

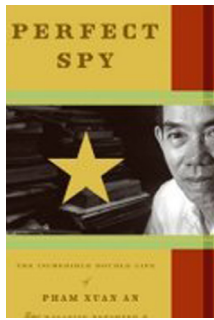
Dr. Erich Helfert reviews *Perfect Spy*

Every once in a while one reads a good spy novel or sees a movie like ‘The Good Shepherd’ and is fascinated by the interplay and clashes of loyalty, betrayal, greed, hatred, and violence. Far more rare is experiencing a well-documented account of the life and personal attributes of a humane, yet highly successful spy who as a trusted journalist for the foreign press in Saigon manages to interpret for the “other side” vital intelligence he gathers from his contacts, insights that affect the outcome of the war in Vietnam. His cover is never blown until the war is over and he lives to an old age, honored by his North Vietnamese masters as a hero and given a general’s rank—yet he never loses the many friendships he had nurtured with important American and South Vietnamese journalists, diplomats, officers, and their families over decades.

Told by distinguished historian Larry Berman, who befriended Mr. An in his later life until his death, the book is a fascinating narrative of a double life worthy of a five-star documentary. The author brings to life an attractive personality with a complex mix of Confucian beliefs in the sanctity of family ties and personal friendships, impatient patriotism longing for release of his country from foreign domination—whether Japanese, French, American, or Russian—a deep understanding and liking of American people and their ways, a strong sense of fulfillment in his chosen profession of journalism begun during a stint in California, and yet a solid commitment to the intelligence role Hanoi had given him. By all accounts a gentle and likable man, he is exceedingly skilled in building long-lasting relationships and trust. Highly intelligent, independent, and informed, he applies his deep knowledge of his country and his insights into the foreigners’ motivations and activities to carry on a running dialog with hundreds of friends and officials. He serves as one of the leading journalists for *Time* and *Reuters*, among others, and applies the same skills to transmitting meaningful clandestine reports to the Communist leadership, which significantly affect their strategies for eventual conquest.

How as it possible to create a climate of friendship, trust, and respect while at the same time helping to defeat the very groups they represent? A breach of faith? Pure betrayal? Why have practically all of his friends and contacts forgiven him when the huge surprise of his double role became public? Perhaps it is due to the fact that he never directly betrayed any of his friends, perhaps it is due to his great willingness to assist his friends in journalistic endeavors or even help to rescue some in the confusion of the last days at great personal risk? Perhaps it is the perception that he was a patriot who wanted the best for his country, not personal gain or glory. Yet, some riddles will remain forever.

The book is densely packed with historical detail and hundreds of references to individuals who crossed Mr. An’s path. Sometimes the shower of facts is overwhelming, yet the underlying story of both the person and the evolving tragedy of the Vietnam adventure drives the reader forward—a must read for anyone interested in the complex interplay of human fates and geopolitical misconceptions of the Vietnam War—with the consolation that even such disastrous miscalculations do eventually dissolve in reconciliation. Mr. An was living proof of this. His successful son is now serving a constructive role in rebuilding Vietnam’s ties with the US.



Author Larry Berman on ‘Keeping Friends’

Nothing was more difficult in writing about the life of Pham Xuan An, the man whom the Vietnamese communists have identified as their most important and productive spy during the Vietnam war, than trying to understand why hardly any friends rejected An when they learned he had been a communist spy.

During the war, An was the dean of Vietnamese journalists, employed by *Time* magazine as a full-fledged correspondent. What none of his colleagues knew was that An was really agent X6, first assigned a mission to study journalism at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa; intern at the *Sacramento Bee*, drive across the United States in order to develop an understanding of the American temperament, intern at the United Nations and return to Vietnam with cover as a journalist. An’s mission was to use his access as a conduit for obtaining details on U.S. war plans and strategy. After the war, Pham Xuan An was promoted to the rank of Major General and given the title People’s Army Hero.

For over twenty years An lived his cover, deceiving everyone about his real identity. In order to succeed as a spy, An became his mask, admiring the values of his journalism profession and treasuring his American friendships with David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Francis Fitzgerald, Stanley Karnow, Robert Sam Anson, Robert Shaplen and a host of veteran war correspondents. None of these former colleagues felt they had been used as source material for An’s political intelligence reports to Hanoi. An told me that he regularly faced self doubts with respect to using friends for intelligence purposes, but he did report to Hanoi what he learned.

What kind of man can forge such enduring friendships based on a falsehood and, when the deception is unveiled, leave few feeling betrayed? The answer is that An believed he did not engage in any acts of personal betrayal against Americans and his friends agreed with him. He insisted to his last day that none of his American friends ever suffered personally or professionally because of what he did. On the contrary, most of them benefited from An’s help and just about every one of his Americans friends had come to see the war in a way that was basically the same as An’s view of it. Friends saw An not as a hard core communist spy, but as a Vietnamese revolutionary fighting for his country’s independence, free from foreign interference.

Given that An had not actually betrayed his friends and given that these Americans were sympathetic with his basic understanding of the war, most of his friends had no reason to be upset when they learned about his spying, years after the fact. There had been so many lies on all sides of the war and An was defending his country.

In the aftermath of the war, An came to symbolize the reconciliation process between former enemies. “*I had lived and worked with Americans for so long. I knew them as good people. Most Americans believed what their government told them, they did not know the real Vietnamese. I had no reason to dislike the Americans, just as the Americans who knew me before the war had no reason to dislike me.*” An’s friends raised over \$30,000 so that a spy’s eldest son could study journalism at the University of North Carolina. “*They knew me as someone who always helped them and I was not their enemy. I fought for my country, not against the Americans.*”

Author Larry Berman will sign *Perfect Spy* at Campton Place on August 29 at the San Francisco Literary Society
Champagne reception, screening of *The Quiet American*. Reservations essential for tickets 415.381.6671