

s t a t e m e n t

*of TAB member—George E. Brown, Jr.*

CONGRESSIONAL RECORD. EXTENSION OF REMARKS

*[Office of Technology Assessment: Defense Against the Dumb. Hon. George E. Brown, Jr. of California, in the House of Representatives, September 29, 1995]*

Mr. BROWN of California. Mr. Speaker, today marks the last day of existence for the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment. For 23 years OTA has served the American public by giving invaluable guidance and analysis on the dizzying array of technological advances we face in modern society. In its ignorance, Congress has voted to end this institution. It will be missed.

In recent months, I have seen a lot of mindless things being done in the American public's name. First we saw science-based regulatory decisionmaking being used as a slogan for the process of gutting Federal health and safety regulations. Then we have witnessed the slashing of research budgets designed to provide the science upon which these decisions were to be based. Across government, research and development budgets have been cut

in order to pay for tax cuts that we don't need.

This mindless approach to government substitutes public relations gimmicks for policy, trying to palm off as reforms simplistic proposals to sell House office buildings, dissolve cabinet agencies, and end daily ice deliveries to House offices. The unfortunate irony of this process is that the victim of this irrationality has been an agency set up to make the legislative process more rational: OTA.

I was serving in Congress in the mid-1960's when we first discussed the need for OTA. In what seems like the dark ages, before e-mail, genetic engineering, flip phones, and dozens of other technologies that have changed our lives, we were concerned that the rush of technological advance would overwhelm our ability to make rational political judgments.

We looked over the various congressional support agencies and did not find the kind of scientific and technological expertise needed to address the challenge. So, we created OTA, an agency that has served Congress well in the intervening years.

In recent months we have heard many criticisms of OTA, as those intent upon issuing press releases on the downsizing of government focused upon that agency's elimination. Some said that OTA studies took too long. But the OTA was established to provide comprehensive, balanced analysis of complex questions. It looked at the technology, at its social and economic impacts, and then made a range of recommendations for congressional action.

That process takes a long time. For those with short attention spans, those who fear factual information because their minds are already made up, and those who never get past the executive summary of "shake and bake" boiler-plate policy reviews, OTA probably takes too long. For those of us who take our elective

responsibilities seriously, careful analysis is a necessity.

Some critics have maintained that other congressional support agencies could accomplish the same task. That was not the case in 1972 and is even less true today.

None of the support agencies have the expertise that OTA had on science and technology issues.

None of these agencies employ the use of a balanced panel of outside experts and stakeholders to review the issue under examination. None of these agencies have a bipartisan, bicameral governing body to insure neutrality and independence. None of these agencies have a science advisory panel composed of world-class science and technology leaders.

Each of these agencies have expertise and produce competent studies, but none can produce the high-quality in-depth studies for which OTA has become internationally known.

And I disagree with those who say that the executive branch, or the National Academy of Sciences, or some department of science

could provide this information. These are not congressional agencies. They cannot tailor information to the unique needs of the legislative branch. And, as we determined when we first looked at this issue in the 1960's, we did not want the legislature held captive to information produced by the executive branch, without regard to which party is in the White House.

Mr. Speaker, as someone who was around at the birth of this agency, it saddens me to be present at its death. It saddens me to see dedicated public servants turned out of jobs that they performed with outstanding competence, even up until the final hours today. Each of us owes a debt

of gratitude to those people and each of us has a responsibility to help them make the transition to another position. For those of my colleagues who are unaware, these people cannot use the Ramspeck provisions to move into civil service jobs. In fact they do not even have active civil service status. We have treated these people poorly and they deserve much better.

Let me conclude with an observation made by a former OTA employee who stated OTA's task as being to create for Congress a "defense against the dumb." It is shameful that in the end, OTA was defenseless against a very dumb decision by Congress.