



COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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B-177806

The Honorable Ray Thornton
Chairman, Subcommittee on Science,
Research and Technology
Committee on Science and Technology
House of Representatives

FILE 3506

Dear Mr. Chairman:

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UTH 450

I appreciated receiving from you a copy of your Subcommittee's report on its review of the Office of Technology Assessment. The hearings and the resulting report represent a substantial effort on the part of your Subcommittee and staff on this important issue. While looking over the report's conclusions and recommendations, I noted the Subcommittee questioned GAO's authority to be involved in science and technology policy issues. I would like to take this opportunity to state my views on this matter, inasmuch as the Subcommittee staff did not consult with us when considering GAO's role in the area of science policy. Some of the language in a report on GAO's role in this area by the CRS American Law Division, prepared for the Select Committee on Congressional Operations, apparently influenced the conclusions reached by the Subcommittee. I should point out that the CRS Legislative Attorneys stated in their May 12, 1976, report to the Select Committee that the language in GAO's statutory authority could include studies in science policy and related areas.

TITLE
UTH 20

GAO 66-6-61

The Subcommittee report states on page 114 that the charters and precedents behind CRS and OTA have either explicit or strongly implied authority for a role in the science-technology policy area, whereas GAO's authority seems "somewhat fuzzy." The report states further that "The Comptroller General has interpreted a number of statutes which assign specific missions to GAO as providing broad authority in this field as well as technology assessment itself." It was concluded that the basis for such interpretations appeared cloudy. Consequently, the Subcommittee feels a careful evaluation of this matter by an independent institution or entity would be useful.

003160

Letter

Under Section 312 of the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, the Comptroller General is responsible for:

- investigating all matters relating to the application of public funds;
- making investigations and reports ordered by either House of Congress or by committees having jurisdiction over revenues, appropriations, or expenditures; and
- directing assistants from his Office, upon request of these committees, to furnish them such advice and information as may be requested.

Under Section 204 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 (Public Law 91-510), the Comptroller General is responsible for reviewing and analyzing the results of Government programs, including the making of cost-benefit studies, upon the request of either House of Congress or of any committee having jurisdiction over such programs, or upon his own initiative.

Title VII of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 amended various provisions of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 while not modifying or limiting other GAO responsibilities mandated by prior legislation. The net effect was to strengthen and emphasize the role of GAO in program review and evaluation. It is our view that a properly conducted program evaluation will consider all aspects of a program, including its technological components. While we do not specifically set out to do technology assessments, we must consider the contribution of technology to the attainment of program goals.

Basic to all our reviews is whether funds expended are achieving the program objectives intended by the Congress. Because many of the programs and activities for which the Congress has authorized funds involve the promotion or control of technology, the application of technology to meet an existing problem or need, or the treatment of problems brought about by technological change or programs, our work necessarily involves us in such issues. Our reviews of programs from the standpoint of achievement of objectives can and often do result in providing information which suggests the need to revise or strengthen a program or its administration or to improve its effectiveness. In some cases this information leads us to recommend a change in the governing legislation itself. As program objectives become more concerned with and provide recognition of the impact of technological application we will, in the ordinary course of activities, automatically gear our reviews to include disclosures which show the impact of technology.

In fact, Congress has mandated GAO to do reviews of several major programs which have a high technological content. For example, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act of 1978 (Public Law 95-242) requires the Comptroller General to complete a study and report to the Congress on the implementation and impact of the Act on the nuclear non-proliferation policies, purposes and objectives of the Act. The Congress views the proliferation of nuclear explosive devices or the direct capability to manufacture or otherwise acquire such devices as a grave threat to the security interests of the United States and to continued international progress toward world peace and development. Through this Act, the Congress intends to increase the effectiveness of international safeguards and controls on peaceful nuclear activities to prevent proliferation. The Comptroller General is to report to the Congress on this Act in 1981.

In view of the foregoing, I do not believe there is a need for an evaluation of GAO's authority in this area. I appreciated the opportunity to be a part of the Subcommittee's efforts in its review of the Office of Technology Assessment.

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) ELMER B. STAATS

Comptroller General
of the United States