

Bringing Science and Technology Back to Congress

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Holt

Congress needs better scientific and technological advice. It is nearly impossible to find issues on the legislative agenda that are not in some way linked to science and technology. For example, members of Congress would certainly benefit from a deeper understanding of the behavioral sciences in addressing such diverse issues as AIDS, cancer prevention, neuroimaging, substance abuse, and education. Similarly, there is not a single environmental issue that does not require some degree of scientific analysis.

The events of September 11 have put an even higher demand on lawmakers to grasp highly specialized scientific information. How can we successfully address bioterrorism, airport security, and cybersecurity without the help of experts? Yet less than 5 percent of Members of Congress have any scientific or technical training.

Congress used to have scientific expertise at its disposal. The Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) was established in 1972 because lawmakers recognized a need for the legislative branch to have its own source for technical analysis. During its existence, OTA provided Congress with unbiased technical analysis. In analyzing technological issues, OTA adopted an interdisciplinary approach that resulted in reports that provided Congress with many alternative solutions to a problem. To ensure a balanced approach, a bipartisan, 12-member Technology Assessment Board (TAB), comprised of six House and six Senate members with both Democrats and Republicans equally represented, governed the OTA. In fact, OTA's reports were so balanced and unbiased that members of Congress on opposite sides of an issue might actually cite the same report in the course of debate.

The Office of Technology Assessment, at its peak, consisted of about 200 permanent staff members. Two-thirds of the staff was professional research personnel with advanced degrees. Other research personnel were brought in on a temporary basis to provide analysis for specific projects. To ensure a balanced approach, the OTA staff, outside experts, and the TAB reviewed all reports before they were released to the requesting committee. OTA produced over 750 reports in its 23 years of existence; many of these reports are still relevant and are still used. These reports cover a wide range of topics, including missile defense, biological diversity, and alternative energies. The topics covered by OTA also included many issues that are addressed in the behavioral sciences, including drug abuse, Alzheimer's disease, animal research, new directions in neuroscience, and polygraph tests, to name just a few examples. Members of the American Psychological Society will be interested to know that psychological scientists – including your executive director Alan Kraut – were centrally involved in providing expertise for many OTA reports. (All of OTA's reports are still available at www.wws.princeton.edu/~ota.)

In 1995, Newt Gingrich and many others in Congress voted to dissolve the Office of Technology Assessment in a misguided attempt to institute government reform. On September 30, 1995, OTA closed its doors, and Congress has been without a source of scientific and technical analysis ever since. Some critics of OTA argue that other institutions are filling the void left by the Office of Technology

Assessment. The Congressional Research Service (CRS), part of the Library of Congress, provides valuable summaries and histories of legislative issues. CRS, however, does not give, nor is it equipped to give, the detailed technical analysis that OTA provided. The National Academies of Science and Engineering are equipped with the resources to carry out the types of studies that OTA did, but their studies take longer and are more expensive than OTA's were. The National Academies also serve clients other than Congress and may not be as responsive to the legislative branch's needs as an entity devoted solely to Congress, such as OTA, would be.

I believe it is absolutely necessary for members of Congress to have access to a wider range of technological and scientific analysis. How else are we going to make sound, well-informed decisions in the 21st century? That is why I have introduced a bill, H.R. 2148, to reestablish the Office of Technology Assessment. So far 67 cosponsors have signed on to this bill. The support to reestablish the OTA is bipartisan; original cosponsors include the chairman of the House Science Committee, Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-NY, Rep. Amo Houghton, R-NY, and Rep. Connie Morella, R-MD. Many in the scientific community have expressed their support for the reestablishment of OTA. I hope that you will lend your support to this legislation. Together, we can bring a better understanding of technological and scientific issues to Congress that will improve the legislative process.

More Information

To find out more about H.R. 2148, legislation to re-establish the Office of Technology Assessment, please visit Representative Holt's website at <http://holt.house.gov/>.