

Townley Admits 'Incorrect Answer' In Previous Testimony on Letelier

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WASHINGTON — Admitted assassin Michael V. Townley, the government's key witness against three Cubans charged in connection with Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier's bombing death, ended three days of cross-examination Wednesday with his account of the murder unbroken.

Despite intense and sometimes hostile questioning, defense lawyers Lawrence Dubin and Paul Goldberger managed to catch Townley in only minor discrepancies in his earlier statements.

They did, however, draw from Townley a potentially damaging admission that he had given an "incorrect answer" to presiding Judge Barrington Parker Jr. last summer.

Townley's credibility is crucial to the prosecution's case because he is the one who allegedly brought the Cubans into the assassination plot.

Defense attorneys found not only that their cross-examination was generally frustrated by the witness, but also that their questions sometimes enabled Townley to shore up earlier allegations with his calm, well-reasoned responses.

TOWNLEY, 36, has pleaded guilty to masterminding Letelier's assassination on orders from the Chilean secret police agency called

DINA, for which he worked.

He has testified that he enlisted five members of the Cuban Nationalist Movement — including the three defendants — in that plot. The other two Cubans are fugitives.

Two of the defendants, Alvin Ross Diaz and Guillermo Novo Sampol, both of Union City, N.J., are charged with participating directly in the assassination conspiracy. The third, Guillermo's brother Ignacio, who lives in Miami, is charged with lying to a grand jury investigating the murder and with participating in a coverup.

Letelier — the former Chilean ambassador to the United States under President Salvador Allende's Marxist government — died when a bomb attached to his car exploded

as he drove along Embassy Row here. A co-worker, Ronni Moffitt, also died.

Letelier had lived in Washington in exile since a military junta toppled the Allende government in 1973.

THE SINGLE FLAW in Townley's testimony came late Wednesday. He admitted that he had inadvertently given "an incorrect answer" to Parker when he appeared before him last August to plead guilty to his role in the assassination.

At that time, Parker asked Townley if he had any "prior experience" in making a remote-controlled bomb. Townley said he had not.

During the cross-examination

Wednesday, however, Townley said he had made a nearly identical bomb in February 1975 — more than 18 months before the Letelier assassination.

He admitted buying components for that bomb in Miami.

WHEN defense attorney Dubin confronted Townley with the inconsistency in his two statements, he admitted the error and said his statement to Judge Parker was "an incorrect answer."

Parker leaned over his bench and asked coldly: "Did you realize at the time that it was incorrect?"

Townley replied in polite tones: "At the time I don't think I realized [it was incorrect] . . ."