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In Letelier Case, Justice Is Served

The final paragraph can now be written in a compelling human drama that this column first began reporting 23 years ago.

In 1972, we wrote a series of exposés that embarrassed the Chilean military. Its shadowy secret police, known by the acronym DINA, blamed Chile's ambassador to Washington, Orlando Letelier, for slipping us the secret documents that led to the articles.

The following year, Letelier's wife smuggled us a message that he had been imprisoned following a bloody military coup that led to the death of Marxist President Salvador Allende. But Letelier denied giving us the documents, and Chilean authorities eventually released him for lack of proof. After his release from prison, Letelier went into exile in the United States, where he became one of the most prominent critics of the military regime headed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

On Sept. 21, 1976, Letelier's blue Chevrolet was blown up in Washington by a terrorist bomb. The blast killed Letelier and an American friend, Ronni Moffitt, who worked for a local think tank. But her husband, Mike Moffitt, was miraculously spared.

Moffitt's first stop after his release from the hospital was our office, to ask us to investigate the assassination. More than a year later, we were able to spell out the details of the plot.

In September 1977, we became the first to report that Letelier's assassination had been ordered by Manuel Contreras, who was the head of DINA. We reported that he recruited Cuban veterans from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion to do his dirty work—mercenaries who had been trained by the Central Intelligence Agency in the art of assassination.

At the time of our original reports, U.S. Justice Department officials called our allegations "totally incorrect" and stated we had no evidence to back up our claim that Contreras was the man responsible. But after their own exhaustive probe, U.S. officials reached the same conclusion.

Contreras vowed at the time that he'd never spend a day in jail—and his prediction almost came true. For 19 years, Chilean authorities rejected intense American pressure to prosecute the powerful Contreras. But last winter, authorities finally nailed

him. He was quickly found guilty, and his conviction was later upheld by the Chilean Supreme Court.

But convicting Contreras proved easier than actually sending him to jail. Instead of going to prison, Contreras holed up in his ranch in southern Chile.

This outraged the Chilean public, which has waited a long time for justice to be carried out against the military thugs who ran the country from 1973 to 1990.

When Chilean authorities seemed to be closing in, Contreras was moved to a naval hospital, where he was supposedly receiving treatment for a variety of ailments. Military officials, who are still autonomous from the elected government, protested that their comrade was too sick to go to prison.

But last week, a panel of civilian doctors who examined Contreras ruled that he is fit enough to serve a prison term. And with that, the man responsible for the murder of Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffitt finally received his just reward.

President Clinton is privately fuming about something. But this time his anger has absolutely nothing to do with Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole or House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

Bill Clinton is peeved about his golf game.

Sources say the president was moping around the White House last week with a painful-looking sunburn on his face. When solicitous aides asked Clinton about it, the president explained that he's been spending a lot of time on the golf course recently.

"How's your golf game?" one aide asked Clinton.

"Terrible," Clinton replied. "It gets harder when you grow older and more tired."

But don't shed too many tears for Clinton. He loves to sneak away from the White House to play golf on the two swank courses at Andrews Air Force Base.

As we recently reported, Andrews is in the process of building a third golf course—at a time when dozens of military bases across the country are on the verge of being closed. The new course is going to cost \$5 million at a time of fiscal austerity.

Clinton, the golf putter-in-chief, will now have another course to practice on in order to improve his game.