

Trump closes the Kennedy Center: The oligarchy declares war on American culture

Nick Barrickman
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On Tuesday, Trump’s handpicked board of directors voted to immediately close the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts—the capital’s showcase performing arts complex—in what amounts to the most brazen act yet in a systematic campaign to subordinate American cultural life to the personal vanity and political interests of a fascist administration.

The center, whose genesis dates to a 1955 Eisenhower-era commission to build a national showcase for American culture at the height of the Cold War—a monument to a ruling class that then felt compelled to present itself as the guardian of civilization—has now been vandalized outright by the current administration.

Minutes before the board voted 23-3 to shutter the center, US District Judge Christopher Cooper had once again blocked the board’s latest effort to inscribe Trump’s name on the building’s facade—ruling that the board was engaging in “linguistic gymnastics” to circumvent a permanent injunction he had issued in May.

Trump responded within hours on Truth Social: “The closing will take place immediately, however, the Renovation and Reconstruction, which is a very large and complex job, cannot begin until such time as the D.C. Circuit rules on the Board’s approved name.”

Trump is citing the existence of real structural weaknesses, presented in a recent engineering report to the board, revealing severe corrosion in exterior panels suspended 60 feet above public walkways and water intrusion into electrical systems—problems that are the product of decades of bipartisan underinvestment.

The administration is also seizing on a projected \$23 million funding deficit, with board documents warning that Trump was unlikely to “lead the fiscal rescue of the Center” without “appropriate recognition.” Despite these pompous and absurd statements, the presiding judge on the D.C. Circuit noted there was “no proof that current or future donations hinge on President Trump’s name being on the building” and “no competent evidence that removing the Trump name would” harm its finances. On Wednesday, Trump further threatened that without an immediate financial commitment which only he could raise from donors, the center could be “ripped down.”

Trump’s claims are further belied by the center’s own consultants at Delta Consulting Group, who expressly disclaimed the administration’s conclusion that the building was “unsafe for continued occupancy.” The reality is that the administration’s 19-month assault—which sent ticket sales and fundraising plunging

after Trump’s name was added to the facade in December—has itself critically deepened the financial crisis it now invokes to justify closure.

Trump is threatening that the foremost performing arts center in the US capital will remain dark until a court hands Trump the vanity inscription he demands.

To understand what has happened, it is necessary to trace the full arc of this assault. In February 2025, Trump fired roughly two dozen board members appointed by his predecessor and installed himself as chairman—an unprecedented seizure of a nominally independent cultural institution. He appointed Richard Grenell, a political operative with no background in the arts, as interim executive director. Grenell announced his team would focus on “bringing arts and entertainment to the Kennedy Center that actually sell tickets”—code for purging what the administration calls “woke” programming and replacing it with MAGA-friendly fare.

What followed illustrated the administration’s vision of culture. Pride Month events were canceled without explanation, including “Tapestry of Pride,” a multi-week celebration of LGBTQ voices in theater and classical music that had been planned to include panels from the AIDS Memorial Quilt. The WorldPride International Pride Orchestra was informed by email that its contract would not be honored.

Trump personally hosted and emceed the 2025 Kennedy Center Honors, announcing he had chosen “98 percent” of the nominees himself and rejected “woke” options—ultimately honoring actor Sylvester Stallone, the rock band KISS and disco singer Gloria Gaynor. By October 2025, over 43 percent of seats were going unsold—compared to 7 percent during the same period the year prior. The Kennedy Center’s largest venues, the Opera House, Concert Hall and Eisenhower Theater, were hemorrhaging audiences.

In December 2025, the board voted to attach Trump’s name to the building’s exterior—bypassing Congress, which under the National Cultural Center Act is the only body authorized to rename the memorial. In May 2026, a D.C. Circuit Court ruled the renaming illegal and ordered Trump’s name removed. The board complied in June, leaving a tarp and scaffolding over the wound in the facade. Then in August, the board tried again—voting 20-3 this time to use the formulation “The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Restored and Renovated by President Donald J. Trump.” On September 15, Cooper blocked that too. The board’s

response was to lock the doors.

Throughout this period, dozens of artists canceled performances in protest. Grammy-winning banjo player Béla Fleck, Mexican-born songwriter Sonia De Los Santos, the Washington National Opera, multiple jazz ensembles and dance companies withdrew their engagements. The list of cancellations ran to more than a dozen major acts. The Kennedy Center—which had for half a century presented the Bolshoi Ballet, Yo-Yo Ma, Stephen Sondheim and the greatest performers in the world—was now a political sideshow generating empty seats and international embarrassment.

The Kennedy Center closure is the sharpest expression of a coordinated assault on every institution through which American cultural and intellectual life has been organized and sustained. The National Symphony Orchestra has been displaced by the closure and will be forced to relocate performances to off-site venues, severing its historic connection to the hall and further damaging seasons already devastated by cancellations.

Trump's budget proposals have called for the outright elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. The NEH laid off 70 percent of its workforce and canceled roughly \$100 million in grant funding. Its director, Shelley Lowe, was forced to resign. Directors overseeing NEA grants for dance, theater, design and folk arts resigned en masse. Organizations ranging from the Berkeley Repertory Company to leading literary publishers were notified that their grants had been rescinded—to be replaced by funding priorities including “Make America Healthy Again” initiatives and projects celebrating the 250th anniversary of American independence on administration-approved terms.

The Smithsonian Institution—the world's largest museum complex—has been subjected to a sweeping political review. Eight of its museums faced content audits, exhibition changes and accusations of political censorship. The director of the National Portrait Gallery faced a removal attempt. Multiple senior officials have resigned or retired under pressure.

The administration has also moved to physically transform Washington's monumental landscape in its own image. The East Wing of the White House was demolished in October 2025 to make way for a \$300 million ballroom. A triumphal arch, estimated to cost \$100 million and sited between the Lincoln Memorial and the entrance to Arlington National Cemetery, has been proposed and is advancing through planning.

The arch would fundamentally distort and reorient the architectural and historical character of one of the most significant memorial landscapes in the world—a landscape organized around sacrifice, mourning and democratic memory—and subordinate it to a monument of personal glorification.

Trump fired all six members of the independent Commission of Fine Arts, established by Congress in 1910, replacing them with loyalists. The renovation of the National Mall's reflecting pool resulted in its defacement.

The character of this assault embodies concentrated elements of philistinism. More fundamentally, however, it is the expression of an oligarchic class that no longer wants or desires the legitimating cultural institutions of bourgeois democracy.

The Kennedy Center was never a neutral repository of a “public” culture. From its inception it was an instrument of American state soft power, a monument of Cold War liberal anticommunism. Its conception of art was expressed by Kennedy himself in 1962 when he declared: “art and the encouragement of art is political in the most profound sense—not as a weapon in the struggle, but as an instrument of understanding of the futility of struggle between those who share man's fate.”

This represented a specific class ideology of art: the liberal-bourgeois conviction that culture could overcome class antagonism, that the great achievements of civilization belonged to “man” in the abstract. It expressed—however hypocritically—certain liberal sentiments celebrating genuine artistic achievements and democratic aspirations of the past.

What the present administration has done is to discard the alibi. The oligarchy that once felt compelled to present itself as the guardian of civilization no longer wants or desires even its own cultural institutions. It rejects the idea of a shared national culture and therefore feels free to dispose of it. The administration's position, stated without apology in its extortionate closure order, is that art belongs to whoever can put their name on it.

The working class has a profound stake in opposing this assault. The great democratic and revolutionary traditions of American culture—the literature of the abolition movement, the art of the Harlem Renaissance, the theater of the Depression era, the music that gave voice to the civil rights struggle—were not produced by or for oligarchs and were at heart hostile to them. They were expressions of working people's aspirations, suffering and resistance. Those traditions are now under direct attack, along with the physical institutions that preserved and extended them.

The defense of culture, like the defense of democratic rights and living standards, requires the independent political mobilization of the working class—not appeals to the Democratic Party, which governed alongside and accommodated the preparations for this assault, but the construction of a movement that links the defense of culture to the struggle against the capitalist system that has produced this government.



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