

Reversing the Congressional Science Lobotomy (Wired.com)

April 29, 2009 By U.S. Rep. Rush Holt

Beginning with a declaration during his inaugural address that we will “restore science to its rightful place,” President Obama has placed science and scientific process at the heart of his public policy and decision making. We see it in the \$22 billion invested in science research and development through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. We see it in his appointments. And we see it in administrative policy changes.

It is time for Congress to do the same by restoring a once robust science resource to its rightful place: the Office of Technology Assessment.

With so much on our agenda, every member of Congress needs access to unbiased technical and scientific assessments finished in a time frame 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.

An emphasis on science in our national discourse and public policy has been dangerously absent in recent years. It is well documented that political aides and appointees in the Bush Administration aggressively challenged, manipulated, and at times silenced the work and judgment of professional scientists.

On March 9, I witnessed President Obama sign an executive order lifting the ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. While that move received most of the attention that day, as a scientist I find equal significance in his presidential memorandum directing the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy to develop a strategy for restoring scientific integrity to government decision-making.

It's not simply for the sake of scientists that the President wants to protect their work and thinking. More importantly, it is for the sake of good public policy.

Science works if scientists are free to ask questions and answer them as the evidence directs, without political restraints. The public gets poor results from the government if taxpayer-funded scientists are hobbled.

President Obama is not a scientist, yet I am confident that when he makes a policy decision — whether it concerns health care, energy or the economy — he is thinking like a scientist.

I can't say the same about many of my colleagues in Congress.

Among the 535 members of Congress, there are three physicists, one chemist, six engineers, and one microbiologist. Most members of congress avoid science at all costs, and the handful of trained scientists cannot and do not try to inject the scientific thinking on the particulars of every issue.

What Congress needs is its own science advisors. We need not look far for a model: Until 1995, Congress could rely on the Office of Technology Assessment.

While members of Congress do not suffer from a lack of information, we lack time and resources to assess the validity, credibility, and usefulness of the large amount of scientific information and advice we receive as it affects actual policy decisions. The purpose of the OTA was to assist members of Congress in this task. It both provided an important long-term perspective and alerted Congress to scientific and technological components of policy that might not be obvious.

By the time it was defunded in 1995, for example, OTA had written on now current topics, such as "Electronic Surveillance in a Digital Age," "Potential Environmental Impacts of Bioenergy Crop Production," and countless other topics. The work of the OTA served as the basis for legislation on genetic non-discrimination and for policy on Alzheimer's disease.

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.

This year, Congress and the President are prepared to address health care reform and energy reform. In the 1990s, OTA wrote comprehensive reports on clinical preventive services, patient cost-sharing, health care in rural America, and health technologies. It also wrote informative reports on energy efficiency, including how to save energy on transportation.

Despite its importance, new leaders in Congress successfully defunded the OTA in 1995, which as one former member put it, was like Congress giving 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.

Like President Obama, members of Congress need to think like scientists and rely on the scientific process as we make public policy. We need the help that only an office like OTA, one that is of Congress and for Congress, can provide.