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NATIONAL NEWS

The Bomb Under Pinochet

The Letelier-Moffitt Assassinations Shake the Chilean Regime

BY JOANNE BARKAN

On Saturday evening April 8, the aircraft carrying Michael Vernon Townley, an American citizen deported from Chile at the request of the U.S. Justice Department, landed in Baltimore, and so began the critical phase of the investigation of Chilean-exile leader Orlando Letelier's assassination—an investigation that is shaking General Augusto Pinochet's iron grip on Chile.

"A high State Department official told us that Pinochet's days are numbered because of his involvement in the murder," a spokesperson for Washington's Institute for Policy Studies, where Letelier was working at the time of his assassination, informed *Seven Days*.

Michael Townley, who was arraigned April 10 before a U.S. magistrate as a material witness, is the link between those who planted and detonated the plastic bomb that killed Letelier and Ronni Karpen Moffitt in Washington and those who ordered the assassination in Chile.

On April 14, police and FBI agents arrested Alvin Ross Diaz and Guillermo Novo Sampol, both right wing Cuban exiles preparing to flee the United States, after explosives and detonating equipment had been found in a Union City, N.J., shop that Ross once operated. Michael Townley is now known to have met with Novo and other Cuban exiles in the U.S. in June 1976.

The case is breaking open after 19 months of sensitive and highly secret investigations handled by the FBI. During this period relations between the U.S. government and Pinochet have become increasingly strained: His regime is a source of irritation here because of both its brutal character and the well-documented involvement of the CIA and U.S. corporations in Chilean affairs leading up to the 1973 military coup.

The Letelier-Moffitt case dates back to September 21, 1976. That morning Letelier—who had served the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende as ambassador to the United States and as minister of the Interior, Defense and Foreign Affairs—was driving Institute colleagues Michael and Ronni Moffitt to work. As the car turned into Sheridan

Circle, just a short distance from the Chilean Embassy, a bomb attached to the I-beam below the driver's seat exploded. Letelier, his legs blown off in the blast, died shortly afterwards in a hospital. Less than a half-hour later, 25-year-old Ronni Moffitt, her carotid artery pierced, drowned in her own blood. Michael Moffitt escaped with minor injuries.

Isabel Letelier, widow of the slain exile leader, and Moffitt were convinced that the assassinations were the work of DINA, the Chilean secret police.

For nearly a year and a half, the U.S. Justice Department seemed to be making little headway on the case for reasons that have not yet surfaced. Then on February 21 of this year, the department sent "letters interrogatories" to the Chilean government asking that Juan Williams Rose and Alejandro Romeral Jara be questioned by a Chilean court on behalf of the U.S. government.

"Once the letters were sent," says Isabel Letelier, "everything began to happen."

The two men, it was revealed, had entered the United States several times in 1976 with official Chilean passports. In

June and August, Williams or perhaps both had met with Cuban exiles suspected of involvement in planting the bomb under Letelier's car.

Less than two weeks later, the right wing Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* reported that the names on the passports and in the Justice Department's letters were false and that one of the men was in fact an American, Michael Townley, a well-known activist of the extreme-right organization Patria y Libertad, who had been living in Chile for 20 years. Townley, 35-years old and born in Waterloo, Iowa, fled Chile in early 1973 after taking part in a Patria y Libertad action at a radio station during which a night watchman was killed. Townley also figures in a 1974 report on U.S. counterrevolutionary activity in Chile published by the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) and is said by sources in Chile to work for the CIA.

On March 7, Chilean military sources identified Alejandro Romeral Jara as Armando Fernandez Larios, an army captain who took part in the assault on the presidential palace during the coup, and who is a DINA agent.

Michael Moffitt and Isabel Letelier mourn their murdered spouses.

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The Junta: Generals Leigh (far right) and Pinochet (next to him) are now at odds.

Alain Keller / Sygma

After weeks of stalling, and under pressure from the U.S. government which reportedly threatened to recall its ambassador and disclose all it knows about the assassinations, the Chilean government authorized Townley and Fernandez to be questioned by the Chilean Supreme Court. The questioning took place on April 1. Townley was apparently "unresponsive" to questions about contacts with right wing Cuban exiles in the U.S. and invoked the Fifth Amendment against self-incrimination.

"I think Townley was more of a messenger boy," says Moffitt. "Pinochet ordered the murders."

Soon after the court finished questioning Townley and Fernandez, Pinochet announced the release of about 400 prisoners, authorized the return to Chile of Jaime Castillo Velasco, vice-president of the Christian Democratic Party and another lawyer (the two had drawn up detailed reports on the illegal activities of Chile's secret police) and released and exiled two air force officers imprisoned for allegedly giving military secrets to the outlawed Socialist Party.

"The U.S. press is reporting all this," says Isabel Letelier, "as if Pinochet were a benevolent dictator, rather than how it's obvious that he's trying to cover up."

Pinochet also seems to be using any means available to keep from being directly implicated in the Letelier assassination. "He's trying to 'stonewall'," says Moffitt, "blame it on a lesser officer, stop it lower down."

One of those people lower down is now dead.

In October 1977, Guillermo Osorio, the foreign ministry official who issued the

passports to Townley and Fernandez under false names and signed the request to the U.S. consulate for their diplomatic visas, was murdered. Authorities at first claimed that he had committed suicide; "heart attack" was written on the death certificate. But when the body was exhumed, it was found that Osorio had been shot in the head at a distance.

It was then learned that three generals had accompanied Osorio from an official lunch for some Peruvian diplomats to his house where they shot him. "They killed him because he followed orders," says Letelier, "and could tell who gave those orders."

One of the three generals, Enrique Valdes Puga, was Deputy Foreign Minister and Osorio's superior; another was Manuel Contreras Sepulveda. General Contreras was Pinochet's closest associate and the head of the secret police from the 1973 coup until last October. (An internal struggle over Pinochet's control and a desire to present a better image led the junta to officially disband DINA last August. The new National Intelligence Center took over DINA's operations.)

On March 21 of this year, Contreras suddenly resigned from the armed forces. He is now under house arrest, reportedly for his involvement in Osorio's death.

The strains in the junta are clear. In March, one member, General Gustavo Leigh, who is commander of the air force and belongs to the Patria y Libertad faction of the right wing, called for the present junta's replacement with new commanders who would prepare for elections by 1980 and a rapid return to civilian rule. General Leigh has the support of the air force in his move to

take control out of Pinochet's hands. The navy too is moving toward this position. The weekend of April 1, General Leigh was in Washington where he is known to have met with Pentagon officials.

But since General Leigh has previously expressed his preference for a fascist regime similar to those of Mussolini and Franco, the call for elections and civilian rule could be just a public relations effort.

According to Moffitt, however, a change in the form of government is possible. "If Pinochet falls, there will be more political activity. The Christian Democrats will try to bargain for something less repressive. The U.S. government would probably like to see Eduardo Frei [President of Chile before the Popular Unity government and a Christian Democrat] come back."

The U.S. investigation has relied heavily on FBI informers in Cuban exile communities here and on CIA help in foreign countries. According to *New York Times* sources, the investigators have not fully exploited information in CIA files and had obtained the names of Townley and Fernandez months ago but did not act on the information.

More on the Justice Department's handling of the investigation, as well as Townley's alleged connection with the CIA, may be uncovered in the next few months, but a few things now seem clear. "The anti-Pinochet forces in the State Department," says the source at the Institute for Policy Studies, "are holding sway. They've got Pinochet on murder committed in the United States, and everyone is mad."

The General's days in power could indeed be numbered. □