

The Michael Townley Puzzle

OUTSIDE the courtroom of U.S. District Court Judge Barrington Parker, Jr., last Friday afternoon there was the air of a college reunion as a dozen reporters awaited Michael V. Townley's sentencing for his role in the assassination of former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier.

Much hand-shaking and smiling took place as the reporters, from several nations, brought each other up to date on their activities since their last gathering almost four months ago.

It was a friendliness born of familiarity. Sporadically through 1978, then almost daily through January and February, the reporters listened as the bizarre Letelier story of international intrigue and political assassination unfolded in Parker's courtroom.

In many ways, Townley's sentencing Friday was like a graduation. After this gathering the reporters would probably go their separate ways, seldom to see each other again.

ALL of us will take away from this case some common memories that would seem the stuff of a good John LeCarre novel. Even when stripped to its barest elements, the story of Orlando Letelier's assassination in downtown Washington for effectively criticizing the policies of Chile's present military government will probably remain among the most interesting of each reporter's career.

But I will remember most vividly my impressions of Michael Townley, the American expatriate who admitted masterminding the assassination on orders from his super-



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riors at DINA, the Chilean intelligence agency.

He will remain a fascinating puzzle to me and, I suppose, to others who followed the trial.

Townley is a living contradiction in morality. A gentle-spoken and clean-cut man, he testified that he rarely failed to buy his children gifts when he was traveling "on missions" abroad.

He told a jury that he postponed one assignment because it would have caused him to miss a son's birthday and he away from his wife when she was preparing for an operation.

Townley, in essence, appeared the model parent and husband.

BUT in that same soft tone of voice, Townley described in scrupulous detail how he assembled the bomb that blew Letelier's legs off and, by accident, killed Letelier's co-worker, Ronni Moffitt.

More important, without registering any hint of emotion, Townley initially said that he had no regrets about carrying out his assignment to kill the former ambassador because both he and Letelier were "soldiers" carrying out their respective assignments.

I found it especially disturbing that a man who appeared so gentle and wholesome could show no remorse about carrying out what



was, on the face of it, a terrible crime.

But in grappling with that incongruity for the past several months, I have come to the conclusion that Michael Townley's rationalization of what he did is not at all unusual.

In fact, there may be a little of Michael V. Townley in each of us.

I WAS helped to that conclusion after thinking about his explanation that he was simply a soldier doing his part in a battle.

Killing in battle, after all, is not like killing at all. At least, that has been the time-honored rationalization that allows even the most religious among us to get around the Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

A disturbing parallel can be drawn between Townley's rationalization and that, say, of the Air Force B52 pilots who took part in the saturation bombing raids over Hanoi and Haiphong only a few years ago.

Like Townley, most of those pilots considered themselves technicians — men with excellent educations and finely honed skills that enabled them to maneuver a complex aircraft over a target and bring it back safely.

It was also for them a technical decision — not a moral one — to press the buttons that released the bombs that rained death on so many unarmed people.

WERE these men murderers? They certainly don't believe they were.

They never looked their victims in the eye, but death, nevertheless, was the result of their actions.

The disturbing thing is that it isn't a great step from that rationalization to Townley's. He never looked his victim in the eye, either.

Perhaps the only difference is that Townley finds no distinction between a political war and a shooting war.

But his rationalization of the Letelier assassination as the act of a soldier helps explain how a man can appear perfectly rational while taking credit for a despicable action.

Another reporter, in one of those press-room discussions that dominated the trial recesses, captured the essence of the troubling moral contradiction, that Townley personified.

"After all," my colleague said, "Adolph Eichmann was supposedly a nice guy, too." Consider what he rationalized himself into doing.