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References and Notes

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Advice for a Better OTA

NOW THAT A SERIOUS EFFORT TO RESTORE THE U. S. Government's Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) has begun, some anomalies in the structure of this much lamented institution need to be addressed (News of the Week, "Memo to Congress: Get better advice" by D. Malakoff, 22 Jun., p. 2229). In the past, the advice from OTA was valuable to Congress, but even more valuable to policy researchers. From their point of view, OTA's location in Congress was a great advantage, because it kept OTA's focus on policy and enforced political neutrality.

This location, however, also led to some problems. OTA never set forth a basic analytic

approach to technology assessment. Each study was a unique effort. Its documentation focused on procedures such as how to relate to congressional clientele, how to constitute an advisory committee, and how to present the final results. Consequently, there is no manual from which the aspiring and newly appointed technology assessor can learn the basic intellectual framework underlying the craft: what constitutes an assessment, how one goes about doing one, what techniques are the most useful, and what are the hallmarks of quality. Another problem is that OTA left no direct academic legacy. It drew on the expertise of many individuals, but left behind no institutions that can carry on technology assessments in its mold. Its alumni will soon reach retirement age, leaving a legacy of valuable reports but no students to succeed them. And lastly, the OTA tended to neglect the international dimension of the issues it addressed. This was understandable at the time, but would be a serious anachronism today.

We need a 21st-century OTA, one that retains the laudable features of the previous OTA, but that addresses the institutional issues outlined above. It should have a clear mandate to establish an intellectual methodology and build departments and research teams in universities in different

parts of the country. And a new OTA should also place its analyses in an international context by examining the international aspects of the problems it addresses, and by comparing U.S. domestic problems with their counterparts in other countries. In this way, technology assessment could this time become a recognized academic discipline and research activity that could survive any future political vicissitudes.

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*Member of the Workshop on OTA Policy Analysis that reviewed the overall OTA program in November 1992. The workshop was convened by OTA just before it was abolished by Congress, but before such a plan was known.

Comparing Human Genome Mapping Data

A PRESENTATION GIVEN BY ONE OF US (COLIN Semple) at the joint Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory/Wellcome Trust Conference on Genome Informatics (8 to 12 August, Hinxton, UK) is the topic of a News of the Week

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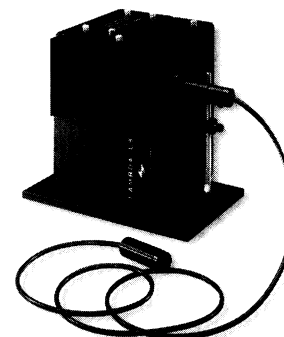
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