

# Professor details the double life of the perfect spy

Secret agent Pham Xuan An fooled Americans, but still won them over

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Professor Larry Berman of political science professor at the University of California, Davis spoke on campus last Thursday about his book, "Perfect Spy," which discusses the story and the experience of an infamous undercover spy.

During the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese government sent Pham Xuan An on his first mission to go undercover as a Time magazine correspondent, which led him to countless life-threatening situations. The double life of An as a Vietcong agent and a Time correspondent is viewed as one of the most successful espionage in our century. Although he deceived many people, he ironically somehow managed to escape animosity and resentment from either side because of his loyalty to both countries.

According to Berman, Perfect Spy illustrates the conflicts of Vietnam from the gaze of a Vietnamese communist. Berman made 17 flights to Vietnam to interview An, after which he was able to inform readers about the most important secrets in America's history.

After recruiting him as a spy, the Vietnamese government sent An to California to study journal-

ism at Orange Coast College. With his proficient grasp of the English language, An easily assimilated to the American culture and embraced the American people.

"He was among the most proficient of the Vietnamese, thereby enabling himself as a valuable asset to the Americans and Vietnamese, building relationships with dozens of future South Vietnamese commanders and influential Americans," Berman wrote about An in a press release from his book's website.

These amicable characteristics later helped him befriend numerous American journalists, including Neil Sheehan, David Halberstam and Stanley Karnow when An worked for Reuters and Time as a reporter. Not only did An develop close companionships with these well-known journalists, but they also respected him and considered him a trusted source. Nevertheless, he carried out his primary job as spy by providing intelligence to the North Vietnamese communists without the knowledge of his American colleagues. Furthermore, according to Berman, An's reports were so accurate that General Giap jokingly said, "We are now in the

U.S. war room."

With constant conflicts that

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could have easily blown his cover, An mastered balancing his primary job and his cover-up job during and after his mis-

sion so efficiently that he lived a lie for 20 years before being discovered. Moreover, the communist government awarded him six medals, promoted him to the position of general and hero, and praised him as "Hero of the People's Army" because he did such an exceptional job. But eventually, he did it so well that the Vietnamese government became suspicious of him.

After the war, An was placed under house arrest and forbidden from leaving Vietnam. He was sent to re-education camp, a school where the North Vietnamese trained people to be communists, because he was "thinking too much like an American."

Yet, despite the tension between An and the communists, Berman said it was tragic day for both the Vietnamese and the Americans when An died in September 2006. Even though he was eventually exposed as a spy to the Americans, he was able to side-step resentment and still

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found favor in their eyes.

Those who knew An viewed him as modest and competent, regardless of the circumstances.

Third-year Spanish major Sasha Marakowski came to find the answers about An. She was dumbfounded by how a deceitful man not only got away with his clandestine life, but also did not cause any resentment among others.

"I came thinking [of] how it was possible for a person to accomplish this. The answer I found here was that he was a communist not fighting for his country, but for what he believed in. The answer is quite simple," Marakowski said.

Fourth-year biology major Carolyn Pham enjoyed said this event because she thought it was interesting to learn about the double life that An lived and about Vietnam.

"I want to know more about my culture because my dad went to the re-education camp in Vietnam," Pham said.

Berman addressed An's sense of culture and nationalism in regards to his goals as a spy, which were to help prevent American colonialism in his country.

"When the Americans came with their advisors and money, followed by military, An accepted his national obligation to work in espionage," Berman said. However, he added that An also came to value American culture during his mission, which led to a state of duplicity. It is this unique perspective that Berman is interested in sharing with his readers.

In the words Berman, he would like Perfect Spy to give its readers "a better understanding on the complexities of the war as seen through the eyes of a master spy, Vietnamese nationalist and patriot, as well as friend and admirer of our system and way of life."

The event was sponsored by UCR's program Southeast Asia: Text, Ritual and Performance, more commonly known as SEATRIP. More information about Perfect Spy can be found at [www.larrybermanperfectspy.com](http://www.larrybermanperfectspy.com).



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