

## The Quiet Vietnamese

*Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life of  
Pham Xuan An, TIME Magazine Reporter and  
Vietnamese Communist Agent*

By Larry Berman

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*By Merle L. Pribbenow*

What goes on in the heart of a spy? What makes him tick? Can a spy truly have friends? How does a spy decide between his loyalty to his secret masters and his loyalty to his friends? How does he live with himself? And how do his friends react when they find that the friend and colleague they had known, trusted, and even loved, lied to them betrayed their confidences, and may have been responsible, directly or indirectly, for the deaths of other friends and countrymen?

These are some of the questions Larry Berman poses in a fascinating new book, *Perfect Spy*. Berman, a political science professor at the University of California-Davis and the author of three previous books on Vietnam, has made a formidable contribution to untangling the twisted skeins of truth and lies that made up the life, and the myth, of a man whom the Vietnamese Communists now proclaim as their most important and productive spy during the Vietnam War's American phase.

Despite the author's conscientious efforts—which included dozens of trips to Vietnam to interview Pham Xuan An and a number of An's espionage associates and controllers, along with prodigious archival research in the United States and extensive interviews with An's American friends and colleagues—much about Pham Xuan An's life still remains shrouded in mystery. An, like the professional intelligence officer that he was, set strict limits on his cooperation with Berman. An refused to name most of his sources of information, and while eager to discuss his journalistic career, he was almost maddeningly vague about many aspects of his parallel covert life as a Communist spy. The Vietnamese government provided Berman only very limited assistance and support, and the files on An held by the Vietnamese intelligence service and by the many other intelligence services with officers An admittedly contacted (the CIA, the South Vietnamese, the French, the British, and the Taiwanese, among others) remained closed to Berman, and to all outsiders.

Because of these vital limits, which the author freely admits, this book does not provide the complete story of Pham Xuan An's espionage activities. That story will have to await the opening of Vietnam's intelligence archives. Until that time—if indeed, it ever

comes—Berman’s book will stand as the definitive, first-hand account of An’s life as a Communist undercover operative.

It is now well known that thousands of Communist officers and agents were active in all branches of the old South Vietnamese regime during the Vietnam War. After the war ended, however, the victorious Communist regime concluded that three individuals out of this vast army of spies had made such important contributions to the cause that they deserved to be promoted to the rank of “major general” in the Vietnamese military intelligence service. One of the three, Vu Ngoc Nha, had penetrated the inner sanctum of the South Vietnamese Presidential Palace before he was caught and imprisoned in 1969. Another, Dang Tran Duc, had worked for more than a decade as a mid-level officer in South Vietnam’s Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) before he was exposed and forced to flee to the jungle a year before the war ended. Pham Xuan An, the third Communist “super-spy,” worked as a journalist for Western news organizations, and in contrast to his two colleagues, An’s efforts went undetected for the duration.

In the mid-1950s, after the United States replaced France as the primary obstacle to Hanoi’s dream of putting all of Vietnam under Communist control, the Vietnamese Communist military intelligence service realized that it needed a window into the American camp, someone who could provide information about what the Americans were thinking and doing. Berman describes how Pham Xuan An, a low-level Communist agent who happened to be one of the very few South Vietnamese at that time who spoke English, was offered an opportunity to go to the United States to study in 1957, and how and why An’s Communist superiors leapt at the opportunity. A question-mark still lingers about this period, however: Why did a senior American CIA officer, General Edward Lansdale, and the head of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem’s intelligence organization, Dr. Tran Kim Tuyen, both decide to support and assist An’s application to study at an American college? The reader is left with hints, but no satisfying answers.

Reading about An’s two years at Orange Coast College is almost a surreal experience, only because one cannot forget that nearly two decades after welcoming An, Orange County, California would become a refuge for tens of thousands of Vietnamese fleeing Communist control. Berman paints an almost idyllic picture of An’s student life in the United States. An “embraced all aspects of collegiate life” as it existed in the late 1950s, from learning how to square dance to writing editorials that admonished students to clean up after themselves in the cafeteria. The notion that he was a disciplined intelligence officer was beyond anyone’s ken, as was the strife in Vietnam itself.

When An returned to South Vietnam in 1959, he briefly served in Dr. Tuyen’s intelligence organization before going to work full-time as a journalist, employed first by a British, and later, by several American news organizations. Throughout his journalistic career, An maintained regular “contact” with Dr. Tuyen’s intelligence organization and its successor, the South Vietnamese CIO, according to Berman. An also told Berman that his CIO contacts became the primary source of the secret U.S. and South Vietnamese internal documents that he would supply to his Communist espionage handlers throughout the war.

Though no fault of Berman's, the book does not provide a clear explanation of the precise nature of An's relationship with South Vietnamese intelligence. An would only admit to being an occasional "consultant" to the CIO. Despite An's demurrals, however, it seems likely that his connections with South Vietnamese intelligence went much deeper.

Intelligence organizations do not dole out favors and information willy-nilly – for the CIO to have maintained a relationship with An for so long (15 years), and to have given him as much classified information as An claimed, suggests that the CIO must have been getting something it deemed substantial from An in return. What that information could have been is anyone's guess. The most likely possibility, to my mind at least, is that An probably gave the CIO information on An's American journalist employers and colleagues, but then I have always had a reputation as something of a cynic.

At the heart of *Perfect Spy* is the account of An's career as a journalist working for the Americans and the friendships he formed during the course of his employment, all the while putting first and foremost his duties as a covert Communist spy. An clearly was a very intelligent, perceptive, and engaging man, a witty and even brilliant raconteur. Berman provides excellent descriptions of An's relationships with a number of Americans, ranging from journalists Robert Shaplen, Neil Sheehan, and Robert Sam Anson (the book's first chapter is devoted to the risks An took to secure Anson's release when Anson was captured by Communist forces in Cambodia in the summer of 1970) to Edward Lansdale and Lou Conein of the CIA, the latter an officer in the Saigon station who was deeply involved in the 1963 *coup d'état* against Ngo Dinh Diem.

The most authentically fascinating element of the story is how few of An's American friends and colleagues seem to have felt betrayed when they found out, not long after the war was over, that An had been a senior officer in Hanoi's military intelligence service all along. (One notable exception to this general equanimity, Berman notes, is Beverly Deepe, who employed An and depended on him greatly when she was the Saigon correspondent in the mid-1960s for the now-defunct *New York Herald Tribune*). An himself adamantly insisted, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that he never betrayed his American friends and that his espionage activities had never caused any deaths or physical harm to anyone. He claimed this despite his own admission that he provided the Vietnamese Communist military command with much of the information they needed to plan the Saigon aspects of the 1968 Tet offensive. During the second phase of this attack, John Cantwell, one of An's own colleagues at *TIME* magazine, and three other foreign journalists (one British and two Australian) were killed by Communist troops in a single ambush.

An also admitted to Berman that he provided Hanoi with advance warning of the early 1971 South Vietnamese and American offensive into southern Laos. On the third day of this operation, North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns—weapons that had been moved into position based, in part at least, on the warning that An provided—shot down a South Vietnamese helicopter carrying a team of foreign newsmen who had flown up from Saigon to cover the operation. Those killed in this incident included the noted *Life*

magazine photographer Larry Burrows and several other of An's colleagues from Saigon, including an American photographer for UPI.

Since An is now dead, it will never be known whether or not An himself actually believed that his espionage activities never harmed anyone. The psychology of espionage is a tricky business. Spies often are forced to compartmentalize their lives in order to be able to "live their cover" and to survive the tensions of living in two different worlds. Frequently, they also develop the ability to perform some bizarre mental gymnastics to justify their actions, even to themselves, or perhaps, most importantly to themselves.

What is more interesting to me is why An's American journalist friends, for the most part, believed him, continued to support him, and insisted that they did not feel betrayed by him even after they learned the truth about his double life. (During the war, the only journalist/employer who seems to have ever harbored reservations about An was Reuters' Nick Turner, a New Zealander). I wonder whether these American journalists would have been equally forgiving if it turned out that An had been spying for the CIA rather than for the "Viet Cong."

An told Berman that he was no "James Bond" and that his role as a spy more closely resembled that of his hero Sherman Kent, a founding father of U.S. analytical methodology, rather than the dashing Ian Fleming character or Richard Sorge, the German journalist and Soviet intelligence "super-spy" who in 1941 warned Stalin of the impending German invasion of the Soviet Union (the Vietnamese media has frequently compared An to Sorge). An said that while he did provide photographs of classified American and South Vietnamese secret documents to Hanoi on occasion, most of his reports were not raw intelligence in the strict sense of the word, but rather were his analyses of the situation based on his understanding of the Americans and the South Vietnamese from his unique vantage point, with one foot in both camps.

Although An may well have been down-playing his role as a spy, at least for the American audience, his claim actually does make more than a bit of sense. The xenophobic and relatively poorly educated Communist leadership in Hanoi had very little knowledge of the United States. Almost none of them had ever traveled to the West, and many had never traveled anywhere outside of Vietnam. The only Western country with which they had any experience at all was France, and knowledge of the writings of Victor Hugo and of the treasures of the Louvre were of little help in deciphering the thinking of American "invaders" led by the "cowboy" Lyndon Johnson.

They desperately needed someone like An who could not only provide them raw intelligence on the Americans but could also interpret U.S. actions and the American psyche for them. In his position as a journalist working for the Americans, An could tell his masters in Hanoi how the Americans viewed the war; he could explain their thoughts and fears, their frustrations and impatience as the war became protracted, and American casualties mounted with no end in sight. In many cases, such observations may well have been more useful to Hanoi than any secret documents provided by An.

This point is demonstrated most clearly in the story of the four “Exploit” medals that An was awarded for specific contributions to the Viet Cong war effort. At least one of these medals—the one awarded for An’s 1964-early 1965 predictions that Washington was about to send large numbers of ground troops into South Vietnam—was given to him for what was essentially an analytical judgment.

*Perfect Spy* is a book that focuses on one single covert operative and makes no claim to tell the complete story of the Vietnamese Communist espionage establishment as a whole. It would have been useful, however, to have had at least a short exposition on the overall apparatus and its activities so as to place An’s life and work into context, and enable the general reader to assess better An’s overall contribution to the Communist victory. An, after all, was but one of thousands of spies, ranging from coolie laborers, maids, and high school students, to generals in the South Vietnamese army and members of the South Vietnamese legislature, who reported to at least three separate Communist intelligence services—An’s own military intelligence service, a civilian public security espionage department, and the Party’s separate intelligence and propaganda organization.

Ever since An’s double life began to be known in 1976, a number of accusations have been made claiming that An’s primary role, in fact, was to use his position as a journalist working for U.S. news organizations to plant disinformation and Communist propaganda in the press for the purpose of influencing and demoralizing the American public. Berman devotes several pages to refuting those charges, and I think that on balance, he is probably correct. No professional intelligence officer worth his salt would ask such an invaluable intelligence source as An to take the risks involved in spreading propaganda stories that could, and probably would, immediately raise suspicions about his loyalties.

If anything, An’s instructions from his intelligence superiors would likely have been to appear “more Catholic than the Pope” – to express strong anti-Communist views and strong pro-American feelings to his journalist colleagues and in his own writings, in order to avoid giving any hint of his true sympathies. But if these actually were the instructions, An clearly decided that a far more sophisticated and nuanced approach would prove more effective in his dealings with Americans.

There is one last secret in Pham Xuan An’s life, one that this book raises briefly but does not answer. During one of Berman’s last interviews with An, he revealed that he had continued to work for the Vietnamese Army’s General Department of Intelligence after the war ended and right up to the last six months before he died (on September 20, 2006). An told Berman that his work was only as a “consultant” (the same description he gave for his relationship with the old South Vietnamese CIO), and also claimed that he was simply asked to “read things and give my analysis.”

An had previously told Berman and every other American and foreign visitor with whom he met that ever since 1975, the Communist regime in Vietnam had viewed him with suspicion, and had placed him under constant surveillance because of his close relations with Americans and his obvious affection for the United States. One must ask, then, if An’s claims about the regime’s suspicions of him were true, why did its

intelligence service continue to share information with him and trust his analytical conclusions? Is it not more likely that An's old spymasters asked him to report on his conversations with his foreign friends and visitors, and provide his personal assessments of them and their political views? Was there some hidden purpose behind An's meetings with his "old friends" and his efforts to reestablish old contacts? Is this just one more secret that the perfect spy Pham Xuan An has taken to his grave?

We may never know, but this is only one of the intriguing questions that this important book raises.

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Merle L. Pribbenow, the author of "[Limits to Interrogation: The Man in the Snow White Cell](#)," *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 48, No. 1, is a retired CIA operations officer and Vietnamese linguist who served in Vietnam 1970-1975. During this period he had no contact with or personal knowledge of Pham Xuan An. It should also be noted that Pribbenow provided extensive translation support to Professor Berman as he conducted his research for *Perfect Spy*.