

United States-born Pinochet hitman's "confessions" declassified

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A memorial plaque remembers exiled Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier and Institute for Policy Studies staffer Ronni Moffitt, who were assassinated by Pinochet regime's secret police via a car bomb on September 21, 1976, in Washington, D.C. Photo: Oliver Contreras for The Washington Post via Getty Images

Recently declassified notes reveal for the first time the entire scope of the role an agent in Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's secret police played in multiple assassinations and in a fatal 1976 Washington car bombing that shocked Americans.

The big picture: That assassination in Washington of an exiled Chilean diplomat laid bare the brutality of Pinochet's regime to U.S. government officials, some of whom, including former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, had facilitated the coup that resulted in Pinochet coming to power.

Kissinger died last week.

Details: The National Security Archive, an independent, non-profit investigative journalism center at George Washington University that seeks to declassify U.S. documents, released notes written by Michael Townley last month. Townley was born in the U.S.

- They show that as a member of Chile's Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional, known as DINA, Townley used nerve gas to murder Chileans and participated in one of the most notorious attacks of terror on U.S. soil.
- Documents reveal Townley plotted the assassination of former Chilean foreign minister Orlando Letelier, who died in the car bombing on Sept. 21, 1976. Letelier's colleague, 25-year-old Ronni Karpen Moffitt, was also killed in the explosion.
- According to the notes, Townley said he received orders to assassinate Letelier from a Chilean military and DINA operative, and he recruited anti-Fidel Castro Cuban Americans to carry out the murder.

In another batch of documents, Townley writes about worrying that the Chilean government may kill him rather than turn him over to the FBI for the Letelier and Moffitt killings.

- The Pinochet regime did turn Townley over to the FBI on April 8, 1978, and soon after he pleaded guilty.
- Townley served 62 months in prison after his 1979 sentencing.

Context: Chile was one of several countries the U.S. saw as crucial during the Cold War to halt the spread of leftist governments as the U.S. was embattled in the Vietnam War.

- The U.S. helped overthrow democratically-elected President Salvador Allende, a leftist who died during a Sept. 11, 1973, coup d'état, paving the way for Pinochet's rise to power.
- The U.S. State Department in August released two formerly top-secret documents that shed light on how former President Richard Nixon was kept in the loop on details of the coup as it unfolded.
- Chileans in September commemorated the 50-year mark since Pinochet came to power.

What they're saying: The Townley documents' release was the first time that his four-year career as a DINA assassin was "reproduced in full and published together," the National Security Archive said.

Parts of his confessions have appeared in books and articles as researchers and reporters gained access to Chile's judicial files over the years, but not in full, the center said.

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