

I hooked bomb to Letelier's car: Witness

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Dispatch Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON—An American expatriate testified yesterday he and anti-Castro Cubans from New Jersey carried out the 1976 car-bombing assassination here of former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier on direct orders from the Chilean secret police.

Michael Townley, the government's key witness in the trial of three Cubans charged in connection with the killing, told the jury his "mission was elimination, or the killing, assassination of Letelier." He admitted placing the bomb under Letelier's car.

Speaking in a loud clear voice and without hesitation, Townley said he had been ordered to recruit the Cubans—members of the Union City-based Cuban Nationalist Movement—"only if needed."

But in nearly four hours of testimony, Townley under questioning by the prosecution, described an international plot of intrigue, murder attempts and murder in which CNM members participated voluntarily in return for "political considerations" and other help from Chile in their anti-Castro, anti-Communist activities.

Townley, a former member of DINA, as Chile's secret police was known, has since pleaded guilty to one count of murder conspiracy.

The three defendants—brothers Guillermo and Ignacio Novo and Alvin Ross—sat rigidly at the defense table throughout Townley's testimony. Shortly after Townley first entered the courtroom, however, and with the jury, judge, and lawyers absent, Ignacio Novo directed a stream of curses at Townley, and called him "traitor," according to Latin American reporters in the courtroom.

Guillermo Novo and Ross are charged with conspiracy to murder and murder, Ignacio Novo with lying to a grand jury and not telling police about the crime.

Under questioning by Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene Propper,

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I hooked bomb to car, admits Letelier witness

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Townley told the jury that:

- It was he who placed the bomb under Letelier's car, in the presence of two other CNM members, Virgilio Paz and Jose Dionisio. Paz and Dionisio, indicted for murder in the case, are still fugitives and the subject of a massive manhunt.

- Guillermo Novo supplied much of the bomb-making material used in the killing, while Ross was fully informed of the plot before the killing took place.

- Ignacio Novo was fully informed of the "mission" after the murder.

Townley did not say who actually triggered the remote-control bomb that killed Letelier. But he claimed he was in Florida at the time the bomb went off and that by then, Paz had apparently already returned to New Jersey, where he lived.

- The order to kill Letelier was given by Pedro Espinoza, DINA's former director of operations and a Chilean army officer.

Espinoza, former DINA director Manuel Contreras and a third DINA official, Armando Fernandez, have been indicted on murder charges in the case. They are now awaiting a Chilean Supreme Court decision on a U.S. government request to extradite them.

- Contreras was the highest Chilean official who knew about the plot to kill Letelier.

The prosecution contends DINA ordered Letelier killed to end his criticism of Chile's military junta.

Letelier was ambassador to the United States and later held several key cabinet posts in the government of Marxist President Salvador Allende, who was overthrown and killed in a 1973 military coup.

Letelier was jailed for one year by the military junta, then expelled from Chile. He and an aide, Mrs. Ronni K. Moffit, formerly of Passaic, were killed when a remote-control bomb exploded under the car in which they were going to work on Washington's Embassy Row on Sept. 21, 1976.

Townley, who described himself as an electronics expert, admitted offering his services to the CIA in 1970 and 1973, when he was living in Florida, but said the CIA never showed any interest and that he never worked for the agency.

Defense attorneys assert the CIA masterminded the plot to kill Letelier, and that neither the Cubans nor DINA played any role in it.

Townley said he first came into contact with the Cuban Nationalist Movement in 1975, when he was ordered to kill two Chilean dissidents gathered for a meeting in Mexico City. Townley said he was told to recruit Cubans in the U.S. for the mission. After despairing of Cuban groups in Miami because they were "talkative" and "lax in their security," an acquaintance suggested he contact Guillermo Novo of the CNM, Townley testified.

Novo, Suarez, and other CNM members ultimately agreed to provide him with explosives, Townley said, while Paz accompanied him to Mexico City. But Townley said he never carried out the Mexican mission because they arrived one day after the Chilean exiles' meeting had broken up.

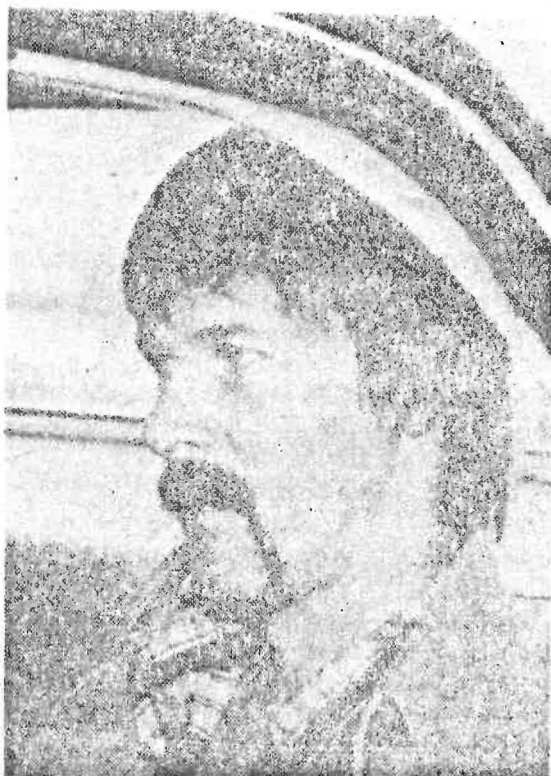
Townley said he returned the explosives to CNM because they were given to him "on the quality of a loan...if they were used or abandoned, they were to be replaced."

Townley also said he later met Paz in Chile, where the Cuban was to receive intelligence training from DINA.

In mid-1976, Townley said, Espinoza gave him orders to kill Letelier, making it look "as an accidental death, suicide, as innocuous as possible."

According to Townley, the following sequence then took place:

- Sept. 8. Townley arrives at Kennedy Airport, meets DINA agent Fernandez, who had been shad-



Michael Townley

His mission was to eliminate Letelier

owing Letelier for the past several days. Fernandez reports on his work, then returns to Chile. Townley calls Paz. Later that day, Paz, his wife and Townley meet in the Bottom of the Barrel restaurant in Union City. Townley is introduced to Ross.

- Sept. 9. Townley meets Guillermo Novo and Dionisio at the Four Star Restaurant in Union City, where they discussed the Letelier mission. At first, the CNM members are hesitant to go along because of the recent expulsion from Chile of a fellow Cuban exile.

Townley and Ross, Dionisio, Guillermo Novo, Dr. Juan Pulido, a leader of northern New Jersey's Cuban community who has since died, as well as several other unidentified Cubans meet in the Chateau Renaissance in North Bergen. Townley "explained" the mission itself (which was to kill Letelier) and requested their assistance to carry it out.

- Sept. 21—morning. Townley calls Paz in New Jersey. Paz is "uptight," asks Townley to call back later.

- Sept. 21—afternoon. Townley meets Ignacio Novo in Miami. "We discussed the operation, what had happened."

- Sept. 22. Townley returns to Chile. Informs Espinoza about the mission (he already knows that Letelier is dead).

Townley calls Paz, who tells him the explosive device malfunctioned when first triggered on Sept. 20.

Later that year, Townley sends the CNM new explosives, in accordance with the "replacement" agreement.

- January 1978. Guillermo Novo calls Townley from New Jersey, requesting a loan of \$25,000 he says the CNM needs to pay off debts and to allow CNM members to leave the country "due to the problems created because of Letelier's death."

Townley asks Contreras for the loan, but he says he can't help since he no longer heads DINA, which was succeeded by another agency in August 1977. Contreras adds he "can't go to a higher authority since no one higher up had any knowledge" of the Letelier plot.

Later that year, the Chilean government, under U.S. government pressure, turns Townley over to the FBI.