

## Flunked Agency Says It Actually Performed Quite Well

The Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), stung by criticism that it is hobbled by organizational weaknesses and management failures, has prepared a low-key rebuttal which claims that its performance record has actually been quite "creditable."

The agency, which was created in 1972 to provide analytical support for Congress, was the target of a blistering critique published recently by the House Commission on Information and Facilities, a unit that is evaluating the various information services available to the House.

The commission's report charged that OTA fell "substantially short of reaching levels of performance reasonably expected of an information resource of its size and cost and access to expertise." It lambasted OTA for a host of alleged organizational and administrative failings which, it claimed, might undermine the agency's ability to function effectively over the long term (*Science*, 16 July).

The significance of the attack was that it represented the first outside assessment of the fledgling agency. The OTA frequently analyzes the performance of other agencies, but now, for the first time, the tables were turned. Outsiders were evaluating the OTA, and the marks looked bad.

Some congressmen close to OTA were concerned that the commission's attack might be on target—that OTA might indeed be headed for trouble. Others were concerned that, even if the commission's complaints were ill-founded, the barrage might tarnish the reputation of OTA, hamper its ability to function effectively, and perhaps lead the congressional appropriations committees to cut the OTA budget. The commission had been established at the request of the House Appropriations Committee, which expressed concern that the various analytical agencies used by Congress were growing too rapidly, were of undetermined effectiveness, and might be duplicating each other's efforts.

### Teague's Defense

In an effort to counter the criticism, Representative Olin E. Teague (D-Tex.), chairman of the Technology Assessment Board, a bipartisan group of six senators and six representatives who oversee OTA operations, asked the staff of OTA to prepare a "status report" on their operations. The report is not a point-by-point answer to the criticisms, but rather a presentation of what OTA has been trying to do, and why. After reviewing the document, Teague added a preface which dismisses most of the commission's criticisms as ill-conceived and claims that OTA has already chalked up a significant record of accomplishment.

To hear OTA tell it, the agency's studies have been both useful and influential. Various key congressmen are quoted as describing particular OTA studies as "extremely useful" (a report on oil tankers) or "fine work" (a study of rail transportation) or "the best work that has been done on the entire problem" (an analysis of oil and gas exploration issues). Claims are also made, and to some extent documented, that various OTA studies influenced legislation or agency policies. At the time the commission made its study, OTA had issued only six reports. But since then another 16 have been completed. According to Teague, "all of these 22 reports have been utilized in the legislative deliberations of the Congress." The claims must be dis-

counted a bit because they emanate from an embattled agency that is trying to prove its effectiveness through a self-evaluation. But the OTA review of itself represents the first major effort to determine just how significant the agency's contributions have been.

Teague suggests that there will be reports "of even greater significance" in the near future, namely a group of "thorough and comprehensive" assessment projects which were initiated 2 years ago and are now nearing completion. These will cover such topics as potential shortages of materials, solar and ocean energy resources, and agriculture, food, and nutrition policy. The information amassed, Teague predicts, "will be of great value to public policy makers for many years to come." That judgment appears to be an effort to counter criticisms that OTA has too often performed trivial tasks while neglecting in-depth studies of long-term importance.

As for the commission's numerous complaints about OTA's alleged management and organizational deficiencies, Teague largely dismisses them as misguided. The commission's staff had found fault with everything from personnel policies to accounting procedures to internal communications and the structure for assigning responsibilities. Some OTA staffers discounted such criticisms as the views of management consultants who were chiefly interested in stiffly structured bureaucratic organization charts and not very receptive to innovative approaches in a fluid, developing agency.

The OTA rebuttal document does not explicitly challenge the mind-set of the management consultants, but it raises the same point by implication. Whereas the management consultants had complained that too many staff members were reporting directly to the OTA director, Teague retorts that the granting of such "direct and unimpeded access" to program managers has kept the director continuously abreast of current projects while affording Congress easy access to program managers with the authority to respond quickly. Teague defends OTA's management procedures, organizational effectiveness, personnel policies, and accounting and contracting procedures. He concludes that "the simple, direct and unbureaucratic approaches taken in the development of OTA's organization structure have been appropriate and effective for the current stage of OTA's evolution. When measured against the objectives that have been set for the Office . . . these procedures seem entirely suitable." The OTA rebuttal does not directly address charges that the agency is paying "exceptionally high salaries," often without regard to "discernible qualifications."

The OTA's self-evaluation has been distributed to members of the Technology Assessment Board and to a handful of others with keen interest in the agency. There has been no general distribution, possibly because there is no point in alerting everybody that you have been harshly criticized. Emilio Q. Daddario, the former congressman who serves as OTA director, says he has heard "no reaction from anybody" outside the immediate OTA family concerning the original criticisms. The agency's board is expected to discuss the issue at its next meeting in September. At least one board member has indicated concern that some of the criticisms may be justified.—PHILIP M. BOFFEY