

# A Killer From Middle America

By TOM FIEDLER *1-20-79-22*  
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WASHINGTON — Michael Vernon Townley looks every bit as middle American and wholesome as anyone Waterloo, Iowa, ever produced.

He is tall, lanky and friendly, even to hostile defense attorneys. His polite "yes, sir" to every affirmative question comes in a soft-spoken deferential tone that would make any mother's heart swell with pride.



**TOWNLEY** But the actions which Townley admits to in his gentle way can raise chills on a listener's neck. This product of Waterloo, Iowa, and one-time resident of Miami is a contract killer, as cold and calculating as almost any figure in the pages of a John LeCarre spy novel.

Townley, now 36 years old, is, in short, a living contradiction.

**FOR THE** past two days, he has held spell-

bound a U.S. District Court jury and a packed courtroom of reporters and spectators with his description of his exploits as a sometime-assassin for the Chilean secret police agency, DINA.

He has admitted plotting to "eliminate" former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier with a "device" that he constructed. The "device" was a remote-controlled bomb that exploded with such force beneath the driver's seat of Letelier's car that his legs never were recovered.

Townley recounted calmly how he built the bomb — combining his lifelong hobbies of electronics and radio-transmitting — and left militant Cuban exiles to detonate it in downtown Washington.

If there was any remorse in his heart, he didn't let it show. But he did tell the jurors minutes before that he initially had declined to participate in the assassination.

**THE REASON:** "My wife wasn't feeling well. She was going to have an operation." Also, he added, he might have missed his son's birthday.

The son of a Ford Motor Co. executive, Townley came to Chile at the age of 14 after attending schools in Iowa, New Jersey and Miami.

He quickly adapted, becoming proficient in Spanish.

At the age of 19 — when his parents left for the United States — he stayed behind to marry a politically active woman a decade older than he was. He returned briefly to the United States and worked for AAMCO Transmissions in Dade County. But he and his wife missed Chile.

In 1971, after four unhappy years in Miami, they returned and quickly got involved in political activities against then-President Salvadoré Allende, a Marxist.

By day, Townley ran an auto-repair shop. But, at night, he operated a clandestine, anti-Allende radio station which he built himself.

**FATEFULLY**, the government official assigned to stop the broadcasts came to admire Townley's ability to elude capture. After Allende was overthrown, that official — DINA Col. Pedro Espinosa — offered Townley a job as an electronics expert.

"I took the job because things weren't going too well in my business at that time, anyway," Townley testified.

That, as they say, is the beginning of the story.