

Credibility Of Townley A Trial Issue

By Kenneth Bredemeier
Washington Post Staff Writer

The credibility—or lack of it—of Michael V. Townley, the Government's key witness in the Orlando Letelier bombing assassination trial, generated more than 6½ hours of impassioned arguments yesterday as prosecutors and defense attorneys made their final appeals to the jury.

Assistant U.S. Attorney E. Lawrence Barcella Jr. told the U.S. District Court jury that Townley, the American-born Chilean secret police agent who has confessed to planting the bomb that killed Letelier, is "a man you don't have to like and probably don't, but he's a man who told the truth."

But Paul Goldberger, one of the defense attorneys for three anti-Castro Cubans charged in connection with the Sept. 21, 1976, Letelier slaying, told the seven-woman, five-man jury that Townley was a "bald-faced liar . . . a man who talks about eliminating people as if they were bugs."

As the jury listened raptly, Barcella, Goldberger, and defense attorneys Lawrence Dubin and Oscar Suarez disparaged each other's cases for and against the three defendants—Guillermo Novo Sampol, his brother Ignacio Novo Sampol and Alvin Ross Riaz.

Barcella, pointing to charts and displaying government exhibits for the jury, said that Ross had called Townley "a rat, a traitor, and informer, but never a liar."

The prosecutor paced back and forth in front of the jurors for two hours, but stood still in front of a lectern when he pointedly said, "Only an insider can unravel the conspiracy. Only an insider can breach the secrecy (surrounding the slaying). You need an insider. With Michael Townley you found out what was happening in Chile and the U.S."

Barcella said that the 36-year-old Townley was "so concerned about telling the truth" that at one point in his six days of testimony, when he felt he had misstated a fact, he immediately turned and apologized to Judge Barrington Parker.

To varying degrees, Townley implicated all three Cubans in the Letelier slaying, a mission Townley said came directly on orders of his superiors in the Chilean secret police, formerly known as DINA. Ronni K. Moffitt, a colleague of Letelier's at the Institute for Policy Studies, was also killed in the bombing at Sheridan Circle.

As Barcella recited the intricate details of the assassination plot, he regularly told the jury at key junctures, "Orlando Letelier comes a little closer to doing."

The prosecutor discounted defense's efforts to show that Townley had actually killed Letelier on orders from the Central Intelligence Agency. "What did the defense produce to substantiate the grand promises (in opening arguments)?" Barcella asked.

"I submit essentially nothing. You can't be swayed by fantasy. You can't be swayed by something that isn't there," he said.

But Goldberger compared the government's case to a building that is "built on a foundation of mush and garbage. You can't put anything else on top of it."

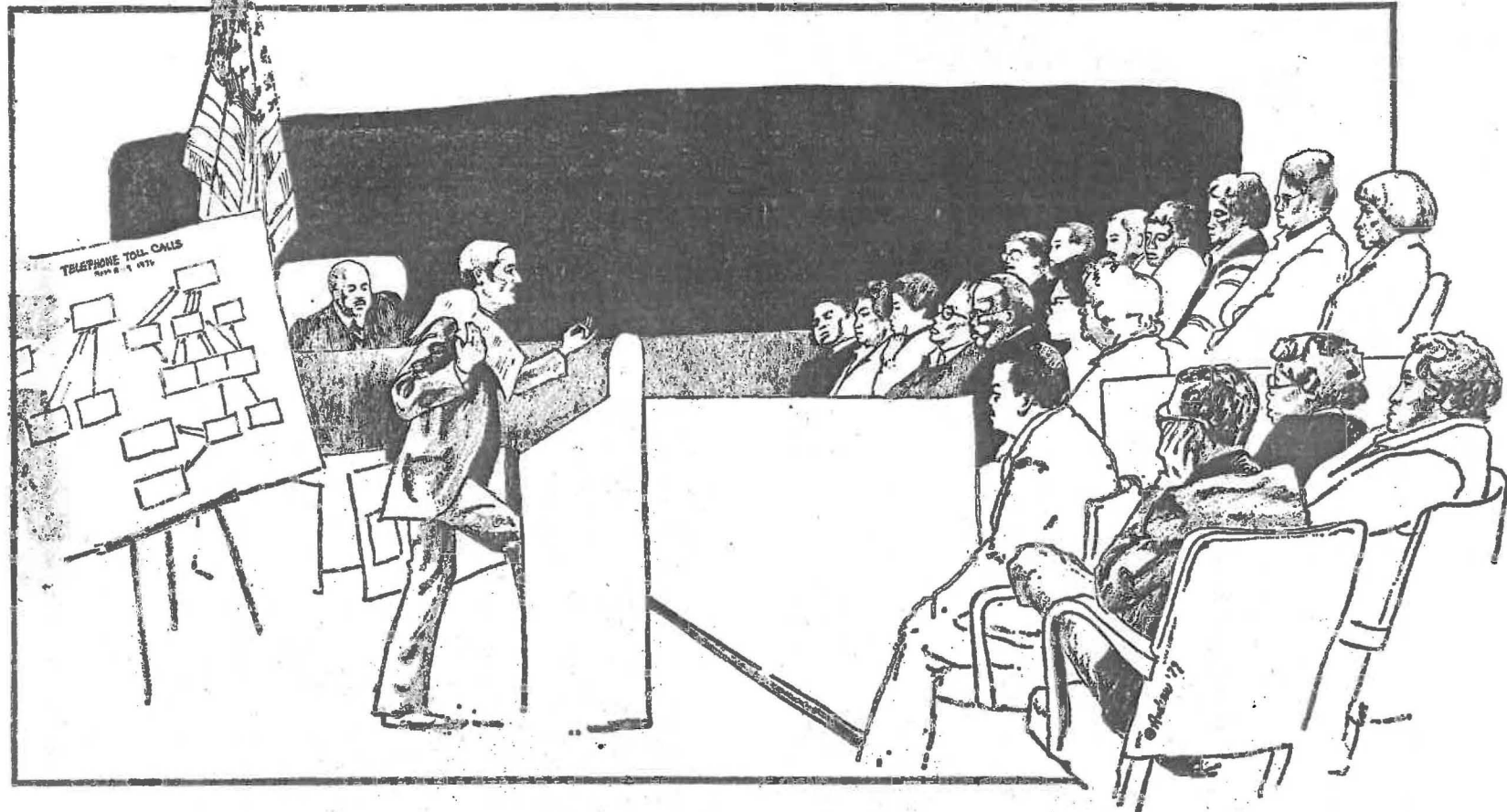
The government's case, he said, relies almost totally on Townley, whom he described as "a man who would kill without regret, without conscience."

"Is he psychotic?" Goldberger asked rhetorically. "Is he crazy?" Maybe. Is he stupid? No. He's an absolute person of our system of justice.

"There's something Mr. Townley has less familiarity with than most of us—the truth," Goldberger told the jurors.

version of our system of justice. Townley had admitted in his testimony that he had lied 42 times in a 14-page statement to a Chilean general. The general had been assigned to determine the extent of the Chilean government's involvement in the Letelier killing before Townley was turned over to the FBI to testify in the current case.

Goldberger and Dubin conceded to the jury that they may not have proved their contention five weeks ago that Townley was acting on CIA orders when he killed Letelier. But the defense attorneys suggested that Townley's contacts with the CIA in the early 1970's left open the possibility. "There are enough unanswered questions there," Dubin argued. "There are enough gaps of reasonable doubt here. You could drive a truck through the holes in this case."



Prosecutor E. Lawrence Barcella Jr. argues his case before the jury during closing arguments in Letelier case. Judge Barrington Parker listens from bench.

By Joan Andrew for The Washington Post

Guillermo Novo and Ross are charged with the Letelier and Moffitt murders, as well as other offenses. Ignacio Novo is charged with lying to a grand jury investigating the Letelier slaying and failing to tell authorities about the crime.

The jury is expected to start deliberating today after the government makes its rebuttal of defense contentions and Judge Parker gives the jurors legal instructions.

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