

On the shutdown of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* by CBS

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28 May 2026

On May 21, Stephen Colbert signed off for the last time on *The Late Show* on CBS, ending the popular comedy program after an 11-year run. In an unprecedented act of political censorship, CBS followed through on its July announcement to shut down the show as demanded by Donald Trump.

The final episode of *The Late Show* featured an appearance by Paul McCartney and other musicians, including Elvis Costello, Jon Batiste and Louis Cato, and the broadcast became something of a farewell concert as much as a talk show.

The finale had a reported 6.74 million viewers, the largest ever audience for Colbert on CBS. The number of viewers highlighted the fact that the cancellation was a political rather than a business decision as originally claimed by the network.

Colbert treated the night as a significant ending, honoring the people who had worked on the program and the musicians who had helped define it. Rather than offering a sentimental closure, the finale focused on the show's significance and became a protest against CBS management's actions.

In his final monologue, Colbert thanked his audience and reflected on his legacy. He did not respond directly to Trump, though he made one understated joke during a conversation with McCartney.

When the former Beatle reminisced about the iconic 1964 performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*—which took place in the same New York City theater as *The Late Show*—McCartney noted a difference from the band's appearances on British television. “We'd gotten used to a little bit of makeup in England,” McCartney said. “But we went down there, and the girls put makeup on us, and it was like bright orange.”

To which Colbert responded, “That's very popular in certain circles these days.”

In a typically stupid, vindictive manner, Trump

celebrated the show's cancellation and posted on social media that Colbert was “finally done at CBS.” The post also included a crude AI-generated video image of himself grabbing Colbert by the collar and throwing him into a trash dumpster. This sort of open interference by a US president in what people see on their television screens is without precedent.

Colbert first became a major national figure through *The Daily Show* and then *The Colbert Report* on Comedy Central, where he built a comic persona modeled on conservative punditry. That persona was a sustained satire of right-wing politics and gave Colbert a platform to mock both the inanity of the far right and the way corporate news media content is manufactured.

During the period from 2005 to 2014, Colbert's work on Comedy Central helped move late-night comedy more directly into political commentary, even if it remained limited within the framework of official American capitalist politics.

One of Colbert's better moments was his appearance at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner in May 2006 at which, noted the WSWWS, he delivered “a biting, ironic monologue directed at President George W. Bush and the media establishment.” Under Barack Obama, however, three years later, Colbert disgracefully solidarized himself with the US war effort in Iraq on a well-publicized trip to Baghdad.

Beginning in 2015, Colbert's *The Late Show* evolved into one of the most watched late-night programs on broadcast television with 2.7 million nightly viewers. It ranked as the number one late-night talk show for nine consecutive years.

Colbert's jokes during his monologues moved between criticism of government policy and cultural commentary, and he turned his desk into a place where political satire was front and center. He became a vocal critic of both the first and second Trump administrations and this made the

show a target. Again, there were very distinct limits to this criticism. In February 2017, for example, Colbert, along with the rest of his talk show confreres, signed up for the anti-Russian (and anti-communist) hysteria, suggesting only half-jokingly that Trump was “being run by the Kremlin.”

Colbert’s CBS years coincided with a period of significant corporate media consolidation and the growing shift to the right within American bourgeois politics. As the television networks became increasingly controlled *directly* by the financial oligarchy and abandoned any pretense of independent news gathering or commentary, Colbert remained one of the few mainstream figures who openly ridiculed the president with consistency and bite.

Colbert’s response to Trump was direct and unambiguous. When Trump gloated over his show’s cancellation months earlier, Colbert answered on air in a way that made clear he viewed the decision as part of the larger political assault on free speech rights, not as a programming adjustment by CBS, as the latter claimed.

The significance of the show’s cancellation lies, above all, in the relationship between the corporate media and political power. The decision to cancel *The Late Show* was made as Paramount was seeking regulatory approval for its merger with Skydance, a company owned by David Ellison, son of Trump supporter and mega-billionaire Larry Ellison, who now serves as chairman and CEO of the combined company.

The Ellison family’s investment vehicles hold the controlling voting interests, and while Larry Ellison’s wealth helped finance the deal, David Ellison is the public face and operational controller of the new company and control of its properties sits with the Ellison family and their partners, including RedBird Capital.

The creation of Paramount Skydance is part of a broader consolidation of media power among ultra-wealthy owners closely aligned with Trump’s fascist politics. Media ownership is not politically neutral; it controls who gets airtime, what is said and the limits within which satire can operate.

Of the five existing media entities that control most US entertainment, News Corp (owned by the Murdoch family) and Paramount Skydance (owned by the Ellison family) are open supporters of Trump, while two dominant operators of local television markets are aligned with the Trump administration, Sinclair Broadcast Group and Nexstar Media Group.

While two other primary US media corporations—The Walt Disney Company (ABC) and Comcast

(NBCUniversal)—are not owned by Trump supporters, media watchdog groups have noted a wave of corporate capitulation across almost all major networks. Billionaire owners like Amazon founder Jeff Bezos (*Washington Post*) and Patrick Soon-Shiong (*Los Angeles Times*) have blocked political endorsements to protect their business interests and align with the White House editorially.

Meanwhile, the Ellisons have launched aggressive bids to expand their right-wing media empire by attempting to acquire Warner Bros. Discovery, the parent company of CNN.

One day after the end of *The Late Show*, Colbert resurfaced on Monroe County, Michigan’s, public-access TV show *Only in Monroe*, and delivered a low-budget satire about his own transition out of national television. The special was a one-hour episode featuring Jack White, Jeff Daniels and even a cameo from Eminem—all from Michigan—that spread quickly online.

As of this writing, the YouTube recording of the show has had a viewership of over one million and more than one thousand comments. CBS initially used copyright claims against third-party uploads, but viewer backlash forced the company to reverse course.

CBS backed off and said the episode had been financed and produced by CBS Studios and was authorized only on specific channels, while suspending further enforcement pending review.

The orchestrated attack on Colbert can only be understood as part of the broader attack on fundamental democratic rights by politically connected media empires to restrict what the public can watch, hear and read. The hysterical effort to silence Colbert and his lampooning of Trump is a warning about the implications of the concentration corporate and financial power as a critical element of the descent into an authoritarian dictatorship.



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