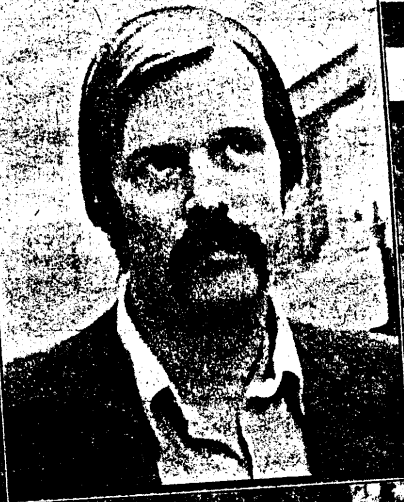


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Michael Townley, who constructed the bomb in his hotel room.

By Raul Montoya



**BY TAYLOR BRANCH and EUGENE M. PRUPPER**

On Sept. 21, 1976, a bomb exploded under an automobile that was passing through Washington's embassy district. The blast killed the car's driver, former Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier, and a young American woman named Ronni Karpen Moffitt.

Eighteen months after the crime, U.S. investigators had announced no results. After hundreds of false leads, disappointments and bursts of hope, the prosecutors and FBI agents handling the case believed that the ruling military junta of Chile had ordered the assassination to silence Letelier's criticism of the regime, but they had no proof. They suspected that the murders had been carried out by a militant anti-Castro organization headed by Guillermo and Ignacio Novo, but they had very little supporting evidence.

In a desperate gamble, they tried to force the Chilean government to produce a mysterious "blond Chilean" whose description had popped up in several leads. Suddenly, the case began to break, and they were stunned to learn that the "blond Chilean" was actually an American named Michael Townley, who worked for the Chilean secret police.

After a series of extraordinary maneuvers by the U.S. and Chilean governments, Townley was expelled to the United States. On April 17, 1978, inside the Marine stockade at Quantico, Va., he agreed to plead guilty to involvement in the murder conspiracy and to serve as a government witness.

Townley is now in prison. His testimony led to the indictment of three Chilean military officers, including the former head of the Chilean secret police. But the Chilean government continues to refuse to extradite or try these officers. Four Cubans were also indicted on murder and conspiracy charges. Guillermo Novo and another Cuban were acquitted of the charges last May after their initial convictions were overturned. At the same time, Guillermo Novo was convicted of lying to the jury. The other two Cubans are still fugitives. Ignacio Novo