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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE

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STATEMENT OF

ELMER B. STAATS

Comptroller General of the United States

To The

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Council For Applied Social Research, Inc.

Annapolis Hilton Hotel  
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[\*WHY ISN'T POLICY RESEARCH UTILIZED MORE BY  
DECISIONMAKERS?]

(OR, WHY DO RESEARCHERS JUST TALK TO EACH OTHER?)

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I am happy to be here today to discuss with you a topic of great interest these days in the research field, the linkages among knowledge production and dissemination. In keeping with the, perhaps radical, notion that social researchers should be talking to policymakers, not just each other, I will be emphasizing the factors which might improve utilization of research. The situation reminds one of the familiar quotation:

"And then there is good old Boston,  
The Home of the bean and the cod,  
Where the Lowells talk to the Cabots,  
and the Cabots talk only to God."

Only recently have statistics been available on expenditures related to social research and development. A report by the National Research Council shows that in fiscal year 1976, the Federal Government obligated \$1.8 billion to acquire, disseminate, and use knowledge about social problems. That includes obligations for both basic and applied research, and other areas such as evaluation, statistical and dissemination programs.

Recent evidence indicates that policymakers believe social science can help them. A 1977 GAO review of the use of social research by national policymakers disclosed high expectations. More than 70 percent of the respondents, consisting of top management officials in Federal agencies, thought that social science should have a substantial or very large effect on the formulation of national policy.

Our review, however, demonstrated that there are problems in the utilization of social science research. In terms of practice, our study showed that 45 percent of the policymakers indicated that they were not satisfied with the translation of research results into usable products or into techniques for problem solving.

Suggested Reasons for the Gap Between Expectations and Utilization

A number of explanations have been offered to account for this gap between the expectations of policymakers and the actual utilization of social science research.

Lawrence E. Lynn, Jr., now at Harvard University, addressed the issue of problems in the use of social research from a management perspective. He suggested that a major problem is that little attention is paid by researchers to the nature of knowledge that will be most useful to the Congress, the executive agencies and other audiences prior to the authorization of research projects. Lynn criticized research management that emphasized individual projects, rather than considering the cumulative and reinforcing impact of research.

Problems in the dissemination of social research information contribute to low utilization. A major concern is whether or not the results of the research actually reach the appropriate

user in an understandable form. Frequently, there are no formal arrangements for this phase of research and dissemination is often haphazard.

The form of the social research that reaches policymakers will affect the prospects for utilization. Research reports are often written for academic audiences rather than for use in policymaking. Policy implications associated with project results can only be ascertained by identifying, acquiring, and reviewing project reports on topics relevant to policy issues. It is for this reason that each research design should discuss which groups of users the report is intended to serve.

#### Measurement Problems

I do not mean to suggest that utilization can be easily or clearly measured. A study is usually just one input into a very complex decisionmaking process. The cumulative impact of a series of related studies in an issue area provides the major indicator of use. An example of research findings being used can be found in the poverty research field. When poverty programs were established in the 1960's, there was little consensus on the definition of poverty. After many studies on this issue, there is considerably more agreement on a definition. We feel that more research needs to be conducted that attempts to develop indicators of utilization.

Increased Interaction between Policymakers  
and Social Researchers

Increasing the utilization of social research will not be simple and painless. However, we believe that increased interaction between policymakers and social researchers could greatly contribute to the utilization of research results.

The timing of research results in a matter on which it is particularly important for the researcher and decision-maker to reach agreement. If a decision must be made by a certain date and the information is late, that data will have little value. Many decisions, such as annual budgets, follow a set schedule. Others, like those creating new programs, may permit longer timeframes. However, most decisionmakers do not have the time or the resources for extended studies. This usually means that timing of the information will be regarded as very important. Increased interaction between policymakers and social researchers--and clear communication regarding timeframes for each of the involved parties--will contribute to greater use of social research.

In GAO there is a continuing need to marry research results to the timetables and specific legislative and oversight needs of committees. This means that we have to always draw a careful line. We must avoid inaccurate and misleading analysis but we rarely have the luxury of sufficient time and resources to carry out an "ideal" research design.

## Limitations on Interaction

We believe that increased interaction between policy-makers and social researchers could contribute to improved utilization, but there are limitations to this interaction.

For one thing, there are potential users of a research study beyond those who commission the research. Secondary users cannot be involved in the research planning and may not even be identified by the researchers. Even the primary users may have moved to other positions by the time the study is completed. In addition, researchers may need to proceed with the knowledge that the interaction process may pose threats to the existing bureaucratic structure.

Related to the question of multiple users is the issue of multiple-agency inputs. Major questions being investigated by researchers could involve different agencies operating under a multitude of different statutes. This situation presents complexities in bounding or scoping the research.

Organizational dynamics can play a major role in constraining policy research that is interactive. Some organizational patterns may be more conducive to problem solving than others. Some organizations are open to new ideas, but not always willing to put them into effect. In some cases, it is very difficult for decisionmakers to know what information they need. Also, if users believe that certain research

information may be detrimental to the best interests of their organization, they may be unwilling to discuss or utilize such information. A related problem is that many policymakers are extremely busy people. Access to them may be difficult. It may be necessary for researchers to engage their staff members in a series of dialogues as surrogates, but the researchers must recognize the risk of misunderstanding which is implicit in this sort of arrangement.

#### GAO USES AN INTERACTIVE PROCESS

The issue of the utilization of our own work has been of major concern at GAO. Substantial interaction with others outside of GAO is a major part of our evaluation and analytical processes. However, interaction must occur within a framework that increases the policy relevance of our work for congressional and executive decisionmakers. You may be interested in a brief discussion of the system that is evolving within GAO.

Within the past decade, our work at GAO has evolved from a focus on financial and economy and efficiency audits to a major concern with the actual effectiveness of Federal programs. The development of our work from audit to program evaluation and policy analysis has led us to seek more sophisticated ways both to organize and plan our work and to assure an appropriately high level of interaction with relevant decisionmakers.

In 1975, GAO instituted a program planning system. One central feature of this system is the identification of major issues as the framework for planning our work. As a result of that continuing effort, we now have 35 issue areas covering a broad spectrum of Government activity. Some, such as food, energy, health, and environment deal with world problems. Some areas include domestic concerns: crime, housing, and transportation. The plan for each issue area clearly defines the issue area: What is it? What does it exclude? What are the major concerns within the issue area? What are the gaps in knowledge between congressional and executive expectations and program performance?

The next step is identifying lines-of-effort which represent groupings of projects which will aid in solving the identified problems. Lines-of-effort are classified as priority or non-priority during the 18 month period covered by the plan, given available resources.

As we have refined our program planning approach over the last several years, we've added a couple of new ingredients. Recently, we added a special "futures section" as a requirement for each program plan. That section describes the outlook for the issue area in terms of emerging problems, concerns, and opportunities which might form the basis for future GAO efforts.

Another addition to our program planning process is an assessment of what has been accomplished in relation to what else needs to be done. This section of the program plan relates outputs such as reports, testimony, and briefings to the stated objectives of each of our priority lines-of-effort. This part of the process compares information from our audit, and evaluation work with congressional and executive expectations. Adjustments are made in the plan to reflect a narrowing of the knowledge gap in a particular issue area over time.

Obviously, it is no small task to know what's going on in the total audit and evaluation community. In each issue area, one of our divisions is responsible for knowing what is happening and for developing the plan for our work in that area. Those responsible for the plan get advice from any person in GAO who can make a contribution. Extensive knowledge of the concerns of the Congress are obtained from frequent contacts with Congressional Members and their staffs. We also maintain extensive contact with executive policymakers and program managers. Help is also obtained as needed from outside consultants and recognized experts in the field. Symposiums are frequently held during which people with different skills, approaches, and ideas are brought together and their viewpoints probed face-to-face.

A fairly substantial aid to this knowledge base is the work that we do--pursuant to the Congressional Budget Act of 1974--in developing and monitoring inventories of program-related information. One part of this was to develop an initial inventory of selected Federal agency program evaluations. You may have seen the big blue, red, and green volumes on Federal Program Evaluation, Federal Information Sources and Systems and Recurring Reports to the Congress.

These issue area focal points significantly enhance our capability to be more responsive in producing timely information that will be useful to the Congress. These centers of information help to more quickly and effectively prepare for testimony, briefings, and conferences that may be requested by the Congress.

Another essential part of our planning involves the need to maintain close liaison with the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Budget Office, and the Office of Technology Assessment. One mechanism used to assure that new and completed projects are coordinated is the "Research Notification System" which is prepared weekly by the Congressional Research Service. Top management officials from these sister organizations meet bi-monthly to discuss the overall liaison coordination efforts.

Another communication vehicle concerns a program of the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future. The Clearinghouse publishes a monthly newsletter which reports findings from the Trend Evaluation and Monitoring Program (TEAM). TEAM is sponsored by the Clearinghouse and the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress in the belief that emerging issues need to be identified and analyzed to give the Congress more lead time to understand shifts in the society and to anticipate the needs of their constituents.

GAO participates in TEAM which involves over 125 people who have volunteered to make the program a success. Volunteers include monitors and abstract analysts from Congressional offices, committees, study groups and capital hill support agencies - OTA, CRS, CBO and GAO. Monitors read and abstract articles in 70 periodicals in 5 subject areas: politics and government, business and economics, culture, science and technology, and social sciences. An Analysis Committee made up of 7-10 analysts meets to discuss the implications and emerging patterns in the abstracts submitted during the previous 30-day period.

Thus, substantial interaction is an integral part of our audit and evaluation processes. We believe that this approach has contributed to the increased utilization of our work.

For example, the utilization of our reports by the Congress and the agencies frequently result in modification to legislation or corrective action by the agencies. We keep track of these results through accomplishment reports, which we compile annually. I brought a few copies of our latest compilation, for those who might be interested. A few examples will help illustrate the point.

Upon the request of the Senate Committee on Human Resources, we issued a report to the Congress on the effectiveness of the Department of the Interior's administration of the Federal Metal and Nonmetallic Mine Safety Act. We reported that limited progress had been made in the safety record of mines covered by the Act since its passage in 1966. An advance summary of our report was used extensively in the Senate floor debate prior to passage of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977. Several provisions in the Act were made in accordance with our recommendations.

In April 1977 we recommended that the Social Security Administration identify those individuals who were denied benefits because of excess personal resources and advise them that they may now be eligible for Supplemental Security Income benefits because of a change in the law on home ownership. We also recommended that similar outreach efforts be made in the future when legislative changes are made that effect previously denied applicants.

In January 1978, we were advised that Social Security would contact about 50,000 to 70,000 individuals previously denied benefits because of excess resources. We were also advised that similar outreach efforts will be made in the future.

Recently we had an example of a report which was very timely, but the timeliness reflected factors beyond our control. In March 1979, during the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor incident, we issued a report discussing the need for areas around nuclear facilities to be better prepared for radiological emergencies. Three Mile Island certainly led to our report getting more attention than would otherwise have been the case, but we would have been quite happy not to have had such a prompt example of the problem we were discussing.

A recent report we issued focused on Federal employment examinations in which we found that the Professional and Administrative Career Examination (PACE) and the Junior Federal Assistant Examination screen out black applicants at a much higher rate than whites and that few blacks who pass the test score high enough for a realistic job opportunity. While the report offers no solution to the problem, it focuses attention in the need to renew emphasis on developing selection methods which give everyone an equal chance for employment while assuring a competent and productive Federal work force.

## GAO Report Proposes an Interactive Process

GAO is interested in increased interaction in a variety of contexts. One particular context which--because of our responsibilities to the Congress--we have focused on, involves the relationship between Congress and the programs it authorizes.

In November 1977, we issued a report to Congress called, "Finding Out How Programs Are Working: Suggestions for Congressional Oversight." This report provides guidance for an interactive process involving evaluators and decisionmakers that can be used for planning and carrying out congressional oversight of programs.

We suggest that the six-element process begin when the Congress enacts legislation authorizing a program. At that time, oversight requirements should be spelled out so that agencies know when and what they should report to the Congress about implementing and evaluating the programs. The other elements of the process would involve interaction between agencies and committees aimed at clarifying and, if necessary, adjusting executive branch policy, agency program design, actual program activities and planned evaluation measures. The last element involves defining detailed requirements for reporting the results of completed evaluation studies.

The interactive oversight procedure that we proposed would establish a more systematic review process. An advantage of the process is that although it clearly articulates a review process for all programs, it also permits case-by-case flexibility for tailoring the type of evaluation to the nature of the program under review since evaluation would result from a series of discussions between committees and agencies. We believe that such a process would lead to the Congress' greater interest in and use of evaluations.

A recently issued GAO report dealing with the Department of Agriculture's Water Program incorporates some aspects of the six element process. After our review of a USDA evaluation of the program, we prepared questions with the assistance of the USDA and transmitted them to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. We suggested that these questions be sent to six Federal agencies and 19 nongovernmental organizations involved in wetland preservation. At the request of the Committee, we analyzed the responses and held discussions with officials from OMB and several of the agencies involved. As a result of this interactive process, we recommended that the Committee propose legislative changes that would increase the Secretary of Agriculture's flexibility

in administering the program. We also suggested that a coordinated data collection and research effort between several Federal agencies be required.

The active involvement of decisionmakers requires a commitment of valuable and scarce time and resources. Consequently, there is a need to be selective. Research will need to be sensitive to the costs of active involvement and the benefits of enhanced decisionmaking ability through use of research data. For example, the Congress may wish to use all the elements of the oversight process proposed by our office only with the most crucial pieces of legislation and take a less active role in certain others. The limitations of time and resources may mean that only a few of the many issues needing decision can be thoroughly analyzed.

#### CONCLUSION

The availability of relevant, timely, objective, reliable, and valid research does not automatically ensure its use in decisionmaking. For a long time, social scientists were unwilling to address the issue of utilization; those who believed that the value of research was defined by its uses were criticized. Utilization is much more openly addressed today. The challenge of the future is to better define what constitutes utilization, to determine ways to decide what is usable, and to develop techniques

and organizations to facilitate utilization. These undertakings should be conducted within the context of a total research process which gives emphasis to the creation, diffusion, and utilization of knowledge.

We have learned that an interactive process between decisionmakers and policy researchers is a crucial factor in planning for utilization. We have also learned that policy research is more likely to be utilized if planning for utilization is an integral part of the research process. We believe that such planning should address the following types of questions over time:

- How well identified and defined are decisionmaker problems needing research?
- What priorities are to be placed on supporting projects designed to help solve the problems identified?
- How well did research perform in helping to understand the problem and contribute to its solution?
- How well did information on research performance reach the relevant decisionmakers?
- To what extent did decisionmakers apply the new knowledge to change expectations or policies?

#### WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON?

During the month of May, we testified at congressional hearings on proposed legislation for congressional oversight. We are encouraged that there appears to be a growing consensus on the need to improve Congress' capability both to find out how well or poorly laws are

working and to act through legislation on the basis of what it has learned.

For example, information on programs and policy options would need to be developed and presented to the Congress so that it can act responsibly in decisions to continue, terminate, or modify programs. In our testimony, we emphasized that better oversight ideally should begin at the "front end" of the legislative process. We urged that Congress, in authorizing new or in reauthorizing existing programs state its objectives and expectations for such programs as clearly as is feasible, and to include statutory requirements which are as specific as possible for systematic monitoring and evaluation of its programs by the administering departments or agencies.

Statements of program objectives and expected results can serve as benchmarks against which to judge the performance of programs. Ideally such statements should be included in legislation, but this is not always practical, for a variety of reasons. Certainly such statements should be included in committee reports.

In testimony concerning effective oversight of the regulatory process GAO pointed out that, it is important to note that the obstacle to the choice of the least costly method of achieving regulatory goals is sometimes

in the enabling legislation itself rather than in the executive branch implementation of that legislation. Congress occasionally has enacted legislation that mandates a particular regulation, and the regulatory agency is effectively foreclosed from considering alternative approaches. For example, the Motor Vehicle Information and Cost Savings Act, as amended, (15 U.S.C. et. seq.) set specific fleet fuel economy standards for cars that must be met by 1985. The Department of Transportation and EPA have only limited discretion in implementing the law and may not consider whether it is the optimal strategy to achieve the goal of reduced fuel consumption. That kind of analysis is required by Senate Rule 29.5 which requires that a regulatory impact evaluation be included in the committee report accompanying all public bills and joint resolutions.

Thus, the major elements of the oversight process which can provide a major incentive for improved audit, evaluation, and research utilization include:

- a review schedule which can relate analytical efforts to coincide with congressional oversight timetables;
- statements of legislative objectives for programs which can provide better criteria for assessing how well programs are working and whether alternative approaches may offer greater promise; and
- establishing periodic performance reporting requirements which will be directly useful in committee reviews.