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When the federal government was first established, the number of employees in the executive branch was a mere handful. Indeed, there may have been more congressional delegates from the thirteen original states than the total work force in the executive branch.

Over the intervening years, there has been a tremendous expansion in the federal work force. Although appropriations have been made for sizable support staffs for individual members of Congress and for congressional committees, the growth in the legislative branch has been extremely modest by comparison with the explosive expansion of personnel within the executive branch.

As a result, within the past decade, Congress found itself—collectively and individually—coming more and more to rely on the technical expertise within executive agencies because it lacked any such resource itself. Moreover, as this situation developed, the issues coming before Congress—whether they dealt with space exploration, sophisticated military hardware, supersonic aircraft, energy resources, environmental concerns, and so on—increasingly required accurate and reliable technical facts as well as good, sound interpretations of those data.

Having to rely exclusively on the executive agencies for such information or assessments left Congress understandably uneasy. For example, a Defense Department official would be expected to support the need for a new bomber and to describe the virtues of that airplane with a favorable bias when testifying before a congressional committee or otherwise being consulted by Congress.

The obvious answer seemed to be for Congress to establish its own scientific and technical advisory office staffed with appropriately qualified people. And that was just the step that Congress took about five years ago.

The resultant agency was named the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), and former Congressman Emilio Q. Daddario was named its first director. He was a very logical choice, having served with distinction as chairman of the science subcommittee within the House, as well as being generally credited as the originator of OTA.

However, OTA never seemed to live up to its potential or to the expectations of its followers. With the single exception of the drug bioequivalence study, which was conducted by a panel of outside people and staffed by OTA, the agency maintained a very low profile and seemed to side-step controversial issues. At least it managed to avoid taking any definitive stand on those issues that might have controversial overtones. Although this is a good formula for survival in the political jungle, it doesn't lead to any noteworthy track record with respect to achievement.

Within the past six months, it appears that Congress has decided to do some assessment of its own—specifically, to conduct a series of oversight hearings under the chairmanship of Rep. Ray Thornton (D-Ala.) of the House Subcommittee on Science, Research, and Technology. The hearings were announced shortly after a strange scenario in which there were mass resignations by Senate and House members of the joint Congressional Board which is charged with overseeing the OTA, and then an announcement by Daddario that he, too, was resigning as the agency's full-time director.

Although there were recurring mumbles of dissatisfaction, some of which were elaborated upon in press interviews, the real basis of congressional unhappiness remains somewhat fuzzy and obscure. This is attributed, in part, to a reluctance by resigning Board members to criticize publicly and openly the alleged interference in OTA's operation practiced by one of their Senate colleagues.

Whatever the reasons, it was expected that Daddario—having already submitted his resignation as director—would “let it all hang out” when he appeared as a witness before Thornton's Subcommittee. But the prevailing characteristic of Daddario's operation of OTA was to avoid controversy and the hard issues, and his appearance before the Subcommittee was true to form. In short, he ducked again, even when leading questions afforded him the opportunity to be candid.

Well, the search is now on for a new OTA director. At this writing, the leading candidate is Russell W. Peterson who certainly has the credentials: research chemist and then senior executive at Du Pont, governor of Delaware, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, and currently chief executive officer of New Directions, a respected citizens' organization. In fact, he is so “leading” that one recent press report said his appointment to the post has gone “from speculation to expectation.”

In sharp contrast to Daddario, Peterson has a reputation as a decisive manager with very strong-willed ideas. Clearly, if appointed, he would not be content to let OTA meander along as a subservient puppet. The question now being asked is whether Congress is quite ready to accept such a dramatic change. We hope they are, and that they will bite the bullet in proceeding with the appointment of a strong administrator such as Peterson. For OTA, the gestation period is over; if it does not begin to produce, it does not deserve to survive.