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The importance of science and especially its technological applications to human affairs continues to increase. But most individuals are poorly informed about science and technology and are therefore fearful that these will be used without adequate thought and safeguards. These attitudes are not new; they were visible in the 1960's and were recognized then as important long-term threats to the health of society.

Among those who sensed that a major problem was developing was Emilio Daddario (D–Conn.), who was then serving as chairman of the Subcommittee on Science of the House Committee on Science and Astronautics. Daddario consulted many colleagues, including the senior minority member on the subcommittee, Charles A. Mosher (R–Ohio). It became apparent that other congressmen were also uneasy about unexpected adverse effects of technology. Accordingly, in 1969 Daddario introduced legislation calling for an Office of Technology Assessment designed to attempt to foresee major problems and to serve and be responsive to Congress. In the initial bill, policies for the office were to be established by a board, half of whose members were to be congressmen and the remainder distinguished scientists and engineers.

Three years passed before final action was taken. In the meantime, Daddario left Congress and provisions of the bill were modified. The composition of the cognizant technical assessment board was altered so that today it is made up of senators and representatives. The guidelines for the office were also modified. Section 3(c) of the act stated, "The basic function of the office shall be to provide early indications of the probable beneficial and adverse effects of the applications of technology and to develop other coordinate information which may assist the Congress." Under section 3(c-8) the "coordinate information" was further amplified as "such additional associated activities as the appropriate authorities [for instance, the board] . . . may direct." Thus, OTA was authorized and directed to do both long-term assessments and anything else that its governing board might require. It is human nature to be much more interested in an immediate crisis than one that may occur some years hence. This is particularly true of politicians, who love the media attention that goes with the tempest of the moment. In consequence, there have been many congressional demands on OTA for quick responses to such developments as the saccharin problem.

When OTA was finally established in 1973, Daddario was its first director. The choice was a good one, for he enjoyed the confidence of members of Congress and the esteem of scientists and engineers. He had need of these assets in creating a new organization that could function usefully dealing both with highly technical long-term matters and with the heat of the political cauldron.

As might be expected in such a situation, Daddario has received mixed notices—critical and complimentary. However, in departing from OTA, he leaves a record of solid accomplishments. A small OTA staff has interacted well with congressional staff and members of the Executive Branch, while drawing on the talents of about a thousand of the country's leading scientists and engineers. Inputs from the public have been sought and considered. The OTA staff has managed to be highly useful and influential in short-term matters while carrying out many long-term studies that have led to substantive documents. The scope of the activities has been broad. In addition to 46 reports that have been issued, projects under way include energy (6), food (3), health (5), materials (7), oceans (4), transportation (3), and research and development (3).

Today, OTA is the most effective mechanism for inserting factual, technical material into the political process. There is an easy short path between advisers and Congress. Mr. Daddario can take pride in his central role in the creation of an important tool for society.

—PHILLIP H. ABELSON