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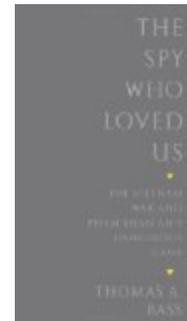


Thomas A. Bass. *The Spy Who Loved Us: The Vietnam War and Pham Xuan An's Dangerous Game*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2009. xviii + 297 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58648-409-5.

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The Spy Among Us: Pham Xuan An and the Vietnam War

Thomas A. Bass, a professor at SUNY's Albany University, spent more than fifteen years piecing together this book on one of the most puzzling and frustrating personalities of the Vietnam War. Early on, Bass promises to objectively juxtapose Pham Xuan An's life as mercurial spy with that of respected, meticulous chief correspondent for *Time* magazine. Bass does that as best he can, given his own close relationship with An, but this account does not assuage a reader's discomfort with the U.S. press corps' reverence for a man who won medal after medal from the North Vietnamese government for access and intelligence that led to hundreds, if not thousands, of American deaths in Vietnam.

Bass's work follows by about two years the "official" biography, *Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An, Time Magazine Reporter and Vietnamese Communist Agent*, by Larry Berman. The Bass book is compiled from a series of lengthy interviews Bass conducted with An during the thirteen years before his death and from authorized biographies published in Vietnam as well as a serial of An's life printed in Vietnamese newspapers.

An went to work for *Time* in 1965 at a time when the war was still getting a passing grade from American citizens and the U.S. Congress. Only a few journalists (Dorothy Day and I. F. Stone were two) had questioned—or were beginning to question—U.S. motives or strategies. According to the finest war correspondents of the day, An brought great clarity to a complex war, providing ac-

curate and detailed accounts for American readers hungry for information about a war they understood only from Pentagon and White House spin.

In 2005, Bass profiled An in *The New Yorker*, a piece that would blossom into book form after An's death the following year. Before An lost his battle with emphysema at age seventy-nine, Bass thought An had won four medals from the North Vietnamese government, and that his broad, strategic intelligence activities probably were balanced by his honest reporting and his apparent role in freeing fellow *Time* correspondent Robert Sam Anson from North Vietnamese custody. But after the profile appeared, An cut off contact with Bass, implying that the author was revealing too much information about issues sensitive to the North Vietnamese government. An, after all, had carried on his charade for three decades, extending well after the war and involving secrets deeper than even those already known about the enigmatic spy.

Though Bass claims great remorse and loss in An's decision, the breakup allowed him to discover the depth of An's involvement as a spy. The actual record is frightening: An actually won sixteen medals from his government and his activities extended to helping move troops into more strategic and tactical positions. He even scouted the streets of Saigon, plotting targets for the Tet Offensive of 1968, an event that helped forever alter the shape and direction of the war.

Bass's book, while nodding to An's wit and charm, provides enough spook and chill to make the reader

cringe at the extent to which the U.S. intelligence communities and major media could be duped. The North Vietnamese sent An to school in the United States in the 1950s, where he excelled on his community college newspaper and earned an internship at the *Sacramento Bee*. He subsequently drove cross country to intern at the United Nations, then, with a deeper understanding of U.S. culture and diplomacy, headed back to Vietnam to assume reporting positions with United Press International (UPI), Reuters, and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

That carefully engineered and executed resumé set An up for a thirty-year career as a spy and journalist much revered by protagonist and enemy. He wrote his reports to Hanoi in invisible ink and often spirited the information in spring rolls. That An was a master spy is no surprise. That he was an excellent journalist is not disputed. But what Bass gives in this book is not the fawning that so marks previous works. It is by far the most critical, forthcoming account of a man the North Vietnamese government designated a war hero and put on the road to promotion to the rank of general.

“The Vietnamese studied their adversary,” Bass writes. “They cultivated an agent who could think like an American, who could get inside the American mind to learn the country’s values and beliefs.... They needed a strategic spy, a poetic spy, a spy who loved Americans and was loved by them in return. After gaining their confidence, he would pick the lock most prized in military strategy—the lock to their dreams and ambitions, their myths about themselves, and their role in the world” (pp. 8-9).

During the war phase of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, An compiled nearly five hundred North Vietnamese intelligence field reports, many of which were met with great glee by President Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap. Ho, in fact, is said to have credited An with putting North Vietnamese leaders surreptitiously at the table in the U.S. “war room.”

Bass attributes An’s motives in this elaborate plot to the spy’s lifelong resentment over imperial or colonial control of his country for hundreds of years. It was nothing personal against the United States, perhaps making it possible for An to achieve near-hero status among his American journalist colleagues, including the legendary David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan. Though Bass notes that a few journalists wondered how An could be right on so many details so many times, none figured out his bizarre and extensive intelligence network for the enemy.

That enduring reverence by An’s former U.S. colleagues becomes a challenge for Bass. Reporters for years have defended An, saying he loved his enemy and did great journalism unimpeded by his spying activities. Bass, however, asserts that An was more than a casual double-crosser whose acumen in both arenas and on both sides of the war was just some interesting philosophical or conceptual debate in An’s own mind—or a mere footnote in Vietnam War history. Bass reveals that An, despite claims he took to the grave, was not a mere strategist but a hands-on tactician whose direct involvement killed American troops and contributed mightily to the North Vietnamese victory.

The duality of An’s life must have required constant mental and moral acrobatics. As the most influential reporter in the press corps, An usually was notified in advance when Buddhist monks, protesting the South’s repressive government, planned to burn themselves alive on Saigon streets. In interviews with Bass, An claims he was bound to secrecy by his sources and that journalistic ethics prevented him from intervening or revealing his tips to police. “These also are the ethics of an intelligence agent who knows the propaganda value of burning monks,” Bass sarcastically notes (p. 139).

Bass’s biography of An’s life as spy and correspondent stands well on its own as a gripping, well-documented tale. But it explains much more about the failure of the American military officials to understand the culture of the Vietnamese. In many ways, the book confirms Stone’s contention that it never pays to fight for the landlord in a peasant war. An even tells Bass that the United States had several opportunities to win, specifically with Americanization and during Tet, but squandered them by failing to execute good plans and appropriate policies.

In a number of places in his book, Bass writes that American press colleagues defend An—and, in some cases, absolve him of any guilt—because he never told a lie. They say he gave his North Vietnamese handlers the same information he was weaving into his stories for *Time*. For whatever reasons, An left a legacy that, among his American friends, framed him as friend over foe, journalist over spy.

Bass, however, seems now to doubt that remarkable rationalization. In the final pages, he relates conversations with An during his slow surrender to death. There were hours of conversations punctuated by shallow breathing, desperate doses from a breathing machine, and complaints that Bass had betrayed An in his

New Yorker piece. This was the backdrop as An jilted Bass, who is convinced that their separation came from An's superiors, not the jovial, witty chief correspondent who made a career of long and exhaustive conversation. The personal and emotional description of their final days together reflects the very ambiguity and confusion that An so cleverly and deftly used in his double life. "While An's biographers argue over his legacy, debating whether he was a romantic or a revolutionary, a lover of

Americans or a Communist, committed to killing them, the old man is cutting a caper and laughing at us, taking his secrets to his grave," Bass writes (pp. 251-252).

More than thirty years after the fall of Saigon, a story that An covered alone for *Time*, this story of the Vietnamese reporter-spy answers many questions about how Vietnam slipped away from American forces. For the future, it should warn us about what our own freedoms can do to us if they are seized and manipulated by an enemy.

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