

# CURRENT BOOKS

## FELLOWS' CHOICE

*Recent titles selected and reviewed by Fellows of the Wilson Center*

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**PERÓN: A Biography**  
by Joseph Page  
Random, 1983  
594 pp. \$25

Though dead for 10 years, Juan Domingo Perón (1895–1974) is almost as powerful a political force in Argentina today as he was when he ruled the country as its president. He continues to be to his nation, on a somewhat smaller scale, what Charles De Gaulle was to France: the vital symbol of its historical sense, its powerful military establishment, and its thwarted but undying will to greatness.

Perón was born in Lobos, a small country town 100 kilometers southwest of Buenos Aires, to a family whose declining fortunes put it near the bottom of the middle class. His origins troubled him all his life, not only because his mother was an Indian but also because his parents did not marry until he was six. Perón's route to respectability and power was the army. Graduating from Argentina's military academy in 1913, he served in a number of key posts—professor of military history, attaché in Chile, and, from 1939 to 1941, member of a military mission to Italy. Traveling through Europe, he studied the totalitarian regimes whose practices he would later, at least in part, imitate. But if fascism formed the base of Perón's ideology, his political and social programs also embraced populist and Catholic social welfare principles. Above all, he envisioned a new Latin American alternative (which he labeled the "Third Position") to counter equally the influence of the United States and the Soviet Union.

After a military coup in 1943, Perón was appointed director of Work and Welfare. Using that position to build a large labor following, and campaigning with his wife, Eva ("Evita") Duarte, Perón was elected to the presidency in 1946. The next nine years saw the full bloom of "Perónism": nationalization of banks and utilities, public works and welfare programs, aggressive nationalism, accompanied by the suppression of some civil liberties. In 1955, after a violent confrontation with the Catholic hierarchy, Perón was deposed and exiled in the name of a Christian Argentina.

Considering Perón's complexity, it is not surprising that his previous biographers have examined only a few aspects of the politician and the man. Some, such as his official biographer, Enrique Pavón Pereyra, have even distorted or left out important facts. Page, a Georgetown professor of law, is, by contrast, thorough, scholarly, and reliable. To say that he has gathered all the questions and provided most of the answers is to affirm the excellence of this work.

Page is particularly skillful in illuminating two key episodes in Perón's political life. The first concerns the U.S. Ambassador, Spruille Braden, who tried to block Perón's ascent to the presidency in 1946. Not only did Braden fail, as Page puts it, "to do for the Argentines what General

Douglas MacArthur was doing for the Japanese," he played perfectly into Perón's strategy to excite anti-American sentiment. Page also makes sense of the crucial power game played between the ex-president and his nominal allies, the labor union chiefs, from his aborted return to Argentina in December of 1964 until the end of his exile and his remarkable re-election to the presidency in 1973.

Page's primary object was to study the public period of Perón's life beginning with his leap to fame as director of Work and Welfare in 1943 and ending with his death 31 years later. But the brevity with which Page passes over Perón's youth (and particularly the conflicts between Perón and his parents) and early military career is probably the book's greatest weakness. The Perón who assumed a leadership role in the nationalist revolution of 1943 was already a soldier who had taken part in the army's bloody repression of two blue-collar strikes (in 1918 and 1919). He had also played a major role in the military coup that brought down the democratically elected president, Hipólito Yrigoyen, in 1930. Failing to go deeply into these matters, Page leaves his readers with little understanding of the military role that has darkened Argentine life since the middle of the 20th century.

Nevertheless, within the limits which Page himself has set, this biography of Perón is the best explanation of a man whose personality and record remain deformed by the passions that his name alone unleashes.

—Tomás Eloy Martínez

**UNCONDITIONAL  
DEMOCRACY:  
Education and Politics  
in Occupied Japan,  
1945–1952**

by Toshio Nishi  
Hoover, 1982  
367 pp. \$19.95

At a time when Washington is urging Tokyo to play a greater role in matters of defense and international security, we are fortunate to have a book that traces the roots of the current pacifist orientation in Japan. Nishi, a Hoover Institution Fellow, was born in Japan in 1941 and received all but his graduate education there. He thus seems to have been drawn to the subject of the U.S. occupation of his country by a natural curiosity about his past and about America's role in it.

Nishi is not alone. In 1982, a controversy swept Japan, pitting pro-American nationalists, who wish to remove occupation-instilled pacifism from school textbooks, against anti-American pacifists, allegedly intent on fighting "militarism." Last year, a documentary film about the Tokyo Tribunal of 1945 (which tried Japan's war criminals) became a stunning box-office success. What will come of this powerful new wave of historical curiosity and revisionism?

The future of U.S.-Japanese relations will depend in part on the extent to which the two peoples can come to terms over the settlement of the Second World War. The unusual arrangement gave the conquering power