US journalist who exposed Shiite death squads murdered in Basra

Patrick Martin
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American journalist Steven Vincent was kidnapped and murdered August 2 in Basra, the southern Iraqi city where he had been working as a freelance writer and blogger. Suspicion for this killing, the first of an American reporter in Iraq, focuses not on Al Qaeda or Sunni-based insurgents, but on the police of the Shiite-based administration installed in Basra with the support of US and British occupation forces.

Vincent and his translator and assistant, Nour Weidi, were seized Tuesday evening outside a currency exchange shop by five men dressed in police uniforms and driving police cars. According to a report in the *Los Angeles Times*, "One witness, who refused to give his name, said he recognized one of the abductors as an Interior Ministry employee"—that is, a functionary of the US-backed puppet regime in Baghdad. "The man also recognized me, after I saluted him," the eyewitness told the *Times*. "He said to me: 'Do not interfere! It is our duty.'"

A few hours later, the journalist's body was found dumped by a road outside the city, with multiple bullet wounds to the head. He suffered bruises to his face and shoulder, had been blindfolded and his hands were tied in front with plastic wire. Weidi was seriously wounded but survived. She was taken to a local hospital.

On Sunday, July 31, Vincent received his widest media exposure with an op-ed column in the *New York Times* describing the takeover of the Basra police by Shiite militants, some loyal to radical cleric Moqtada Sadr, others to the two main Shiite parties which run the US-backed government in Baghdad.

He wrote, "A police lieutenant confirmed for me the widespread rumors that a few police officers are perpetrating many of the hundreds of assassinations—mostly of former Baath Party members—that take place in Basra each month.... He told me that there is even a sort of 'death car,' a white Toyota Mark II that glides through the city streets, carrying off-duty police officers in the pay of extremist religious groups to their next assignment." Two days after these words were published, a "death car" came for Vincent himself.

Vincent was a freelance writer and professional art critic living and working in New York City until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. After the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, which he fervently supported, he decided to go to Iraq and report on the conditions there and the progress of what he mistakenly believed was an exercise in the establishment of democracy in the Middle East. He wrote a book-length account of his experiences in Iraq after the US invasion, *In the Red Zone: A Journey Into the Soul of Iraq*, Spence Publishing, 2004, and was at work on a contemporary history of Basra.

However misguided his faith in the democratizing mission of American imperialism, Vincent was a man of some personal courage and an honest observer of events, traveling without military escort or bodyguards, his physical safety depending on using his wits and his contacts among ordinary Iraqis. (He spoke no Arabic and relied heavily on his unpaid translator, to whom he gave the pseudonym Layla.)

His columns, mainly published in the right-wing *National Review Online*, did not simply parrot Bush administration propaganda. On December 15, 2004, for instance, under the headline, "The Oppressive Occupier? This Wasn't How the Liberation was Supposed to Go," he related discussions with Iraqi men on the streets of Fallujah and Ramadi, two cities which have been the focal point of opposition to the US occupation. (Vincent posed as a Yugoslav journalist and was promptly deluged with complaints, whose gist

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was “America bad, worse than Saddam.”)

“It was painful to see America the object of so much hatred and fear, the very image of an oppressive occupier,” he wrote. “It was worse when we found ourselves behind a trio of Humvees ... and I looked at the GI manning the roof-mounted m60 machine gun (Where was he from? What city? Where did his parents live?), reflecting on the isolation of these young men out here, how the Iraqis shun and avoid them, even as they face the threat that a roadside pile of debris will erupt into fire and shrapnel. This was not how the liberation was supposed to go.”

Vincent spent the bulk of his time in Iraq reporting from Basra, supposedly a quieter and more secure location than Baghdad or the Sunni Triangle, without the constant terrorist attacks and gun battles between US troops and insurgents. He came to regard the Shiite organizations, particularly that of Moqtada Sadr but also the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (Sciri), one of the two main parties in power in Baghdad, as reactionary and violently antidemocratic.

Writing in the *Christian Science Monitor* July 13, he described how militias linked to these Shiite parties had attacked students, harassed women deemed in violation of strict Islamic codes of conduct, threatened local journalists, and carried out the political assassination of as many as 1,000 people, mainly Sunni Muslims, in a three-month period. He criticized the British military, the ultimate authority in Basra, for not cracking down on these activities.

An editor’s note appended to this article explained why all of Vincent’s Basra sources had remained anonymous: “The Iraqis Steven interviewed said that the climate of fear is worse than under Saddam Hussein.”

Writing for his own blog two weeks later, July 26 (a week before his death), Vincent described the rampant corruption in the city: “Not surprisingly, given Basra’s dilapidated condition, contracting is big business. Not only for the city’s numerous contractors, but also for the crooked politicians, parasitical religious parties and criminal gangs who take their cut from every construction job, creating a business climate that combines the accountability of Tammany Hall with the law and order of 1920s Chicago.”

After relating a conversation with an American officer charged with awarding reconstruction contracts, who was completely oblivious to the political conditions in the city, he ended with this pessimistic note: “Not for the first time, I felt I was living in a Graham Greene novel, this time about a US soldier—call it The Naive American—who finds what works so well in PowerPoint presentations has unpredictable results when applied to realities of Iraq. Or is that the story of our whole attempt to liberate this nation?”

This tragedy bears certain similarities to the 2002 murder of another American journalist, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, in Pakistan. Like Vincent, Pearl stepped into the hornets’ nest created by US military intervention in the region and paid the price with his life, murdered by Islamic fundamentalists.

There are contradictions piled upon contradictions in the case of Steven Vincent. He denounced all armed resistance to the US occupation of Iraq as the work of “Islamo-fascism” and right-wing “death squads,” and, according to the *New York Times*, “even compared his trips to Iraq to the tours taken by journalists covering the rise of fascism in Europe during the Spanish Civil War.”

Yet his writings were published in a reactionary publication, *National Review*, founded by William F. Buckley and other arch-conservatives who had sympathized with the fascist side in the Spanish Civil War (on the basis of anti-communism), and which served as an apologist for US-backed death squad regimes throughout Latin America.

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