

## A Capitol Crime

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Surely it is time to stop all the foolishness, once and for all, about extending the West Front of the Capitol. This dangerous Congressional boondoggle has now surfaced three times, and the idea doesn't improve with revival. The proposal is to expand the Capitol to gain some additional space by building a new front in front of the old front, which itself has structural problems.

Congress apparently cannot live with the simple solution of restoring the wall, the last remaining original facade of the Capitol and the focus of the superb crowning vista of Capitol Hill from Washington's Mall. Built in 1822, it bears the stamp of William Thornton, Benjamin Latrobe and Charles Bulfinch. The rebuilding would alter the famous symbolic view of the dome and its traditional relationship to the building below. This is a proposal so unequivocally bad as economics, art history and planning, that one marvels at its apparent immortality.

In practical terms, the expansion scheme is probably the worst way to get the least new space for the most money. The cost would run to an astronomical \$550 a square foot for an addition that would be only 20-to-60 feet wide. (Just \$50 a square foot buys an excellent new office building.)

Vistas and cost aside, the plan is an esthetic atrocity. Replacing the west wall with a copy is like making a plastic replica of the Parthenon or repainting The Last Supper. And burying the original wall inside the building is merely a more polite kind of disposal than demolition. The rationalization of the would-be "improvers" that they could fix up some alleged "incorrect" features of the historic facade at the same time is monstrous arrogance. The Architect of the Capitol, who supports the scheme, seems content to confuse perversion of use and intent with preservation.

Granted that Congress needs more space. In 23 years



the combined staff of the House and Senate has quadrupled and the operating budget has gone from \$42 million to \$325 million. But even without considering how much of this expansion is Parkinsonian, the Capitol cannot accommodate the kind of growth that consumes phalanxes of House and Senate office buildings. Indeed, it should not be expected to serve the purpose of office expansion at all; for that, a master plan is now being prepared by the Office of the Architect of the Capitol. All that the costly mutilation of the West Front would provide are a few more hideaway offices, some new restaurants, and enlarged tourist facilities and toilets.

Perhaps even more appalling than the scheme itself and the eagerness for it in Congress is the fact that it can be done with impunity. There is no watchdog agency or review machinery to control how Congress deals with its domain, which also happens to be the national patrimony. Funds should be appropriated for restoration, not extension, of the West Front. The barbarians are not outside the Capitol gates; they are within the walls.

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