

Stephen Colbert Shook Up Late-Night Twice, but His Push Into Politics Could Have Ultimately Hurt the Format

By [Brian Steinberg](#)

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Scott Kowalchyk/CBS

Stephen Colbert in 2016 tried to bring together a nation that was coming apart.

On Election Night, Colbert and crew [mounted a live special for the Showtime cable network](#), and as more electoral votes were called for Donald Trump, cementing a victory that set many Americans on edge, groans from the live crowd became more intense. Suddenly, Colbert’s comedy show was no laughing matter.

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“It feels like an asteroid has smacked into our democracy,” one guest said. “Get your abortions now.”

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“Outside of the Civil War, World War II and including 9/11 this may be the most cataclysmic event our country has seen,” said another.

Realizing that late-night sketches would no longer be appreciated, Colbert and team winged it — no rundowns, no scripts. In doing so, [Colbert told this reporter during an interview in 2017](#), he realized he [had hit on a new “Late Show” foundation](#). “The last 10 minutes of that election show were honest. They were honest, and that was a turning point for us,” he said at the time. “After that, we knew I could never do this show without at least attempting to keep my emotional skegs in the water.” At the end of the Election Night program, the comic delivered an unrehearsed monologue, asking viewers, “How did our politics get so poisonous?”

He may be asking a similar question a decade later.

On Thursday, [CBS](#) will air its last broadcast of “The Late Show,” doing something that has many viewers and media observers scratching their heads. The Paramount Skydance network is killing a series that leads in the ratings; generates digital chatter on most days; and gives people a reason to stick with CBS stations well after primetime and the late local news come to an end. By nearly all industry metrics, Colbert has fulfilled the job duties he was given — and then some.

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[CBS has said it’s ending the program due to financial considerations](#), and it’s certainly true that late-night TV has become [more economically fragile since the coronavirus pandemic](#). But the consensus is that Colbert’s politics — and perhaps most of late-night’s — don’t mesh with those of Paramount’s CEO, David Ellison, and maybe even not with those of a chunk of the potential audience. [CBS is getting out of the wee-hours business](#), ceding its late schedule to entrepreneur Byron Allen, who will run two hours of less glitzy entertainment programming, including an 11:30 p.m. comedy roundtable.

When Colbert goes, so too will another piece of financial bedrock for late-night TV. CBS’ “The Late Show” accounted for 27% of all spending on late-night TV shows in 2025, according to data from Guideline, a tracker of ad spending, and 29% of all spending so far in 2026. In a different era, advertisers would move dollars into whichever show had better ratings, says Sean Wright, Guideline’s chief insights and analytics officer. Now, he says, marketers likely believe they can get to the younger viewers who like late-night programming on streaming services and social media. Perhaps 15% of the ad dollars attached to Colbert will move into rivals’ late-night programming, like NBC’s “Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon,” says Wright. But the rest is likely to move out of the format entirely.

“My guess is that with the departure of Colbert, there will also be a kind of the sunset of budgets dedicated to [late night](#),” he says. That can only accelerate Madison Avenue’s exodus from the daypart. Spending on late night television shows fell to \$209 million in 2025, according to Guideline, down from \$519.7 million in 2017 — a drop of nearly 60%.

How could this happen? Colbert struck many new relationships with viewers — so many that his “Late Show” became the most watched late-night show on TV, something CBS hadn’t achieved since David Letterman first moved over from NBC (Jay Leno brought the category title back to NBC in July of 1995). And yet, as he focused more on the headlines — and for much of his “Late Show” tenure, President Trump — others who might have tuned in to late night began to feel Colbert was not for “them.” During his time at CBS, Colbert spearheaded a move to a more partisan brand of comedy, whether he intended to or not.

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While Johnny Carson was a monolith, shaped by a dominant TV media structure to be all things to all people, the current crop of late-night hosts are merely splinters. They need to be all things to only a certain amount of people. All of their audiences are paltry compared to Carson’s.

In this era, when nearly any type of niche, hobby or attitude can find a bespoke media property, success is found “in partisanship,” said Nick Marx, a professor of film and media studies at Colorado State University who examines the cultural implications of comedy programs. “It’s in division and paying to a hardcore, dedicated audience of confidants, not in trying to prop up the big tent.” Since Colbert began taking on Trump — and getting bigger ratings from doing so — others have emulated him, including Meyers, Kimmel, and Samantha Bee.

Indeed, more of the late-night hosts appear to hold similar attitudes. Not too long ago, the different personae considered the others fierce rivals. Letterman and Leno did not get along, and Kimmel also expressed disdain for his NBC competitor. The current generation of hosts cheer one another on. For a time, the executive producers of the various programs consulted one another via a phone-text chain, particularly during Trump’s first term and the coronavirus pandemic. [When a host like Larry Wilmore lost his perch at Comedy Central](#), the other shows sent farewell gifts. Last week, Colbert convened Fallon, Kimmel, Meyers and John Oliver for a visit on one of his last few episodes.

Over the years, some of these [hosts have said and done things on air](#) that would have spurred intense backlash if they were uttered by a right-leaning personality. [In 2017, Colbert raised hackles](#) when he said President Trump was a “c— holster” for Russian leader Vladimir Putin. [Bee lost sponsors for her program](#), “Full Frontal” on Warner’s TBS, in 2018 when she referred to Ivanka Trump, the daughter of President Donald Trump, as a “feckless c—.”

There’s a reason Fox News was able to create a show [it bills as being part of the late-night coterie](#). “Gutfeld,” which airs at 10 p.m. on the east coast, does not vie against NBC’s “Tonight,” CBS’ “Late Show” or ABC’s “Jimmy Kimmel Live” in the same hour, but its host, Greg Gutfeld, features trappings on his program similar to Colbert, Fallon or Kimmel.

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“We wouldn’t have him without them,” says Dannagal Young, a professor of communication at the University of Delaware who studies political satire and the media preferences of liberals and conservatives. “His entire format is built on resentment of being left out by the left.”

The sense that late-night plays to a particular type of audience wasn’t supposed to be part of the mix. Johnny Carson made fun of politicians, but mostly their public goofs, not their policies. Leno rarely became political. And Letterman, often irascible, feuded with politicians but not over what they did in Washington. John McCain became a Letterman target because the former U.S. Senator canceled a 2008 appearance on “Late Show” in favor of talking to Katie Couric. When Letterman squabbled with former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, it was because of a demeaning remark he made about Palin’s teenage daughter.

Late-night shows in 2026 are a wholly different creation. “These shows were built to be vaudeville in the box in your living room,” says Young. “They were a place to watch jugglers and clowns and funny people doing impressions. They were not made for this.”

[Colbert wasn’t looking to alienate crowds](#). He was simply following what had already made him successful. This is, after all, an improv comedian and writer who got his big break working for Jon Stewart at Comedy Central’s “Daily Show” at a time when Stewart was presiding over a cable program that asked its young viewers to look harder at media and politics. Colbert did the unthinkable when he launched “Colbert Report” on Comedy Central in 200, playing a fictional character for nearly a decade who was meant to satirize conservative TV pundits.

So entrenched was the character in viewers’ minds that Colbert spent several sketches after he moved to CBS trying to separate himself from the creation he once played. Indeed, his former employer, Viacom, [made outreach asking whether such use of intellectual property was fair](#). It didn’t help, of course, that the character shared Colbert’s name.

“Colbert never shook his ‘Colbert Report’ persona. That show was groundbreaking,” says Marx. “And he really brought some of that savvy audience with him from Comedy Central.”

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Comedy Central’s fortunes rose and ebbed over how many younger male viewers it could reach. CBS’ hinged on the network’s ability to draw the biggest, broadest crowds. The challenge: The biggest crowd CBS could get was a cohort composed largely of people who wanted to see Colbert zing the powers-that-be. And maybe some hate-watchers, too.

Even as CBS won the ratings, the group of people watching late-night became less heterogenous. And as other hosts adopted a similar stance, more of midnight-TV viewership developed in the same way.

When the coronavirus pandemic forced the various late-night shows to halt traditional production, the programs faced an identity crisis of sorts. No live crowds to laugh at jokes. No bands playing on stage. And no celebrity guests in person. This was the same stuff people could get on podcasts

and YouTube vignettes.

And because the programs largely catered to a similar crowd — Fallon’s “Tonight,” perhaps, is the exception — the broad support that had been in place for them when Letterman and Leno owned the audiences had eroded. These days, most of the hosts are seen as battling President Trump in a war for First Amendment rights. “What they are fighting for is freedom of expression and the opposition to Brendan Carr at the FCC and a recognition that in the Constitution, satire has special protections,” says Young.

It’s noble. It’s important. But is it funny and entertaining? And will it soothe viewers before they turn in for the evening, as early-era late-night stalwarts like Steve Allen and Jack Paar tried to do?

Late night will continue, but more of its humor and personality is likely to surface in new frontiers. Younger generations like podcasts and even longform video, says Marx, but they also are big partakers in “clip culture” and microcontent, while also dipping into social-media phenomenon like “Hot Ones,” the digital series in which celebrities answer questions while snacking on increasingly spicy chicken wings.

The regular appearance of major celebrities on such programs is a death knell for the traditional late-night programs, which once were the place to see celebrities in more relaxed fashion. And even [Stephen Colbert](#), who is known to get elbow deep into everything from set design to product placement, can’t stop such dynamics.

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Colbert shook up late night twice: once by playing a fictional character and once by taking the show Letterman built and adapting it to a new era in which news, not absurdist humor, was the main focus. All the comic’s work may not have been able to keep “Late Show” around for another generation, but chances are his years of labor will help him — if he wants — to capture the interest of a new set of fans in an entirely different medium. And Colbert could find himself, once again, trying to get some part of the nation to convene.

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