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Jay Leno Criticizes Partisan Late-Night Comedy for Dividing Viewers

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Jay Leno, longtime host of The Tonight Show, has weighed in on the state of late-night television, warning that the increasing injection of partisan politics into comedy is pushing away half the audience. In a candid interview with David Trulio, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, Jay Leno reflected on his approach to political humor and the shift he's observed in recent years.

Leno, 75, explained that during his 22-year tenure on The Tonight Show, he made a conscious effort to keep his political jokes balanced, targeting both Republicans and Democrats equally. “It was fun to me when I got hate letters like ‘Dear Mr. Leno, you and your Republican friends’ and then others saying, ‘Mr. Leno, I hope you and your Democratic buddies are happy all from the same joke,’ he said during the interview. “That’s how you know you’re reaching everyone.”

Leno contrasted his approach with today’s late-night format, which often leans heavily into one-sided political commentary. “Now you have to be content with half the audience because you have to give your opinion,” he noted. Rather than leaning into ideology, Leno said he preferred to let the comedy speak for itself. “I knew Rodney for 40 years, and I have no idea if he was Democrat or Republican. We never discussed it, we just discussed jokes.”

Throughout the conversation, Leno stressed the value of common ground and the unifying power of humor. “Funny is funny,” he said. “It’s when someone laughs even though the joke’s about their side that’s what I do. People don’t want a lecture. Just get to the joke.”

Leno’s comments arrive at a time when late-night television itself is facing mounting criticism and significant changes. On July 17, CBS announced that The Late Show with Stephen Colbert would be canceled in May 2026. The network claimed the move was strictly financial, citing broader challenges across the late-night landscape. CBS emphasized that the decision was not related to the show’s performance or content.

However, the timing has raised eyebrows. Just weeks before the announcement, CBS and parent company Paramount reached a \$16 million settlement with President Donald Trump over an edited interview with then–Vice President Kamala Harris. Colbert, who frequently targets Trump on his show, openly criticized the settlement on air, calling it a “big fat bribe.”

Following the announcement of the show’s end, Trump posted celebratory remarks on his platform, Truth Social, prompting an expletive-laden response from Colbert during a live monologue. Several of Colbert’s peers, including Jimmy Fallon, Seth Meyers, Jon Stewart, and John Oliver, later appeared on his show in a public show of support.

Meanwhile, David Letterman, the original creator of The Late Show, condemned CBS’s decision, calling it “pure cowardice” and alleging the network mishandled Colbert’s exit. Yet, for many Americans, the drama underscores a larger issue one Leno has long warned about: the transformation of comedy into political theater.

Leno's legacy, built on accessible and inclusive humor, continues to stand in contrast to a cultural shift that often prioritizes political jabs over universal punchlines. "Why shoot for just half an audience?" he asked. "I don't understand why you would alienate one particular group. Just do what's funny."