

Summary Report of Advisory Council Activities

Jerome B. Wiesner, Chairman

The Technology Assessment Advisory Council spent much of its time this past year attempting to further clarify and establish its role as an integral part of OTA. With the arrival of a new Director, Dr. Russell Peterson, there was opportunity to explore the relationship among the several components of OTA; in particular, the Council saw an opportunity to resolve the many ambiguities in its role.

At its first meeting of the year, held in February with Dr. Peterson, the Council voted unanimously in support of Dr. Peterson's proposal to shift oversight responsibility of the R&D panels and of the program in the New and Emerging Technologies from the Council to the Director's Office. It was agreed that the three existing panels would finish their reports at the earliest possible date, and would then be dissolved. A new and single R&D panel would be established later.

There were two main objectives in this shift of responsibility: 1) to improve the Council's oversight effectiveness; and 2) to create a new role for the Council, at the request of the Board, as an active participant in the priority-setting process of OTA. While a start has been made, this new role has not yet been adequately developed. There were some substantial time constraints for many Council members that prevented sufficient Council interaction with the Director, with the Board, or with the OTA staff. It is hoped that the Council's impact on OTA priority setting will be strengthened in the future.

Originally, considerable enthusiasm was generated among Council members for this priority-setting responsibility. Members devoted considerable time and energy to preparation of individual presentations made to the Council and Director on priorities that they felt were pertinent to the unique mandate of OTA. Much of the Council's time was devoted to these presentations and to

serious discussion of topics covered. These topics included: Life Support Systems; Decisionmaking in Technology Assessment; Productivity, Innovation, R&D—Their Potential Impact on Inflation; and the Status of Military Technology Assessment and Funding. Much of the discussion sessions focused on the appropriate role of OTA in its science advisory capacity to Congress. Council members hope to have an even greater impact on the priority-setting process in the coming year.

The Council has continued to strive for improved communications with both the Director and the Technology Assessment Board. An event of enormous significance in improved relations was the first-ever joint meeting in September of the Board, the Advisory Council, and the Director. Council members were encouraged by this meeting as they had an opportunity to air their opinions and concerns on such matters as Council participation in the priority-setting process, the appropriateness of such various proposals as the Nuclear Effects Study, and ramification of OTA involvement in military technology assessment.

In other Council business, Dr. Jerome Wiesner and Dr. Fred Robbins were reappointed to the Council for 6 months, at the end of their respective terms. This Board action was taken to allow the new Director and OTA time to consolidate activities before major changeovers took place. Dr. Wiesner was reelected Chairman of the Council, a position he has held since 1976. Dr. Edward Wenk declined renomination as Vice-Chairman; Dr. Robbins was then elected to the position.

In July, Drs. Wiesner and Robbins were reappointed by the Board. At that time, the Board also appointed Dr. James Fletcher to fill the position left vacant with the expiration of Dr. Eugene Odum's term. Dr. Odum had declined renomina-

tion for reappointment. Though the Council regrets the loss of Dr. Odum, it warmly welcomes Dr. Fletcher, Professor of Technology and Energy Resources at the University of Pittsburgh.

The development of the congressional technological assessment activity has been marked by a series of difficult administrative and human relations problems, including those discussed in this report. The search for a new Director was long and complicated. These difficulties have been highly visible and tend to mask the fact that OTA has done many studies of major value; studies not only of great benefit to Congress but to the Nation at large. A number of OTA documents have become basic source materials in their fields and some members of the OTA staff and panels are regarded as leaders in their respective fields.

Furthermore, as our society becomes increas-

ingly complex and increasingly risk conscious, good technological assessments will be an essential ingredient of technological and social progress. Clearly much is left to be done in the development of assessment methodology. Essential information on which to base assessments is often lacking, especially information needed to establish the magnitudes of risks posed by technology. Also, a totally satisfactory mode of interaction with the many elements of Congress remains to be developed.

We should keep in mind the fact that OTA is a wholly new undertaking, a social experiment attempting to integrate the many aspects and impacts of technology in a modern society. It is in this spirit that the Council will continue its support of the congressional effort to create a strong OTA and sound assessment processes.