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A dirty job, and Phil Donahue was just the man to do it

MEDIA ANALYSIS/ Don Kowet

It was a dirty job, but someone had to do it.

Daniel Ortega, the president of Nicaragua, had the poor taste to time his suspension of all civil liberties at home shortly before he was due in New York to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the United Nations.

Liberals who had bestowed on the Sandinistas their blessings were bleeding.

New York Times columnist Tom Wicker wrote that Mr. Ortega's act was "a heavy burden to bear," calling the Sandinistas "their own worst enemy."

The Washington Post's Mary McGrory was about to award the Sandinista an "Oscar for bad timing." She wrote: "Whoever he was aiming at, Ortega, once again, seems to have shot himself."

Someone had to face the fallen idol on national television.

Phil Donahue, that incurable hemophiliac, rolled up his sleeves,

tightened his tourniquets and braced himself for the blood-letting.

In a program last March, Mr. Donahue had flaunted his Sandinista sympathies, joining a nun and a congressman in their assault on Rep. Robert Dornan, California Republican, a defender of aid to the Nicaraguan resistance.

But yesterday morning, with President Ortega and his wife, Rosario Maria Murillo, seated beside him at the conference table, Phil seemed uncharacteristically subdued. Glum. A power-outage dimmed his usual high-energy performance. Phil was taking Mr. Ortega's indiscretion personally.

Mr. Ortega had forgone his famed battle fatigues for a solemn gray suit; his wife, the pretty Rosario, was wearing a blue dress with a puritanically high collar. The scenario was familiar to any parent who ever was called to school to see the principal because little Janey or Johnny had cut a class or tossed a spitball in science lab.

Phil was disappointed in his pupils and had to reprimand them. But he was not prepared to admit that they had fulfilled the dire promise of the White House probation officer who had predicted all along they'd end up in reform school.

It didn't take long before the audience realized that, as far as Phil was concerned, suspending all civil rights in Nicaragua was only a misdemeanor.

"How could you impose such radical measures on your own people at a time when you claim to be on the edge of victory?" Phil said. "You really have apparently scored, without meaning to, a tremendous public relations victory for the Reagan administration."

Phil was so upset.

Mr. Ortega replied that "when you're at the point of reaching a victory, but you have an opponent who has many resources, then you have to make a maximum effort to assure your victory, and thus bring nearer the possibilities for peace."

The answer made no sense at all. Suspending civil liberties, as most idiots know, is a sign of weakness, not of strength. But not this idiot. Phil had a list of questions, and kept on reading them.

"But . . . this is the worst kind of repression," said Phil. He was worried about the appearance of dictatorial arbitrariness. "This looks like the work — I'm not saying it is, Mr. President — it looks like the work of a fascist government."

The lovely Mrs. Ortega wanted to interrupt.

"May I?" she said.

"You may, of course you may," Phil gushed.

"We don't like these measures, we regret them. But what else can we do if we are at war?" asked the first lady, her voice dripping with pathos and wounded sincerity. There was, she said, "a manual by the CIA on how to assassinate our leaders."

Phil: "Yes, there was."

"We have to defend ourselves."

Phil: "Yes, you do."

After Mrs. Ortega's passionate plea, it was time for Phil to unload the first of his vaunted Value Judgments. Would he deliver an indictment of Sandista repression?

"I don't speak for all Americans," said Phil with a rare modesty. "but I do speak for a considerable number when I say that . . . millions were embarrassed by that [CIA] manual. And millions today," Phil added emphatically, "are upset at this administration for the private war that they accuse it of engaging in against your country."

Having rendered this public apology on our behalf, Phil returned to the root of his irritation: Mr. Ortega's clumsiness at public relations.

"You have 60,000 armed people in Nicaragua," Phil roared. "It looks like you're afraid of your own people!"

Phil was bothered. It wasn't that Mr. Ortega had confiscated a church newspaper, but that he had done it when the world was watching.

"You've snatched defeat from the jaws of victory! You've got the whole Catholic Church angry with you. . . . You cannot confiscate a church newspaper and expect the world to give you a standing ovation," he said. "It's a political newspaper," replied Mrs. Ortega.

"So what," said Phil, assuming the role of media consultant. "Let them speak. Your revolution," he said, "is popular."

This might have been a relief to the president and his first lady. Others might wrongly conclude from Mr. Ortega's suspension of civil liberties that he feared that his fully armed populace might be discontented enough to start pointing their pistols in his direction. But Phil had taken his own poll, and found that Mr. Ortega had the full support of the people!

A photo flashed on the screen showing Mr. Ortega in his role of doting father, surrounded by his seven sons.

"Seven boys!" cried Phil. "Wow! Your daughter has the sympathy of most of the women in this audience."

The audience laughed. Now the Ortegas were just mom 'n' pop.

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Phil was nearing the end of the show. A caller complained that he had been apologizing "for America to a Communist dictator." "Well," said Phil scathingly, "aren't you a little ashamed that we gotta privately fund [the resistance]? What a terrible thing for a powerful nation, a democratic nation, to do."

In a rush of commercials — nobody gets interrupted by commercials in Nicaragua, the Ortegas bragged — the program was over.

It had been a dirty job, but someone had to do it.