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Publishing: The Letelier Case

By HERBERT MITGANG

WORKING independently, two authors discovered they were investigating the same story — the assassination in Washington of Orlando Letelier, former Chilean Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the United States in the Government of Salvador Allende Gossens. On Sept. 21, 1976, a bomb was set and exploded in Mr. Letelier's car, killing him and an American colleague, Ronni Karpen Moffitt. Instead of trying to win the race to publication, the two authors met, agreed they were both interested in pursuing the case to its roots in Chile and Washington, and decided to team up.

The result is "Assassination on Embassy Row" by John Dinges and Saul Landau, published by Pantheon Books. Mr. Dinges, who reported on Chile for more than five years for Time magazine, The Washington Post and ABC radio, now works on The Washington Post's foreign desk. Mr. Landau, who has written documentary films, is a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. He worked with Ambassador Letelier at the institute.

The book attempts to reconstruct the chain of events that led to the assassination, the inquiry by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the subsequent trial, which ended with the conviction of three Cuban exiles and Michael V. Townley, an American agent of Dina, the Chilean secret police, who recruited the Cubans. Mr. Townley, a witness for the prosecution as part of a plea-bargaining arrangement, was given a sentence of up to 10 years, but will be eligible for parole at the end of next year.

Mr. Landau says that he pursued the story in Washington while Mr. Dinges returned to Chile for more information. In separate interviews, the authors said that all their requests under the Freedom of Information Act had been turned down by the State Department, the F. B. I. and the Central Intelligence

Agency on the ground of national security. Former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger declined to talk with them. Mr. Dinges maintains that warnings from the C. I. A. and American Embassy officials in South America about a plot to kill Mr. Letelier had been sent to Mr. Kissinger's office in Washington.

"The Augusto Pinochet Government in Chile perpetrated a terrorist attack on United States soil," the authors say, "but the Carter Administration did not see that as sufficiently serious to punish his regime. General Pinochet got away with murder."

André Schiffrin, managing director of Pantheon Books, had been discussing a book with Mr. Letelier, but it was never written. The authors decided that Pantheon was the proper publisher for "Assassination on Embassy Row," and Mr. Schiffrin agreed.

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