

Mounting evidence suggests that Cuban exiles
did the Chilean junta's dirty work

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The Letelier-Moffitt Mystery

JEFFREY STEIN

She sold the house in Bethesda and moved into the smaller one in Washington, she said, because she just didn't need the rooms any more. Her sons, starting out on their own adult lives, had moved away. Then she laughed, her Latin eyes dancing, as she wondered where they would all sleep when her sons came back to the city in September.

The conversation paused as Isabel Letelier poured a glass of wine and offered crackers and cheese to her visitor. While they sat on the porch, taking in the summer evening, thoughts of her dead husband, Orlando, silently drifted between them.

Then, brightly: "I remember a cocktail party we went to, in 1972, the usual diplomatic kind of social event. Henry Kissinger was there, and at one point he pulled Orlando aside, and said, you know, in the way he would do it," she smiled, about to imitate the German accent. "'Ambassador Letelier, I must tell you that those reports about the CIA in Chile are absolutely false. There is no truth to them. We are not trying to overthrow your government. You must tell your president that those reports are false.'

"And so Orlando turned to him," she said, batting her eyelashes and recreating the moment, "and said, 'Why, Mr. Kissinger, I don't know of any reports about the CIA in Chile. But of course, we would be very interested to know what you've heard. I hope you will give us a report on that.'"

She smiled widely at the story, and so did her visitor.

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but it was not a happy smile. For on that muggy evening in late August, eleven months had passed since her husband and a young American woman colleague, Ronni Karpen Moffitt, twenty-five, had been blown up in their car as they drove to work at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. Ronni's husband of almost six months, Michael, who had been riding in the back seat of the car, survived the blast, only to watch his wife stagger to the sidewalk and die as blood filled her lungs from an artery in her neck torn by shrapnel. Orlando Letelier lived another agonizing twenty minutes, his legs ripped from his body, pinned in the wreckage of the car.

Justice Department officials have believed for several months that the generals who now rule Chile marked Letelier for assassination and hired anti-Castro Cuban exiles to carry it out. Several of the exiles, remnants of the clandestine army created by the CIA for its war on Cuba and Fidel Castro, have been interviewed by a grand jury which has been investigating the murders for the past year. One of them, Jose Dionisio Suarez, was jailed in the spring for refusing to testify after having been granted immunity from prosecution.

From the beginning, the investigation has been marked by ineptitude and political intrigue. For weeks after the assassination, investigators tried to track down personal motives for the murder, although the strongest, most immediate circumstantial evidence led directly to the doorstep of the Chilean junta and its chief, General Augusto Pinochet.

Letelier was the junta's number one enemy. As the former ambassador to the United States from Chile while Salvador Allende's socialist coalition governed the country, Letelier was the preeminent leader of the North American exile community. As troubles mounted for the

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Popular Unity coalition in 1973, Letelier had been recalled to Santiago to become Allende's foreign minister, and later, defense minister. On the day of the coup, September 11, 1973, he was led from the Defense Ministry in handcuffs by the machine gun-toting troops of the victorious generals. After a year of torture and interrogation at the hands of the junta's notorious secret police, the DINA, in a concentration camp in Chile's antarctic south, Letelier was released and deported to Venezuela. In 1975, he returned with his family to Washington. In 1976, he was appointed director of the Transnational Institute, the foreign affairs arm of the Institute for Policy Studies, a left-leaning Washington-based research organization.

International outrage had forced the junta to release him; he was well known and respected in Washington's diplomatic community. In 1976, Letelier began to draw on that respect as he lobbied against the junta in Washington and abroad. U.S. foreign aid and credits to the junta were reduced; dock workers in London refused to handle Chilean-bound cargos; and in June 1976, the Dutch government, as a result of Letelier's persistent urging, canceled a \$62.5 million credit planned for the junta. He was becoming increasingly effective. In August 1976, Letelier emerged as the leader of the exile factions in a New York City gathering, and the death threats, which had begun months earlier, began to intensify. In September, Augusto Pinochet decreed the end of Letelier's Chilean citizenship. On September 21 he was murdered.

Grief and outrage, expressed by members of Congress, foreign heads of state, and other leading public figures, were immediately reflected in the newspapers, which printed diabolical portraits of the junta and its dread DINA agents on their editorial pages. Not long after, however, it became apparent that the Justice Department was trying to explore every possible lead and motive except the most obvious one.

In the immediate wake of the assassinations, the FBI failed to interview the janitor at the Institute for Policy Studies, who makes frequent trips into the alley and thus might have provided information on who might have attached the bomb to Letelier's car. It failed to show pictures of suspects to Letelier's maid, who told IPS associates that she had noticed four Latino men loitering near the house on the morning of the murders. FBI agents also took four days to retrieve evidence from the bombing site which had been gathered by a private citizen walking through Sheridan Circle the day after the murders.

Further, the U.S. attorney in charge of the case, Eugene Propper, failed to arrange an interview with Orlando Bosch, the supreme leader of the Cuban anti-Castro exile terrorist groups, who was jailed in Venezuela last November. Meanwhile, a free-lance writer was able to waltz into Bosch's jail cell in Caracas last April and obtain the admission from him that he had organized a meeting of all the Cuban exile factions' leaders in the Dominican Republic in June 1976, where Letelier's assassination was discussed. Letelier's campaign to discredit the junta abroad "was bothering some of our friends in Chile," Bosch told the interviewer. "Chilean officials told me many times when I lived there that they wanted him dead." Bosch

denied further knowledge of the assassination in the interview, but reportedly told Venezuelan authorities that two other Cuban exiles carried out the hit.

While the Justice Department's investigation puttered along through the winter, Letelier's associates at the Institute for Policy Studies became alarmed over the handling of evidence by FBI officials, the D.C. Metropolitan Police, and U.S. Attorney Propper.

Among Letelier's personal effects recovered from the bombing site was a briefcase full of the normal mix of personal correspondence and working papers. Mrs. Letelier was unable to have the briefcase returned to her on the day of the assassinations. Soon afterward, however, documents from the dead man's briefcase began appearing in the press, most often in the columns of Jeremiah O'Leary, a conservative reporter for *The Washington Star* known to have a close association with the FBI and CIA, and in the nationally syndicated columns of Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. The overall effect of the stories, which twisted and distorted Letelier's papers, was to brand him falsely as a Soviet or Cuban agent, a smear campaign whose object no doubt was to distract attention from the suspects and somehow justify the murders.

Eight months after Letelier's death, an Institute for Policy Studies staff member called U.S. Attorney Propper and notified him she would be down to his office that day to retrieve an inventory sheet of the briefcase's contents. She was startled to learn, however, that the Justice Department official had never received or demanded one from the District of Columbia police.

Mrs. Letelier immediately called Propper and demanded an explanation. "You have to understand," Propper told her, "that most of the documents were in Spanish. Therefore the police could not classify them. You know how the police department is." It turned out that the briefcase's contents had all been photocopied, but no lists of the items had been prepared.

"And the contents were efficiently distributed among right-wing writers," Mrs. Letelier noted to the official. "I had nothing to do with that," Propper replied. "It is impossible to control the press. The Department is very upset about it."

"I don't want to receive more surprises," she replied, and hung up. But more surprises were on the way. On May 23, Mrs. Letelier's assistant, Rhonda Johnson, arrived at Propper's office in the Justice Department to compare lists of the briefcase's contents. She found some materials from the investigation mixed in with photocopies of the briefcase materials and other items missing. And although all of Orlando Letelier's belongings retrieved from the car by the police had supposedly been returned to his widow by that time, Propper reached into his filing cabinet and handed Johnson Letelier's appointments book. Johnson was further disturbed to find that when she compared her inventory of the briefcase with copies of the items held by the D.C. Police Department homicide squad, nine pieces of material were missing. The

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police had no explanation for how the items had been lost.

Under pressure from the Institute for Policy Studies, Propper issued a statement that none of the contents of the briefcase had any relevance to the Letelier case, or any other case pending before the Department. By early summer, however, details of Letelier's personal life, as culled from correspondence in the briefcase, were circulating throughout the press and right-wing groups close to the CIA and FBI. In an interview last June, Edwin Wilson, a former CIA officer whose primary duty was to set up fronts for the agency for the Bay of Pigs invasion and other CIA wars in the Congo and the Far East, admitted to me that he had learned details of Letelier's personal life from friends inside the agency. Wilson, who was interviewed by the FBI in connection with the Letelier assassination, now runs a Washington consulting firm whose business includes shipping explosive timing devices to foreign clients.

More recently, an aide to Senator Richard Stone of Florida said he had heard from "Judiciary Committee sources" that Letelier was a "Cuban agent," and "that's why he was killed." Jack Anderson associate Les Whitten aired the same charge in a December 1976 column. Still another rumor was that Letelier was murdered by leftists, rather than the right, to make a martyr of him. *The New York Times* failed to assign a reporter to the case; *The Washington Post* remained largely silent during the late summer.

In March, Isabel Letelier and Michael Moffitt had met with Attorney General Griffin Bell and requested the appointment of a special prosecutor, based on their knowledge of mishandled evidence and the questionable ability of the Justice Department to obtain cooperation from the CIA, which played a prominent role in the "destabilization" of the Allende government and supplied the junta's secret police with arms and training after the coup. Bell refused, explaining that he didn't want "another Watergate."

His choice of words was apt. Justice Department investigators now believe that the Cubans connected to the Letelier hit were trained by the agency, and that the CIA-supported junta sponsored the murders.

The American decision to intervene against the Allende government was recommended by the so-called 40 Committee under the direction of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and approved by President Richard Nixon. CIA Director Richard Helms put the plan into action. At the same time the CIA was waging a clandestine war against the socialist government of Chile, however, the agency had retreated from its secret war against the communist government of Cuba. By late 1974, the disillusioned anti-Castro Cuban armies, largely cut off from the CIA's welfare rolls, turned to the generals in Chile, and especially to Augusto Pinochet, who had assumed leadership of the hemisphere's anticommunist crusade.

After the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban right-wing leader, Orlando Bosch, had retired to medical practice in Miami's "Little Havana," interspersed with occasional terrorist

activities in various countries. In December 1974, he established a base of operations in Chile. "I passed several times from Chile to Argentina... we tried to shoot some Cuban diplomats in the middle of 1975... because of the contacts we made down there, we set up the murder of two Cuban diplomats," he has admitted. Bosch also reportedly received training from the DINA while he was in Chile. "The purpose behind the training," according to a former Cuban exile leader who has recanted his past and returned to Havana, "was to have Bosch assassinate Andres Pascal Allende, nephew of the slain Chilean president."

In the summer of 1975, while Bosch traveled through Latin America and the Caribbean on a Chilean passport, setting up some of the 150 bombings and fifty murders his group has taken credit for, DINA chief Manuel Contreras arrived in the United States to inspect DINA operations here. The visit included a meeting with then-CIA Deputy Director Vernon Walters in Washington. Shortly before the Contreras visit, DINA agent Frederico Willoughby also came to the United States for medical tests at Johns Hopkins University hospital. Before returning to Santiago, Willoughby visited the CIA, State Department, and several members of Congress. On September 16, 1975, according to published reports, DINA chief Contreras asked Pinochet for an extra \$600,000 to "neutralize" Chilean dissidents in seven countries, including the United States.

In October, the former vice president of the Christian Democratic Party, Bernardo Leighton, was gunned down with his wife in Rome. During that fall and later, there was a noticeable increase in DINA operations throughout Latin America, Western Europe, and the United States. The international movements of DINA agents began to be more closely monitored by the police. In some cases, DINA agents were deported when assassination plans came to light.

For Chilean exiles, it was a frightening period. Letelier, for one, learned that the junta had been debating whether or not to kill him. Shortly before he was murdered, it has been learned, a Chilean official in Miami, Consul General Hector Duran, met with well-known exile terrorists Gaspar Jimenez Escobedo and Ramiro de la Fe and other members of the Miami-based exile group, Brigade 2506. At about the same time, investigators believe, explosives used for the Letelier hit arrived aboard a Chilean airlines flight to Miami, and were shipped north into the hands of Cuban exiles who would carry out the execution.

A prime suspect for that assignment is Guillermo Novo, a close associate of Orlando Bosch and a member of the Cuban Nationalist Movement, which is based in Union City, New Jersey. Novo was jailed in 1973 in connection with conspiracy charges in the bombing of a Cuban ship. When he was paroled in 1974, Novo joined Bosch for assignments in Chile and Venezuela. Foreign travel was a violation of his parole terms, and so a hearing was scheduled in New Jersey last June. Novo, however, failed to appear, and a warrant has been issued for his arrest.

For the next two years, from 1974 through 1976,

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why can't he welcome me and shake my hand?'**

various gangs of Cubans, operating mostly out of friendly territory in Chile, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and the murky underworld of Miami's "Little Havana," carried out scores of bombings, kidnappings, and murders. But in June 1976, Bosch decided to try and pull them all together. At a summit meeting of some twenty Cuban terrorist leaders in the Dominican Republic, Bosch formed an umbrella group, CORU (Coordination of the United Revolutionary Organizations), for which he would be the only publicly identified spokesman. Since CORU's formation, the organization has claimed credit for fifty bombings outside the United States.

However, no one has stepped forward to take credit for the Letelier assassination, and the exiles are thought to be increasingly worried about the FBI. The Chilean junta, of course, has steadfastly denied any involvement in the murders, and the exiles, according to a Miami source close to Brigade 2506, have become increasingly apprehensive over the prospect of the welcome mat being withdrawn by Pinochet, who is anxious to gain the approval of President Carter.

Just before Pinochet left Santiago for Washington and the Panama Canal treaty ceremonies, the president of Brigade 2506, Roberto Carballo, sent Pinochet a letter outlining conditions for a proposed meeting with exile leaders in Miami. Pinochet had been mulling over the idea of a show-the-flag stopover in Miami on the way back to Santiago, and reports that he would meet with exile leaders leaked into a Spanish-language newspaper in Miami early in September. But Carballo's letter, hand-carried to Pinochet, outlined conditions for a meeting that were apparently stiffer than Pinochet had expected. Claiming to represent all the anti-Castro, anticommunist Cuban warriors in Miami, Carballo demanded:

¶ A proclamation by Pinochet of "the willingness of the government of Chile to support the fight against the tyranny of Fidel Castro. . . ."

¶ An explanation of the "ways and means of the support of Chile in the fight" against Castro.

¶ "Consideration of the necessary means to implement this fight. . . ."

¶ "A joint statement. . . giving details of the talks and taking international responsibility" for the arrangements between them.

Carballo had wanted to negotiate a treaty between what he evidently saw as two sovereign entities — the junta and the exiles — but for whatever reason, he was rebuffed. Pinochet flew straight home to Santiago.

During that same week, Representative Ronald Dellums, California Democrat, sponsored a press conference with Isabel Letelier and Michael Moffitt to denounce President Carter's welcome of General Pinochet in the White House. They also announced they had requested a personal meeting with Carter to press for the appointment of a special prosecutor. "If President Carter can welcome Pinochet in the White House and shake his hand, why can't he welcome me and shake my hand?" Moffitt asked. "I'm an American citizen, and my wife was murdered by people who Justice Department officials believe were agents of the junta. This meeting will be used by Pinochet to bolster his support back home. If Carter is serious about human rights, why doesn't he welcome Isabel and me, just like he's welcoming Pinochet?"

The Washington Post, *The Washington Star*, and *The New York Times* did not think the views of Isabel Letelier and Michael Moffitt would be important enough to send a reporter to listen to them. *The Times* did report on September 10, however, that Pinochet had returned to a "triumphal welcome" in Santiago after his meeting with Carter, which "enhanced his political prestige here, according to a wide range of political observers."

Relations between the new government in Washington under Carter and the four-year-old Chilean junta had been cemented. Pinochet's public relations ploy in August (changing the name of the secret police) had apparently worked. Upon his return to Santiago on September 9, Pinochet announced that a new U.S. ambassador would soon arrive. The announcement was not made in Washington. The post had been vacant since Carter's election.

The most chilling aspect of this new phase of relations between Washington and Santiago is that Pinochet may now feel that he has a free hand to provide the terrorists with base camps in Chile for operations throughout the hemisphere. If so, President Carter, to whom the American people had looked for a fresh start after the treacheries of Vietnam and Watergate, has chosen to pick up the burdens of the past.

"The thing I worry about," Michael Moffitt said one night early in August, "is that Chile will go the way of Brazil. The Brazilian generals have shot or jailed the opposition or sent it into exile, and the resistance has been largely crushed. The unions have been busted, and political parties outlawed. And yet, what do people here know about it? It's been years now, and the U.S. Government has hardly made a peep. That's why we have to do something. In a couple more years, it may be too late." □