

CBS cancels *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*

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The announcement that *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, a long-running talk show, will end in May 2026 has generated widespread outrage and suspicion—justifiably so. CBS’s official explanation that the show’s cancellation was an “agonizing” and “purely financial” decision has not fooled very many people.

While it is true that late-night television has entered an impasse, the decision to eliminate *The Late Show*, one of CBS’s flagship programs for nearly a decade, is politically charged and reveals the growing convergence of economic pressure, state repression and censorship in the US.

The Late Show debuted in 2015, following Colbert’s transition from Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*, where he famously parodied right-wing punditry. With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Colbert emerged as a leading voice of liberal indignation. His nightly monologues offered a steady diet of jabs at Trump’s lies, bluster and authoritarianism, carefully calibrated to resonate with Democratic Party loyalists while avoiding any critique of capitalism or imperialism.

This formula proved lucrative. *The Late Show* dominated the ratings for nine consecutive seasons, even as the rest of network television hemorrhaged viewers.

Despite this track record, CBS will not only terminate Colbert’s show, but it has announced the retirement of *The Late Show* franchise itself. The genre is being dismantled, not only due to budget constraints but as part of a broader strategic pivot toward low-cost programming and streaming-first content.

Colbert’s show cost over \$100 million annually and reportedly lost \$40–50 million each year. But this alone does not explain its termination. Television history is filled with unprofitable yet high-profile productions that networks sustained for strategic reasons.

The Late Show brought prestige and a reliable audience. (More than 250,000 people have signed “Save Colbert” petitions.) So why end his show now?

The political atmosphere surrounding the decision and the mounting evidence of behind-the-scenes coercion offer further insight into Colbert’s firing. Paramount Global, CBS’s parent company, is in the midst of an \$8 billion merger with Skydance Media, which would create a \$28 billion behemoth called Paramount Skydance Corporation. Skydance CEO is David

Ellison, son of Oracle’s Larry Ellison, a multimillionaire. Both Ellisons are Trump supporters.

The merger is undergoing regulatory scrutiny—particularly by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), now under the direct control of the Trump administration. The deal’s approval has been delayed until at least October 2025, and its fate clearly hangs on Paramount’s ability to placate the White House.

This is the same Trump administration that has made a specialty of waging legal and financial war on the media. Most recently, Trump has filed a defamation lawsuit against the *Wall Street Journal* (\$10 billion). Previously, he settled a defamation lawsuit with ABC News (\$15 million) and, most relevantly, with Paramount itself—\$16 million paid to settle a suit related to a “60 Minutes” interview with Kamala Harris.

Colbert publicly denounced the latter settlement, calling it a “big fat bribe.” Days later, CBS announced the cancellation of *The Late Show*.

The *New Republic* argued bluntly:

Mock a Trump bribe on Monday, get canceled by Thursday. *The Late Show*’s death reveals how billionaires and presidents are reshaping American media.

Colbert’s ouster is part of a larger pattern. Media companies, law firms, universities and cultural institutions are falling into line under the weight of lawsuits, federal funding threats and regulatory intimidation. Columbia University had \$400 million in federal funds frozen for allegedly “failing to address antisemitism” during pro-Palestinian protests.

As the WWSW has argued, an argument only strengthened by Colbert’s cancelling,

Trump is implementing an American version of *Gleichschaltung*—the Nazis’ “synchronization” of all elements of intellectual and cultural life ... to correspond with state ideology.

Comic Jon Stewart, returning to *The Daily Show*, described the current atmosphere as one of “fear and pre-compliance.” He slammed CBS for failing to defend its “No. 1 rated late-night franchise,” calling the cancellation “maybe the path of least resistance for your \$8 billion merger.”

Yet Stewart’s rant ended with a pitiful and impotent plea for institutions to “fight,” concluding with the juvenile demand that they “sack the f--- up.” This appeal, even offered as a jest, to the very corporate entities responsible for censorship is the equivalent of asking a reptile to turn vegan.

Political and economic processes nourish one another. Without doubt, the old media order is collapsing under the weight of seismic technological and social shifts. Between 2018 and 2024, advertising revenue for late-night TV plummeted by nearly 50 percent, from \$439 million to \$220 million.

Young people are abandoning television en masse. Streaming platforms, owned by the same conglomerates, dominate but cannot yet replace the old ad-based revenue models. Paramount’s latest earnings report showed a \$10 million net loss in Q1 2025, with a 13 percent decline in TV media revenue. It is implementing sweeping layoffs (2,000 in 2024, 800 in February and 650 in June) and austerity measures across its operations.

The late-night genre is the latest casualty of this collapse. *The Late Show*, on the air since 1993, will likely be replaced by a cheaper, shorter, stripped-down program—a show designed to be profitable, not relevant. While this is pitched as a pivot toward “modern audiences,” it is in reality a form of cultural liquidation.

The goal is to preserve profitability by gutting staff, lowering wages and avoiding controversy. The 200-person crew behind *The Late Show* will be disbanded.

What is unfolding is the Detroit-ification of Hollywood. The 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes marked a major turning point, exposing the deep rot in the entertainment industry, its unsustainable foundations and the pathetic and treacherous role of the union bureaucracies.

Rather than respond to the crisis with investment in quality programming or improved working conditions, the studios have doubled down on automation and consolidation with the complicity of the unions. The spread of AI into screenwriting, animation and production has only accelerated this process. Technological change, under capitalism, is not used to liberate labor or enhance creativity—it is wielded as a weapon against workers.

None of these developments are accidental. They are the logical consequence of a media system owned and operated by massive transnational corporations whose only concern is private profit.

In this context, Colbert’s criticisms must be seen in perspective.

Colbert lampooned Trump as a clown and a fool, but never questioned for an instant the system that elevated him. He made

fun of Fox News but praised Barack Obama and Joe Biden—presidents whose policies paved the way for the far right. His show is a pressure valve for middle class outrage, safely channeled into late-night laughs and electoral dead ends. Along with the rest of the talk show comics, he shamefully fell into line with the Democratic Party’s reactionary anti-Russian hysteria in 2017.

To be fair, Colbert has taken some brave positions in the past—his 2006 roast of George W. Bush remains a highlight of recent political comedy.

As the WSWS has long warned, however, satire on CBS (or Comedy Central) is no substitute for class-conscious opposition, especially as even the most trenchant satire tends to come and go with changes in the political winds.

By tethering his critique to the Democratic Party and its political fortunes, Colbert ultimately reinforced the status quo he claimed to ridicule.

Nonetheless, this makes his cancelling all the more revealing and sinister. The situation in the US has reached a point of such tension where even mild critiques of power face censure or censorship to secure mergers, curry favor with the state or avoid legal penalties.

The collapse of late-night television is not just a media story. It is a window into the decay of American democracy and the tightening grip of the oligarchy over every important aspect of life. What is needed is not appeals to corporate conscience, but an organized, independent movement of the working class. This is the only social force capable of defending cultural freedom, democratic rights and the possibility of a humane and informed public life.

The termination of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* is not just a budget cut. It is a symptom of a diseased society, ruled by billionaires, heading toward dictatorship. The working class must respond accordingly.



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