

Endorsements of *Congress's Own Think Tank*

“There has been no time since OTA’s defunding in 1995 that the Congress needed more an institution through which both parties could jointly base their policy debates on the best scientifically established facts. As Peter Blair knows from experience at both OTA and the National Academies, the key to informing policy alternatives by the best technical knowledge requires scientific analysis that is dependable, understandable, and pertinent to the political context. Blair offers three institutional options; without one of them our democracy will continue to erode.” – *Lewis M. Branscomb, Professor Emeritus, John F. Kennedy School of Government Harvard University*

“Peter Blair’s carefully researched history of Congress’s own think tank – the non-partisan Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) (1972–1995) – chronicles the enduring need of Congress for independent, authoritative, and objective analyses of major public policy issues involving science and technology. His personal observations as a former OTA Assistant Director are poignant lenses on the key people and events that kindled and earned the agency respect around the world until its demise in 1995. Blair forcefully argues that today’s question is not so much as whether but in what forms science and technology advice can be sought and received by Congress. His book is a valuable source of wisdom for the science and technology community and our citizen governors.” – *John H. Gibbons, Assistant to the President for Science and Technology and Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, 1993–1998; Director Office of Technology Assessment, 1979–1993*

“For almost a quarter of a century the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) was one of the most respected, productive, and cost-efficient agencies in history, producing comprehensive reports for the House and Senate on issues relating to climate change, health care policy, agricultural production, telecommunications, space policy, electronic surveillance, national defense, and many more. In a senseless fit of government reduction the agency was closed in 1995, and the country lost a valuable resource. A new mechanism for providing independent, non-partisan, science and technology advice for the Congress is essential for our country. No one is better able than Peter Blair to tell the story of why OTA worked so well for legislators and the general public and what can be done now to revive the service OTA provided. With an insider’s view and with science policy expertise, he gives a clear, well-documented account that will be invaluable to anyone thinking about how best to legislate in a world teeming with overlapping and incompletely understood technologies.” – *Rush D. Holt, Jr., U.S. Representative for New Jersey’s 12th congressional district*

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CONGRESS'S OWN THINK TANK: LEARNING FROM THE LEGACY OF THE OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT (1972–1995)

Albert N. Link

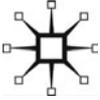
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*For my many friends and colleagues from the
former Office of Technology Assessment*

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Preface

In 1972 the United States Congress established the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) as a small analytical agency to become better informed about implications of new and emerging technologies. The agency's architects intended the reports and associated information OTA produced to be tuned carefully to the language and context of Congress. OTA's principal products—technology assessments—were designed to inform congressional deliberations and debates about issues that involved science and technology (S&T) dimensions but without recommending specific policy actions.

OTA's governance by a bicameral and bipartisan board of House and Senate Members—with equal membership between majority and minority parties, which was unique in the Congress, helped ensure that issues the agency addressed were tightly aligned with the congressional agenda and that assessments were undertaken with partisan and other stakeholder bias minimized. Over a span of 23 years OTA delivered over 750 reports to the Congress and the public on a wide range of topics including health, energy, defense, space, information technology, environment, and many others until Congress terminated the agency's annual appropriation of funds to operate in 1995.

OTA's creation was the result of a mixture of foresight, clearly defined need, and the politics of the time. The agency's birth, development, and demise comprise an important case study for science and technology policy advice to government. While over its life OTA developed considerable support among many in the Congress and

in the science and technology policy community, that support was not sufficient to prevent the agency's closure in 1995 as a symbol of congressional budget austerity, although Congress did not repeal the statute authorizing OTA's operation. OTA's diminutive size, comprising less than 1 percent of the Legislative Branch annual budget, provided a convenient target for new legislative leaders who were eager to use OTA's closure as evidence of their budget discipline by closing an entire agency within the Congress.

A number of organizations have sought to fill the gap left in the wake of OTA's closure, but with mixed results to date. This monograph recaps the OTA experience—its creation, operation, and the circumstances of its closure—and that of organizations attempting to fill the gap since OTA suspended operations. It also outlines a number of newer forces shaping the current context for science and technology related policy issues the Congress faces today. All these factors are important to consider in fashioning new or adapting existing sources of science and technology advice for the Congress.

No existing option for replacing OTA currently fulfills all the necessary requirements identified in this volume but several options could possibly be adapted to do so effectively. The strengths and weaknesses of three specific options that have a track record of relevant experience are considered in more detail in this monograph: (1) adapting the experimental capability being developed in the Government Accountability Office (GAO); (2) further increasing utilization of the National Research Council (NRC); and (3) reactivating but updating of OTA itself.

This monograph is the result of a good deal of research about the history of OTA and related organizations, but it also reflects on my own personal experiences at the agency where I was privileged to serve for 13 years—first as a visiting scholar on leave from the University of Pennsylvania, as an senior analyst and project director, as director of the energy and materials program, and finally as one of the agency's assistant directors and as Director of OTA's Division on Industry, Commerce, and International Security until OTA closed its doors in 1996.

For the past ten years I have served as Executive Director of the Division on Engineering and Physical Sciences at the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academies of Sciences and of Engineering and the Institute of Medicine. That experience has afforded me a first-hand opportunity to compare the processes for providing science and technology advice to government by the NRC and the former

OTA. That experience has also provided a good position from which to compare those experiences with mechanisms developed in a number of other organizations with similar missions in government, academia, the private sector, and the non-profit world. In writing this volume it was illuminating to revisit my experiences at OTA with that new perspective. As this monograph will illustrate, the missions of the NRC and the former OTA are similar in many respects, so it should not be surprising that a number of my former OTA colleagues also found their way to the Academies and I have benefitted from reflecting with them on our shared experiences.

This book draws conclusions that are mine alone and not necessarily those of The National Academies. I greatly appreciate the advice and thoughtful review of early drafts by John H. Gibbons, Richard Rowberg, James Jensen, Albert Link, Trudi Blair, Susie Bachtel and several anonymous reviewers, as well as informative conversations over the years with current and former colleagues: Amo Houghton, Rush Holt, Jeff Bingaman, Roger Herdman, Clyde Behney, Lewis Branscomb, Granger Morgan, John Ahearne, Al Teich, Christopher Hill, John Peha, Skip Stiles, Larry McCray, Alan Crane, Gerald Epstein, and many other colleagues and friends.