

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-4

THE WASHINGTON POST
21 May 1978

The Letelier Case:

Murder and Diplomacy

By Timothy S. Robinson
Washington Post Staff Writer

One of the first police officers to arrive at the scene of the explosion watched the debris still floating through the damp air to the ground like ash from a campfire. He looked at his watch and noted the time: 9:38 a.m. on Sept. 21, 1976.

Stately Sheridan Circle on Embassy Row was soon filled with investigators from the D.C. police, the FBI, the Executive Protective Service, which guards diplomats and embassies here, and the U.S. Treasury's Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms unit, which investigates crimes involving explosives. As smoke continued to rise from the mangled Chevelle on the roadway of the circle, the investigators scurried to collect every possible bit of evidence from the debris around it.

They shook tiny particles down from tree leaves, drained a rain puddle and strained its contents, vacuumed debris from the grass, and unceremoniously put ladders up against embassy walls to search rooftops. By the end of the gray, rainy day, thousands of tiny plastic bags had been filled with fragments that were taken to an FBI laboratory for analysis.

Painstaking work in the laboratory produced the first clues to the nature of the crime. The bomb had been strapped with precision above the I-beam of the Chevelle's frame so the driver would be hit with the full force of the blast. The high power of the expertly constructed explosive was clearly intended to kill. And the fact that it had apparently been detonated by remote control was further evidence of the sophistication of the crime.

The next clue was the identity of the target of the crime: Orlando Letelier, a former ambassador to the United States from the Chilean government of Marxist president Salvador Allende and an outspoken opponent in exile of the current Chilean president, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who overthrew Allende in 1973.

Letelier had been working here at the Institute for Policy Studies, a liberal "think tank" that gave him a platform for speeches and writings critical of Pinochet's government and the Chilean secret police, then known as DINA.

Two colleagues of Letelier's were in his Chevelle when it was blown apart on Sheridan Circle. One of them, Ronni Moffett, who was riding along side Letelier in the front seat, died quickly of a severed artery. Her husband, Michael, who was in the back seat, was thrown clear of the car and survived.

Letelier's colleagues at IPS, which itself had been infiltrated and spied upon by informants for the FBI during the anti-Vietnam war years, immediately decided that DINA had murdered Letelier to shut him up. And, because of disclosures of CIA involvement against Allende in Chile, they doubted the U.S. government's determination to find and bring Letelier's killers to justice if it meant embarrassing the Pinochet government. Their suspicions and anger grew when they discovered that investigators, checking out every possible motive, were asking whether anything in Letelier's and the Moffitts' private lives might be connected to the killing.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene M. Propper of the major crimes division was sitting in the cafeteria in the federal courthouse here that September morning when the investigation of the Letelier killing began. Propper had just told friends at the table that two police officers with whom he had an appointment could not show up because "some ambassador" had been killed when one of Propper's supervisors came by and asked him to work on the Letelier case.

His supervisors warned him that such crimes are among the most difficult to solve and prosecute and that this one seemed particularly likely to involve unpleasant political pressures. But Propper, a nonestablishment prosecutor who had already begun thinking of leaving the U.S. Attorney's office for private practice, agreed to take the case anyway.

A few blocks away in the Washington field office of the FBI, agent Carter Cornick had been waiting for his assignment here to take shape after his recent transfer from Puerto Rico. When the Letelier bombing occurred, Cornick was selected by FBI agent-in-charge Nick F. Stames for the job because of Cornick's availability, his knowledge of Spanish, and his investigations of other bombings in Puerto Rico.

Cornick is an outgoing man descended from several generations of Virginians who is frequently given to humor—traits not often expected in the dry stereotype of FBI agents.

Propper and Cornick, who had never met before, would spend the next 18 months on the unusually painstaking and often frustrating investigation that only last month produced arrests of a number of suspects and word that federal prosecutors here knew the details of the crime and had traced its origins to DINA and the Chilean government.

Unknown to the victims' friends and colleagues at the Institute for Policy Studies, the FBI investigation already had turned toward Chile. Agents in the nation's Cuban exile communities, aware of a growing affinity between some very militant anti-Castro Cubans and the rightist Pinochet government in Chile, began checking Cuban informants.

The FBI and the Justice Department soon realized that this part of the investigation necessarily would involve intelligence information here and abroad, so they began laying delicate groundwork. Propper, Assistant Attorney General Stanley Pottinger and CIA Director George Bush met to determine to what extent that agency could help in the investigation. A carefully worded agreement placing the Letelier case in a "national security" status allowed that cooperation.

The investigation quickly focused on the Cuban exile connection after Venezuelan authorities informed the United States that Cuban exile leader Orlando Bosch—who was being held in that country for the bombing of a Cuban commercial airliner in which 73 persons died—had implicated "the Novo brothers" in the Letelier case. By the end of October 1977, the Novos and other Cuban exiles were being brought before a federal grand jury here for questioning.

The Novo brothers—Ignacio Novo Sampol and Guillermo Novo Sampol—were known in the U.S. Cuban community and to federal agents as leaders of the Cuban Nationalist Movement, a group that wants to regain its homeland without help from the United States.

In 1964, they had fired a bazooka from across the East River toward the United Nations while Che Guevara

CONTINUED