

FORUM: PUERTO RICO AND THE UNITED STATES AT CRITICAL JUNCTURES

## The Office of Civil Defense and Colonialism as a State of Emergency

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To many observers, the failing performance of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in Puerto Rico during the aftermath of the 2017 hurricanes revealed once again the ignorance, intentional neglect, and disposability of the racialized Other characteristic of colonial rule.<sup>1</sup> But it also hints at how U.S. emergency-response agencies are motivated by more than basic humanitarian concerns. They aim to discipline individuals and communities into the liberal-capitalist principles of the U.S. nation-empire.<sup>2</sup> FEMA's insistence on online form submissions, even while people in Puerto Rico lacked electricity, and its denial of aid to those who lost their homes, because they lacked legal property titles, are just two examples of the preoccupation with bureaucratic authority and order that undergirds relief endeavors.<sup>3</sup>

Practices of benevolence have long served as key fibers used to thread and rethread the colonial fabric of the U.S. nation-empire, especially after World War II. Take the most immediate institutional antecedent to FEMA: the Office of Civil Defense (OCD). Imbued with Cold War national security logic, the OCD conflated preparedness in case of enemy attacks and sabotage with that of nature-related disasters.<sup>4</sup> U.S. federal government units, Puerto Rican state officials, and common people living in Puerto Rico attached themselves to the OCD's programs, bureaucrats, and practices for divergent reasons. Such attachments forged intimate and complex bonds that, while providing relief at moments of extreme need, also naturalized militarization, inculcated a sense of the ideal liberal (colonial) citizen, and consolidated the authority of the new *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA) or Commonwealth state.

In the early Cold War context, civil defense initiatives endeavored to preserve government authority and order in the event of an emergency. The Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950 called for preparations to respond to enemy attack or sabotage to persons and private property. But the meaning of "emergency" soon became even more expansive. The 1952 OCD annual report noted that, in practice, civil defense trainers and volunteers frequently found themselves forming frontline emergency response teams in high-profile disasters such as floods, air crashes, tornados, and snow storms.<sup>5</sup> As a result, thirty-two states and four territories and possessions revised local legislation to allow the use of civil defense forces in peacetime disaster. In Puerto Rico, the local OCD law enacted in 1950 included nature-related disasters from its

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<sup>1</sup>Laura Sullivan, "FEMA Report Acknowledges Failures in Puerto Rico Disaster Response," *NPR*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/13/628861808/> (accessed May 5, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>John Preston, *Disaster Education: "Race," Equity, and Pedagogy* (Rotterdam, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Rebecca Banuchi, "Llueven las denegatorias de asistencia por parte de FEMA en Puerto Rico," *80grados*, Feb. 25, 2018, <http://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2018/02/llueven-las-denegatorias-de-asistencia-por-parte-de-fema-en-puerto-rico/> (accessed June 11, 2019).

<sup>4</sup>Homeland Security National Preparedness Task Force, *Civil Defense and Homeland Security: A Short History of National Preparedness Efforts* (Washington, DC, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>Federal Civil Defense Administration, *Annual Report 1952* (Washington, DC, 1953), 19–23.

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inception.<sup>6</sup> The organization also took steps to plan for nuclear attacks or accidents (though U.S. federal officials would disregard worries about the radioactive pollution produced by their own navy's target and bombing exercises in places such as Vieques).<sup>7</sup>

Then in 1955, Puerto Rico's OCD Director, Miguel A. Muñoz, made a slight but not insignificant change to the program's description: he substituted the term "rebellion" for that of "sabotage."<sup>8</sup> Such a change likely responded to regional political convulsions, not least the anti-colonial mobilizations against the recently inaugurated ELA and the Puerto Rican Nationalists' armed attack to the U.S. Capitol the year before. The ELA government subsequently took pains to alert the OCD to potential internal political dangers and their own plans to address them. For instance, the OCD office received and filed copies of the ELA's 1957–1958 *Master Plan of Public Relations*, which proposed that in case of a new Nationalist attack, the ELA government would have ready a sheet with information on known Nationalists for immediate distribution to U.S. media outlets so as to discredit them as fanatics.<sup>9</sup>

Such national security concerns and emergency management practices set in motion a new array of bureaucratic means of tying the Puerto Rican islands closer to the U.S. federal apparatus, which in turn cultivated explicit and implicit forms of colonial consent. The establishment in 1958 of a direct private telephone line to communicate attack warnings between OCD headquarters, the Roosevelt Roads naval station (the main Caribbean site for the US Atlantic Fleet), the Puerto Rico police headquarters, and the Federal Agency for Aviation (FAA) branch at San Juan's international airport, where workers retransmitted signals to the U.S. Virgin Islands, offered one fitting illustration of the growing connective tissue between U.S. federal powers, Puerto Rican offices, and institutions across the Caribbean more broadly.<sup>10</sup> The OCD likewise shared its headquarters and army training facilities with the National Guard.<sup>11</sup> ELA employees meanwhile were recruited in increasing numbers to attend radiological defense courses on the continental U.S., which became quite popular, perhaps because they provided opportunities for professional advancement.<sup>12</sup> These courses were later taught on the island through the University of Puerto Rico. There were also efforts to reach out to high schools by providing instruments and training to students in science classes.<sup>13</sup>

The OCD mobilized all of the modern technology at its reach to communicate urgent concerns about national security and prompt civilians to preparedness, vigilance, and action. They partnered with the Red Cross, with whom they also coordinated to extend the Puerto Rico OCD model to the nearby Dominican Republic.<sup>14</sup> OCD officials showed Spanish-dubbed

<sup>6</sup> *United States Statutes At Large, 1950–1951*, vol. 64, part I (Washington, DC, 1952), 1245–7.

<sup>7</sup> Manuel A. Rodríguez, "Imaginar el desastre: Aprensiones nucleares, desvarios radioactivos, y Defensa Civil en Puerto Rico, 1960–1965," in *Tiempos binarios: La guerra fría desde Puerto Rico y el Caribe*, ed. Manuel R. Rodríguez and Silvia Alvarez-Curbelo (San Juan, PR, 2017), 73–116; César Ayala and José Bolívar Fresneda, "The Cold War and the Second Expropriations of the Navy in Vieques," *Centro Journal*, 23, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 10–35.

<sup>8</sup> O. Riefkohl to A. Mercado, Aug. 7, 1958, *Materia Defensa Civil, Años 1952–60*, Caja 3341, Tarea 96-20 [hereafter T 96-20], Serie Correspondencia General II, Fondo Oficina del Gobernador, Archivo General de Puerto Rico [hereafter AGPR], San Juan, PR.

<sup>9</sup> Sontheimer, Runkle & Associates, "Master Plan of Public Relations, Fiscal Year 1957–58," August 3, 1957, Caja 3342, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>10</sup> This warning system also demanded the repair and expansion of the siren alarm system to all island municipalities, which could be used, they argued, for other emergencies such as fires or for the nightly curfews of minors: A. Mercado to Gov. Luis Muñoz Marín [hereafter LMM], Nov. 20, 1959, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>11</sup> G. Irizarry to T. Vidal, Aug. 30, 1962; "Boletín Informativo," Aug. 17, 1961, Caja 3343, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>12</sup> Students to LMM, S. Quiñónez, and E. Antonini, Nov. 24, 1959, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR; student reports, 1961 and 1962, Caja 3343, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>13</sup> A. Mercado to E. Padilla, Dec. 18, 1959; R. Sánchez Vilella to A. Mercado, Mar. 25, 1960, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>14</sup> Red Cross's "Statement of Understanding," Oct. 26, 1959, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR; "Boletín Informativo," June 13, 1961, Caja 3343, T96-20, AGPR.

films in theaters and local TV channels; hosted weekly radio programs; wrote monthly bulletins; placed newspaper articles; established OCD Day (later, OCD Week); organized exhibits, public talks, and parades; placed banners; and created the island-wide, monthly siren system check-up.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, officials sought to create a tight social fabric by building ties with a wide array of youth-focused groups as well as adult civic organizations, such as the Rotary and Lions Clubs, masonic lodges, and church lay groups.<sup>16</sup> They created a police and medical auxiliary corps and, later, an OCD rural corps.<sup>17</sup> These efforts built upon long-standing economic and social development projects aimed at cultivating colonial liberal citizenship on the islands by reinforcing norms and behaviors of everyday socialization, civic participation, political organization, discipline, production, and consumption that conformed to heteropatriarchal and white, middle-class norms. Volunteers were pushed to acquiesce to the current colonial pact when they were required to take loyalty oaths to the U.S. federal government and its laws before a judge at the end of training, and public employees had to do the same to get travel reimbursement for the radiological courses they attended.<sup>18</sup> Political developments in Cuba after the 1959 Cuban Revolution, such as the 1962 Missile Crisis, made it necessary for the OCD to continue this militarized policing and redouble its socio-cultural endeavors.

Puerto Rican government officials did not accept OCD officers' authority without question, even after the 1958 increase in funds. However, island politicians had just rearticulated a few years earlier the colonial compact with the United States, which granted Puerto Rico limited political autonomy and directorship of old and new local state offices, and embarked on a major structural overhaul and expansion. Thus key political leaders increasingly saw the OCD as one more means in the ongoing project of ELA state formation. While the OCD's main objective was to maintain US federal government authority and control in the case of emergency, for ELA officials it offered the opportunity to insert themselves in the chain of authority. The Puerto Rico OCD office required detailed governmental authority succession plans for every agency in case of emergency, which were drafted several times, discussed, and distributed locally and federally.<sup>19</sup> In 1958, the OCD also took control of civil defense endeavors away from municipal mayors, probably in an effort to distance the institution from local partisan struggles, and divided the PR islands into zones to coordinate municipal activities.<sup>20</sup> The OCD recruit selection became a complicated affair conducted by a committee composed of, and stringing together, all key municipal figures.<sup>21</sup> It also required an investigation on the reputation, character, habits, and customs of the applicant. Although almost impossible to sustain, the procedure meant to consolidate ELA authority at the local government level.

The OCD provided an additional pool of resources for the ELA to continue its development project with the same personalist, populist approach that had made possible the rise to power of the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) in the 1940s.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, the OCD slowly established its presence and built support for its endeavors among marginal sectors of the population.<sup>23</sup> The governor's special assistants often redirected people's petitions for material support

<sup>15</sup>J. Villeta, "Carta Circular," Dec. 29, 1959; A. Mercado to LMM, Aug. 29, 1959, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR; monthly reports, 1966-1967, Caja 3350, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>16</sup>"Boletín Informativo," Sept. 15, 1965, Sept. 16, 1965, Sept. 17, 1965, and Sept. 20, 1965, Caja 3343, T96-20, AGPR; monthly reports, 1966-7, Caja 3350, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>17</sup>Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico, "Reglamento," Oct. 14, 1959, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>18</sup>A. Mercado to LMM, Oct. 9, 1959, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>19</sup>E. Padilla to H. Alonso, Mar. 21, 1960, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR; R. Fournier to T. Vidal, Nov. 8, 1962, Caja 3345, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>20</sup>L. Hoegh to LMM, Dec. 23, 1958, and A. Mercado to LMM, Jan. 14, 1959, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>21</sup>Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico, "Reglamento," Oct. 14, 1959, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>22</sup>O. Riefkohl to A. Mercado, Aug. 7, 1958, Caja 3344, T96-20, AGPR, and "Boletín Informativo," Aug. 30, 1961, Caja 3343, T96-20, AGPR.

<sup>23</sup>For an example, see A. Mercado to E. Rodríguez, Mar. 17 and Mar. 30, 1960, Caja 3341, T96-20, AGPR.

to OCD directors. It became practice for the latter to send the corresponding zone coordinator to investigate the circumstances of the petitioners, producing lengthy reports on their dire living conditions. The OCD often stepped outside of its bounds to address other issues, mostly housing-related problems occasioned by floods, high tides, and fires, as well as by hazardous construction, bad terrain conditions, or just simple poverty. Correspondence shows that these male officials indeed sympathized with petitioners, and sought to bend rules to alleviate their plight, albeit still within a paternalist, individualist, benevolent framework.

The OCD's history in the PR islands during the Cold War highlights the complex web of long-standing, multilayered, overlapping, colonial entanglements at the core of United States–Puerto Rico relations, which FEMA continues to replicate through its militarization of emergency efforts and complex bureaucratic and financial arrangements with insular state offices.<sup>24</sup> The U.S. federal state's concerns about national security and protection of liberal politics, economics, and sociality after World War II led to a renewed presence in Puerto Rico (and region) in a wide array of areas. Everyday people, out of necessity, reinterpreted their survival needs as forms of emergency, too, and grabbed onto those few available threads—coerced dependency—that produced a tight colonial fabric, which we must unravel today.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Edwin Meléndez, “The U.S.’s Neglect of Puerto Rico Has Never Been Benign,” *Global Americans*, Oct. 3, 2017, <https://theglobalamericans.org/2017/10/neglect-puerto-rico-never-benign/> (accessed May 5, 2019).

<sup>25</sup>Ramón Vélez to the CD, Nov. 16, 1964, Caja 3345, T96-20, AGPR.