

A Perfect Spy -- For Which Side?

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Perfect Spy: the incredible double life of Pham Xuan An, Time magazine reporter & Vietnamese communist agent. Larry Berman. 328 pages. New York: HarperCollins, 2007. \$25.95
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Causes for the U.S. defeat in Vietnam are many. Lacking strategic intelligence was one. Meanwhile, communist agents were able to infiltrate all levels of the U.S. military's commands and of the Saigon government.

Pham Xuan An was a journalist for *Time* magazine, who had close contacts with important people in South Vietnam's political and military arena, and with American reporters. No one believed An worked for Hanoi until he was promoted to the rank of general after North Vietnam took over the South in 1975.

After the war ended, An became a subject of discussion among the American reporters. They suspected him, but no one was definite that he had been a Hanoi agent. General Edward Lansdale did not believe An was a communist spy. Journalists from Neil Sheehan, Dan Southerland and David Halberstam to Robert Shaplen, and Stanley Karnow were all impressed with his knowledge and caring. He saved lives of CIA spy Mills C. Brandes, *Time* magazine reporter Robert Sam Anson, and Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, the former chief of South Vietnamese intelligence under the Ngo Dinh Diem regime.

Who truly was An? What connections did he have with the CIA that caused former Director William Colby to try unsuccessfully to meet with him a few times after 1975?

Vietnamese Communists praised Pham Xuan An as their talented spy. However, some did not believe that he was just working for Hanoi. So, did Pham Xuan An work for the French G-2, Ngo Dinh Diem's secret police, the CIA, South Vietnamese intelligence, or did he work for all sides? Was his work so important that he should have been awarded four stars, as he joked when he was promoted to the rank of one-star general and the title of Hero of the People's Army?

After the war ended in April 1975 Pham Xuan An was so closely watched and Hanoi's policies so harsh that he became disillusioned with his dream of a developed and free Vietnam. He was not allowed to leave the country, even though he tried several times and in different ways.

Those are the fascinating details in *Perfect Spy*.

Pham Xuan An considers the author his official biographer. To reconstruct An's life, the author traveled to Vietnam numerous times to interview him, his friends, commanders, colleagues, relatives and did research at archives on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.

The story begins when An infiltrates the U.S. Military Mission in the mid-1950s, which takes him to America to study journalism in late 1950s, then his return home to work as a correspondent for the Republic of Vietnam's Press Agency and international news agencies in Saigon.

Perfect Spy beautifully blends important events in South Vietnam with An's actions, from Ngo Dinh Diem's consolidation of power, the battle of Ap Bac in 1963, the strategic hamlet program, and the coup that overthrew the Ngo family, to the arrival of U.S. combat troops, the Vietnamization program, the 1972 Easter Offensive, the Paris Peace Talks, and the final days of the Republic of Vietnam. At each stage, An provided Hanoi strategic analyses to help it devise plans to deal with.

While planning for the 1968 Tet Offensive, An took a communist cadre all over Saigon to select targets to be attacked, including the U.S. Embassy.

Those who knew An during the war agreed that he had a deep understanding of both cultures and was able to accurately analyse current events.

Years of study in the United States provided An the keen understanding of America. His study abroad had been arranged by Mai Chi Tho, the younger brother of Le Duc Tho -- who later became Henry Kissinger's counterpart at the Paris Peace Accords.

While at Orange Coast College in southern California, Pham Xuan An demonstrated quick adaptation to American life, even though he was then 30 years old. He had many close and dear friends and at a time wanted to marry an American girl. When he was offered a chance to stay in the United States, he wandered to the Golden Gate Bridge, looked out at the prison on Alcatraz Island, and thought of Con Son Island in Vietnam. But he decided to return to his homeland, with fear that he would be arrested because Muoi Huong, his cell's leader in Vietnam, had already been detained, and his identity might have been exposed.

But he was not. During the turbulent years of the war, Givral Café in downtown Saigon was Pham Xuan An's headquarters, where American correspondents sought him out to exchange information and to look for leads. He was given the nickname "General Givral."

In 2003 a U.S. battleship made a port call in Saigon for the first time since the Vietnam War ended. An was invited onto the vessel. He was so pleased with the visit and told the author that he could now die happily because the two former enemies now are developing the relations into strategic partners. That had been his dream when the war ended almost thirty years before.

Aboard the ship, a People's Army Colonel recognized the intelligence general and jokingly asked him which side he belonged to. Without hesitation, An replied, "Both sides," and then added, "Just kidding." An told this story to the author with an assessment: "You see, that is why they can't let me out; they are still unsure who I am."

Perfect Spy draws the reader into the life and activities of an extremely talented and mysterious spy, whose work began when Le Duc Tho, alias Sau Bua, inducted An into Communist Party member in Ca Mau in 1953. With prospects that the United States would replace the France and would intervene deeply and forcefully in South Vietnam, the Party ordered An to study about Americans, their culture and to infiltrate into the ranks of the American press.

Which side was Pham Xuan An really with? *Perfect Spy* does not provide readers a clear answer. Perhaps An took the truth to that question to his grave when he died in Saigon on September 20th, 2006 at the age of 79.

The Vietnam War remains a controversial and complex issue, but the author has done a very good job in handling this intricate and interesting subject matter.

Prof. Larry Berman of University of California-Davis is the author of three books about the Vietnam War: *Vietnam: Planning a tragedy: the Americanization of the war in Vietnam*; *Lyndon Johnson's war: the road to stalemate in Vietnam*; and *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and betrayal in Vietnam*.