

House Saves, Kills, Then Saves OTA

The tiny congressional Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) was left for dead this spring after both the House and Senate passed budget resolutions that targeted it for extinction. But Representative Amo Houghton (R-NY), chair of OTA's governing board, was determined to bring it back from the grave. Last week Houghton assembled a bipartisan coalition that withstood a political free-for-all on the House floor and voted, twice, to preserve a slimmed-down OTA by aligning it with the larger Congressional Research Service (CRS). Although OTA supporters expect an equally tough fight next month in the Senate, they see their margins of victory—by 27 and 16 votes on consecutive days—as a sign that the low-profile agency has some secret admirers.

The House votes came on an amendment to a \$1.7 billion appropriations measure for legislative activities in the 1996 fiscal year beginning on 1 October. Although OTA's budget is only \$22 million, the appropriations committee had zeroed it out earlier this month to conform with Republican promises to downsize the federal government.

"Nobody complains about the quality of OTA's work," Houghton noted at a pep rally for the agency held a few days before the floor votes. "The problem is that it's science. And science is not sex. Science needs a protector in Congress; it can't make it on its own." Houghton's compromise would allow OTA to subsist within the CRS, sustained by \$15 million taken from the operating budget of the Library of Congress.

Houghton, chief executive officer of Corning Inc. for many years before being elected to Congress in 1986, says OTA's mission of assessing current and future technologies is more important than ever as the federal budget contracts. "Product development is fine," he says about work by other agencies that helps lawmakers fine-tune pending legislation. "But we also need long-term, independent, and bipartisan analysis of where we're going with proposed technologies."

The agency's supporters say OTA and CRS make a good fit because their missions are complementary. OTA chooses topics for its studies—which often take 18 to 24 months to complete—from among requests by the chairs and ranking members of congressional committees, and it relies heavily on outside experts. In contrast, CRS, with a budget of \$60 million, responds to all requests and typically provides a rapid, brief analysis written by its own staff of analysts. Houghton's amendment would cut OTA's budget by nearly a third, and OTA Director Roger Herdman says the agency is prepared to trim 50 to 60 slots from its 180-member staff and will save

\$2 million a year by moving out of privately leased office space.

Although only the chair of the appropriations panel spoke against OTA in the floor debate, the first vote on Houghton's amendment triggered a political donnybrook. The House Republican leadership, realizing it had lost a small but symbolic piece of its pledge to cut government, took advantage of a procedural rule to call for another vote. In the meantime, party deputies persuaded several GOP members to switch their votes against the agency. However, when the presiding officer gavelled the vote to a close at



Protector. Representative Amo Houghton goes to bat for OTA.

214 against and 213 in favor of the amendment just as two Democratic supporters prepared to cast their ballots, the disgruntled minority cried foul. The next morning, after complaints from members of both parties, House leaders decided to allow a third vote, and Houghton's amendment passed again.

OTA may face new crises when the Senate takes up the legislative spending bill on 10 July. But for now there's a glimmer of optimism in staffers' gallows humor. "Last week people accused us of rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*," says press spokesperson Jean McDonald. "At least now maybe we can get some of them re-upholstered."

—Jeffrey Mervis

BIOMEDICINE

Management Overhaul at Johns Hopkins

As competition for funding grows keener, many top biomedical institutions are taking a close look at how they run themselves. And some are making big changes—even reinventing top management. The latest to enter that category is Johns Hopkins University (JHU). On 20 June, the Hopkins Board of Trustees unveiled a new structure that will combine all of JHU's medical functions—including two major fiefdoms, the hospital and medical school—in a single office. The move, according to Morris W. Offit, chair of the board of trustees, is designed to make JHU "more responsive to rapidly changing conditions in the health-care arena." Some say it's also designed to curtail infighting that has plagued JHU's medical staff.

Hopkins's new strategy puts all medical care into a single organization, the Office of Johns Hopkins Medicine. This office will report to a new governing board composed of the JHU president (a nonvoting member) and 10 others selected by the trustees: five each from the hospital and medical school.

The task of putting this plan into effect falls mainly to Daniel Nathans, Hopkins's interim president. Nathans, 66, a molecular biologist who shared the 1978 Nobel Prize in medicine for work on viral genetics, took over the university's reins on 1 June as President William Richardson stepped down to become chair of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan. Under the new arrangement, Nathans told *Science*, the president will become the chief officer for the entire JHU health-care system. The structure "may look cumbersome at first blush," he concedes, but it accomplishes a "major change," giving the president more authority.

Nathans brushed aside reports in the *Bal-*

timore Sun suggesting that JHU launched this reorganization to cool down a long-running feud between leaders of the medical school and hospital. However, several members of the Hopkins faculty who spoke with *Science* on condition of anonymity confirmed that the hospital's president, James Block, and the medical school dean, Michael Johns, have been at loggerheads for some time. One point of contention is Block's effort to reverse an earlier JHU decision to sell off its right to enter the market as a managed health care seller until after the year 2000.

Nathans insists that such "personal clashes are not driving" the reorganization. Rather, Nathans says, the reform is being driven by financial necessity. Managed health care is putting "tremendous pressure on academic medicine ... to compete on the basis of price," Nathans says. To stay in the game, Nathans says, Hopkins must do a better job of coordinating services provided by the hospital and medical school. "We need to make business-type decisions" that involve a common plan for physician services (controlled by the medical school) and clinical care (controlled by the hospital). Nathans also notes that Hopkins hopes to extend its operations to new clinics in the suburbs, which will require agile management.

Hopkins scientists, meanwhile, are taking everything in stride. As one oncologist said, "the supposed feud" between Block and Johns has hardly been noticed at the laboratory level. And if the reorganization gives the president more power, so much the better. As a basic researcher, he said, "I couldn't dream up a better president" than Nathans—even if he is just an interim chief.

—Eliot Marshall