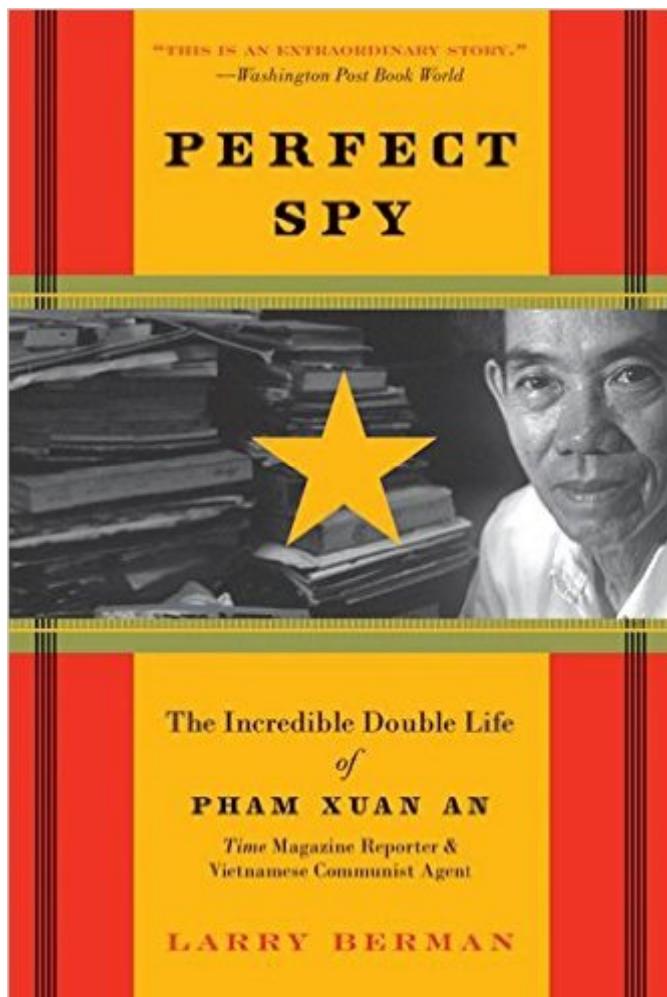


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# Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life Of Pham Xuan An, Time Magazine Reporter And Vietnamese Communist Agent



## **Synopsis**

During the Vietnam War, Time reporter Pham Xuan An befriended everyone who was anyone in Saigon, including American journalists such as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan, the CIA's William Colby, and the legendary Colonel Edward Lansdale "not to mention the most influential members of the South Vietnamese government and army. None of them ever guessed that he was also providing strategic intelligence to Hanoi, smuggling invisible ink messages into the jungle inside egg rolls. His early reports were so accurate that General Giap joked, "We are now in the U.S. war room." In *Perfect Spy*, Larry Berman, who An considered his official American biographer, chronicles the extraordinary life of one of the twentieth century's most fascinating spies.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Professor Berman's latest book is highly readable and fascinating. An the spy left Saigon in 1957 (at that time, dozens, maybe hundreds of South Vietnamese also came to the United States including my father who arrived for pilot training with the Air Force) for Orange Coast College (OCC), smack in the middle of John Birch's conservative Orange County, California, now the de-facto capital of ex refugees who fled after An's North Vietnamese Army overran their homeland. And yes, An played a major role in that victory. Just ask the much-heralded Saigon press corps and the likes of Neil Sheehan, Stanley Karnow, and Morley Safer. The late David Halberstam knew An fairly well too. Most of them have seen An in the years since the war had ended and have raised money to send his son to the University of North Carolina in the 1990s. Toward the end of the book, there's a picture of An's son standing next to President Bush during his "first" visit to Vietnam in late 2006.

The son was serving as a translator. Time Magazine, An's last American employer, still had a pension for him. Berman, an occasional marathonist with plenty of energy for an academic, had traveled to Vietnam numerous times to visit with An. He deftly weaves a terrific narrative that takes readers through the Vietnam War and An's relationships with South Vietnamese officials and his American counterparts. The rehashing of key events during the war sometimes bog down the pacing of the book. What I found most fascinating was An's time at OCC, where he was remembered as being outgoing, flirtatious and even fell in love with an American student, a blonde haired, blue eyed editor of the school's newspaper. He later befriended the daughter of newspaper mogul, C. K. McClatchy.

Larry Berman's book, *The Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An* is a fascinating read on many levels. First, I believe the book should be considered an indispensable volume in the vast collection of Vietnam War literature. It is more than an intriguing tale of espionage and history of the Viet Nam War, it's an enlightening view into the soul of the American press corps and how they provided cover and legitimacy to North Vietnam's most successful spy. An, working for his communists' masters, successfully deceived and manipulated the foreign press corps as well as U.S. and South Vietnamese security officials for the duration of the war. Truly An was one of the great spies of the Twentieth Century, whose chief enablers were well-known members of the American press corps. The book unfortunately is colored by the author's desire to make An's treachery something we should accept and forgive, notwithstanding his direct culpability in the deaths of U.S. servicemen and untold numbers of South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. If I had a nickel for every time An was referred to in the book as "charming" or "helpful" I'd have a nice start on my son's college fund. For the most part, these "friends" served as useful idiots to An, who played them like a fiddle. The larger question that remains unanswered is to what degree An succeeded in coloring press stories critical of U.S. policy. The book points out that almost all the newly arrived American correspondents in Viet Nam sought out An because he was a man of uncommon insight and had the best sources. An surely fed anti-American or anti-war views to the Viet Nam press corps, many of whom arrived in Viet Nam profoundly opposed to the war. He essentially gave them what they wanted to hear. An's impact on the U.S.

Pham Xuan An was recruited by the Communist Party in Vietnam and sent to the U.S. in 1957 to learn journalism as a cover - long before the U.S. took a major role in the conflict. An quickly came to admire the U.S., did well in his studies (Orange Coast College) and internships, and was had

several attractive offers for permanent work upon their completion. Yet, despite fear that he would be arrested by the South Vietnamese government upon returning to Vietnam, An returned, first reporting French troop actions, then also working for various government military figures (eg. teaching English to future VN spies; helping set up the Vietnamese spying service), and finally for various American publications - Time magazine in particular. Several times the CIA even tried to recruit An, with no success. Early in his career An risked exposure to save the life of a Time reporter captured by the VietCong in Cambodia because he knew the reporter had saved a number of Vietnamese children's lives from various Cambodian army massacres. This conflict between his spy role and friendship with Americans continued up to America's last day in Saigon when An helped a Vietnamese friend who had worked for the Americans escape. These actions, however, did not dull An's effectiveness - his insights and reports based on conversations and documents played key roles in VietCong/NVA tactics and strategy development. After the war ended, An was promoted to Maj. General, and collected his ten top-level medals. An received no formal spy training - instead, he read a number of books by others who were past masters. Communications involving An were almost entirely one-way - towards nearby VietCong and much farther away NVA leaders in Hanoi.

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