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## Book Review

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# In search of a decent and true biography of Juan Perón

by Stephen Pepper

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### **Peron, A Biography**

Joseph Page.  
Random House, 1983.  
594 pp. \$25.00.

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The overthrow of the legitimate government of the Philippines led by President Ferdinand Marcos by agencies of the U.S. government, and the campaign to villify and discredit him and his wife, Imelda, is almost a carbon-copy of the campaign that Washington conducted against President Juan Perón of Argentina and his wife, Eva, and which is in fact still continuing. Spruille Braden, the U.S. ambassador to Argentina from April 1945 to June 1946, and subsequently assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs, casted himself in the role of Perón's destroyer, much as Stephen Bosworth, Paul Wolfowitz, and Michael Armacost performed in the present Philippine fiasco. Then as now the State Department was willingly aided by the U.S. news media.

The present biography is a continuation of this campaign, written by Joseph Page, who is a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center, and a former collaborator of Ralph Nader. Page's book is the typical product of an American academic who believes that he lends credibility to his prejudices by maintaining the posture of scholarly objectivity. The result is a mealy-mouthed text in which each absurd scandal against Perón is treated as if it were a major affair of state. For example, Page writes (p. 295), "As Juan Perón moved steadily toward his sixtieth birthday [as opposed presumably to certain alcoholics who move unsteadily toward their 60th—S.P.] . . . telltale traces of gray were still absent from his slick hair. Many suspected that he was using dye to maintain a relatively youthful mien."

Nevertheless, the book is valuable on two counts: It introduces to someone like myself, who knew nothing of Perón, the fascinating account of his rise to power and world influence, which persists to this day; secondly, it unwittingly serves to indict State Department policy over a period of several decades.

This would be a very different review were it written by someone well-informed in the subject, for surely it would

shred much of Page's assumed command of the subject. But in fact it may be useful for it to be written by a *Yanqui*, because the surprise of the encounter with one of the most important and impressive figures of our century is still fresh. It is as if someone knowing little or nothing about France, but able to appreciate greatness, comes upon the life of Charles de Gaulle.

Indeed, the comparison to de Gaulle is apt because Perón, too, was one of the few individuals in our time to have truly served his fatherland. It can be said of him that he saved Argentina, and made it rise to a period of greatness. Significantly Perón bore witness to de Gaulle's greatness, as this passage from Page's book testifies, which also incorporates his typical snideness toward his subject (p. 386): "In early October [1964], French President Charles de Gaulle arrived in Argentina on a tour of Latin America. Perón instructed his followers to greet the distinguished visitor as if he were their *conductor*. It was an opportunistic gambit that succeeded. Shouting slogans that linked the two men, the Perónists gave de Gaulle a warm reception."

De Gaulle and Perón had in common that they were both military men, both strong nationalists, and both were well hated by the State Department. In fact, the reason they were so despised was that they were first and foremost national patriots, and in the Anglo-American scheme of things this is the worst of all crimes, as President Marcos, also a former military man, is the latest to experience. The State Department invariably identifies this outlook as fascist, as in the case of de Gaulle, sympathizing with Nazism as in the case of Perón.

An excellent example of this attitude was Washington's response to a speech made by Perón on June 10, 1944 at the University of La Plata on the occasion of the inauguration of a new professorship of national defense. The speech was entitled, "The Significance of National Defense from a Military Point of View." As Page reports (p. 74), "[North Americans] . . . found in the speech nothing less than the blueprint for the creation of a totalitarian state." Shortly afterward, on July 11, 1945, newly arrived Ambassador Braden cabled Washington, "Perón as the one outstanding leader now on [the] Argentine scene is [the] embodiment of [the] present

Fascist military control. . . .” Page weighs “objectively” the evidence of Perón’s Nazi ties and finds it lacking any substance, but still manages to defame Perón with the charge (p. 89): “. . . Expediency always enjoyed first priority in Perón’s scheme of things. . . . His admiration for the German and Italian experiences burned most brightly when the Wehrmacht was enjoying its spectacular success. . . .” Key to Page’s liberal bias is the view that Perón’s “approach obviously carried with it a predisposition to authoritarian rule.” Proof of this disposition is speeches Perón made in 1944 where “he reiterated the proposition that the state should harmonize the interests of employees and employers and thereby achieve true social justice.”

What’s wrong with that? one may well ask. In fact, for me, one of the most surprising discoveries in reading this book is that Perón possessed a mature philosophy of government and leadership called “Justicialismo” in which the head of state is referred to as “the Conductor” to re-enforce the concept of “harmony” in governance. *Justicialismo*, which has more in common with Henry Carey’s *Harmony of Interests* than with Marxism, conceives the state as a potential unity for action, a concept beyond Page’s grasp. Indeed, it’s rejection of the text-book class-struggle creed so infuriates Page that he calls it, “nonsensical obscurantism” (p. 221).

In fact, *Justicialismo* depends on a highly developed sense of productive labor power, obviously not in the Marxist sense, but in the sense of the American System. From his earliest entry into politics, Perón possessed this sense, which set him apart from other military officers, a fact which Page grudgingly acknowledges (p. 62). As already expressed in his speeches of 1943 and 1944, Perón conceived of a society functioning in harmony in which the engine of progress is a well-organized labor force: “Modern experience shows that the better organized masses of workers without doubt are those who can best be directed and led in a completely orderly way” (p. 70).

Perón developed his sense of labor power from a military concept called the “nation-under-arms,” which he encountered in the Spanish translation (1927) of *Das Volk in Waffen*; a book written by German Gen. Colman von der Goltz in 1883. The concept has its modern origin in Lazar Carnot’s “levée-en-mass” of 1793, in which, for the first time, the entire population of a nation was mobilized. It became the basic doctrine of the German General Staff from whom Perón derived it. He then converted it into a theory of governance in which the labor force plays the role of the army, and the nation must be mobilized to achieve secular strategies in peacetime the way the army achieves them in war. This doctrine is actually most similar to the West Point concept of the military-engineer as applied by General Douglas MacArthur to post-war Japan.

Perón first wrote of the “Nation-under-Arms” in a text called *Apuntes de historia militar (Notes on Military History)*, written around 1931 as a military-history course at the

Argentine War Academy, where he was lecturer at the time, but not published until 1951. It is interesting again to note that de Gaulle was similarly engaged in these years, and produced his later famous, *France and its Army*. But Perón’s interests were if anything wider than de Gaulle’s, who remained narrowly focused on military issues until circumstances forced him into political life.

The second surprising discovery for the novice in these matters is Perón’s fully developed international program. He considered *Justicialismo* to be an appropriate formulation for all developing nations and he developed his Third Position as an international outlook. Within the Latin American continent he actively strove to create a unified movement. Perón frequently told his fellow Latin Americans, “The year 2000 will find us either united or enslaved” (p. 274). Page adds that, deriving his notion from the European common market, “he saw the confederation of Latin states as the only road to development. . . .” And indeed, he struggled until the day he died to bring this unity into being, first with Chile and then

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with Brazil. The elections of Getulio Vargas as President of Brazil in 1950 and Gen. Carlos Ibanez del Campo as President of Chile in 1952 provided the conditions for Perón. In his famous remarks before visiting Chile in 1952, he said, “I believe that Chilean-Argentine unity, a complete unity and not a halfway one, should be made total and immediate. Simple economic unity will not be sufficiently strong. . . . In this situation, one must be bold. Create unity and then solve the problems as they arise” (pp. 275-6). He then added that Argentina would give Chile all the meat and wheat she needed, and with a wink, added that Argentina would be disposed to annex Chile. The political opposition, which included the unsuccessful Socialist Party candidate, Salvador Allende, hammered away at the Argentine leader and his Chilean supporters, and eventually blocked the attempt to achieve unity.

The antagonisms between Argentina and Brazil have been the cornerstone of Anglo-American policy toward the southern continent throughout the 20th century. Vargas, however, was the one politician who could overcome this situation from Brazil’s side. He was sympathetic to Perónism, “and open to the idea of continental unity.” But the combination of the State Department and the Brazilian oligarchy was too

much, and Vargas allegedly committed suicide in 1954. Joao Goulart, then minister of labor, became President in 1961, and was overthrown by the United States under the direction of then Ambassador Lincoln Gordon three years later. Regardless of Goulart's own reliability, the U.S. justification of its role in the coup was that, "[Goulart] was about to attempt a Perónist solution to the crisis confronting his nation at the time" (p. 278).

In the larger world, Perón put forth the foreign policy of the Third Position. He unveiled this in a global radio address he made early in his first term. In it he claimed that a policy to steer between the emerging power blocs was a solution for all those nations unwilling to enroll in one or the other. He called for the adoption of this policy as a means to put an end to the Cold War. In a follow-up note to other Latin American governments, he invited them to join together for peace and make contact through the good offices of the Vatican (p. 185). At the same time Argentina remained a bulwark against Soviet penetration of the continent. Even though Perón's initiative clearly preceded and inspired the non-aligned movement, Page is at pains to disparage this claim, and to ridicule Perón's effort.

In Page's text the State Department and its allies, the U. S. press, stand indicted for their intemperate meddling in the affairs of a sovereign nation. Secretary Cordell Hull, who never thought to help Jewish victims of Hitler throughout his reign, nevertheless set in motion the unremitting persecution of Argentina as a Nazi-fascist state. But it was Ambassador Braden who, in the words of the British Ambassador, "came to Buenos Aires with the fixed idea that he had been elected by Providence to overthrow the Farrell-Perón regime" (p. 96). Braden met with the representatives of the North American press to declare U. S. policy to be non-intervention in the affairs of a sovereign power, but at the same time to promote representative government throughout the Americas. Page reports, "The ambassador immediately won over the reporters who, as one diplomat put it, henceforth 'foamed at the mouth when they heard Perón's name'" (p. 100). "Very little has changed from Perón to Marcos."

In the national election of 1946, the first in which Perón ran for the presidency, Braden, now assistant secretary, planned his masterstroke to destroy Perón. He quietly directed U.S. agencies to compile a dossier of Nazi-Argentine relations. Braden then made the decision to release what has come to be called the *Blue Book* just before the vote and to accompany it with a drum beat of publicity in the U. S. press. The *New York Times*, *Life* magazine, and *Look* magazine all published venomous scandals to accompany the release of the book. The book was issued on Feb. 11, thirteen days before the vote.

Perón won a smashing victory, which was followed by the customary accusation that the results were rigged because of violence. "Braden-style diplomacy, in the form of direct political in-

terference, had failed. More subtle methods, based upon the economic relationship between the two countries, would yield Washington more satisfying results."

In fact, it was Perón's struggle to maintain the pace of industrial expansion in Argentina that opened the way for North American interests finally to get rid of him. In 1952, he was forced to seek foreign investment. One source, Kaiser industries, was represented by none other than Washington attorney Lloyd N. Cutler. Anglo-Dutch companies were represented by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands. Finally, Perón was forced to invite foreign companies to develop Argentine oil resources. Squeezed by these companies, Perón was reduced to requesting the help of the State Department, which did not raise a finger to expedite the negotiations. Ultimately, the agreement with Standard of California failed to be ratified, and this more than any other event turned the political environment against Perón.

In September 1955, Perón was forced to leave Argentina, not because he had been defeated by overwhelming forces, but because as a nationalist, he could not countenance civil war and destruction of the infrastructure of the nation that had been won by so arduous an effort. In the course of the rebellion, the Navy threatened to bomb the huge oil refinery in Eva Perón City. "When Perón heard about it, he voiced a deep dismay. . . . He called the Navy 'barbarians,' and complained of their willingness to destroy 'the great work of my government, a project that cost \$100 million'" (p. 321). Faced with this blackmail, Perón decided to resign to ensure the well-being of the nation. In the end, the mutineers relied on Perón's love of his nation.

Following Perón's departure, the campaign to vilify him and Eva raged on. The issue of the Peróns' hidden wealth persisted throughout his exile, despite the fact that Perón lived an openly modest life in the 17 years he was abroad. Immediately after the overthrow, the ruling junta decided to display their extravagances. Thus, as Page reports (p. 343): "The new rulers of Argentina convinced themselves that once people looked at the evidence of the dissolute life styles of their idols, they would realize how badly they had been defrauded and would become permanently disillusioned with Peronist rhetoric. . . . These exhibits drew large curious crowds, but did not change their minds."

Throughout this history, what emerges, one might say over the irritable and carping debater's style of the author, is the force and strength of one of the most remarkable men of the century. Even more important, however, is that we learn once more the history of the principal political fight of our time: on the one hand, those champions of national sovereignty who conceive of politics as the organization of a free people to achieve dignity through the growth of their sovereign powers, and the international oligarchy committed to Gnostic belief structures, which view nations as impediments to their perversities. All the more reason that republican forces urgently need a decent and true biography of Perón.