

Capitol Crime

The United States Capitol does not belong to the seven Congressmen of the Commission for the Extension of the Capitol. It belongs to the people of the United States and to history. In spite of public and professional opinion that the controversial extension of the Capitol's West Front is a gross error of art and judgment, these gentlemen seem determined to proceed with this gigantic bungle and boondoggle.

They have, in fact, insured it by boobytrapping the legislation that called for the recent feasibility study that recommended restoration instead of new construction. They built in a proviso that the extension scheme must go ahead if certain criteria could not be met by preservation, and they guaranteed it could not be met by setting a totally unrealistic \$15-million maximum cost for restoration. No limits have been set on the extension, however. They are quite willing to let that price go up from the original \$36 million to \$50 or \$60 million today and ever onward. Call it cynicism or sabotage.

Even if the extension scheme were not a contradiction of the historical and esthetic values that this country has been promoting in recent years in landmark legislation and preservation, the proposal is an appallingly bad plan. It is architecturally atrocious, loaded with ill-considered features. It is based on no adequate space utilization studies to correctly determine real present and future needs. It is a third-rate railroading job. With the destruction of the West Terraces designed by Frederick Law Olmsted timed for national celebration of the Olmsted Sesquicentennial, irony is added to irresponsibility.

The decision is reported to have been made by the Commission because its members feel that preservation involves too many unknowns of cost and durability. Of course there are procedural unknowns, but no reason to doubt results. The skill and ingenuity required are becoming an American specialty as the body of landmarks being restored grows daily.

The extension plan offers the Congressmen certainty if that is what they want—the certainty of irreversible damage to an irreplaceable structure and of absurd costs for minimum space gains and maximum loss of architectural integrity, just as the East Front was treated a few years ago.

And there is the certainty of a monumental national display of arrogance and ignorance in the cold permanence of marble. That is not a memorial any Congress should want to leave.