

office: "OTA was a small agency [about 200 employees]. It was a generous place. For some, colleagues became like second families and these relationships extended to committee and personal staffs. Friendship, joy, and grief seemed to be shared without regard to job description. Many at OTA value this legacy as much as any other."

OTA was vulnerable

When the Republican leadership, led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, brought the "Contract with America" to Congress in 1995, one of the central promises was to cut the size of government. To show they were serious, Gingrich made cuts in Congress itself, and the OTA, being a small, somewhat independent science agency, was vulnerable.

"There was an exuberance in the new majority back in 1995," Holt said. "They wanted to change everything in Congress. They got rid of the ice buckets provided each day to the members of Congress, then they got rid of the OTA."

Representative Robert Filner (D-Calif.), a history of science professor for 22 years at San Diego State University before coming to Congress in 1993, described the OTA's death as "the most tragic thing that Gingrich did. He had to cut something, and OTA didn't have much political support."

Ideology also played a role. "Newt's guys saw science as a liberal idea," Filner said. "On issues such as global warming, what they saw was science advice that was going against their ideology."

Gingrich, now a consultant and lecturer, doesn't disagree with Filner's assessment, but believes it was the OTA's science that was ideological. "Those of us who were conservative Republicans felt that the OTA was used by liberals to cover up political ideology with a gloss of science," Gingrich said in a recent radio interview. "We constantly found scientists who thought what they [OTA reports] were saying was not correct."

The office was killed in a conference committee by one vote. Six years after the OTA was interred, all of the more than 700 OTA reports can still be found on The OTA Legacy, a Web site (see <http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~ota>) maintained at Princeton University as a sort of monument to the office.

Why such strong feelings for a small government organization that ground out lengthy reports on topics as diverse as the role of insects in AIDS transmittal, the potential of fusion energy,

Brookhaven Celebrates Maurice Goldhaber's 90 Years

Three generations of Goldhaber physicists, with Maurice front and center, posed for this family portrait during a pause in the festivities at Brookhaven National Laboratory on a day in July dedicated to the celebration of Maurice Goldhaber's 90th birthday. Formal talks about physics past and present were interspersed with spontaneous reminiscences by celebrants who had come from far and wide.

Goldhaber's career spans the decades from James Chadwick's laboratory at Cambridge in the early 1930s to the latest solar neutrino results from the Super Kamiokande collaboration, of which he is an active member. He was Brookhaven's director from 1961 to 1973.

Flanking Maurice are his brother Gerson (right, University of California, Berkeley) and his sister's son Benjamin Eichhorn (professor of statistics at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey). Behind them are (right and left) Maurice's sons Alfred (SUNY Stony Brook) and Michael, who has a PhD in particle theory but writes mostly about public policy. Between the brothers is Alfred's son David, who recently joined the physics faculty at Stanford University.

BERTRAM SCHWARZSCHILD



BROOKHAVEN NATIONAL LABORATORY

sanitation in Alaskan native villages, and the adequacy of scientific equipment for undergraduates? For Gibbons, the answer is simple: "Congress is made up of citizen-governors," he said, "and they need good advice on spending trillions and trillions of dollars on issues that involve technology and science. Not to have any formal office dealing with science and technology in the legislative branch is to say that none of this matters."

No apologies offered

Gingrich offered no apologies. "I strongly opposed OTA," he said. And Congress doesn't need to revive the office and return to getting science advice from "a bunch of analysts who read papers and then tell you what they think."

Congress does need a system for getting good science advice, Gingrich said, but it should be a network of scientists, perhaps coordinated through the NAS, that enables senators and representatives to talk directly to scientists. "We ought to be getting Nobel Prize winners in the room and talking directly to them," he said. "Do you want to have genuine scientists talking directly to you, or congressional staff people writing up summaries? I want every viewpoint in the room so I can hear the arguments. It's a matter of philosophy."

Former Science Committee chairman Robert Walker, now the CEO of the Wexler Group, a Washington lobbying firm, shared Gingrich's opposition to the OTA, partly because the office wasn't effective, he said.

Elaborating on Ehlers's complaint that the OTA was too slow, Walker said the agency "could never meet a legislative schedule. It was a nice science agency, but it never did its studies in a time frame that met the needs of the legislators. They worked on a science rhythm, not a legislative rhythm."

"Both Newt and I are science nerds," Walker continued. "But none of the OTA work helped me on the Science Committee. When we passed the energy bill in the early 1990s, the OTA didn't come out with its energy report until a few months later."

Gibbons's response to the timeliness criticism of the OTA is, "You can't make wine on Sunday and drink it on Monday." Sometimes legislators wanted instant responses to complex questions, he said, and that wasn't possible. He noted that, while final reports sometimes came out after legislation had been voted on, legislators could get interim updates on studies when they needed information.

But even many supporters of the OTA revival effort agree with Walker's criticism. "The OTA never saw a side issue it couldn't delay on, and it often lost sight of the ball," said a former staff member. "But it did provide important, neutral information that Congress needs. It helped structure the national debate on scientific issues."

While Holt deals with the pressure to alter his bill to correct for the perceived shortcomings of the previous OTA and to address the difficulties of winning over past opponents, a less dramatic effort to bring more science