

study of the matter, declines to be named. The viruses may, to be sure, occur naturally, but there is always the chance that in the course of preparation some change may occur in the viruses themselves. "Passage of a virus in any host by unnatural means, or infection of an unfamiliar host, may result in the selection of a mutant virus with different properties," warns the WHO report. Mutations may occur in the development or production of a virus and may cause a change in its virulence or host range. According to Heimpel, there are theoretical reasons, however, for supposing that not one but several mutations would be neces-

sary before a nuclear polyhedrosis virus acquired the ability to infect vertebrate cells. If an insect virus capable of infecting vertebrate cells were to be disseminated, there is a remote possibility of recombination between the insect virus and a vertebrate virus.

Another kind of hazard is contamination of the virus culture. This has been a serious problem with vaccines—millions of people received polio shots contaminated with a monkey virus that causes tumors in lower animals. Any contaminant virus, however, even if it managed to propagate in insect cells, would be eaten or breathed by human beings, forms of exposure

which are less dangerous than injection.

"There have been objections to the use of viral insecticides, some of a philosophical nature, some based on the whims of individuals," says an EPA official. "But none are well founded scientifically. The farther away from the field a man is, the more generalized are the kind of objections he may raise." The preponderance of evidence certainly seems to support the EPA's belief that the viruses are essentially safe. But confidence in the EPA's action would probably not have been diminished by a more formal treatment of such theoretical hazards as may exist.—NICHOLAS WADE

## OTA Funds Are Up Against the (West Front) Wall

The Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) will probably get only half or less of the \$5 million originally envisioned for its first year of operation, and the delays in funding are pushing the starting date for the office back so far that it is unlikely to complete any substantive work before late 1974. After 7 years of discussion, Congress last year decided to establish the OTA, which, although it has a governing board, still has no director, staff, or funds.

Part of the reason seems to be genuine parliamentary foot-dragging by a Congress which over the summer has been absorbed in Watergate and other national business; but another possible cause is the fear that Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) who is serving as chairman of the board of OTA through January 1975, will, in the words of one liberal Democrat, "use the OTA for his own political purposes."

When Congress reconvenes this month, a joint House-Senate conference committee will meet to resolve the different versions of their respective fiscal 1974 legislative appropriations bills. Among the differences is a \$3.9-million item for OTA in the Senate bill, but there is no money for OTA in the House version. Usually when this occurs, the conference will award the project an intermediate amount, and one House staffer who follows OTA said, "There's no question but that we won't get the full amount. We might get \$2 million or \$1.5 million."

Why have funds for OTA been so long in coming? Why are they turning out to be so meager? For the last year and a half, Kennedy's staff has been doing much of the legwork in the Senate to get OTA set up. Recently, this display of energy has been criticized on the Hill and in the press. The *Wall Street Journal*, for example, called Kennedy's prominence in OTA matters an attempt to build a "shadow government" for a future presidential bid. By now, the rumor has spread so widely that it appears to be inhibiting some of the aggressive efforts on OTA's behalf.

Kennedy's staff man for OTA, Ellis Mottur, has repeatedly denied that Kennedy's interest is politically motivated, but the feeling persists. When a last-minute

bid for \$289,000 for fiscal 1973 start-up funds—which would have enabled a director to be appointed—came up before another House-Senate conference committee last June, they were knocked out of the bill. Ostensibly this was done because at the time only 3 weeks remained in fiscal 1973—not time enough to spend the money wisely. But one of the House conferees reportedly growled during the discussion that OTA was Ted Kennedy's "bag," and there was no point giving any money to him. And, a few weeks ago, a Democratic member of the House Science and Astronautics Committee remarked that he had no doubt whatever that the funding had been delayed because some people believe Kennedy might "use" OTA for his own political aims. OTA, for the time being anyway, has become the victim of that particular kind of resentment which members of Congress sometimes reserve for those of their number with alleged presidential hopes.

As if its present troubles were not enough, there is one further obstacle to OTA's getting any money now, for reasons that have nothing to do with Kennedy, or OTA itself, but which relate—of all things—to the West Front of the Capitol building.

Both the OTA budget items and money for repairing the crumbling West Front of the Capitol are in legislative appropriations bills that could total \$650 million. Some congressional leaders favor extending the West Front to create more offices, and they have plenty of representatives on the conference committee. Opposed to this is a group that is led in committee by Senator Ernest F. Hollings (D-S.C.) and favors restoration of the existing West Front walls. Hollings is also a member of the OTA board, is friendly to Kennedy, and is the chief conference committee champion of the Senate \$3.9-million appropriation for OTA. Sources close to the situation say that this fight over the West Front will be the main issue confronting the committee when it meets. In the inevitable bargaining process, little OTA may get traded away. What with the Kennedy rumors and a lot of congressional passion over architecture, OTA seems up against the wall.—D.S.