

PBS cancels “Tavis Smiley” show as sex witch-hunt expands

By Barry Grey
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The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) announced Wednesday it was halting distribution of the late-night interview program “Tavis Smiley” following allegations of sexual misconduct on the part of its producer and star of the same name.

As has become typical in the expanding witch-hunt over alleged sexual offenses by prominent men in politics, the media and the entertainment industry, the public broadcaster did not name the accusers or provide any details of their allegations. Smiley himself has not been given this information, nor afforded an opportunity to confront his accusers and dispute their charges.

The network issued a perfunctory statement Wednesday, declaring: “PBS engaged an outside law firm to conduct an investigation immediately after learning of troubling allegations regarding Mr. Smiley. This investigation included multiple, credible allegations of conduct that is inconsistent with the values and standards of PBS, and the totality of this information led to today’s decision.”

The termination of Smiley’s show, which was about to begin its 15th season on PBS, is among the latest in an expanding list of programs and careers canceled and individuals pilloried and personally and professionally ruined as a result of unsubstantiated allegations and the abandonment of the principle of innocent until proven guilty.

Many of those summarily fired or forced to resign have denied the charges against them. Smiley issued a defiant and angry response to PBS’ action against him, writing, “I was as shocked as anyone else by PBS’ announcement today. *Variety* knew it before I did.”

His statement continues: “To be clear, I have never groped, coerced, or exposed myself inappropriately to any workplace colleague in my entire broadcast career,

covering 6 networks and over 30 years. Never. Ever. Never.

“PBS launched a so-called investigation of me without ever informing me. I learned of the investigation when former staffers started contacting me to share the uncomfortable experience of receiving a phone call from a stranger asking whether I had ever done anything to make them uncomfortable, and if they could provide other names of persons to call... Only after being threatened with a lawsuit did PBS investigators reluctantly agree to interview me for three hours.

“If having a consensual relationship with a colleague years ago is the stuff that leads to this kind of public humiliation and personal destruction, heaven help us. The PBS investigators refused to review any of my personal documentation, refused to provide me the names of any accusers, refused to speak to my current staff, and refused to provide me any semblance of due process to defend myself against allegations from unknown sources... This has gone too far. And I, for one, intend to fight back...”

Within the framework of PBS, Smiley has been among the more left-wing voices. In 2011 he participated in a “poverty tour” with Cornel West that criticized the role of the Obama administration in increasing poverty in the US, especially among African Americans.

So far this week, in addition to the Smiley cancellation, two celebrity chefs and American Broadcasting Network television personalities who were accused of sexual improprieties, Mario Batali and Johnny Iuzzini, have lost their television programs.

The campaign produced its first fatality when Kentucky stage legislator Dan Johnson, a first-term Republican, shot himself in the head on Wednesday,

two days after he was accused of molesting a teenage girl.

Another Republican politician, Texas Congressman Blake Farenthold, announced Thursday that he would not run for reelection, following reports that he had settled sexual harassment claims by his former communications director for \$84,000.

Just this month, at least 15 people prominent in politics, entertainment, the arts and the media have been named in the #MeToo campaign and fired or forced to resign from their posts. The list includes: Democratic Senator Al Franken, Democratic Congressman John Conyers, Republican Congressman Trent Franks, former Metropolitan Opera Music Director James Levine, actor Jeffrey Tambor, public radio personalities Garrison Keillor (Minneapolis Public Radio), Leonard Lopate and Jonathan Schwartz (New York Public Radio) and Tom Ashcroft (WBUR in Boston), Detroit TV anchor Malcom Maddox, and longtime editor of the *Paris Review* Lorin Stein.

In the aftermath of the Democratic victory in Tuesday's special election to the US Senate from Alabama, in which right-wing Democrat Doug Jones defeated his evangelical fascist opponent Roy Moore on the basis of a campaign focused on allegations of sexual advances by Moore more than 30 years ago to teenage girls, the sex scandal frenzy will only intensify.

It is now clear that the campaign on sexual harassment launched in October by the *New York Times* in its exposé of producer Harvey Weinstein was seen as the basis for the Democratic Party to frame its opposition to Donald Trump and the Republicans leading up to the 2018 congressional elections and beyond. Toward this end, they sacrificed Conyers and Franken, the better to use sex as a weapon against Trump, with Democrats increasingly demanding his resignation because of his sexist behavior.

The aim is to preempt mass popular opposition to Trump over his attacks on social programs, his tax bonanza for the rich, his assault on immigrants and his war-mongering against North Korea and Iran, and divert it into reactionary and anti-democratic channels. On the basis of right-wing feminism, the Democrats are mobilizing layers of the upper-middle class behind their anti-working class policies of war and austerity.

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