

CIA Disowns Townley in Letelier Trial

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WASHINGTON — Two senior CIA officers flatly denied contentions Friday that Michael V. Townley, an American-born Chilean intelligence agent, was a CIA "mole" when he planned the Orlando Letelier assassination.

The officials verified earlier statements that Townley had gone to the CIA in Miami in 1970 and again in 1973 and volunteered to work for the agency in Santiago, Chile. But they denied that the CIA took him up on his offer.

Townley has confessed to building the bomb that killed Letelier, a Chilean diplomat, in downtown Washington on Sept. 21, 1976.

"WE WEREN'T interested in Mr. Townley," said Marvin Smith, CIA deputy director of operations. "He had become quite a figure in Chile ... in newspaper reports."

Smith also denied that the CIA was aware that Townley had instead gone to work for the Chilean intelligence agency, DINA.

"Had he been identified by us as a member of that service [DINA]," Smith said, "I'm sure [his file]

would have been marked in such a way that I would have noticed it."

The testimony of Smith and the second CIA official, Robert Gambino, appeared to undermine defense contentions that Townley was a CIA double agent, buried with DINA as a "mole" to report on its activities.

That argument holds that Townley, acting under CIA orders, planned and carried out Letelier's assassination and then framed DINA and members of the militant Cuban Nationalist Movement.

TOWNLEY HAS testified that he planned Letelier's assassination under orders from DINA and carried it out with help from the Cubans. He has denied that he ever worked for or with the CIA.

The two CIA officials were the last witnesses called by defense attorneys representing three Cuban exiles charged as Townley's accomplices in Letelier's death.

The defense rested its case after calling 11 witnesses over the past three days. Much of the witnesses' testimony was designed to bolster the defense theory that the Cubans



Michael V. Townley
... built the bomb

were victims of an elaborate CIA frame-up.

Smith and Gambino were the only CIA witnesses called by the defense. But their testimony appeared to backfire because of their flat denials that Townley worked for the CIA.

Defense attorneys Paul Goldberger and Lawrence Dubin initially had planned to call former CIA Director Richard Helms. But Goldberger said Helms — who now serves as a consultant to Iran — could not be located.

"HAD WE HAD this to do all over again, we would have laid off the CIA thing," Goldberger said later. "But when this case began, we thought the government had so much going for it that we had to take some sort of roundhouse punch."

The "roundhouse punch" was the theory of Townley's being a CIA agent.

The defense attorneys hoped that the CIA would be unable to make convincing denials about Townley's contacts with the agency, thus giving the defense the opportunity to imply that he worked with the CIA.

Instead, the CIA officials testified in detail about Townley's contacts.

They said CIA records showed that Townley, then an auto mechanic in North Miami Beach, called the CIA in 1970 and offered to work as an informant in Santiago, where he was moving.

Smith said the CIA gave Townley a "preliminary clearance" after an

interview and routine security check. He said that meant other CIA officers could contact Townley for information.

BUT SMITH added that, before Townley could actually work for the CIA, he would have had to undergo a more exhaustive security check.

However, agents in Santiago never were able to contact Townley after he moved there. In December 1971, Smith said, the "preliminary clearance" was revoked and efforts to contact him ended.

Townley contacted the CIA again in 1973 after fleeing to Miami from Chile, where he was wanted for activities against the Marxist government of President Salvadore Allende.

As before, Smith said the records indicated that Townley initiated the contact, calling the CIA and offering to brief the agency on political developments in Chile. At the time the CIA was involved in moves to undermine Allende's government.

Smith said the Miami agents were ordered to "listen to him, but do not interview him." When asked why, Smith answered: "We weren't interested in Mr. Townley — there was quite a bit of notoriety around him in Chile."