, presided.[38]

President Clinton and the Release of the Prisoners

By the early 1990s, national and international demands for the release of the prisoners were escalating. Supporters ranged from Nobel Prize winner Reverend Desmond Tutu in South Africa to singer Ricky Martin in Puerto Rico ("Support for the Release of the Fifteen Puerto Rican Political Prisoners" 1999). Realizing that the time had come to press the issue, in November 1993, "the campaign...submitted a formal application to the U.S. Justice Department asking the president to exercise the constitutional power of pardon to grant the immediate and unconditional release of the prisoners" (Susler: 125–6). In response to the political pressure he received, President Clinton issued a statement that he would commute the sentences of the prisoners in August 1999 (*New York Times* 1999a).

President Clinton would not have released the prisoners unless it was politically expedient for him to do so. For close to two decades, the solidarity movement had

worked diligently and consistently to build support for the prisoners. By the early 1990s, their efforts resulted in growing demands for Clinton to free the prisoners. The swelling clamor came from a variety of sources: tens of thousands of people wrote letters or phoned Clinton; activists staged demonstrations across the country, including at the White House; Democratic Party luminaries such as President Carter and respected personages such as Coretta Scott King joined Nobel Peace Prize winners, religious leaders, and officials representing all the political parties in Puerto Rico to call for the freedom of the prisoners. Their voices both encouraged Clinton and offered him a political cover to make his decision. Indeed, in response to the firestorm that erupted following his decision, Clinton defended his order by noting,

> **The petitioners received worldwide support on humanitarian grounds from numerous quarters. President Jimmy Carter wrote in 1997 [in support of] granting clemency to these men and women. Bishop Tutu and Coretta Scott King all wrote to seek clemency for the petitioners. In addition, various Members of Congress, a number of religious organizations, labor organizations, human rights groups and Hispanic civic and community groups supported clemency. The petitioners also received widespread support across the political spectrum within Puerto Rico. (President Clinton's Letter 2000: 17)**

On August 29, 1999, tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans marched through the streets of San Juan demanding immediate and unconditional release of the prisoners. Manifesting the extent to which the cause of the prisoners had become synonymous with the affirmation of what it meant to be Puerto Rican, people from all the political tendencies and walks of life joined the demonstration.[39] As one reporter covering the march wrote, "Independentistas and pro-statehooders, people from the Left and the Right, lower class people and intellectuals, politicians, religious people, and young and old joined together on a rainy Sunday in Plaza Barceló in Barrio Obrero" to call for "the freedom of the political prisoners" (Cárdenas 1999).

Charles Ruff, the White House Counsel who had defended Clinton successfully in the impeachment hearings, also played an important role. His legal skills had contributed to the defeat of Republican efforts to impeach Clinton, a fact for which the President was very grateful. Ruff employed this same legal training to study the case of the FALN prisoners and he found legal merit to the petition to release them (Anonymous 2010). There is no doubt that his recommendation carried weight with Clinton.

One of the major arguments that convinced Clinton was the length of the prisoners' sentences. Although only Haydée Beltrán had been convicted of murder, the prisoners had all received disproportionately long sentences, ranging from Edwin

Hundreds welcome the political prisoners to La Casita, located in the Puerto Rican neighborhood of Chicago, September 1999. Reprinted, by permission, from Alejandro Molina and the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Political prisoners.

Cortés, with thirty-five years, to Carmen Valentín with ninety years; most of the original eleven were sentenced to an average of fifty-five years (*La Raza* 1999). By 1999, they had all served more years than had many prisoners convicted of murder or other violent crimes (Susler 2006: 123). As Clinton pointed out in his letter explaining why he had released them, "the prisoners were serving extremely lengthy sentences—in some cases, 90 years—which were out of proportion to their crimes (President Clinton's Letter 2000: 16).

Clinton's decision to release the prisoners received a hostile response from the FBI, many members of the Republican Party, some members of the Democratic Party, and much of the media.[40] Many accused Clinton of releasing the prisoners to garner support among Puerto Ricans for Hillary Clinton's upcoming run for the Senate in New York, which, it should be noted, represents a tacit admission that Puerto Ricans wanted the prisoners out of jail (*Washington Post* 1999). This accusation also reveals that U.S. politicians and the media view Puerto Ricans as both a voting bloc and a community that operate with shared demands and a unified voice. It also illustrates that the political prisoners had become such an important factor that many believed their release could affect the outcome of the New York senatorial race.

Largely overlooked by those who criticized Clinton's decision was his demand that the prisoners' renounce violence and *the fact that all of them did*.[41] In order to arrive at a joint position, the prisoners held discussions among themselves, the first time

that many of them had had the chance to converse with each other for close to fifteen years. All the prisoners agreed to the terms Clinton extended to them and all but one, Oscar López Rivera, accepted the offer. López Rivera refused to accept the offer because it did not include Haydée Beltrán, who had been convicted of murder in the Mobil Oil Corporation bombing, and Carlos Alberto Torres, and because of the conditions that were attached to it.[42] On September 10, 1999, the other prisoners walked out of the prisons nineteen or sixteen long years after they were captured (See Table 1). Family, friends, and supporters welcomed them joyously and greeted them as heroes whose sacrifices and dedication had upheld and affirmed Puerto Rican dignity and the struggle for independence.

Conclusion

This article explores the struggle to free the Puerto Rican FALN political prisoners from their arrest in 1980 to the release of most of them in 1999. It chronicles how the prisoners and their supporters overcame the media's condemnation of them as terrorists, the scant political support they received initially from the progressive sectors and the general public alike, and a justice system that refused to recognize their status as prisoners of war and, instead, meted out disproportionately long sentences. The captured Puerto Rican independentistas entered prison branded as terrorists and emerged nineteen years later celebrated as national heroes by Puerto Ricans, with the support of a broad range of progressive people in the U.S. and around the world.

What accounts for this transformation? The prisoners themselves were central to the campaign and key to its victory. They consistently maintained that they were fighting for the independence of their nation and they were neither criminals nor terrorists. Gradually, but definitively, their position obtained understanding, support, and respect. The prisoners had and have deep familial and political roots in their respective communities in Chicago, New York City, or Puerto Rico. Families, friends, and supporters in both cities, as well as across the U.S. and in Puerto Rico, mobilized in support of the prisoners and worked diligently to explain who they were and the colonial condition of Puerto Rico that they were fighting to end.

However, family ties and community activism alone cannot account for the increasing clamor for their freedom that occurred in the 1990s. Respect for human rights and the shared sense of puertorriqueñidad galvanized Puerto Ricans from small towns in the mountainous interior of the island to San Juan and from Orlando to the barrios of Chicago and New York City to protest what they perceived to be a fundamental injustice being committed against their compatriots. The belief that the U.S. government was treating the Boricua prisoners unjustly *because they were Puerto Ricans, just as we*

Hundreds in San Juan welcome the just released political prisoners, September 1999. Reprinted, by permission, from Alina Luciano.

are, permeated the entire political spectrum, from leaders in the pro-statehood New Progressive Party and the pro-status quo Popular Democratic Party to the entire independence movement, and everyone inbetween.

Both the prisoners and the movement that stood in solidarity with them successfully reframed the struggle to secure their freedom, moving from the 1980s definition of them as freedom fighters to the 1990s projection of them as national heroes and patriots. And they did so without sacrificing the principles the prisoners had adopted at their arrest in the early 1980s. The pro-independence activists went to prison because they believed that Puerto Rico should be a sovereign nation and they emerged from prison with the same demand, albeit they now renounced violence. They and the movement that supported them defined their position as political prisoners and the disproportional sentences and harsh treatment they had received as a metaphor for the colonial situation of Puerto Rico. They focused on reuniting the prisoners with their families as part of the process to suture the rupture colonialism and the U.S. government created for many individual Puerto Rican families, as well as for the Puerto Rican family writ large. In the process, the prisoners and the campaign to release them turned the defeat that the 1980s arrests represented into political victories in the 1990s.

The prisoners used their imprisonment to educate people about the colonial situation of Puerto Rico at the same time as they personified the strength and determination of anti-colonial activists to struggle against U.S. imperialism. They, and their supporters, evoked and mobilized Puerto Ricans' sense of collective national identity

and humanitarianism in the pursuit of their freedom. At the same time, they mobilized North Americans and the international human rights movement to speak out against their imprisonment. Together, they built a movement capable of generating sufficient pressure to convince President Clinton and his advisors that the politically correct and expedient action to undertake was to release the Puerto Rican independentistas. When the prisoners stepped out of the plane that took them to Puerto Rico in September 1999, the crowd assembled to greet them yelled, "Bienvenidos a casa! (Welcome Home)." In response, Lucy Rodríguez, one of the prisoners, thanked the crowd "for all your work and for bringing us home" (*New York Times* 1999b).

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NOTES

1 This article focuses exclusively on the campaign to free the FALN political prisoners; it does not discuss either the imprisonment or the release of Puerto Rican political prisoners from other organizations. For a list of Puerto Rican activists imprisoned from 1980 to 1999, see Paralitici (2004: 470–4). As of this writing, there are two Puerto Rican political prisoners in U.S. prisons. They are Oscar López Rivera (Terre Haute, IN) and Norberto González Claudio (Central Falls, RI). For information on them, see Boricua Human Rights Network http://boricuahumanrights.org/ and Pro Libertad http://www.prolibertadweb.com/.

2 President Clinton included Puerto Rican political prisoner Juan Segarra Palmer in the offer. Segarra Palmer was arrested in 1985 and convicted of having participated in the 1983 robbery at a Wells Fargo depot in Hartford, Connecticut. Like López, Clinton required Segarra Palmer to serve an additional five years. He was released in 2004.

3 I thank César Rosado Marzán for this formulation. Although consensus among Puerto Ricans regarding what the status of the island should be does not exist, Puerto Ricans inevitably define themselves as Puerto Ricans. For some, this signals Puerto Ricans identify as a nation, which "is not necessarily tantamount to a desire for political independence" (Morris 1995: 12), while others argue that Puerto Ricans see themselves as members of a shared "ethno-nation" (Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997: 17). For the purpose of this essay, I define Puerto Rican nationalism as an awareness of a collective identity shaped by a common history, language, culture, and territorial base. Puerto Ricans on the island and in the U.S. share this identity, even though their realities are quite different.

4 For a discussion of the U.S. government and Puerto Rican politicians' positions on the Jones Act,

see Trías Monge (1997: Chapter 6). For various interpretations of the U.S. government's extension of citizenship to Puerto Ricans and the ramifications of this decision, see Rivera Ramos (2001: 145–54).

5 I have rounded off the figures to highlight the correlation between the two populations.

6 For a discussion of their efforts in New York City, see Thomas (2010).

7 For a discussion of Puerto Ricans and political activity in the U.S., see Torres and Velázquez (1998).

8 For life histories of the prisoners, see *Can't Jail the Spirit* and González Cruz (2006: 86–115).

9 The bombed sites were the following buildings: Exxon and Banco de Ponce in Rockefeller Center, Union Carbide and Lever Brothers on Park Avenue, and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and the Marine Midland Bank (*New York Times* 1974c).

10 The five prisoners referred to were members of the pro-independence Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. They were Oscar Collazo, imprisoned since 1950 following his failed attack on Blair House, where President Truman was staying; and Lolita Lebrón, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irvin Flores, and Andrés Figueroa Cordero, who fired shots in the U.S. Congress in 1954. President Carter released the five Nationalist prisoners in 1979, after they had served twenty-nine (Collazo) and twenty-five (the four others) years of their sentences.

11 Fraunces Tavern is an up-scale restaurant located in Manhattan's financial district. To date, no one has been charged with carrying out the bombing, although the FALN claimed credit for it. The goal, according to the FALN communiqué, was to protest and publicize attacks (including murders) of pro-independence supporters in Puerto Rico (Sojourner Truth Organization 1979: 61).

12 On January 11, 1975, the PSP was holding an event in Mayagüez when it was bombed. The PSP claimed the attack was the work of "Cuban exiles and the right-wing of the PNP. Twelve people were injured and Charbonier and Ramón Torres were killed" (Nieves Falcón 2009: 172).

13 In August 1977, the FALN called Mobil Oil Corporation in New York City to inform them the group had placed a bomb there. Despite the warning, a janitor working in the building died in the explosion. In 1974, the FALN directed police officers to a site in New York City where they had placed a bomb in retaliation for the "brutal murder" of a Puerto Rican by the NYPD. The officer who found the bomb "lost an eye and was permanently disabled" (Fernández 1994: 208).

14 In fact, as noted above, the janitor's death was an accident. A 1981 RAND Corporation study on "Puerto Rican Terrorists" also refers to the FALN's post-1974 actions as "symbolic bombings," as cited in Fernández (1994: 206). Fernández discusses the FALN's use of violence and counters the U.S. government's assertion that the eleven Puerto Ricans arrested in Evanston are terrorists, in Chapter 6.

15 Other anti-colonial struggles have also conducted military actions in the nation that colonizes them. On Algerian actions in France, see Haroun (1986) and Horne (1987); on the Irish in England, see McGladdery (2006) and A. R. Oppenheimer (2009).

16 The book contains communiqués from armed clandestine organizations that operated in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Many of the FALN communiqués end with the demand to "Release the five Puerto Rican political prisoners in Yanki jails."

17 Roughly 48,000 Puerto Ricans served in the Vietnam War, of which number 38,000 were drafted. It is not clear how many Puerto Ricans were killed during the war; estimates range from 345 to 430, but these figures may be low (Black 2011).

18 For background on the PRSC, see Starr (2010: 140–2).

[19] For a discussion of the politics and organizations during this period, see Starr (2010: 142–8).
[20] On March 1, 1954, the four Nationalists had fired shots in the U.S. Congress; since the Bloc prioritized their release it named itself for the date. Attitudes toward the FALN were not the only point of disagreement, but the one that bears most directly on the topic of this article; for other points of conflict, see Gosse (1996: 315–7). For a statement of the political points, see March 1 Bloc (1997). The main Puerto Rican force in the Bloc was the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional; the North American organizations included Prairie Fire Organizing Committee and Sojourner Truth Organization.
[21] For a vivid picture of what occurred during the trials of the FALN, see Fernández (1994: 7–16, 218–26.)
[22] In Puerto Rico, the Comité Unitario Contra la Represión and the Comité Especial de Defensa y Apoyo a los Prisioneros de Guerra Puertorriqueños also carried out work in support of the prisoners during the 1980s.
[23] Carlos Alberto Torres, who was released in July 2010, was in jail for over thirty years, during which time his family continually worked to secure his well-being and release. The family of Oscar López Rivera, who as of this writing is still in jail, continues its efforts to obtain his freedom.
[24] They considered it an "impossible crime" because they did not believe that Puerto Rico was part of the U.S. Therefore, to fight for independence was not to overthrow the U.S. government but to end its colonial occupation of Puerto Rico. For a discussion of this point, see Reyes (2002: 7–8).
[25] For a history of the formation and early politics of Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, see Weather Underground (1976). For a discussion of Sojourner Truth Organization, see Staudenmaier (2010). For a discussion of the May 19th Communist Organization (May 19th is the birthday of both Ho Chi Minh and Malcolm X), see Berger (2006: 225–43).
[26] For a history of the MLN, see Movimiento de Liberación Nacional (1987: 3–5).
[27] Lolita Lebrón spoke in New York City, Milwaukee, Chicago, Los Angeles, Portland, San Francisco, Denver, El Paso, and Ciudad Juárez, México, cities where either the MLN or the New Movement or both had a strong presence.
28 For a picture of this, see Block (2009: 146).
[29] For a discussion of organizations in the Puerto Rican Community, see Flores-González (2001) and Ramos-Zayas (2003).
[30] This overview is based on my reading of *Libertad*, the publication of the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War, leaflets from the New Movement, and other materials located in the archives of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, Chicago, IL.
[31] Most of these attorneys were or are associated with the People's Law Office, a progressive law office in Chicago. Melinda Power, my sister, works in the West Town Community Law Office, as did Mara Siegal.
[32] In 1953, following the designation of Puerto Rico as a "Free Associated State," the U.S. government succeeded in convincing or pressuring the U.N. to affirm that the island was no longer a colony and therefore the U.S. no longer needed to "transmit[] information on Puerto Rico to the United Nations' Decolonizing Committee" (Duffy Burnett and Marshall 2001: 19). By the mid-1960s, the presence of Cuba and former colonies changed the political dynamics in the U.N. For a detailed discussion of the work to reopen U.N. discussion on the status of Puerto Rico, see García (1984).

[33] *EXITO* was the Spanish-language weekly publication of the *Chicago Tribune*.
[34] In the mid-1990s, the National Committee had chapters in Ann Arbor, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Orlando, St. Paul/Minnesota, Philadelphia, and San Francisco (*Libertad* 1997).
[35] Nozomi Ikuta was chair of the Interfaith Prisoners of Conscience Project, which operated as part of the National Council of Churches, U.S.A. The National Council "is made up of 32 denominations of about 40 million Christians" (*Chicago Tribune* 1997).
[36] To date I have not been able to ascertain why.
[37] The other Nobel Peace Prize winners who joined the call were Mairead Corrighan Maguire (Ireland), José Ramos-Horta (East Timor), Dr. Victor W. Sidel (U.S., Founder and co-President of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War), and The Most Reverend Desmond Mpilo Tutu (South Africa).
[38] For testimonies and judgments from the Tribunal, see Molino (1996).
[39] The increased demand for the release of the prisoners paralleled the growing protests against the U.S. Navy in Vieques; both reflected and stimulated a heightened sense of puertorriqueñidad.
[40] See U.S. Government (1999a, 1999b).
[41] In fact, the prisoners had already indicated their willingness to "participate in reaching a just and dignified political solution to our colonial problem" ("Statement from the Puerto Rican Political Prisoners" 1997).
[42] Haydée Beltrán was released in April 2009 and Carlos Alberto Torres in July 2010. In January 2011, Oscar López Rivera was denied parole and was told that he must wait fifteen years to again seek parole. See National Boricua Human Rights Network, http://boricuahumanrights.org/.

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