



Wreckage of Letelier's car after 1976 bombing; inset: Suspect Michael Townley

Who Killed Señor Letelier?

One suspect is a mysterious American, whisked back from Chile

The elegant tranquillity of Washington's Embassy Row was shattered one rainy morning in 1976 when a light blue Chevelle suddenly exploded in flames. The driver, Orlando Letelier, was killed instantly, both his legs blown off by the bomb. Dead too was his research colleague, Ronni Moffitt.

Letelier had been a trusted Cabinet member under Chile's Marxist President Salvador Allende Gossens. After Allende was overthrown by a right-wing military coup in 1973, Letelier was jailed for 14 months, then allowed to go into exile in Washington. His fellow exiles immediately blamed his murder on the Chilean secret police, but for nearly two years federal investigations were able to produce neither suspects nor direct links to Chile.

The first break in the case came two months ago, when U.S. officials became suspicious of two men, supposedly Chileans named Williams and Romeral, who had visited Washington shortly before the murder. The Chilean government claimed to know nothing about them, but the Washington *Star* unearthed and published photos of the two. One of them, "Williams," was recognized by a former Marine guard at the U.S. embassy in Santiago, who had known him as Michael Vernon Townley.

Born in Iowa, Townley had gone to Chile at 15 with his parents and stayed on as an auto mechanic. To the American community there, the lanky, goateed expatriate hardly seemed a likely conspirator. "I never thought of him as a political type," said the Marine guard, Edward Cannell. "He was more like a hippie or a Peace Corps volunteer."

According to the FBI, however, Townley was deeply involved in Chilean politics. During the Allende years he worked for the right-wing *Patria y Libertad*

group, and after the 1973 coup headed by General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, joined the new regime's military police. Shortly before Letelier's death, Townley and a Chilean army officer, Armando Fernández, obtained visas under the names of Williams and Romeral and made three trips to the U.S.

Pinochet originally ridiculed any suggestion of Chilean military involvement in the killing. But the U.S. continued to demand that the two suspects be interrogated—and threatened cuts in U.S. aid. The general promised full cooperation and later forced the head of the military police, General Manuel Sepúlveda, to resign.

As soon as Townley's identity became known, U.S. District Attorney Eugene Propper flew to Santiago to negotiate his expulsion from Chile. "I am a supporter of the junta above everything else, and I have full confidence in Chilean justice," Townley protested. "What the U.S. is trying to do through me is carry out a political attack on the government of Chile." But while Townley's lawyers were still challenging the U.S. request, Chilean police hustled the American onto a northward-bound plane and told the FBI to take him away. The FBI agents had to depart in such a rush that they left their suitcases behind in a Santiago hotel. Last week Townley was arraigned in Maryland as a material witness and ordered held without bail until he could testify before a grand jury. At week's end the FBI also arrested two anti-Castro Cubans with bomb-making expertise on suspicion of conspiracy in the case.

"I don't have any doubt that Townley is a small piece of the puzzle," said Letelier's widow Isabel. He is a piece to which many other pieces may yet be fitted. ■