

# putting the 'mock' in democracy

Written by Bill Trotter  
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## The Music Hall welcomes the Capitol Steps

In his book "Democracy in America," political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville suggested a disturbing trend in American democracy: the growing shortage of "great leaders." While his analysis has proven to have some validity, de Tocqueville failed to recognize the potential comedic fodder made available through untimely political calamities. Fortunately, this potential was not lost on the Capitol Steps, a nonpartisan political satire group. Since 1981, the group has performed routines wrought with wit, sarcasm, spoonerisms and exaggerations. Some 26-plus years later, the Capitol Steps are as strong as ever, owing much of their success to seemingly ubiquitous political gaffes.

Originally, all cast members were staffers in the U.S. Congress, but as the act grew, so did the commitment. They all knew it was only a matter of time before someone noticed their absence in Congress, but they managed to pull it off for some 15 years.

"This may have been an indication of what (little) we did (when working with Congress)," noted founding member Elaina Newport.

A former legislative assistant to Sen. Charles Percy, Newport recalls the precautions the group initially took. "(We had) to be very careful in casting the same number of Republicans and Democrats," she said.



Now, the group works full-time on its act, giving the cast more time to perfect their craft and more freedom to offer disparaging views. The Capitol Steps' main concern these days is finding material worth ridiculing. Fortunately, errors in judgment just keep coming, allowing for a topical and entertaining show.

Trish Murtagh, development coordinator for **The Housing Partnership**, has helped bring the Capitol Steps to Portsmouth for the last nine years. With help from The Music Hall, The Housing Partnership will collect 100 percent of the show's proceeds, which will help fund the organization's efforts to bring affordable housing to the Seacoast.

The troupe's inaugural Seacoast show was held at the Portsmouth High School auditorium, but strong public demand called for a venue more aesthetically befitting. The 900 seats at The Music Hall is nearly double the capacity of the high school auditorium. Additionally, the venue's acoustic quality is a perfect fit for the Capitol Steps' brand of performance tomfoolery.

The finished product consistently leaves audiences yearning for further political blunders. Murtagh looks forward to the Capitol Steps' annual display of droll political views.

"There will probably never be a shortage of political antics and blunders, so Capitol Steps is assured fresh material all the time," Murtagh said in an email. "We'll be bringing them back to Portsmouth for years to come."

While Steven Colbert and Jon Stewart receive the majority of attention regarding politically charged satire, the Capitol Steps has a decided edge in experience. The group began in 1981, when a collection of U.S. Senate staffers hoped to put together a Christmas play. But the group ran into one major obstacle. The late Bill Strauss, co-founder and former director of the Capitol Steps, was famously quoted for his summation of the casting struggles: "In all of Congress, we couldn't find three wise men or a virgin." Instead, the original founding members turned to the topics of the day. Their twisted views were an instant hit, spurring further and more elaborate shows.

While much of their material stems from the political arena, the Capitol Steps have been known to dip into other pop culture topics, such as Kobe Bryant's rape trial and Paris Hilton's eventful social life.

Most Capitol Steps skits have a similar format. Each sketch usually begins with a humorous scene-setting dialogue, followed by a parody of a popular song. For example, the skit "Bomb Iran" begins with a confidential meeting in which President George W. Bush and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld discuss policy in Iran. Rumsfeld begins the conversation by mentioning his concern over Iran's advanced nuclear fission capabilities, to which Bush quips, "I love fishin' ... I wonder what kind of bait they use?"

The slightly annoyed Rumsfeld tries to clarify his previous statement. "Nuclear fission—as in, making weapons of mass destruction," he says.

But the always deft President Bush quickly recognizes the trap. "Oh, you're not gonna get me on that one again," he says.

After Condoleezza Rice's entrance, the sketch quickly breaks into a song titled "Bomb Iran," a spoof of the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann."

"We put the mock in democracy!" is the operational axiom of the Capitol Steps. No trivial blunder goes unnoticed, making each show current and a little different from the last. The up-to-date material is refreshing for both the audience and the cast members. When asked if the group had an all-time favorite skit, Newport said the cast remain focused on new material. "We're always excited about the new stuff," she said.

Thankfully, the present state of American politics has left the Capitols Steps with no shortage of absurd material, which the troupe will bring to its two shows at The Music Hall.

Both shows will take place on Saturday, Feb. 2. The first performance begins at 5 p.m. and the second begins at 8 pm. There are still a limited number of tickets being sold for \$49 per seat. For tickets, call The Music Hall at 603-436-2400, or visit [www.themusichall.org](http://www.themusichall.org).

As for the future of the Capitol Steps, it lies in the hands of New Hampshire residents, according to Newport. She cites the New Hampshire primary as a trendsetter for much of the nation's voting tendencies in inaugural elections. Furthermore, every four years it is our responsibility to select the best candidate. But forget the traditional issues—there are more important concerns when electing the leader of the free world.

"No president can solve all the problems, so vote for the funniest candidate!" Newport said.