

# Colbert’s swan song is zeitgeist moment

There’s a lot of schadenfreude on the right, and even more lamentation on the left, about the cancellation of “The Late Show With Stephen Colbert.” Donald Trump leads the schadenfreude caucus. “I absolutely love that Colbert got fired. His talent was even less than his ratings,” Trump crowed on social media. “I hear Jimmy Kimmel is next. Has even less talent than Colbert!” (It is remarkable that a president who campaigned with a vow to end “cancel culture” is so uninhibited in his celebration of cancel culture when it’s on his terms.) The lamentations from the left are just as exuberant, from the other direction. They hail Colbert as a heroic martyr for free expression and speaking truth to power. “Not really an overstatement to say that the test of a free society is whether or not comedians can make fun of the country’s leader on TV without repercussions,” MSNBC’s Chris Hayes declared.

In a sense, both sides essentially agree that Colbert was canceled because of his politics. The argument from the



JONAH GOLDBERG

left is that this was unfair and even illegitimate. The illegitimate claim rests on the fact that CBS’s parent company Paramount has been trying to curry favor with the administration to gain approval for the sale of the network to Skydance Media. Shari Redstone, Paramount’s owner, approved a settlement of Trump’s dubious lawsuit against “60 Minutes” (which Colbert had criticized days earlier as a “big fat bribe”). Colbert’s scalp was a sweetener, critics claim.

I think that theory is plausible, given the timing of the decision and the way it was announced. If this was the plan all along, why not announce the decision at the 2025 upfronts and sell ads in tandem with the wind-down? That’s the way this sort of thing has been done in the past.

But Colbert’s critics on the

right have an equally plausible point. Colbert made the show very political and partisan, indulging his Trump “resistance” shtick to the point where he basically cut the potential national audience in half. He leaned heavily on conventionally liberal politicians (tellingly, on the night he announced the news of his cancellation, his first guest was California Sen. Adam Schiff — a man who couldn’t get a laugh if you hit him in the face with a pie).

But both the left-wing and right-wing interpretations have some holes. The theory that this was purely a political move overlooks the fact that CBS didn’t merely fire Colbert, it’s terminating the iconic “Late Show” entirely and giving the airtime back to local affiliates. If they solely wanted to curry favor with Trump, they could have given the show to more Trump-friendly (funnier and popular with the young’ns) comedians such as Shane Gillis or Andrew Schulz. The show was reportedly losing some \$40 million a year. Even if they hired someone for a quarter of Colbert’s \$15

million salary, it would still be losing money.

On the right, many — Trump included — have pointed to the fact that Greg Gutfeld’s not-quite-late-night Fox show has better ratings than his competitors on the three legacy networks. That’s true, but it’s hardly as if Gutfeld is any less partisan than Colbert, Kimmel or Jimmy Fallon.

It’s also true that the titans of previous eras — Steve Allen, Jack Paar, Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, Conan O’Brien — tended to avoid strident partisanship. But the nostalgia-fueled idea that a more mainstream, apolitical host would garner similar audiences again gets the causality backward.

Those hosts were products of a different era, when huge numbers of Americans from across the political spectrum consumed the same cultural products. The hosts, much like news networks and newspapers, had a powerful business incentive to play it down the middle and avoid alienating large swaths of their audiences and advertisers. That era is over, forever.

Now media platforms look to garner small “sticky” audiences they can monetize by giving them exactly what they want. There’s an audience for Colbert, and for Gutfeld, but what makes the roughly 2 million to 3 million nightly viewers who love that stiff tune in makes the other 330 million potential viewers tune in to something else. The “Late Show” model — and budget — simply doesn’t work with those numbers.

Cable news, led by Fox, ushered in political polarization in news consumption, but cable itself fueled the balkanization of popular culture. Streaming and podcast platforms, led by YouTube, are turbocharging that trend to the point where media consumption is now a la carte (artificial intelligence may soon make it nigh upon bespoke).

The late-night model was built around a culture in which there was little else to watch. That culture is never coming back.

Jonah Goldberg is a national columnist whose work is published regularly in the Grand Forks Herald. ©2025 Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

## NEWS COLUMN

# Commerce Dept. paid over \$122K in employee bonuses for legislative work

MINOT

North Dakota’s Office of Management and Budget routinely makes fiscal presentations to state lawmakers that includes a report of “financial irregularities.” OMB Director Joe Morrisette, who makes these presentations, is always quick to point out the term “irregularities” is a bit loaded. Indeed, he made that disclaimer during a June 25 appearance before the interim Budget Section committee. “The term ‘irregularities’ as used in this section of law doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong,” he said as he presented to lawmakers at that meeting.

He’s right. The report merely details adjustments in spending made outside of the regular budgets.

It’s fairly prosaic stuff, typically, though the June 25 irregularities report, covering December 2024 through May 2025, raised some eyebrows among lawmakers and state officials. In that report, the North Dakota Department of Commerce detailed \$122,275 in bonuses paid to dozens of employees for, as the irregularities report put it, “increased work load due to legislative session.”

North Dakota’s regular, biennial legislative session took place from December (when lawmakers first met for an organization session)



Grant Coursey / The Bismarck Tribune  
Rep. Eric Murphy, R-Grand Forks, joins House lawmakers in singing “Auld Lang Syne” after the Legislature gavelled out early May 3.



ROB PORT

through early May.

The bonuses for increased legislative work ranged from \$550 to \$6,600 per employee. The average bonus was \$4,446.67.

Of the 28 employees who received bonuses for work during the legislative session, seven received the top \$6,600 payment, including Commerce Commissioner Chris Schilken, who was appointed by Gov. Kelly Armstrong in November 2024.

Others who received the largest bonuses, which made up nearly 38% of all the

bonuses related to legislative work, include:

- Sara Otte Coleman, director of tourism and marketing
- Richard Garman, director of economic development and finance
- Tammy Heick, executive assistant to the commissioner and chief operating officer/ deputy commissioner
- Katie Ralston Howe: deputy commissioner/director - workforce development
- Rikki Roehrich: deputy director/federal program lead (community services)
- Alison Widmer: director of administrative services

Why did this report raise eyebrows?

At issue is why state employees working the regular legislative session is considered irregular.

There’s no question that, when lawmakers convene in

Bismarck, it means a lot of long hours. For the lawmakers themselves, for state employees, for lobbyists and interested members of the public, and those of us in the news media who cover the session. Particularly toward the end of the session, committee hearings go long and late. Work gets done on weekends and even holidays. The last day of this year’s legislative session didn’t conclude until after 4 a.m.

It’s tough, but that’s how it’s always done, every two years. Was there something unique about the 2025 legislative session that justified the Commerce Department paying out over \$122,000 in bonuses to its employees? Most jobs have busy times and slow times. Retail workers put in more time during the holiday shopping season. Accountants know tax season probably isn’t the best time to schedule a vacation.

If you work for a state agency, you know working with the Legislature is a part of your job, and you know that job will be busier when lawmakers are convened in Bismarck. Were these bonuses appropriate?

Commerce spokeswoman Kim Schmidt defended them in an emailed statement to me.

“During the 2025 session, the Department of Commerce experienced a significant increase in workload due to the volume and complexity of legislation, new program

responsibilities, and expanded stakeholder coordination,” she wrote. “Temporary salary adjustments were made in recognition of that surge and followed Commerce policy for compensating duties that exceed normal expectations.”

“It is also important to note that Commerce’s exempt employees do not receive compensatory time. Additionally, they are not provided with extra compensation when working on state holidays, of which there are typically three during a legislative session,” she continued. “Temporary pay adjustments are one of the few tools available to acknowledge extraordinary workloads under those conditions.”

Schmidt told me similar “adjustments” were made following the regular legislative session in 2023.

That’s true, though those bonuses were much smaller in size and scope. Per OMB’s June 2023 presentation to the Budget Section, Commerce requested \$17,745 in bonuses for 18 employees. The top bonus that year was \$1,200, with the average coming in at \$986.

Josh Teigen, who was commerce commissioner at the time under then-Gov. Doug Burgum, was among those who received the top bonus.

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Medicaid cuts put the disabled at risk

BY CARL YOUNG  
Bismarck

To the editor,

President Trump’s budget proposal eliminates funding for key programs under the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (DD Act). This includes programs that support access

to inclusive education, employment, community living and more.

According to the Nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO), estimates are that the proposed Medicaid cuts would cost states \$200 billion over 10 years due to reduced federal funding and restrictions on how states can finance their Medicaid programs. The federal cuts would force state changes, including “reducing provider payment

rates, reducing the scope or number of optional services, and reducing Medicaid enrollment.” Of the 7.8 million people the CBO expects to lose Medicaid coverage and become uninsured, 2 million would lose coverage due to state responses to increased financial pressure.

How are states supposed to fund programs when our budgets are stretched thin? In North Dakota, we are fortunate that our DD system does

not have a waiting list to get on the DD waiver; however, other states have waiting lists that can last two years or more. North Dakota is heading in that direction with the cuts.

Some families are deeply worried that the only option for their loved ones is institutionalization at places like the Life Skills and Transition Center in Grafton, rather than receiving support and independence within their own

community. Additionally, this approach will cost North Dakota more than supporting them in their preferred communities.

Providers in North Dakota are already struggling with staffing issues. This legislation won’t improve that. Cutting provider rates won’t improve support for people who require it, or for those who provide it.

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— First Amendment of the United States Constitution

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