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Larry Berman. **Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An, Time Magazine Reporter & Vietnamese Communist Agent.** New York, New York: Smithsonian Books, 2007. 328 pp. photos, notes, index.

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Pham Xuan An was the dean of Vietnamese journalists during the Vietnam War. He worked for Reuters, and *Time* magazine, where he became the only Vietnamese national to obtain the status of full staff correspondent for a major American news organization. As an acclaimed journalist, An had access to many high level military and political figures in Saigon during the war, and was one of the few Vietnamese reporters to be admitted to off-the-record briefings by American officials. When Saigon fell to the Communists in April 1975, An remained behind, filing his last dispatch for *Time* on 12 May. One year later, the new Communist government named him a Hero of the People's Army and promoted him to general. Much to the surprise of his former American colleagues, An emerged from the war as North Vietnam's most famous spy.

Larry Berman, a professor of political science at the University of California, Davis, and the author of *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Betrayal in Vietnam* (Free Press, 2001), has written the first English language biography of this agent. Relying heavily on interviews with An, his family, and associates, Berman attempts to demystify one of the most enigmatic figures of the war. Berman argues that An was the Vietnamese equivalent of Richard Sorge, the famous World War II Soviet spy, and that his intelligence assessments proved critical during many of the war's key turning points, including the Battle of Ap Bac, the Tet Offensive, Lam Som 719, the Easter Offensive, and the Fall of Saigon.

An's relationship with the Communist revolution began in 1945, when he dropped out of high school in Can Tho, South Vietnam, to join the Viet Minh. He fought as a guerilla until 1947, and then returned to Saigon to care for his sick father. In 1950, he trained as an intelligence agent at a Viet Minh base north of Saigon, and in 1956, began his double life as a spy when he enlisted in the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). As an ARVN non-commissioned officer, he processed paperwork for South Vietnamese officers heading to the United States for training, and developed close relationships with many men destined to become high level officials in South Vietnam. He also met many Americans, including the famous Edward Lansdale, the head of the CIA's Saigon Military Mission. Lansdale attempted to recruit him for the agency in 1954, but An turned down the offer, explaining that he intended to pursue a career in journalism.

Lansdale instead helped him secure a scholarship from the Asia Foundation (a CIA entity at the time) to study journalism at Orange Coast College (OCC) in Costa Mesa, California.

At OCC, An earned an associate's degree, and then returned to Saigon in 1959. For the next two years, he was employed by the Vietnam Press, the official news organization of the government of South Vietnam. He then worked at Reuters from 1962 to 1965 and *Time* until the end of the war. Although An utilized some cloak and dagger techniques to pass information to the Viet Cong, he mainly obtained his intelligence from open sources such as press briefings and interviews with military officials. *Perfect Spy* is a cautionary tale of just how much raw intelligence can be gleaned from simple journalistic methods. Berman contends that information from An helped the Viet Cong create the tactics that led to the downing of four American helicopters during the 1962 Battle of Ap Bac. The loss of these helicopters was a huge media blow for the American advisory effort—proof that the enemy could thwart sophisticated American military technology with very limited means.

To avoid compromise, An rarely passed along original documents to couriers. He instead wrote summaries and sent those to his overseers in Cu Chi, north of Saigon. By operating in this manner, he not only covered his tracks, but also provided analyses of the raw data. On some occasions, An did take considerable risks. Before the 1968 Tet Offensive, he arranged for a motorized sampan to take him and his handler down the Saigon River to identify locations of fuel depots and security posts. He later drove this same man around Saigon in his green Renault, pointing out targets for easy attack.

In 1974, An passed two key classified documents to Hanoi—an Order of Battle Report for Phuoc Long province and a strategic studies report “documenting that ARVN was running low on supplies and morale and that it was unlikely that American B-52s would return.”(p. 203) These documents helped convince Hanoi to launch an attack on Phuoc Long city in December 1974. The subsequent collapse of this provincial capital's defenses in early January and the lack of an American response would lead Hanoi to conclude that the time was ripe for a final thrust into South Vietnam.

Berman does not explain how An secured these documents, nor does he give details in every instance how the Communist side exploited his information. An's “hero” status, general officer's rank, and numerous decorations provide proof that he was a significant operative, as do the comments of his various case officers. Nevertheless, the book occasionally left me wanting to know more. For example, was An's warning of the 1970 Lam Som 719 assault the only one received by Communist authorities? What were the contents of his report and how did North Vietnam use it to prepare for the attack? Such details would have helped the reader to better assess An's espionage.

To his credit, Berman is fully aware of the limits of oral history and even points out places in the book where he believed An was holding back key details or glossing over evidence so as not to hurt the feelings of his former American colleagues. An proudly discusses several instances where he saved American lives. However, he is less

free with details of how he betrayed those same colleagues, and how the Communist side capitalized on his double dealings. Not until Hanoi opens up more of its archives to foreign researchers will we learn the full extent of An's spying.

Information about An and his activities may also be held by the CIA, which tried to recruit him several times during the war. Berman hints throughout the book that An might have been working for both sides, but is not able to document such a relationship. After the war, the Vietnamese government denied him an exit visa to travel the United States, fearing that he might still harbor ties to the CIA. When visiting the U.S.S. *Vandegrift* in November 2003, An was jokingly asked, "Which side were you a general for?" An replied, "Both sides . . . . Just kidding!"

The role of intelligence in the Vietnam War is now being more fully addressed thanks to books like this one. *Perfect Spy* reveals how one well-placed Communist agent influenced the course of the war. It's a fascinating story told in a lively style. The book also provides another important English language source on the Vietnamese perspective on the war. Along with Bui Tin's *From Enemy to Friend: A North Vietnamese Perspective on the War* (Naval Institute Press, 2002) and Do Kiem and Julie Kane's *Counterpart: A South Vietnamese Naval Officer's War* (Naval Institute Press, 1998), this book fills an important gap in our understanding of the war's impact on the Vietnamese people.



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