

News from
Representative Rush Holt
12th District, New Jersey
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STATEMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE HOLT ON THE OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT

(Washington, D.C.) – Rep. Rush Holt (NJ-12), one of three physicists in Congress, today issued following the statement about the importance of the Office of Technology Assessment, which Congress defunded in 1995. Holt issued the statement in conjunction with the AAAS Annual Meeting and the session, “Providing Science Advice to Congress: Is a New Paradigm Needed?”

The accelerating pace at which technology touches every aspect of our lives means that every decision we make in Congress increasingly is influenced by science and technology. While we do not suffer from a lack of information on Capitol Hill, we do not have the time and resources to gauge the validity, credibility, and usefulness of the large amount of information and advice we receive in order to make knowledgeable, well-reasoned decisions on a wide-range of issues. The purpose of the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) was to assist Members of Congress in this task.

As a forward-looking entity, OTA both provided an important long-term perspective and alerted Congress to scientific and technological components of policy that might not be obvious. By 1995, for example, OTA already had written on such topics, now current, as “Electronic Surveillance in a Digital Age” and the “Potential Environmental Impacts of Bioenergy Crop Production.” More reports like “Losing a Million Minds: Confronting the Tragedy of Alzheimer’s Disease and Other Dementias” might help Congress navigate health care reform. And the additional information that could have been gathered since the 1995 report “Innovation and Commercialization of Emerging Technologies” might have helped guide Congress more effectively through our current economic crisis. A clear appreciation of the current science and technology involved in each of these topics is even more important today than when these assessments were first written.

According to a survey of the 535 members of the 111th Congress, the membership includes three physicists, one chemist, six engineers, and one microbiologist. Most members of Congress avoid science at all costs, but even the handful of trained scientists cannot master the particulars of every issue. The OTA was not there especially for the scientists or exclusively the nonscientists. It

was there for all of Congress. Every member needs access to unbiased technical and scientific assessments finished in a timeframe appropriate for Congress, written in a language that is understood by Members of Congress, and crafted by those who are familiar with the functions of Congress. The issues have grown more complex, but our tools to evaluate and understand them have not kept pace.

When OTA was disbanded, Congress gave itself a lobotomy. Our national policies have suffered ever since. In the years since the demise of the OTA, no group or combination of groups has been able to assume OTA's place as the provider of scientific and technical assessment and advice to Congress. It is important to recognize that policy decisions are value judgments that cannot be made by the balance of facts alone. But it is critical that policymakers have the facts they need to make wise choices. In the absence of OTA, we have not gotten the information – or the analysis - we need to do the people's work. We need the help that only an office like OTA, one that is of Congress and for Congress, can provide.

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