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PERFECT SPY

The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An, Time Magazine Reporter and Vietnamese Communist Agent

By Larry Berman

PERFECT SPY: The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An, Time Magazine Reporter and Vietnamese Communist Agent (Smithsonian Books, ISBN13 9780060888381, on sale April 24, 2007, \$25.95) is the extraordinary story of North Vietnam's most successful spy who worked for Time Magazine during the Viet Nam War.

Pham Xuan An was a Vietnamese nationalist and member of Ho Chi Minh's army in the 1950s. Knowing that war with the United States was inevitable, the Party sent An to America to study journalism (for his cover) and observe its people and culture. He attended community college in California, worked for the Sacramento Bee, interned at the United Nations, and traveled across the country making friends.

Back in Saigon An worked as a reporter for Reuters and Time in the early 60s. He befriended numerous American journalists, including David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan and Stanley Karnow who came to regard him as a friend and trusted source. Meanwhile, he was providing intelligence to Hanoi; his early reports were so accurate that General Giap joked "we are now in the US war room." For twenty years An lived a lie and no one knew because he was so good at his day job, which was interwoven with his assignment in espionage.

Several years after the war, the new Vietnamese Communist government revealed that An had

been one of its most effective spies. He was publicly awarded six medals and named a “Hero of the People’s Army” - one of only two intelligence officers during the war ever promoted to the rank of General and Hero. But An’s disaffection with the new government’s treatment of their southern countrymen and his close friendships with Americans made him suspicious in the eyes of the Communist government. He was soon placed under house arrest and was never permitted to leave Vietnam again. He died in September, 2006 and was buried with full military honors.

In 1997 An’s former journalism colleagues gathered at the Asia Society in New York to discuss An’s role in the Vietnam War. Some were appalled at An’s duplicity but others saw him as a Vietnamese patriot. But An had no regrets about his double life. As he told Morley Safer in 1990: “The truth? Which truth? One truth is that for 10 years I was a staff correspondent for Time magazine, and before that Reuters. The other truth is that I joined the movement in 1944 and in one way or another have been part of it ever since. Two truths — both truths are true.”

Professor Berman met An in July, 2001 and spent hundreds of hours over the past five years interviewing him. An shared his personal files and considered Berman his American biographer.

PERFECT SPY is a fresh and revealing look at a war that continues to haunt us. It leads us inexorably to consider the pitfalls of “human intelligence” altogether.

About the Author:

Larry Berman is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Davis and the director of the UC-Davis Washington Program. The author of three books on Vietnam, he has extensive media experience, including being featured on C-Span’s Book TV and the History Channel, as well as in programs by Bill Moyers, David McCullough and Marvin Kalb. A recipient of numerous prestigious fellowships, Berman has also been a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Rockefeller Foundation’s Center in Bellagio, Italy. His website is www.larrybermanperfectspy.com.

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