

OTA Assessments Were Tailored for Congress

IN HIS LETTER ENTITLED "ADVICE FOR A better OTA" (28 Sept., p. 2394), Charles Weiss urges that any sort of reconstituted Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) incorporate a more formalized methodology for the conduct of assessments, which after codification might be taught and promulgated much as techniques for systems analysis or economic modeling, for example.

As one might suppose, methodology was a common topic of conversation within OTA, a former science advice agency for the U.S. Congress. I participated (as a staff member of OTA from 1979 to 1995) in a number of efforts to evaluate the quality and usefulness of our work and consider ways to improve it. A central lesson from those exercises is that the "best" assessments, regardless of how selected, did not necessarily have much in common. They were linked by the realization that the first task was to try to understand what would actually be useful to Congress in the particular case. The disadvantage of this sort of eclecticism is that it easily becomes an excuse for sloppy, irrelevant work. The remedy is to pay close attention to satisfying the client's (i.e., Congress's) needs.

Weiss also implies that the audience for technology assessment is more or less universal and that a 21st-century OTA need not be attached to Congress. Whether useful technology assessment could be done on such a basis (leaving aside the question of who would pay the bills) seems doubtful.

I'd suggest a parallel approach, on both points above, with "net assessment" as practiced since the early 1970s in the Pentagon under the leadership of Andrew Marshall.

Letters to the Editor

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The objective in both cases is to support decision-making. Accordingly, "[I]t can truly be said that net assessment is not bean-counting, systems analysis, economic or geopolitical analysis, psychological or organizational analysis, technical comparisons of weapons, war gaming, or operations analysis" (1, p. 180). Pick a list of terms for technology assessment; the point is that, whether to be useful to the Office of the Secretary of Defense or to Congress, the exercise cannot be reduced to a formula.

Congress, as a representative body, is a difficult client. Those who laud the former OTA's usefulness to parties outside the Congress confuse a by-product with what has to be the primary objective of any such organization: help the decision-makers come to grips with their problems (which might sometimes include tactfully explaining why those problems have been misconstrued) in their context. Like so many, I believe strongly that Congress needs a new OTA-like support function. It would be more difficult to make the case that the U.S. government as a whole needs an OTA (which would entail showing that something useful could actually be accomplished), given the profusion of analytical organizations in the executive branch and independent agencies that OTA was originally set up in part to countervail, much less some even broader and more vaporous constituency.

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References and Notes

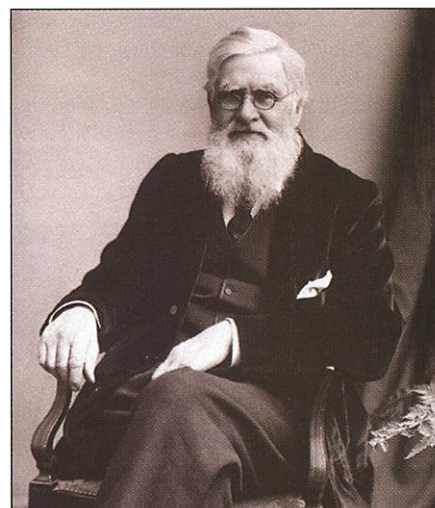
1. G. E. Pickett, J. G. Roche, B. D. Watts, in *On Not Confusing Ourselves: Essays on National Security Strategy in Honor of Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter*, A. W. Marshall, J. J. Martin, H. S. Rowen, Eds. (Westview, Boulder, CO, 1991), pp. 158–185.

Wales Is Not Part of England!

THE NETWATCH ITEM "INTO THE LIMELIGHT" highlights a biographical Web site devoted to the 19th-century scientist Alfred Russel Wallace (7 Dec., p. 2059) (1). In the opening sentence, he is described as an "English naturalist" (as well as on the Web page). Wallace was not an Englishman! He, along with other notables such as the philosopher Sir Bertrand Russell and the

engineer Charles Stewart Rolls (of Rolls-Royce fame), were all born in the 19th century in Monmouthshire in the south-eastern corner of Wales.

Wallace has long been regarded in Wales as a co-ordinator, with Charles Darwin, of the theory of natural selection. His pivotal contributions in this and other areas of endeavor are reflected in commemorations in several Welsh cities. In Cardiff, an impressive lecture hall at the National Museums and Galleries of Wales is dedicated to his memory. Nearby in the



Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913).

town of Neath, where Wallace became involved in attending and delivering lectures to the Mechanic's Institute whilst carrying out geographical surveys in this region, he has also been commemorated. Indeed, it is reckoned that the beauty of the valleys of South Wales proved a major inspiration for his later contributions as a biogeographer. And the National Botanical Garden of Wales, near Carmarthen, has a horticultural area dedicated in memory of this outstanding Welshman.

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References and Notes

1. The site is at www.wku.edu/~smithch/home.htm