

The Public, Perot, and Perón

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Don't cry for just Argentina; shed a tear for the United States. We like to think that it couldn't happen here. We say that Americans are too committed to democratic institutions to choose for president a charismatic personality who arises outside the testing ground of elective office, who disdains to discuss specific policies, and who simply promises that he "gets things done."

We say that's a danger for simple-minded voters in Third World countries, but not for our sophisticated electorate in the United States. Let's hope that 1992 is only a nightmare, for the public's reaction to H. Ross Perot is chillingly similar to Argentina's infatuation with Juan Domingo Perón.

Colonel Perón, a strongman in the government of President Edelmiro Fárrell, resigned his various offices in October 1945 to run for president in 1946. In Perón's words, he sought "to aspire to the presidency of the republic as a simple citizen, eliminating everything that might bear the appearance of official candidacy and undertaking my campaign with my own party." His slogan was "Perón cumple"--"Perón delivers."

Perón wooed politicians and voters from parties on the left and right, and his supporters became known simply as "Peronistas." His ministerial record was pro-labor, but he also appealed to the emerging industrial elite. He did not speak much of government programs, and his supporters were not much interested in such specifics. It was enough that "Perón cumple."

Perón won the presidency with 56% of the vote in a low turnout election. This had the effect of handing a political blank check to a man with neither a well-known program nor a recognized political party. He used this check to disrupt a democratic constitutional system which had flourished for almost a century and to ignore the civil and political rights of many Argentines. Those who objected to these developments found themselves terrorized by political police.

Perón governed until his overthrow and exile in 1955. Old and sick, he was brought back to a troubled Argentina in 1972 by an unpopular military dictatorship. The Peronistas nominated him for president, and he was re-elected in 1973--with his new wife as vice president. She became president in 1974 on Perón's death.

H. Ross Perot's bid for president resembles Perón's in more than just name. Neither is a "simple citizen." Whereas Colonel (later General) Perón was backed by the military, Perot is backed by money. Perón attracted skilled politicians--as well as supporters--from the established parties, and Perot hired his top campaign managers from the Democrats and Republicans. Perón never spelled out "Peronism," and Perot shows no readiness to state where he stands on issues. Like Perón, Perot merely promises to deliver. Already followers of Perot are being called "Perotistas."

Nearly fifty years ago, a Third World electorate became so entranced with a charismatic candidate that they elected him president without asking many questions. Unless our electorate wakes up, that could happen again, here.

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