

Jane Fonda and Her Friendly North Vietnamese Intelligence Officer

By Merle L. Pribbenow

Last month, actress [Jane Fonda](#) published an article on her website titled “[My Trip to Hanoi](#).” In the article Ms. Fonda tried to explain her two-week visit to Hanoi during the summer of 1972—and by doing so, dispel all the “slanderous” internet rumors and accusations of “treason” that have been made against her because of her actions during that trip.

Why address this old controversy now? Because a few days earlier, the television shopping network QVC, after receiving many protests, had abruptly [canceled a scheduled appearance](#) by Ms. Fonda to promote her new self-help memoir. So the article was intended to set the record straight. The Oscar-winning actress did offer an apology of sorts (really more of an excuse than an apology) for the famous photograph of her manning a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun. But the bulk of the article was a defense of the trip and her motivations.

No one but Ms. Fonda can know what her true motivations were, but it is clear that the North Vietnamese exploited her for their own propaganda purposes. She would have been an idiot, which clearly she is not, to have assumed that they would try to do anything less.

One of the strongest charges lodged against Ms. Fonda has been that she was acting as a North Vietnamese agent when she took these actions, and therefore was guilty of treason. If that was the case, then she would presumably have been acting under instructions from a North Vietnamese official, probably a North Vietnamese intelligence officer. The next logical question, then, is whether Ms. Fonda had contacts with North Vietnamese intelligence?

Since intelligence officers of all countries operate “under cover,” not revealing their true affiliation, answering this kind of question is usually extremely difficult. In this case, however, it turns out that the Vietnamese have answered the question for us. They have not only revealed that Ms. Fonda was in contact with a North Vietnamese intelligence officer in 1972; they have also told us the officer’s name, his operational alias, the cover

he was using, as well as his operational instructions and what his goals were in targeting American citizens.

A 2005 article published in *Thanh Nien*, the official newspaper of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Ho Chi Minh Youth Group, describes an interview with a retired Vietnamese official named Ho Nam, who in 1972 was a consular officer assigned to the North Vietnamese diplomatic mission in Paris. Ho Nam describes how he met with Fonda when she came to the mission to request a travel visa to North Vietnam. He and another consular officer taught Ms. Fonda a North Vietnamese army fighting song that she wanted to learn for to use while in Hanoi. He quotes her as saying, "I want to sing it as a gift to your soldiers." Ho Nam also recalls that when Ms. Fonda left Hanoi after completing her visit, she called him from Bangkok, and asked him to meet her at Paris's Orly International Airport when she returned to France, which he did.

Who was this Ho Nam? Was he just an ordinary North Vietnamese consular officer who was concerned with nothing more than processing visa applications? Or was he something else?

In 2004, a book was published in Hanoi to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the birth of the late Tran Quoc Hoan, a member of the North Vietnamese Communist Politburo who served for almost three decades, from the 1950s up until the late 1970s, as the Minister of Public Security. As such, Hoan occupied a position that was equivalent to, and modeled after, the head of the Soviet Union's infamous security and intelligence organization, the KGB. The book contains several articles in memoriam, one of which was entitled, "The Late Minister Tran Quoc Hoan and His Relationship with an Intelligence Warrior." It was written by none other than Ho Nam, which turns out to be an alias.

"Ho Nam" was actually a covert Public Security intelligence officer working for Department A13 (North Vietnam's Foreign Intelligence Directorate). His true name was Hoang Gia Huy, and he had been especially selected to work under diplomatic cover in Paris, with specific instructions to target and recruit American citizens. The name of Ho Nam, which he used on his passport and to conduct all his operations in Paris, was a brazen operational alias. The family name "Ho" was selected to honor North Vietnam's leader, Ho Chi Minh, and the given name "Nam" was selected because it is the last half of the name of his country, Viet Nam.

In the article, Ho Nam (the name he would use from that time forward), provides a long quote from the instructions Tran Quoc Hoan personally delivered to him before he departed for Paris in 1968:

You must understand very clearly . . . that the American imperialist aggressors are our primary target. Only an American could have extensive knowledge of specific American government policies and plans for the war in Vietnam. You must do everything you can to recruit people from among the ranks of Americans whose revolutionary consciousness has

been awakened, from among those Americans who oppose the American war, because those are people who have a conscience and who want to help Vietnam in order to make up for the crimes that US troops are committing. I call this the work of developing friendly relations, and that is the work that I am entrusting to you. Our other people working there have other tasks to perform. You need to know and understand the targets you intend to recruit as agents; you need to know how to select them and to direct them to the right places in order to obtain the greatest possible amount of information, information that will help us and that will help our people back at home to defeat the enemy and that will support the negotiations being conducted by our delegations, etc.

After receiving these instructions, Ho Nam describes how he prepared for his assignment by, among other things, conducting research to determine which targets in Paris would be most useful to him in gaining access to the information he was assigned to collect:

Strictly carrying out the instructions I had received from the minister and under the close supervision of Department A13's leaders, I quickly arranged my affairs, went through the necessary procedures for being seconded to the Foreign Ministry, and I researched the situation in the area where I would be working, paying special attention to Americans who might have access to a great deal of information in Paris, which people frequently called the 'crossroads for all types of information' (*carrefour des informations*).

While Ho Nam, quite naturally, does not reveal the identities of the Americans he targeted and recruited, he does state that he had considerable success. He blandly writes, "After studying and absorbing these instructions, I was able to select and recruit a network that worked actively and supplied us with important information that helped to reduce our casualties and to gain victory."

All this does not in any way prove, or indeed even imply, that Jane Fonda was a witting, recruited agent of North Vietnamese intelligence. First of all, as a movie starlet she would have had no access to the kind of high-level information on secret US policies or plans that Ho Nam was most interested in acquiring. However, as an extremely well-known personality, with a wide circle of social and political contacts in Paris, including many Americans, she could easily have served, probably unwittingly, as an "access agent" or "social broker"—in other words, as a vehicle of introduction to other individuals who did have access to the kind of information Ho Nam had been tasked to seek out.

In addition, while acquiring secret information about enemy plans and intentions is an intelligence officer's first and most important job, it is not his only job. Intelligence officers are frequently asked to initiate and direct covert propaganda operations designed to promote their nation's interests and weaken the morale and the will of their nation's

adversaries. This does not necessarily require recruiting the individual you are using to carry out this operation, and that individual may not even realize that he or she is being manipulated. All that is necessary is to gain the individual's friendship and trust. Minister Tran Quoc Hoan called this the "work of developing friendly relations," e.g., persuading the targeted individual that you both share a mutual interest and making suggestions to that individual about what he or she could or should do to further those "mutual interests."

The point here is not that Jane Fonda was a witting agent of the North Vietnamese communists, because there is absolutely no evidence for such a charge. It is that she knowingly placed herself in a position in which a hostile intelligence service could exploit her fame and her contacts for both covert intelligence collection and covert propaganda operations, and that, according to the North Vietnamese themselves, one of her close contacts was a covert intelligence officer whose entire purpose in 1972 was to exploit people just like her. To imagine that he would not at least try to manipulate and exploit her is naïve in the extreme.

Jane Fonda does indeed owe an apology to Vietnam veterans, and to her country, not for her opposition to the war—many truly patriotic Americans, young and old, were honestly, and perhaps rightly, opposed to the war—but for placing herself in a situation in which the intelligence service of a foreign government actively engaged in hostilities against American forces could exploit and manipulate her, as she herself admits they did.

After receiving a number of hostile comments from readers in response to her initial article about the Hanoi trip, Ms. Fonda posted on her website a follow-up article that is titled "[Forgiveness](#)." It would indeed be appropriate for Ms. Fonda to sincerely ask the American people, and especially Vietnam veterans, for their forgiveness.

Merle L. Pribbenow, the author of "[Limits to Interrogation: The Man in the Snow White Cell](#)," *Studies in Intelligence*, is a retired CIA operations officer and Vietnamese linguist who served in Vietnam from 1970 to 1975. This is his third article for *Washington Decoded*.