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Anatomy Of An Assassination

You Know The Story Of The Murders. This Is The Story Of The Killers.

By John Dinges and Saul Landau

Photograph by Richard Avedon

Editor's Note: It has been almost four years since a car-bomb exploded on Washington's Embassy Row, killing Orlando Letelier, member of Salvador Allende's socialist government and Chilean ambassador to the United States from 1971 to 1973; and a co-worker, Ronni Karpen Moffitt. Letelier had been living in exile in the U.S. since the military overthrow of the Allende government (see *Mother Jones*, December 1976). In the aftermath of the murder, two separate investigations were launched—one led by the FBI, the other by Letelier's colleagues at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS).

As Saul Landau, one of the IPS investigators, puts it, the initial difference between the two investigations was simple. The unofficial investigators had the right hypothesis—that the Chilean secret police (DINA) was responsible—but not a shred of evidence. The U.S. government, on the other hand, actually had photographs of the DINA assassins in its files at the time; but when the investigation began, senior officials in the FBI and the CIA directed the investigators to the theory that the murder had been committed by someone in Letelier's left-wing circles and that the Chilean government was not involved.

Through a tangled web of coincidences, contradictions and government coverups, in both the U.S. and Chile, the FBI investigators came to the same conclusion as did the Institute for Policy Studies, and eventually nailed down a case against the real killers. The search culminated in the uncovering of DINA's chief assassin, who turned out to be an expatriate American, Michael Vernon Townley, who had lived in Chile since 1958. Townley's bilingualism, electronics wizardry and love of soldierly fascism made him the ideal agent. His specialty was the assassination of members in exile of the Chilean opposition; Letelier was at least his third major hit. His record of terror makes him one of the most fearsome assassins of our time.

Once Townley was identified, top Chilean government officials double-crossed him in exchange for a secret deal with U.S. authorities, which would protect themselves. Yet by turning state's evidence against the Cuban right-wingers who had assisted him in the Letelier assassination, and against his own secret police colleagues, Townley himself was able to strike an advantageous plea bargain.

John Dinges, who began writing about the Letelier case as a correspondent in Chile for *The Washington Post*, and Landau have joined forces to write about the investigations and the ensuing trial in a new book, *Assassination on Embassy Row* (Pantheon Books, 1980).

What follows is *Mother Jones'* condensation of the story, based on numerous chapters. It will provide a preview of some of the revelations to be found in this extraordinary book.

—Deirdre English



ORLANDO LETELIER

New York City 11676

JULY 1980
21

SEPTEMBER • 1974

Michael Townley, DINA agent, arranges with Argentine fascists for the assassination of General Carlos Prats. On September 30, 1974, a bomb placed under Prats' car kills the exiled former Chilean chief of staff and his wife in Buenos Aires.

FEBRUARY • 1975

Townley, his wife and Virgilio Paz go to Mexico to assassinate Chilean exile leaders Carlos Altamirano and Velodia Teitelboim. They fail. Townley then spends the next few months following Altamirano around Europe for the purpose of assassinating him. In addition, he spies on Chilean exiles throughout Europe's major cities and builds contacts among European fascist groups for future violent missions for DINA.

OCTOBER • 1975

Townley arranges with members of Italy's fascist youth group to assassinate exiled Christian Democratic leader Bernardo Leighton. On October 6, 1975, Leighton and his wife are shot and badly wounded on a Rome street.

THE TARGET: LETELIER

JULY • 16 • 1976

Michael Townley and Lt. Armando Fernández Larios, under DINA orders to kill Orlando Letelier, arrive in Asunción, Paraguay, planning to proceed from there to the United States. They have worked out the assassination plot with Lt. Col. Pedro Espinoza, head of DINA operations; and DINA Director Col. Manuel Contreras has personally cabled Paraguayan intelligence to request assistance for the two agents. Paraguayan officials give them false passports in the names Juan Williams Rose (for Townley) and Alejandro Romeral Jara (for Fernández) and help them obtain U.S. visas, issued personally by the U.S. ambassador to Paraguay, who is led to believe that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has

given its approval of the mission.

But delays occur and suspicions become aroused. The U.S. ambassador, after issuing the visas, cables the CIA for confirmation, including in his message copies of the Williams and Romeral photos and passports with their photos in them. The cable and photos are channeled through the office of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to the office of CIA Director George Bush, who personally takes up the matter. Meanwhile, Townley and Fernández, fearful because of the delays, return to Santiago, Chile.

A week later, the deputy director of the CIA cables the U.S. ambassador that the CIA wants no part of the mission. The ambassador, alarmed, revokes the visas and sends lookout notices to all U.S. consulates and ports of entry that Williams and Romeral are to be arrested if they try to enter the U.S. Copies of the photos and passports begin to move from office to office inside the U.S. government.

On August 21, DINA Chief Contreras dispatches two other DINA agents—who also use the names Juan Williams Rose and Alejandro Romeral Jara—to the U.S. They enter Miami on August 22 and are not arrested. During their stay in Washington, D.C., they telephone CIA headquarters and announce their presence. Apparently reassured that the CIA is not prepared to take action over the Paraguay incident, they leave the United States in early September. (After the murders of Letelier and Moffitt, the entry notations for Williams and Romeral are removed from Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS] records.)

AUGUST • 26 • 1976

Armando Fernández arrives in the United States with a woman DINA agent to begin surveillance on Orlando Letelier.

SEPTEMBER • 9 • 1976

Michael Townley, using the name Hans Petersen Silva on a false Chilean government passport, arrives at JFK Airport in New York where he meets with Fernández and receives a briefing on the surveillance done on Letelier.

SEPTEMBER • 10 • 1976

Just beyond the only Sears, Roebuck store in Union City, New Jersey, Michael Townley meets with two Cubans in their late 30s. Quatro Estrellas Restaurant serves Cuban fare and attracts large numbers of midday shoppers. Guillermo Novo and José Dionisio Suárez know Townley—as an agent for DINA. They have worked with him before. As Latin American custom demands, the men go through the amenities of asking about families and recalling past good times before they get down to the business at hand.

"At this luncheon," Townley later wrote, "I outlined my DINA mission to



{MICHAEL TOWNLEY}

assassinate Letelier and requested the assistance of the Cuban Nationalist Movement [CNM]." The CNM agrees and supplies Townley with explosives and a remote control detonator.

SEPTEMBER • 18 • 1976

Washington, D.C.: Townley adds the final touches to the bomb as Virgilio Paz of the CNM holds the parts in place for him. Suárez reads and talks. Townley expertly molds the *plastique* and TNT to blow the full explosive force directly upward.

"During the ride to Letelier's house," he wrote later, "I was informed



{RONNI KARPEN MOFFITT}

by Paz and Suárez that they expected me to place the device on the car as they wished to have a DINA agent, namely myself, directly tied to the placing of the device."

Letelier's car is parked in the driveway, nose in. Townley walks directly to the car, lies down on his back on the driver's side, pulls up his blue sweatshirt to expose the bomb, puts his tools in accessible positions and slides under the car. The space is small, Townley large. Moving as little as possible, he attaches the bomb to the crossbeam with black electrical tape, occasionally flicking on a pencil flashlight to check its position.

SEPTEMBER • 21 • 1976

The bomb explodes under Orlando Letelier as he and his companions, Michael Moffitt and Ronni Karpen Moffitt, drive to their offices at the Institute for Policy Studies. Letelier's legs are blown off and he dies within moments; Ronni Karpen Moffitt is pierced in the neck and drowns in her own blood. As the ambulances speed off, her husband, Michael, the sole survivor, is left in the street shouting, "DINA! Assassins!"

SEPTEMBER • 21 • 1976

Two p.m.: The FBI arrives at the Institute for Policy Studies. The bureau has entered the case because Letelier had been a member of

Washington's diplomatic corps, a lifetime status according to protocol, within federal rather than local jurisdiction. The directors, fellows and staff of IPS greet the agents as if they are carriers of bubonic plague.

In 1974 IPS had filed a suit for damages against the FBI. Based on the reports of two former FBI informants, the Institute had charged the bureau with illegally planting informants inside IPS, tapping its phones, opening its mail and keeping its fellows under surveillance during the years 1968-1972. In addition, the IPS brief accused the FBI of systematically rifling its garbage and, on one occasion, reconstructing from discarded typewriter ribbons a letter written by one of its fellows. The FBI admitted to a House Investigating Committee in 1975 that it had 62 informants in IPS. In September, 1976, the suit is still pending. So when the FBI agents ask to interview the various IPS staffers who had been closest to Letelier, the Institute leaders demand that an attorney be present.

"Who do you think might have killed Letelier and Moffitt?"

"Pinochet."

The agents look puzzled. "Again, please."

"Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, the president of Chile," Saul Landau spells the name. The agent taking notes asks him to slow down. Landau describes Letelier's activities against the junta.

"Would anyone else that you can think of want to or have reason to kill him?"

"No."

(To those who knew Letelier, who had been a member of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity Government in Chile, it was all too logical that DINA, the Chilean Secret Police, was the agent of the assassination. The only question was, Would the truth ever come out? Saul Landau and Ralph Stavins of IPS decided not to leave that question to official Washington alone. They launched a campaign to pressure the investigators, to follow their own leads, to keep public attention on the case and, ultimately, to bring the killers to justice. Landau recalls the morning after the assassination: "I awoke and calmly washed, dressed, breakfasted, gathered papers I wanted to take with me to the Institute. I walked out to my car and fished the key out of my pocket. When I tried to insert the key into the

car door, my hand began to shake.

("I used both hands to get the key into the ignition and closed my eyes and bit my lip as the engine turned over. I imagined sound, flame, smoke, pain, but my Plymouth Fury simply started. The trembling stopped. The involuntary daydreams launched themselves like fast-moving ships inside my head.

("The majority of people we knew and loved, as with one voice, told us that we were absolutely crazy to attempt an investigation of these murders. All had different reasons, but all agreed that nothing but more pain and suffering would result from our efforts. Only Letelier's widow, Isabel, did not object. She wasn't optimistic about our chances for success, but at least she did not disagree with our plans. That was all



{JOSÉ DIONISIO SUÁREZ}

we needed. We ignored the rest because we did not like their advice. Our reasons were ethical and political. We felt we had to pursue the killers in any and every way that we could.")

THE MARTYR THEORY

FALL • 1976

Respectfully muted at first, the theory is floated in the press that left-extremists have killed Letelier to create a martyr. Chile has been trying to improve its human rights image in re-

Marcelo Morelino Photo



(MICHAEL MOFFITT)

cent months, *The New York Times* says, and it is "difficult to believe" that Chile's government is involved. The *Times* editorial poses as an open question whether Letelier's murder has been committed "by the government of Chile or by leftist extremists who will stop at nothing to heap discredit" on the Chilean junta.

During the week following the crime, as he makes the rounds of other government agencies and talks to representatives of the Chilean embassy and the pro-junta Chilean community in Washington, Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene Propper, the man named to organize the prosecution, hears the martyr theory over and over. Some of Letelier's former colleagues at the Inter-American Development Bank even provide made-up anecdotes of leftist animosity toward Letelier.

Special Agent Carter Cornick of the FBI hears the same drumbeat. Cornick has been assigned to coordinate "Chilbom"—the FBI's code word for the Letelier case. Some senior FBI officials refer to Letelier and the IPS as "pinkos" and "commie preverts." They drop suggestions to Cornick that he should direct the investigation at the American Left and Chilean exiles.

But Cornick and his men rule out the "martyr" theory by making exhaustive investigations of all left-wing "suspects" and coming up with no plausible evidence or motive. The only logical suspects are in Chile, and to pursue them the FBI will need the cooperation of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The Justice Department and the CIA struggle to define mutually acceptable ways of working together. What Justice needs and what the CIA fears amount to the same thing: information that might find its way into court, and, thus, into public scrutiny.

In the CIA's "worst case" scenario, the investigation might discover that someone with whom the CIA had worked closely in Chile in the past was involved in the assassination. The prosecution of that person or persons, the CIA argues, would inevitably result in the disclosure of "national security" information. A Chilean culprit would be in a position to blackmail the United States by threatening to tell about CIA activities in Chile unless the United States dropped its investigation against him. The issue is left unresolved.

Justice and the CIA reach an agreement for secret, circumscribed cooperation. The CIA will provide "relevant" information from CIA files, but Justice cannot use the information in court unless it has independently obtained it from a separate source. In case the outcome of the investigation hinges on a particular piece of CIA information or a CIA witness, the decision to use the information or not will be made by the president.

LATE OCTOBER • 1976

Robert Driscoll, the man at the State Department's Chile desk, learns that Chilean intelligence had been conducting a secret mission in Washington at the time of the assassinations. His source has given him the names of the purported Chilean agents—Juan Williams Rose and Alejandro Romeral Jara—and a tip that the same two men earlier attempted to enter the United States surreptitiously from Paraguay.

He checks his files and feeds the names into the computer. The computer responds: positive. A flurry of cables referring to Chilean officers Romeral and Williams had been coming into the Chile desk file.

A September 22 cable, sent by overnight traffic to Santiago, but actually composed on the day of the assassination, had advised the Santiago consulate not to issue visas to anyone using the names Romeral and Williams. A September 15 cable, addressed to the

U.S. mission in Paraguay, had been a formal certification of revocation for visas granted Romeral and Williams on July 27, 1976, at the U.S. mission in Asunción, Paraguay.

The next item jogs Driscoll's memory. It is a hefty manila envelope marked August 7 and contains an attached memo on CIA letterhead, addressed: "To Harry W. Schlaudeman, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, for DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency]." Driscoll remembers receiving the packet and looking at the photos inside. Now, he looks again. The same two faces in the same photos—a dark-haired man with a broad, unlined face and a light-haired, angular-faced man with a short-cropped mustache and goatee.



(CARTER CORNICK)

Driscoll finds the U.S. ambassador's original order that a lookout be posted at all ports of entry to the United States for the two men. The messages explain that two Chileans using false identities have tried to obtain visas to the United States from the consulate in Paraguay. One of the cables contains the annotation "reftel," followed by a code number, indicating a reference to a telegram sent on July 28 via the top-secret "Roger Channel" directly to the office of Secretary of State Kissinger and bypassing the central State Department communications network.

Driscoll's new information, that the same two agents—or at least two agents using the same two names—had man-

→Continued on page 56

A TRADE FOR TOWNLEY

APRIL • 1978



(MANUEL CONTRERAS)

The story identifying Romeral as DINA officer Fernández appears in the *Post* the next day, March 8.

The identification of Juan Williams as Michael Townley, an American, sets off a round of feverish activity in the office of Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene Propper. Propper has been prepared for the possibility that "Williams" may have an American parent and speak English, but not that he might be a full-fledged American with possible connections to the CIA. Propper knows there is no question that Townley had contacts with U.S. embassy officials.

The FBI has no record of Townley, but Carter Cornick orders agents all over the country to find out about him, and the Townley file grows quickly. An FBI agent locates Townley's younger sister, Linda, in North Tarrytown, New York, where she lives with her husband. She is wary and vague but says she remembers that her brother visited her during a trip from Chile.

The agent takes the woman's telephone records for September, 1976, back to his New York office and traces the numbers. He discovers that two collect calls were placed to the sister's household on September 9 from the Union City, New Jersey, Bottom of the Barrel bar, a Cuban Nationalist Movement hangout he knows well. On September 19, 1976, two days before the assassination, there was a call from the sister's phone to a number registered to Guillermo Novo, a Cuban already identified to the FBI as a probable assassin.

In Santiago, Chile, Townley schemes to save himself. In the meantime, Chilean Deputy Interior Minister Enrique Montero flies to Washington armed with authorization to negotiate Townley's expulsion—for a price. During long hours of discussion at the State Department with U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia Earl Silbert and prosecutors Propper and Lawrence Barcella, the terms of the agreement are ironed out. Montero demands that the U.S. agree to keep the investigation from going beyond the identification of Townley's role. The Chilean government fears that the Letelier case will be used by Chile's enemies in the American government to seek the overthrow of the Pinochet government. The case could be used as a fishing expedition to explore the whole range of DINA activities at home and abroad, he says.

The United States prosecutors reply that they cannot promise to limit the scope of the Letelier investigation but—in order to obtain Townley's expulsion—will agree to keep all other information about DINA activities from the



(ISABEL LETELIER)

press and from other governments where DINA crimes might have occurred.

Earl Silbert's name is signed to the

agreement by Barcella. Propper also agrees to keep the agreement secret.

In Santiago, Michael Townley is confident that the reports of his impending expulsion are a ruse. He believes that Pinochet, while appearing to give in to the United States, will go along with a gambit Townley's attorney has proposed—to preempt the United States' expulsion demand by resurrecting a 1973 murder charge against Townley for the homicide of a vagrant, and to allow the case to drag on indefinitely in Chilean courts. Townley does not know that President Pinochet has buckled under to U.S. pressure and has already arranged to turn Townley over to United States authorities.

APRIL • 7 • 1978

Six-thirty p.m.: Townley drives with his attorney, Manuel Acuña, to the headquarters of *Investigaciones* [the civilian police] to turn himself over to authorities voluntarily on the local homicide warrant. He is nervous, but in high spirits. Many of the detectives at *Investigaciones* know Townley from his DINA work, and they invite him to their recreation room to play pool.

APRIL • 7 • 1978

Eight-thirty p.m.: Chilean radio stations interrupt their programming to broadcast a special government announcement. By virtue of government decree No. 290, the spokesman says, Michael Townley's residence permit has been revoked and he will be expelled from the country. The government has determined that Townley has committed numerous violations of Chilean law by illegally entering and leaving the country.

Around the pool table at *Investigaciones*, the detectives' banter takes on an edge of meanness. The detectives know of Townley's plans to become a prisoner to avoid expulsion from the country. The jails are full of political prisoners, they remind him. Many of the prisoners are "extremists," they say, even convicted murderers. They laugh, but Townley blanches. "I'll bet you don't last a day," one of the detectives adds. Townley puts away his pool cue and walks out of the room. Guards follow him.

Anatomy Of An Assassination

—continued from page 24

aged to enter the United States and come to Washington despite the look-outs, gives him additional grounds for suspicion. In the context of the assassinations of Letelier and Moffitt, the new information becomes sizzling.

Driscoll is aware that in the State Department, the favored interpretation of the assassination is the "martyr

He ignores Schlaudeman's instructions and simply adds his memo to the file.

Special Agent Cornick of the FBI has received the vague memo and copies of the Romeral and Williams photos, but lacks the crucial information that two agents by those names were actually in Washington near the time of the murders. The Romeral and Williams lead is shelved. For ten months the investigation flounders.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Propper and Special Agent Cornick focus their energies on Cuban exiles with long records of terrorist activity, and especially on those who have established close relations with the Pinochet government. Their informants inside the CNM assure them that Novo and his gang have done the assassination on DINA orders. The two men call more than a dozen Cuban exiles before a Washington grand jury, but to no avail.



(AUGUSTO PINOCHET)

theory." He thinks twice and even three times before advancing a maverick theory that will fly in the face of official policy. He decides not to make waves. He writes a memo.

Driscoll's memo to Harry Schlaudeman is a model of bureaucratic evasion. Nowhere does it mention DINA or indicate an intention to link Chilean officials to the Letelier assassination. Yet Driscoll has done the correct thing. He has reported a suspicious incident to his superior and has recommended action. Let Schlaudeman put on paper that there is circumstantial evidence to suspect Chilean official involvement in the Letelier-Moffitt murders.

Schlaudeman, however, is equally determined to avoid belling the cat. He pens a simple reply: "Bob, don't cancel the visas, but inform the FBI."

Driscoll checks the file again and discovers that a memo on the Paraguay incident had been turned over to the FBI liaison on October 22. That, he decides, is sufficient notice to the FBI.

appear in *El Mercurio*. A young journalist picks up the paper from his doorstep and gasps. "Chicha! El gringo," he cries out. He knows the "Juan Williams" in the picture—has known him since 1974, when the man worked on his car as a mechanic—and saw him only a few weeks before. The journalist rushes to the phone to call *El Mercurio*'s editor-in-chief. Michael Vernon Townley is identified at last.

MARCH • 7 • 1978

An opposition journalist in Chile receives a telephone call from an old friend asking for a personal meeting. At the meeting, the friend tells the journalist he knows the identity of the man in the second picture. Alejandro Romeral is Armando Fernández, he says, and he shows the journalist a Xeroxed page of the 1969 *Cien Águilas*, the yearbook of the military academy.

Fernández has been attached to DINA since its creation, the source says. The journalist knows the identi-

LATE SUMMER • 1977

Cornick and Propper, desperately playing out their last card, return to the dormant photos and decide to show them to a Cuban exile terrorist imprisoned in Miami. The terrorist, Rolando Otero, worked for Chile's DINA, which then betrayed him and turned him over to the FBI. Spurred by his hatred for his Chilean betrayers, Otero does not hesitate when he sees the photos of Romeral and Williams. Yes, he says, Williams is one of the DINA agents who recruited him in Chile. He says he does not know the agent's real name but he remembers that he is tall, light-haired and speaks Spanish with an American accent.



(ORLANDO LETELIER)

MARCH • 1978

After additional months of delay, Propper and Cornick go to Chile, where—with State Department backing—they demand that Chilean authorities produce the man in the picture. Simultaneously, in Washington, the pictures are leaked to a reporter and printed in *The Washington Star*.

The next morning in Santiago, wirephotos of Romeral and Williams

fication will effectively remove much of the red-herring aspect of Townley's being American. If he writes the story, there will no longer be any doubt about the connection of the Chilean military and DINA to the Letelier case. That, he fears, will not be tolerated by the government censorship overseers. When he returns to the office he calls John Dinges, *The Washington Post*'s resident correspondent.

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APRIL • 8 • 1978

Nine a.m.: FBI Agent Carter Cornick's partner on the case receives a phone call at the Santiago, Chile, hotel where the agents are staying. The voice on the other end refuses to identify itself.

"Get out to [Santiago's] Pudahuel Airport right away. Townley will be put on the Ecuatoriana Airlines flight 052, scheduled to leave for Washington, D.C., at 9:45. Don't worry about tickets and reservations. We'll take care of that."

Cornick waits at the bottom of the narrow aluminum stairway. He watches as a caravan of police cars rounds the curve leading to the airport. A few minutes later, a group of men with machine guns emerges from the airport building, and a car heads toward the plane. The tall, jeans-clad figure of Michael Townley gets out slowly. Handcuffed, with his hands at his waist, Townley walks up the ramp and into the plane with one of the guards, who leads him to a window seat at the rear of the plane. Michael Townley raises his manacled hands to his face and cries.

"Mike," Cornick says, "you understand, don't you, that you are in deep trouble and you will be arrested as soon as we reach United States' soil?"

Townley, ashen-faced, answers in a cold, angry voice: "I didn't think you were taking me on a picnic with these handcuffs."

TOWNLEY'S OWN DEAL

MID-APRIL • 1978

A week after his arrival Townley signs an agreement with the U.S. attorney to plead guilty to one count of conspiracy to murder a foreign official. The agreement stipulates that he will tell all he knows about the Letelier case but will not be required to provide information about any other DINA activities, except those involving the Letelier case or crimes either involving U.S. citizens or hatched on U.S. soil. He is guaranteed a sentence of no more than ten years in prison with parole possible after three years and four months.

APRIL • 14 • 1978

Miami police and FBI agents arrest CNM members and co-conspirators Guillermo Novo and Alvin Ross in Miami's Little Havana. Two Cubans remain fugitives: Virgilio Paz and José Dionisio Suárez, who had driven with Townley when he placed the bomb. Suárez had been in custody but was released from jail only four days before Townley arrived in the United States. On August 1, a United States grand jury returns murder indictments against the four Cubans and against three Chilean officials: Manuel Contreras [chief of DINA], Pedro Espinoza [head of DINA operations] and Armando Fernández. Ignacio Novo, Guillermo's brother, is charged with lying to a grand jury and covering up the crimes.

A MEASURE OF JUSTICE

JANUARY • 9 • 1979

The trial is about to begin--*The United States of America vs. Guillermo Novo Sampol, Alvin Ross Diaz and Ignacio Novo Sampol.* The defense lawyers are Paul Goldberger, Lawrence Dubin and Oscar Gonzales Suárez. The prosecutors--Eugene Propper and Lawrence Barcella. And in the pivotal role of star witness for the prosecution--admitted conspirator Michael Vernon Townley.

At 9:30 a.m. the tension can already be felt at the entrance to the U.S. District Courthouse a few blocks from the Capitol, a half-mile from the White House. Spectators and press; Ronni Moffitt's parents and brothers, Isabel Letelier and her sons and the defendants' families all line up single file, empty their pockets into trays, place briefcases and purses on a belt where they will pass through an X-ray box. Then the people themselves pass once more through a metal detector.

The trial will be the first public airing of the two-and-a-half-year official investigation. The importance of the trial rests on the strength of the United States' evidence linking the Chilean military regime of President Augusto

Pinochet to the plot to kill Letelier, not a simple homicide but a grotesque act of international terrorism. The Chilean Supreme Court has found pretexts to delay a decision on the extradition of the three DINA officers, awaiting the outcome of the trial and the public reaction to Chile's role in the murders.

Adding to the charged atmosphere is the projected role of the only DINA agent in United States' custody, Michael Townley, even though his involvement in the murders was more serious than either Novo's or Ross', is cast in the role not of a defendant, but of star witness. He has become an ally of the United States investigators and prosecutors. Their case will stand or fall on his ability to portray himself as an assassin, whose profession is treachery and brutality, yet convince the jury that he is now telling the truth as he lays the finger of blame on his Cuban accomplices.

In opening statements, the defense attorneys state they will show that neither DINA nor the Cubans had anything to do with the assassination, but that Michael Townley, acting as an agent of the CIA, committed the crime alone. On the stand for six days, Townley recounts the story of his assassination missions with the aid of the CNM. His voice makes no distinction between forging a Mexican tourist card, ordering a meal, testing a detonator, reading a road map, planning to murder two people, or buying toys for his children.

During one lunch recess, Townley steps off the stand and sits down on the witness bench. The morning has yielded high credibility for Propper's prize witness, but something else about their relationship has begun to emerge. As soon as Propper finishes stuffing paper into his attache case, he walks toward the exit. As he passes Townley, Propper smiles and winks at him, a quick, intimate sign of approval.

As the trial progresses, a bizarre role-reversal occurs. Defense lawyers Goldberger and Dubin, to impeach Townley's credibility, argue that the trial should become a vehicle to expose Townley's crimes for DINA on three continents. Prosecutors Propper and Barcella become staunch defenders of Townley's rights, and their arguments presume that DINA, far from being a lawless terrorist apparatus, is a legitimate government entity whose employees are bound by oaths of secrecy and whose regulations should be re-

spected by the United States court.

On the ninth day of the trial, Judge Barrington Parker opens the proceedings and immediately calls the attorneys to the bench. Spectators are cut off from the discussion.

JANUARY • 24 • 1979

Meanwhile, *Washington Post* and *New York Times* reporters obtain transcripts of the confidential bench conferences of January 22 and 23, at which the attorneys and Judge Parker discussed the secret agreement the United States signed with Chile as a condition for obtaining Townley's expulsion. "SILBERT AGREED WITH CHILE TO CURTAIL INFORMATION," leads a *Washington Post* headline on January 24. The *New York Times* reports that the agreement signed by U.S. Attorney Earl Silbert means that the United States would "restrict the information it would make available to the world" about the Letelier-Moffitt case, specifically, information about the Prats and Leighton crimes. The story quotes the rationale for the agreement given by

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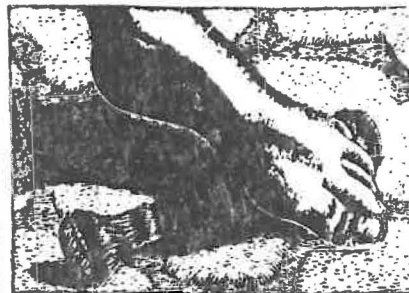
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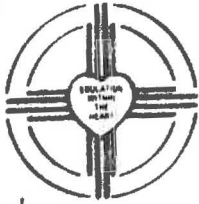
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Propper to the skeptical defense lawyers and judge. The Chilean government believes, he had explained, "that the United States government was using us as a political prosecution to get rid of the Pinochet government, and they wanted some reassurance that we weren't going to spread the stuff all over the world, and that was the basis of the agreement."

The discussions at the confidential bench conferences, the secret agreement with the Chilean government and the terms of Townley's plea-bargaining agreement reveal the guidelines the prosecution is following in presenting its case. Taken together, they provide a partial answer to the puzzling question of why Chile had turned over Townley in the first place. The answer seems to be that the United States has worked out with Chile in advance a way to prosecute the Letelier assassination while shielding the Chilean government itself from exposure and blame. DINA, its operations, personnel and crimes inside and outside Chile have been declared off-limits with the narrowly defined exception of the Letelier case. The prosecutors' self-imposed censorship of their evidence becomes clearer with each new witness, as the trial stretches over five weeks.

FEBRUARY • 14 • 1979

The jury deliberates for eight hours. The defense has not successfully impeached Townley's credibility. It has called CIA witnesses who failed to reveal anything more than material that backed up Townley's testimony. The foreman reads the verdict. Guilty. All three defendants on each count.

MARCH • 23 • 1979

Judge Barrington Parker, saying, "In the ten years I have served on the bench, I've never presided over a trial of a murder as monstrous as this," sentences Guillermo Novo and Alvin Ross to consecutive terms of life imprisonment in a maximum-security institution. They will be eligible for parole in 1999. Ignacio Novo receives a total of eight years imprisonment for his perjury and misprision of a felony conviction and will be eligible for parole after serving 32 months.

MAY • 11 • 1979

Parker sentences Michael Townley, in accordance with the plea bargain, to ten years. Townley, under the federal witness protection program, receives a new identity and is confined to an undisclosed medium-security prison, with parole eligibility coming as early as October, 1981. At the sentencing hearing before Parker, Townley again expresses his lack of remorse for killing Letelier and says he hopes to return to Chile to live after serving his time.

Meanwhile, Virgilio Paz and José Suárez, the other two accused Cubans, remain fugitives. After the trial, however, the Omega 7 and Zero, names used by the CNM for its terrorist activities, bomb the Cuban U.N. mission in New York three times and the Soviet U.N. mission once and explode two more bombs in New Jersey at places allied to Cuban Americans asking to reopen dialogue with Castro. They also claim credit for murdering two Cuban Americans — one in San Juan, the other in Union City, New Jersey. Intelligence officials report that Paz and Suárez are involved in several of the hits.

After months of judicial delay, the Chilean Supreme Court announces its final decision on the fate of the accused Chileans. The U.S. evidence, the Chilean judge says, is insufficient and tainted. No extradition of the three DINA officials.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

SPRING • 1980

The trial, with all that it revealed and all that it concealed, is over. But many questions remain. No bureaucratic explanation can account for the detours and obstacles the investigators encountered in solving the case. It was not DINA's coverups nor the secretiveness of the Cuban Nationalist Movement that kept the investigation off the right track for almost a year. It was the actions consciously taken or willfully omitted by officials and agencies of the United States government.

Both CIA Director George Bush and the office of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were advised by the U.S.

ambassador to Paraguay, George Landau, that Chile was preparing a covert operation in Washington, D.C., in late July, 1976. Yet no action was taken to find out the nature of that mission or to demand that DINA stop it. Ambassador Landau was sufficiently upset by the incident, however, to make ten phone calls to a Paraguayan government official demanding the physical return of the Romeral and Williams passports.

Despite the CIA's statement to the U.S. ambassador that it wanted no part of the mission, and despite Ambassador Landau's revocation order, the U.S. embassy in Santiago authorized U.S. visas on Chilean government passports to Juan Williams Rose and Alejandro Romeral Jara. Both men entered the United States and were not arrested or even scrutinized.

After the assassination neither Bush nor anyone in the CIA volunteered information about Chile's undercover mission. Instead of providing the information that pointed the finger of suspicion at DINA and Chile, the CIA did just the opposite. Stories with the appearance of an orchestrated leak appeared in *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Star* and *The New York Times*, saying that the CIA had concluded that DINA had nothing to do with the Letelier assassination. CIA Director Bush was reported to have personally informed Secretary of State Kissinger of his conclusions about DINA's innocence.

As a result, the Romeral-Williams information and photographs played no active role for the first ten months of the FBI investigation. There have been numerous other examples of withholding, destruction or concealment of key evidentiary documents in the case. Among them are the following:

1. Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene Propper and the FBI did not receive Ambassador Landau's cable explaining the Paraguay incident for more than a year after the assassination.

2. State Department Chile desk officer Robert Driscoll did not inform the FBI of his knowledge that DINA agents Romeral and Williams were in Washington around the time of the assassination. His memo with that information from Chile desk files finally reached the FBI more than one year after the assassination.

3. Immigration and Naturalization Service records—1-94 forms—that doc-

ument entry into the United States of three of the five members of DINA's assassination mission were removed from INS computers. The missing listings were for Alejandro Romeral Jara, Juan Williams Rose (the August 22, 1976, Miami entry with Chilean passports), and Hans Petersen Silva (the name used by Michael Townley to enter New York on September 9, 1976). Moreover, INS officials conducted a file search in 1979 and discovered the disappearance of all paperwork that normally would accompany lookout notices such as those ordered posted by the State Department for Romeral and Williams.

4. Someone with access to United States' citizen registration files in the U.S. consulate in Santiago removed the photograph of Michael Townley that was on file there.

5. Other evidence in consulate files was destroyed as well. After his expulsion, Townley provided investigators with the names Hans Petersen Silva, Armando Faundez Lyon and Liliana Walker Martinez, the names used by himself, Fernández and the female DINA agent to carry out the surveil-

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lance and assassination mission. When an FBI agent looked for records in mid-1978, he discovered that U.S. Consul Josiah Brownell had ordered the shredding of the file, which would have included a Chilean Foreign Ministry letter requesting visas for the three agents.

A sixth example of misuse of evidence must be added to the list. The entire contents of the briefcase Orlando Letelier was carrying the day he was murdered was copied while in the investigators' vaults and leaked to scores of journalists.

Once on the right track, the investigators used the Romeral and Williams photos to identify Michael Townley and Armando Fernández. With Townley's expulsion and confession, the murders were solved; to the credit of the FBI team of Carter Cornick, Robert Scherrer and Larry Wack, and the U.S. Attorney's Office team of Eugene Propper and Lawrence Barcella. Their investigation and prosecution of the case revealed to the world a terrorist conspiracy masterminded by officials of the Chilean military government.

At the same time, they were bound by the limits of the system in which they

worked and did not challenge the narrow framework established for their investigation and prosecution of the crime. The rules of the Major Crimes Division of the U.S. Attorney's Office dictated that the investigative team track down the agents of the assassination without going to the political source of the murder. As Eugene Propper told a reporter in 1978: "People who are attributing political motivations to the indictment are wrong. There's nothing political about this. It's a straight murder case, a case of blowing someone's legs off."


At key junctures, however, political decisions were required.

The United States government was asking the Chilean court to turn over for trial the head of that country's most important intelligence service. At the best of times and in the most democratic of countries, this would have been an unrealistic request. Chile's courts, in the five years of Pinochet's regime, had never ruled against the military government on any important matter. The fiction of the independence of the Chilean judiciary was transparent. The conclusion must be drawn that the United

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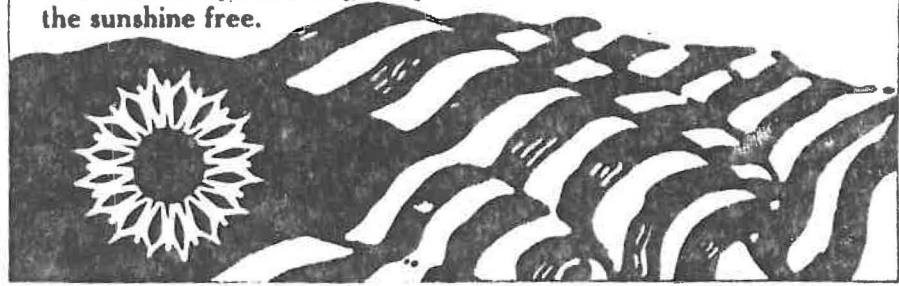
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States government, by accepting that fiction as fact and by submitting the case to the court system instead of treating the extradition as a political-diplomatic issue, acquiesced in the failure of the extradition request.

The United States accepted a second fiction, that the DINA assassins were somehow separate from the Chilean government—as if Townley, Fernández, Espinoza and Contreras had committed the crime as individuals not subject to Pinochet's command. The United States chose not to recognize that the assassination had been committed to serve the political purposes of the Pinochet government, accepting instead the terms suggested by that government for handling the case. Those terms, not surprisingly, included the promise that the United States prosecution of the Letelier case would not implicate the Pinochet regime.

The ability of the United States to act in the Letelier case was also limited by the compromising nature of past CIA activity in Chile and the ongoing relationship between the CIA and DINA. The investigation not only threatened to expose Pinochet and his crimes but also raised the specter of a new round of exposures of CIA covert action. The Chilean magazine *Qué Pasa* laid bare a vulnerable nerve of the United States' intelligence community in a brief commentary in mid-1979: If the United States demands the extradition of Manuel Contreras, the former head of Chilean intelligence, why shouldn't Chile demand the extradition of former CIA Director Richard Helms for his agency's role, revealed by a U.S. Senate committee, in the murder of a Chilean general in 1970?

On November 30, 1979, the Carter administration announced a series of "measures" in retaliation for Chile's actions in the Letelier case. President Carter ordered the reduction of the U.S. mission to Chile, termination of the foreign military sales "pipeline," "phasing down" of the U.S. military mission, and a set of mild and relatively meaningless economic sanctions. Chile's military government had, "in effect, condoned this act of international terrorism," according to Carter's statement, though it stopped short of holding the Pinochet government responsible for the assassination. The measures amounted to "little more than a wrist slap" that "bolstered rather than weakened [Pino-

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chet's] military government," reported *The Washington Post* from Santiago.

Three months after the reprisals were announced, not one embassy official had been withdrawn, and Chilean officials were congratulating themselves on having faced down the U.S. "bluff." By February, 1980, United States relations with Chile had returned full circle to the warm support of the early years of the Pinochet dictatorship.

THE LIVING & THE DEAD

SANTIAGO • CHILE

Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffitt cannot be brought back to life. To that extent, no justice is possible. But their murders did more than simply add two additional corpses to Pinochet's pile. They produced a qualitative change in the political climate. Owing in part to the publicity and the international political campaign that surrounded the investigation and trial, the Chilean military was forced to weaken its strangle hold and to depose Manuel Contreras and dissolve his DINA empire. The Chilean people began again in a limited way to practice politics, to organize opposition, to begin a cautious, determined campaign to restore democratic institutions. For the first time since the coup, students and workers demonstrated and organized strikes, and women cried out against the disappearance of their husbands, sons and brothers.

Before the trial, Isabel Letelier returned to Chile to sue for the restoration of her slain husband's citizenship, to demand that the Chilean court declare that the decree stripping him of his birthright was illegal.

In Chile she repeated what she had said many times since the murders: that Pinochet himself had to have authorized the assassination. CNI/DINA agents openly surveilled her during public appearances and took photos of anyone she spoke with in the street. But she noticed that people did not seem to be intimidated. They stopped, greeted her, expressed sympathy for the loss of her husband and praised her for her continuing battle for justice.

On her last night in Santiago, her legal work done, family visits paid, she attended a folk music concert. After

intermission the master of ceremonies greeted the audience for the beginning of the second half of the concert. He introduced dignitaries from the audience. The German and Venezuelan ambassadors stood up to polite applause. "We are also honored tonight," the emcee continued, "by the presence of the widow of Orlando Letelier, Isabel—" Thunderous applause broke out. It grew in volume and intensity as Isabel stood. The emcee took the microphone and said, "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Now, please, let's begin the second part of the show." But the applause continued, then assumed a rhythmic beat, a *thump, thump, thump*. "Please, ladies and gentlemen," the emcee pleaded.

In the audience a man with a resonating bass voice chanted, "*Compañero Orlando Letelier...*"

The crowd responded, "*Presente!*" The bass voice boomed: "*Ahora...*" Now...

The crowd responded: "*Y siempre!*" And forever!

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Chilean courts denied Isabel Letelier's petition to restore her husband's citizenship. She did not stop there. She and Michael Moffitt have initiated a U.S. civil suit against the Chilean government and all the defendants, including Townley, charging them with committing "wrongful death."

On June 20, 1980, the new trial began. Townley is to testify again. Once again, the case will remind the world of the actions of the Pinochet regime.

If the suit is won, the court will find the Chilean government itself guilty in the deaths of Orlando Letelier and Ronni Karpen Moffitt. Moreover, the case sets a precedent that foreign governments can be sued for felonies committed in the United States.

But no matter how the civil suit is decided, Isabel Letelier and Michael Moffitt will not stop their efforts. For both of them this means lifelong involvement not only against the Pinochet regime and for the restoration of democracy in Chile, but in solidarity with victims like Orlando and Ronni throughout the world—those who are killed, tortured or imprisoned by tyrants. The names Letelier and Moffitt already symbolize that struggle.