

Bring back the OTA

Technology booms as congressional scrutiny withers

By Gabriel Duffany

There is little doubt that today's society is a highly technical one. Exponential development in AI computing has made it abundantly clear that, for better or worse, automation will play a pivotal role in humanity's future. Many Americans are leaning toward 'worse.'

According to a September, 2025, Pew Research poll, 57% of the US population feel AI's risks for society are high or very high, while an additional 26% reported AI risk as medium.

With fears of indiscriminate labor-force automation, rising Big Tech political influence, and a complicit, accelerationist executive, how are members of Congress addressing constituent concerns?

Congressman Bill Foster (D-Illinois) is vocal about the legislature's insufficient response, resulting from what he claims is a lack of science-based congressional resources.

"For years, Congress has not been adequately prepared to engage with complex technical issues that are increasingly important to the legislation we consider," Foster says. "From the rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence to emerging technologies shaping our energy future, it has never been more important for Members of Congress to have access to forward-looking, non-partisan technical expertise and advice."

The advice in question is known as "technology assessment," a careful examination of emerging technology's human harm, financial cost, societal benefit, and potential applications.

From 1972 until its 1995 defunding, Congress had a dedicated Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) tasked with fulfilling House and Senate committees' science and technology (S&T) research requests.

Powered by a staff of nearly 150 scientists at its peak, OTA produced approximately 750 reports on innovations in medicine, defense systems, the environment, physical infrastructure, telecommunications, energy, and more. Each product averaged 100-300 pages. For OTA's proponents, a key strength of the agency was its bipartisan leadership structure.

Put forth in the Technology Assessment Act of 1972, OTA's



OTA got into trouble with Reagan because of OTA's critique of Reagan's Star Wars missile defense boondoggle, a predecessor to Trump and Lockheed Martin's Golden Dome for America boondoggle (White House Photo)

board was composed of six members of the Senate, appointed by the president pro tempore of the Senate, three from the majority party and three from the minority party, six members of the House of Representatives appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, three from the majority party and three from the minority party.

Advising the board were 10 top civilian scientists, hand-picked by board members for their expertise.

In the budget debate that would ultimately spell OTA's functional demise, Senator Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) defended the office.

"If we do not have an unbiased source of information, then we have to rely on organizations with a stake in keeping alive programs that benefit their interests ... it seems to me that Congress ought to have an independent source of information representing all interests in science and technology."

"OTA offers a unique and essential service for Congress, and

I am very impressed with OTA's credible analyses of the developments in technology and related public policy issues," Grassley concluded.

"With all this success, what killed OTA?" asked former OTA staffer and esteemed engineer M. Granger Morgan in his article "Death by Congressional Ignorance," published just one week after OTA's excision from the legislative budget.

His answer: "It was small, and it got lost in the dust of the political stampede on the Hill to downsize and streamline."

Today, Morgan reflected on why OTA became a political target for then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich and his "balanced budget" acolytes in the 104th Congress.

"OTA got into trouble in part because of the very high visibility work they did on things like Star Wars," Morgan said, referring to Ronald Reagan's missile defense boondoggle that lives on today in the Trump administration's planned \$24.4 billion "Golden Dome" project.

For exposing inconvenient truths on the proven outcomes

of politically-charged policy, OTA fell squarely on the chopping block.

In their article "The Big Lobotomy," *Washington Monthly* contributors Paul Glastris and Haley Sweetland Edwards note that Gingrich "particularly despised the OTA, as did many other conservatives, despite its evident usefulness ... Over the years, the OTA had also cast doubt on some conservative ideas – a mortal sin as far as Gingrich and his followers were concerned."

Though costing less than one-percent of the Congressional budget, \$35 million at its FY1992 height, OTA appropriations were cut to zero, where they have remained for the past thirty years.

Morgan eulogized OTA in his 1995 article – Decision-making is easy if you can ignore the facts and skip the details.

Efforts to restore OTA's budget mobilized almost immediately. In the House, outspoken science advocate and career physicist Congressman Rush Holt (R-New Jersey) repeatedly introduced budget amendments

to re-fund and revitalize OTA.

Through efforts led by Congressman Mark Takano, (D-California), in the 116th Congress, a \$6 million OTA budget was approved in the House draft FY 2020 appropriations bill, but later removed by the Senate.

In the same session, Congressman Takano introduced H.R. 4426 – OTA Improvement and Enhancement Act, co-sponsored by fifty Democrats and one Republican – Congresswoman Elise Stefanik (R-New York).

The bill sought "to rename the Office of Technology Assessment as the Congressional Office of Technology, and to revise the functions and duties of the Office," updating OTA's structure and methodology to meet modern demands.

The bill was re-introduced in the 117th Congress with 31 co-sponsors, and again in the 118th with 11 co-sponsors – each attempt was sponsored solely by Democrats.

The pro-OTA coalition announced their intention to introduce the bill once again in the present 119th Congress, with Congressman Foster stating, "I've repeatedly introduced legislation with my colleagues Congressmen Takano, Casten, and Beyer to revitalize the Office of Technology Assessment – and I'll keep pushing to bring Congress into the 21st century."

A spokesperson from Con-

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gressman Takano's office confirmed – "We're looking forward to re-introducing legislation on this front later this Congress."

A timeline for the bill's introduction has not been released.

On May 2, 2025, 34 House Democrats endorsed a letter to Appropriations Subcommittee Chair David Valadao (R-California) and Ranking Member Adriano Espaillat (D-New York), requesting \$6 million for OTA in the FY 2026 budget proposal:

"The OTA is unique in that its mission enables it to conduct in-depth analysis with extensive input from external experts providing forward looking and comprehensive assessment of new technologies. In its absence, the need for the OTA has only grown. Thirty years after OTA was defunded, Congress is grappling with questions around how to encourage innovation while minimizing the potential harms of new technologies."

The signatory list includes lawmakers who have not previously taken a stand on OTA, including Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota), Val Hoyle (D-Oregon) Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), Jan Schakowsky (D-Illinois) and Rick Larsen (D-Washington).

Research and Technology Subcommittee members Suhas Subramanyam (D-Virginia) and Luz Rivas (D-California) also signed the request.

"A restored OTA would help Congress develop thoughtful, targeted policy around emerging technologies, including autonomous vehicles and face recognition. As complex advances in science and technology continue, Congress should have access to OTA's thorough and nonpartisan analysis to help us find the right path forward," the request continued.

Support for OTA in the Senate is similarly limited.

Senators Thom Tillis (R-North Carolina) and Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii) introduced a companion OTA Improvement and Enhancement Act in the 116th Congress, and once again in the 118th Congress with sponsors Tillis and Senator Ben Ray Lujan (D-New Mexico).

Prior to announcing his resignation in June 2025, Tillis's staff told Ralph Nader's Center for Study of Responsive Law he did not intend to sponsor OTA legislation in the 119th Congress.

For lawmakers seeking OTA funding restoration, the battle is uphill. OTA critics cite increased science and technology capabilities in the Government Accountability Office (GAO) as a sufficient alternative for congressional research needs.

GAO expressed confidence in its ability to service Congress without the aid of OTA or an OTA-modeled successor agency.

In 2019, per recommendations from the House Select-Committee on Modernization,



Newt Gingrich despised the OTA and zeroed out its budget in 1995

(AP Photo)

GAO formed a Science, Technology Assessment, and Analytics (STAA) division.

"Since 2019, GAO has significantly increased its capacity to provide a broad range of support to Congress on science and technology issues. Specifically, we increased the number of technology assessments and have published close to 40 since 2019. We also introduced Spotlights, which are short, quick turnaround explainers that provide policymakers with information on emerging technologies and the policy questions they raise," the GAO said in a statement issued on Sept. 16, 2025. "We also provide extensive consultative support to members of Congress and their staff on a wide range of science and technology issues, including the implications of artificial intelligence."

In line with GAO comments, in September 2025, STAA published a two page report titled "Science & Tech Spotlight: AI Agents."

"In addition to technology assessments and related services, GAO has also expanded its horizon scanning efforts and issued the first report on emerging science and technology trends in November 2024 and plans to issue this series annually," the GAO said. "This series is critical to providing Congress with insight into what potentially new and disruptive technologies are under development and could impact Americans lives within 10 years."

GAO's chief scientist Sterling

Thomas reiterated these claims.

"GAO has delivered reliable, nonpartisan information on science and technology for decades," Thomas said. "In 2019 we stood up the STAA team to rapidly expand our science and technology expertise. We now provide comprehensive products and services to meet almost any congressional S&T need."

During the 1995 Senate budget hearing, Senator Grassley predicted the eventual migration of technology assessment duties from OTA to GAO, then known as the General Accounting Office.

"The General Accounting Office's staff, process, and traditions are primarily those of an audit and program evaluation unit," Grassley said at the time. "Only four percent of the GAO staff have PhDs, and few of these doctorates are in science and engineering. In contrast, 58 percent of OTA's staff has PhDs in these areas, and half of those hold degrees in hard sciences. The GAO has relied on prior or concurrent work of the OTA for scientific and technical aspects of the study."

"OTA works closely with Congress through its bipartisan Technology Assessment Board. The Board is equally made up of Democrats and Republicans," Grassley said. "I have served on this board since 1987 and I can certify the Board ensures compliance with statutory and procedural requirements for each OTA project. This is a unique governance for oversight pur-

poses. Other agencies – like GAO – do not have this special bipartisan group overseeing their operation."

Much has changed since Senator Grassley's comments, namely the STAA's creation and the employment of additional qualified experts. Despite these developments, critiques of GAO as Congress's sole technology assessment resource persist.

"The current state of technology assessment in Congress is poor," said Daniel Schuman, president of the American Governance Institute. "The GAO is facing a 49 percent budget cut should the House Republican appropriations bill be enacted and the GAO will have to reduce its headcount even if its budget is maintained at the current level."

In 2020, Schuman co-authored *Science, Technology, and Democracy: Building a Modern Congressional Technology Assessment Office* for Harvard University's Ash Center.

"There is an existential fight over whether the legislative branch matters as a policymaking body," Schuman wrote. "Moreover, the head of the GAO will retire by the end of the year. This departure provides an opportunity to reimagine how technology assessment work is done inside the GAO, but most members will be focused on the bigger question of whether GAO can remain independent of the White House."

"The best path forward remains providing Congress an independent technology assessment capability that is funded by a separate appropriations line item and is closely tied to the needs of members of Congress," Schuman said. "It is difficult to imagine this happening under the current circumstances. As technology has become central to our lives, Congress needs better tools to assess new technologies and their possible effects on our country."

Regarding the Trump Administration attacks, one GAO spokesperson noted that "GAO's FY 26 budget has not been finalized. We are monitoring proposed appropriations legislation. We will continue to have a STAA team."

Despite these assurances, STAA's fate remains unclear. In a June 25, 2025 letter to Congressman Espaillat, GAO Comptroller General Gene Dodaro urged House Appropriations members to lessen planned bud-

get cuts.

"With a 63 percent reduction in staff levels, we would be forced to stop or significantly curtail ongoing work for Congress as well as other support that Congress has come to rely on in carrying out its work," Dodaro wrote. "Specifically, we would need to immediately: Stop work on all ongoing work that was requested by committees and re-deploy those staff resources to mandated work. . . End all details of GAO staff to committees that are not required by law. . . Stop all technical assistance. . . Curtail investment in our science and technology capabilities."

While many acknowledge the need to update OTA, calls to re-establish the office have only grown in the wake of GAO's heightened vulnerability.

"When I was a staffer on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, I saw first hand how desperately OTA was needed," former FCC chief technologist Jon Peha said. "Members of Congress can and should disagree on national priorities and policies, but it is more important than ever that they do so with a shared understanding of the current state of the world and the choices before them. Given how fast technology moves, this is hard without an OTA to bring clarity."

How might OTA be improved for the modern science and technology climate? In their Ash Center report, Schuman and collaborator Zachary Graves recommend "a new office should expand its scope to cover non-technical values such as ethics, adapt elements from participatory models developed by technology assessment offices abroad, improve the timeliness of its reports, make itself more accessible to rank-and-file members of Congress, adjust its oversight structure to empower its director, and put greater emphasis on economic analysis and market-oriented approaches."

Clear blueprints paint a hopeful picture for an OTA of the future, but lacking the political will, some experts warn against relying on Congress to push for change on its own accord.

"Outside constituents will have to mobilize to persuade the Congress that this capability is sorely needed, and that its addition will lead to more informed decisions that better serve the public interest," said Morgan and Peha in their joint 2003 publication, *Science and Technology Advice for Congress*. "Absent such external encouragement, it is unlikely that the majority of Members and Congressional staff will take action to make such institutional changes." **CHC**

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