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Congress's Office of Technology Assessment Closed

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In September 1995, the 23-year-old US Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) closed its doors, following months of debate. Critics of the decision say the $22 million budget was an easy target for the government. Earlier this year, the House had voted to reduce the OTA budget to $15 million and link it with the Congressional Research Service. However, the Senate voted to close it rather than using funds from other agencies to keep it going.

Proponents of the closure said that OTA's expert analysis can be replicated by other advisory agencies, but OTA defenders argue that the agency has a unique decision-making process that is bipartisan and brings a real-world view to a problem. One of the agency's strongest defenders, Congressman Amo Houghton (Republican New York), said, "most Congressman are illiterate, and as we go into the next century, they need a sense of where science is taking this country."

OTA was created in 1972 after Congress became discouraged with the bias of reports it was getting on technologic and scientific developments. Regarding OTA closure, OTA Director Dr. Roger Herdman, a physician at OTA since 1983, says "When congressmen look for advice and bring in the executive branch or the private sector, they will get the advice with the agendas and biases of those institutions." Herdman says that the agency still had reports in the pipeline that it planned to issue before it closed, including reports on antibiotics, healthcare information technology, technology and HIV vaccines, and laser surgery.

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