



# Riots, Rugby and the President of Brazil

## Passions, Curiosity Forge Dynamic Journalism Career

BY TRACY MUELLER

**F**OR UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN ALUMNUS Brian Winter, the journey from humble newsroom intern to presidential confidant began with a plane ticket and a penchant for the unknown.

Inspired by study abroad stints in Spain, Guatemala and Argentina, Winter (Spanish and History '99) moved to Buenos Aires immediately after graduation. He imagined a best-case scenario in which he taught English there for six months before returning to Texas. But plans soon changed.

"I fell in love with Argentina," Winter says. "None of my friends knew anything about it. It was far away and mysterious – I felt like it was a secret discovery."

He arrived in Buenos Aires with no job, but eventually landed an internship with international news agency Reuters. While in school, he was associate editor of the campus newspaper, *The Daily Texan*, but never had formal training in journalism.

"I don't believe journalists need to major in journalism," Winter says. "It's more important to have a broad body of knowledge and a healthy amount of curiosity. Studying fields I was passionate about paid off in my career."

In fact, it was a contact Winter made through a Spanish professor that eventually led to the Reuters internship. After attending a Latin America conference hosted by the university, one of Winter's professors went salsa dancing with conference attendees, including the Latin America bureau chief for Reuters. She knew Winter was interested in journalism, and put him in touch with the bureau chief.

The contact helped Winter get his foot in the door with Reuters in Argentina. After several months working as an

intern, he was assigned to cover a local rugby match – a topic he knew nothing about. Winter quickly learned the rules of the game, watched a few matches online and wrote an adequately knowledgeable article that convinced his editor to hire him full time.



**"I wanted to become a true Latin Americanist, and even though Mexico is next door to the United States, I knew nothing about it except what I saw in movies."**

— Brian Winter

Then in 2001 Argentina's economy collapsed when the government defaulted on its \$132 billion public debt. It devastated the country but provided Winter with intriguing and rich stories. Reporting from the heart of a country in crisis, he covered violent protests, massive strikes, looting and deadly riots.

Winter's work stands out in an era when international news coverage is on the decline. A recent report from the Carnegie Corporation noted that American network television cover-

age of foreign news in 1995 was one-third of what it was in 1975. Print and broadcast news agencies are closing foreign bureaus at a rapid pace, and most publications allocate no more than 10 percent of their space to foreign news.

International news coverage surged after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, but eventually returned to previous levels. Winter hopes it's a trend that will reverse, and thinks people will benefit from increased exposure to the world.

"Traveling to other countries and learning about the world brings out something better in myself," says Winter, who describes journalism as "an excuse to go into strange places and ask questions."

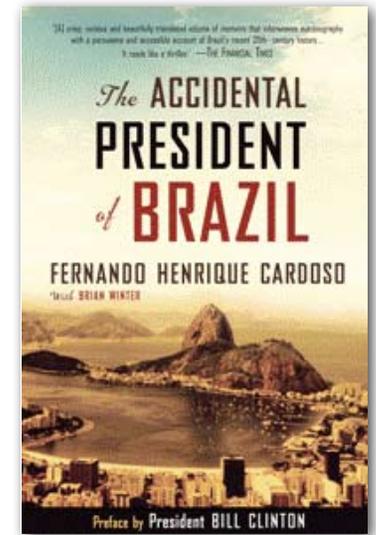
In addition to Argentina, he worked extensively throughout Latin America, reporting on social unrest in Bolivia, presidential elections in Panama and gang violence in Honduras. Then in 2004, ready for a change of scenery, Winter moved to Mexico City.

"As a reporter, it's helpful to go into a foreign environment with fresh eyes," Winter says. "I got too close to the story in Argentina. I wanted to become a true Latin Americanist, and even though Mexico is next door to the United States, I knew nothing about it except what I saw in movies."

Winter soon discovered a Mexico far more vibrant than the one portrayed in films like *Traffic*, where drug wars and kidnapping take center stage. He describes Mexico City as a mecca of modernity, with hip citizens (chilangos) who love films and rap music, sophisticated cafes and taking walks in city parks.

"Mexico was all about variety," Winter remembers. "I could never quite pin it down."

After a year in Mexico, Winter stepped away from journalism to write a travel memoir about his time in Argentina. Publishing house PublicAffairs, a division of Perseus Books Group, accepted Winter's book proposal and then offered



the Latin America enthusiast another project he couldn't turn down. Fernando Henrique Cardoso, president of Brazil from 1995 to 2002, needed a co-author to help pen the English version of his memoirs for an American audience.

The then 26-year-old knew little about Brazil. He spent three weeks interviewing Cardoso, one of Latin America's most successful modern leaders and a highly respected sociologist who has written 30 books.

"We were the odd-couple," Winter says. They conducted the interviews mostly in Spanish, Cardoso's third language behind Portuguese and French. "Neither one of us was speaking his first language, and there was a half-century age difference between us. I was very nervous."

Winter's unfamiliarity with Cardoso compelled the former president to share simple yet illuminating details about his life. As a result, they were able to write a more personal

version of his memoirs than the Portuguese edition, which focused mainly on Cardoso as a politician. In one particularly touching section, Cardoso recalls the heartbreak he felt when, while living in exile in Chile, he received news that his beloved father passed away.

President Bill Clinton wrote the forward for the book, "The Accidental President of Brazil," and critics praised it for its incisive storytelling. The Washington Post calls it "an honest, personable and engaging" book.

Winter's own memoir, "Long After Midnight at the Niño Bien," turns its attention to Argentina's famed tango dance halls, of which he was a regular visitor. It was published July 2007 (see sidebar).

Committed to foreign news, Winter joined USA Today as deputy foreign editor. He will coordinate coverage of Iraq and the Middle East. ■■■■

## Winter's Year of Unrest in Argentina



**State workers shout anti-government slogans** to protest President Fernando de la Rúa's economic policies and reject plans to privatize the social security system (Nov. 13, 2001). The resignation of the new Social Security Minister, Patricia Bullrich, brought a new blow to De la Rúa as he sought political unity to deal with economic crisis and fears of debt default.



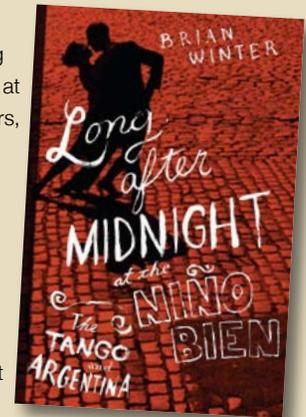
**Argentine federal police officers arrest a demonstrator** during clashes near the Casa Rosada government house (Dec. 20, 2001). Thousands gathered at the Plaza de Mayo square to demand the resignation of President De la Rúa, whose government struggled to save the country's economy from nearly four years of recession, 18.3 percent unemployment and the biggest sovereign debt default ever.



**An employee at a Buenos Aires money exchange house** stands next to the electronic board that shows the Peso exchange rate blank against the world's major currencies, on a day of uncertainty in the Argentine financial crisis (Dec. 6, 2001). The price of the dollar rose seven percent against the Peso in exchange houses, with few sellers on the market. Argentina drifted without a lifeline after the IMF cut off aid, condemning the debt-laden country to a likely economic crash.

## The Dance Begins

Winter's own memoir, "Long After Midnight at the Niño Bien," (PublicAffairs, 2007) turns its attention to Argentina's famed tango dance halls and Winter's encounters with a local dance instructor known as El Tigre (The Tiger). Part travelogue, part history, it chronicles Winter's attempt to learn the mysterious tango and discover the spirit of the country that invented it.



"A few months before the supermarket riots started, I had asked El Tigre to give me my first private lesson. He looked me up and down, his eyebrows wrinkled with disdain, his eyes halting on my mud-stained tennis shoes. 'I don't traffic in miracles,' he sighed, knocking back the rest of his double-malt whisky, the color slowly returning to his weathered face, 'and that's obviously what's needed here. So you'd better start praying to whichever god you prefer. I make no promises. But, if you meet me on Thursday at midnight outside the door at the Niño Bien, I'll give you my best effort.'

The following week, I dutifully did as told, and I even managed to borrow a freshly buffed pair of black dress shoes for the occasion. At a quarter till one, El Tigre finally materialized out of the shadows and into the copper glow of the streetlight, his colossal frame practically floating down the sidewalk, a grin on his face and his fingers twitching with nervous anticipation. 'To war,' he whispered with a nod. We bounded up the marble stairway two steps at a time, paid our five peso admission, and turned the corner into the Niño Bien's grand salon."

