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Science Policy and Congress

Some institutional innovations pay off. That is something to rejoice about, especially when they involve the performance of government in a public opinion climate that has made up its mind to be negative.

The Technology Assessment Act of 1972, fathered by then-Representative Emilio Q. Daddario, called for the creation of a professionalized center for studying the potentialities and impacts of emerging technologies. The Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) was established as an arm of Congress, designed to provide new depth and expertise to the work of committees of the House and Senate in dealing with technological controversy and risk, and complementing the efforts of the Congressional Research Service and the General Accounting Office.

Eight years later, OTA stands on its own feet as an effective and respected center of scientific and technological policy analysis. Its agenda is determined primarily by the questions put to it by committees and subcommittees charged with legislative responsibilities, although OTA has modest latitude to initiate studies under its own power. Quality control is seen to by a ten-member advisory council and an array of credentialed advisory panels, while a bipartisan congressional board of 12 members of the Senate and the House keeps OTA on target.

The roster of advisory panels provides a glimpse of the range of OTA's homework for Congress. The panels number 47 and cover a mind-boggling spectrum. There are panels on Advanced High-Speed Aircraft, Radio Frequency Use, Space Technology, Electronic Funds Transfer, National Information Systems, Technology and Oceanography, Strategies for Medical Technology, Population, Impacts of Applied Genetics, U.S. Industrial Competitiveness, MX Missile Basing, Soviet Energy, Nuclear Powerplant Standardization, and Energy from Biological Processes. All this produces an enviable knowledge base into which the responsible committees of Congress can dip when confronted with near-term and long-range problems of policy choice. Considering that the appropriation for OTA comes to eight-tenths of 1 percent of the congressional operating budget, it would seem a modest enough investment in legislative capacity building.

A further point of interest is that there is no pretense that OTA is in business to make policy. This is a distinction better understood and practiced in Congress than in the Executive Branch, where presidential staff units come to believe that they are policy instruments of the President and behave accordingly. A very good reason for this difference is that Congress remains emphatically pluralistic and has nothing of the policy discipline that is so admired by the Executive Branch. An Office of Technology Assessment in Congress would not last long if it were to push a line of its own.

For most of our constitutional history, the Presidency has had the advantage over Congress in depth of resources for policy research and initiative. More recently, the institutional capacities of Congress have become steadily more comparable. The striking modernization of the General Accounting Office, the solid performance of the Congressional Research Service, and the impressive outputs of the Congressional Budget Office and OTA are healthy signs for all who value the principle of separation of powers. Although there are critics of the growth of the legislative payroll, Congress is aware that guess and hunch make for flawed policy.

Within the present decade we will observe the bicentennial of the Constitution, an occasion for some festivities, perhaps, but even more an occasion for examining the workings of our political technology in an age of danger and risk. Institutions in good working order reflect the better side of government.—WILLIAM D. CAREY