

Car-bombed in Washington, DC, Orlando Letelier's death reverberates

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Car-bombed in Washington: How Orlando Letelier's death woke up the US to dictator's evil

As the 47th anniversary of the bombing approaches, Chilean President Gabriel Boric will be at the attack site in Washington, D.C. to speak about his fallen countryman

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A car bomb shattered a peaceful Tuesday morning along Washington, D.C.'s swanky Embassy Row 47 years ago, killing a prominent Chilean diplomat and his newly married young co-worker.

The bombing not only ended the lives of diplomat Orlando Letelier and 25-year-old Ronni Moffitt. It was a message from Chile's dictator, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, to the rest of the world: I am untouchable.

On Saturday, Chile's current president, Gabriel Boric, Letelier's family and those who fought for justice for Letelier and Moffitt are gathering at the site of the Sept. 21, 1976, bombing.

Boric, who has been working to address some of the atrocities of Pinochet's regime, is expected to give a speech commemorating the anniversary of the attack on his countryman. His trip to Washington comes about two weeks after the 50th anniversary of the U.S.-supported coup that put Pinochet in power in 1973 in what's known as "the other 9/11."

Here's what you need to know about Letelier, Pinochet's brutal regime and why events that happened decades ago are still reverberating in the United States and Chile.



Who was Orlando Letelier?



Orlando Letelier served as Chile's ambassador to the U.S. and as a defense minister for socialist President Salvador Allende, who is believed to have fatally shot himself at his presidential palace during the military-backed coup on Sept. 11, 1973.

Pinochet assumed the presidency two days later. At least 3,065 people were killed or disappeared during Pinochet's 17-year regime, while thousands more were imprisoned and tortured, including Letelier. He was held for about a year before international pressure led to his release in 1974.

Forced into exile, Letelier — a married father of four sons — moved to Washington, D.C. and became a senior fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, a progressive think tank.

Letelier used his freedom to speak out against atrocities still happening in his home country. On Sept. 10, 1976, he gave an impassioned speech at a packed Madison Square Garden in New York City, according to the institute.

"I was born a Chilean, I am a Chilean, and I will die a Chilean," Letelier said. "They were born traitors, they live as traitors, and they will be known forever as fascist traitors."

He would be bombed 11 days later.



The bombing

Letelier, 44, was driving in his blue Chevrolet Chevelle with his assistant, Ronni Moffitt, in the passenger seat and her husband of four months, Michael, in the back when a bomb planted in the car went off, according to a detailed account written by Newsweek in 1976.

Letelier was instantly killed in the broad-daylight bombing, while Moffitt died a short time later. Michael survived with minor injuries.

The assassination "was as blatant as it was impactful," said Iván Jakšić, a Chilean native who has been writing books about his nation's politics for decades and is the director of Stanford University's Bing Overseas Studies Program in Chile.

"(Letelier's) assassination was extremely shocking because of the brutality of the event and the international orchestration that went with it," Jakšić told USA TODAY.



He also cited the assassination of Carlos Prats González in Buenos Aires in 1974. González, who had been a minister of defense under Allende, also was killed in a car bomb, along with his wife.

"It showed the lengths to which the Pinochet regime would go to eliminate potential opponents," Jakšić said. "For the exile community, it was a clear message of how vulnerable everyone was."

Wake-up call



It wasn't until Letelier's assassination that the full reality of Pinochet's regime became clear in the U.S., which — in the grips of Cold War fears of communism — had orchestrated "a massive covert effort to 'bring down'" Allende's government, as President Richard Nixon and his cabinet put it, according to "The Pinochet File."

Published in 2013, the book by National Security Archive senior analyst Peter Kornbluh thoroughly summarizes 30 years of declassified documents that expose the role the U.S. played in usurping Allende and supporting Pinochet.

"Before 9/11, (the bombing) was the most notorious international terrorist attack in the nation's capital," said Sarah Anderson, global economy project director at the Institute for Policy Studies and a speaker at Saturday's memorial event.

"The U.S. government at that time under Nixon was supporting the Pinochet regime," she said. "I think it was a shock to them that they would carry out such a horrific assassination within a couple miles of the White House."



Then Sen. Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts called the killing "political terrorism," and South Carolina Sen. James Abourezk said it "means that the tyranny" of the dictatorship had extended to the U.S., according to a New York Times report the day of the bombing.

U.S. authorities prosecuted seven people in connection with the bombing between 1978 and 1991, according to the institute.

Michael Townley, a U.S. citizen working for the Chilean secret police, pleaded guilty in 1978 to organizing the assassination but served only five years in prison in exchange for his testimony against five Cuban exiles involved in the bombing. The exiles got little to no prison time.

Two Chilean officials also served some prison time in Chile in the bombing. Though he was indicted on human rights violations and arrested in London in 1998, Pinochet died in Chile in 2006 without ever facing trial.

Presidential visit



Now more than 30 years since Pinochet's dictatorship, Chile's leftist President Gabriel Boric has been working to address some of the atrocities of the regime.

To this day, more than 1,100 people who were disappeared remain unaccounted for. Leading up to the 50th anniversary of the coup, Boric announced that his government would launch a national search for those who've never been found.

"The only way to build a future that's free and respectful of life and human dignity is to know the whole truth," he said in a statement announcing the search on Aug. 30.

Juan Pablo Letelier, who was 15 when his father was killed and later became a senator in Chile, told USA TODAY that "it's extremely important" that Boric will be at his father's memorial this year and praised the president's efforts to find the missing.

"We're the lucky ones because we have a place to put a flower," said Letelier, 61, who is traveling from Chile to speak at the event. "I always remember those who still have a big sorrow in their souls. They still can't find a place to leave a flower."



On top of the executions, imprisonments and torture during Pinochet's regime, human rights groups believe that upwards of 20,000 babies were taken from mostly low-income Chilean mothers and adopted out to unsuspecting parents in the U.S.

USA TODAY has been writing about the stolen children of Chile since April, and that coverage has led at least 21 Americans who were adopted from Chile to find out the truth about their pasts, according to Constanza del Río, the founder and president of Nos Buscamos, a nonprofit working to reconnect adoptees with their birth families.

The fight continues



Jakšić questioned Boric's visit to the memorial site, asking: "Would that heal anything?"

"The danger is that turning these painful moments into media performances will trivialize what can never be healed," he said. "What is needed is humility and reflection. Especially from a generation that did not live through that experience."

Anderson said the annual gathering is a time to honor Letelier and Moffitt "but also a time to recommit to the fight for justice and democracy."

Juan Pablo Letelier said his father "was the type of person who would have asked us not to go weep year after year."

"But to get on our feet and do things to get things right," he continued, citing the global fight for democracy. "That's what he taught us, to do it in unity. Because political processes require majorities and unity."

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