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**Alan McPherson. "Letelier Diplomacy: Nonstate Actors and U.S.-Chilean Relations." *Diplomatic History* 43:3 (June 2019): 445-468. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhz002>.**

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The murder of Chilean official Orlando Letelier surely ranks among the most unusual events in the recent history of American foreign policy and U.S.-Latin America relations. In his new book and in this *Diplomatic History* article, Alan McPherson places the Letelier case near the center of the often turbulent U.S.-Chile relationship of the 1970s and 80s.<sup>1</sup> He asserts that the case was “a thorn in the side of U.S.-Chilean diplomatic relations and remained so for a good fifteen years” (445). In the words of a former U.S. deputy chief of mission in Santiago, most U.S.-Chile diplomacy in the 1970s and 80s qualified as “Letelier diplomacy” (445).

Letelier was the Chilean minister of defense under President Salvador Allende (1970-1973). Following the 1973 coup that drove Allende to suicide and ushered in the seventeen-year dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), the new regime imprisoned Letelier for a year without charges. He then went into exile, moved to Washington, took up a position at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) think tank, and built a reputation as an outspoken Pinochet critic. On 21 September 1976, Letelier and his American co-worker, Ronni Moffitt, were killed by a car bomb while driving through Sheridan Circle in Washington’s Embassy Row. A third passenger—Moffitt’s husband, Michael—survived with minor injuries. It remains the only instance of state-sponsored terrorism in the city of Washington.

Chile in the Allende/Pinochet era has not suffered from a lack of scholarly attention. Indeed, the two decades encompassing Allende’s tumultuous tenure, the Pinochet coup and dictatorship, and the eventual transition to democracy have inspired plenty of studies. Among scholars of American diplomacy and U.S.-Latin America relations, much of this attention has concerned President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s contribution to Allende’s downfall, their early support for Pinochet’s junta, the troubled bilateral relationship of the Ford/Carter years, and, some years later, the Reagan administration’s tentative support for democratization.<sup>2</sup> This robust scholarly output reflects Chile’s unique circumstances among Latin American states of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the Pinochet regime’s high degree of contemporary visibility and the rather embarrassing (to Americans) connections between Washington and Santiago. Pinochet’s Chile was a unique

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<sup>1</sup> Alan McPherson, *Ghosts of Sheridan Circle: How a Washington Assassination Brought Pinochet’s Terror State to Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Prominent examples include Morris Morley and Chris McGillion, *Reagan and Pinochet: The Struggle over U.S. Policy in Chile* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Tanya Harmer, *Allende’s Chile & the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Lubna Qureshi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and Allende: U.S. Involvement in the 1973 Coup in Chile* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009); Kristian Gustafson, *Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964–1974* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2007); Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York: The New Press, 2003); and the Chile declassification and documentation projects initiated by the U.S. government and the National Security Archive.

preoccupation of the world's socialist regimes, of activists in the burgeoning human rights movement, and of a wide array of liberal thinkers in both the industrial democracies and the global South.

Yet McPherson makes a compelling case that, even with so many eyes on Chile, scholars have understated how the Letelier saga galvanized anti-Pinochet activity in Chile and abroad.<sup>3</sup> McPherson's main contributions here are twofold. First, he highlights the role of non-state actors (NSAs) in American foreign relations, and argues that individuals, especially, have a "moral public shaming power" which governments and large non-government organizations (NGOs) lack (456). These individual actors may very well sway low- and mid-level bureaucrats, though they are much less influential with presidents and White House advisors (446).

The key figure in this regard was Letelier's widow, Isabel. After the car bombing, she somewhat reluctantly took up her husband's mantle, and eventually grew into the role of leader of the Chilean exiles in America. McPherson's research reinforces the contention that the U.S. government "would not have pressured Chile to such an extent had it not been for [Isabel] Letelier and her nonstate allies" (446). Isabel, writes McPherson, "had enough allies among other NSAs and NGOs for them collectively to use the tools they had—moral standing, information gathering and reporting, and networking among exiles, activists, and legislators—to pressure the U.S. government to lend assistance" (467-468). Another energetic NSA was Moffitt's husband Michael, who worked closely with Isabel and other activists in pursuit of the killers.

McPherson's second contribution here is his favorable perspective on the role of the bureaucracy in foreign policy making. The Letelier story, he argues, "reveals an unusual process among low- and mid-level bureaucrats . . . of adopting and advancing the goals of transnational advocacy networks" (447). What emerges is a fairly consistent "pattern of bureaucratic boldness" as against "executive caution" (447). McPherson portrays a system in which small groups of people can make a difference under the right circumstances, though even minor successes may take years. In their pursuit of justice for Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffitt, NSAs lobbied incessantly, and some of the bureaucrats became "allies" of the Letelier NSAs and "successfully pressured the highest reaches" of the executive branch to change Chile policy (448).

These two contributions are embedded in a fast-moving narrative. McPherson first describes the era's burgeoning human rights movement and its legislative accomplishments, especially the groundbreaking 1975-76 Harkin and Kennedy amendments, which respectively cut U.S. aid to abusive regimes and military aid to Chile. He then notes that Letelier's killing fostered surprisingly little initial energy toward confronting Chile. Simply put, "a robust diplomatic response to the Letelier assassination . . . was not foreordained" (454). Instead, much of the executive branch seemed intent on deflecting attention from Pinochet and the Chilean secret police, DINA, despite (and in some cases, because of) the intelligence community's knowledge of the Chileans' security activities, including the infamous Operation Condor. It is all the more noteworthy, then, that NSAs were able to keep the case alive over many years and, with their bureaucratic allies, persuade high-level policymakers to alter U.S. policy toward Chile (454).

Although the NSAs in this story initially saw little reason to trust the FBI, they and the investigators grew to respect each other's diligence. The victims' families may not have been natural allies of the FBI and the Justice Department, but, writes McPherson, "they learned to overcome their political and cultural differences as the investigators convinced the activists that they were both after the same facts" (459). In time, Isabel Letelier and Michael Moffitt learned to play government agencies and bureaus against one another, and the agencies' hard work began to pay off. The investigations led to indictments for three Chileans and a U.S. national living in Chile. The Chilean government extradited the American, Michael Townley, but their refusal to extradite the other three effectively destroyed what little amity still existed between the Pinochet regime and Washington moderates.

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<sup>3</sup> Rare exceptions include Patrick William Kelly, *Sovereign Emergencies: Latin America and the Making of Global Human Rights Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Steve Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet's Chile, 1973-1988* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

While Pinochet and his henchmen are clearly the villains in this tale, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski comes in for some criticism as well. During the extradition struggle, Brzezinski counseled President Jimmy Carter against taking a tough line, and Carter's ensuing sanctions package displeased NSAs while it also managed to strengthen Pinochet's position in Santiago. Brzezinski comes across as surprisingly Kissingeresque in his conciliatory line on Chile and his indifference to the Letelier investigation. "Brzezinski didn't help at all," Isabel Letelier told McPherson in 2017. "We could never get through to him. Never" (458).

The early Reagan administration sought to rekindle U.S.-Chile relations, but by this time the international human rights movement had been firmly entrenched in Washington. When the administration joined with congressional conservatives to allow military aid and weapons sales to Chile, Congress required the president to certify that Chile was making significant progress on human rights and taking steps to investigate the Letelier murder (463). Similar certification requirements for other Latin American partners needed Reagan throughout the decade, and forced his administration to lobby these governments to implement at least modest reforms. In the long run, writes McPherson, the Letelier case "proved instrumental in Reagan's eventual abandonment of Pinochet" (464). This abandonment paralleled the administration's embrace of democracy promotion as a U.S. national interest.<sup>4</sup> On this point, another of McPherson's contributions is his use of newly declassified sources, including the eye-opening May 1987 CIA memo titled "Pinochet's role in the Letelier Assassination and Subsequent Coverup," in which the agency cited "convincing evidence" that Pinochet personally ordered Letelier's murder.<sup>5</sup>

I agree with the author that the Letelier tale "suggests the need for more research into NSAs as collaborators of the state rather than competitors" (468). Another area that deserves more scholarly attention is the business and financial nexus, as scholars of diplomacy too often downplay or ignore the relationship between regime survival and dictators' links to domestic economic elites, multinational corporations, and financiers. As is well known, the U.S. government cut nearly all of its aid to Chile, but it never banned private loans. Pinochet's lengthy tenure thus owed in no small measure to the continuing flow of capital from American, European, and Latin American investors.

Perhaps the most important lesson of the Letelier saga is that while NSAs can be influential, they must be willing to put in long hours and expect few rewards. Theodore Parker may have been right that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, but this story suggests that the arc is very long, indeed. One is reminded of the Argentine *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and their counterparts elsewhere in Latin America, who worked for years to obtain even the most basic information about missing family members. Sadly, the quest for justice continues for the 'new disappeared' in Mexico and Central America – victims of the drug trade, organized crime, and, often, state complicity.<sup>6</sup> Joyce Horman, whose husband Charles was murdered during the 1973 Chile coup, waited more than forty years for an arrest and conviction, and even then there were unanswered questions about U.S. complicity.<sup>7</sup> Today's counterpart might very well be slain Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's fiancé, Hatice Cengiz, who has been forced into a truth-seeking role much like that of Horman and Isabel

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<sup>4</sup> William Michael Schmidli and Robert Pee, eds., *The Reagan Administration, the Cold War, and the Transition to Democracy Promotion* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Directorate of Intelligence, CIA, "Pinochet's Role in the Letelier Assassination and Subsequent Coverup," 1 May 1987, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB560-CIA-report-concludes-Pinochet-behind-Letelier-Moffit-bombing-in-1976-and-calls-it-act-of-state-terrorism/Document%201%20-%20CIA%20assessment.pdf>, accessed 10 November 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Wilkinson, "Los otros desaparecidos," *El Universal*, 14 January 2019, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/daniel-wilkinson/nacion/los-otros-desaparecidos>; "Hay más de 40 mil desaparecidos y 36 mil muertos sin identificar en México, reconoce Gobernación," *Animal Político*, 17 January 2019, <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2019/01/40-mil-desaparecidos-mexico-victimas-sin-identificar/>, accessed 10 November 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Pascale Bonnefoy, "2 Sentenced in Murders in Chile Coup," *New York Times*, 29 January 2015, A8.

Letelier.<sup>8</sup> We can only hope that Cengiz finds solace in the world's sympathy, and that she doesn't have to wait four decades for justice.

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<sup>8</sup> Alexandra Rojkov, "Hatice Cengiz's Fight for Justice," *Spiegel Online*, 2 October 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/khashoggi-fiancee-hatice-cengiz-continues-fight-for-justice-a-1289459.html>; Barbara Bibbo, "Hatice Cengiz: UN 'Must Take Action Now' over Khashoggi's Murder," *Al Jazeera*, 25 June 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/hatice-cengiz-action-khashoggi-murder-190625121023903.html>, accessed 10 November 2019.