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Statement of
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Subcommittee on Legislation and National Security
Committee on Government Operations
U.S. House of Representatives
on the
Operations of the General Accounting Office



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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today to discuss with the Subcommittee the operations of the General Accounting Office.

GAO cannot be an effective support agency of the Congress unless its work is well-reasoned and objective and is directly related to the decision-making needs of the Congress. This should be true whether GAO is doing work pursuant to the requirements in its basic statutes or in direct response to requests for evaluations from the committees or Members of the Congress.

It is important for me to know how well Congress thinks GAO is doing its work and, I find this oversight hearing useful in that regard. I look forward to a constructive relationship with the Government Operations Committee during my tenure as Comptroller General and welcome the opportunity to appear periodically, perhaps during each Congress, before the Committee to discuss GAO's operations.

Although I have been in Office for only a short time, I have spent a considerable part of that time familiarizing myself with the operations of the GAO. I have met individually with all top officials of the GAO. I have visited several regional offices and discussed with staff at all levels what they do and what their problems and concerns are. I have spent considerable time reviewing reports to the Congress to gain a better understanding of how GAO does its work and marshalls evidence to support the conclusions and recommendations made.

I am gaining a good understanding of what the GAO is about and how it operates and I am beginning to formulate some ideas that can make GAO an even more effective support agency of the Congress than it is today. One of my most immediate concerns relates to the need for GAO to provide timely information to the Congress--an issue that I believe was of great concern also to the Select Committee on Government Operations in its 1978 report on GAO.

GAO should not view itself merely as a reporter of events. We should constantly seek to assure that our work results in more effective operations of the Government. Toward this end we will need to improve procedures for following up our recommendations.

We also need to assure that our work is timed to key in closely to the decisionmaking schedules of the Congress and of executive branch officials who must act on our work. Our most frequent form of communication with the Congress is through informal staff briefings and meetings. I want to explore different ways by which we can communicate our findings to the appropriate congressional committees and Members so they will have the information we have gathered when it is most useful to them.

It takes time to do high quality work that involves gathering and analyzing extensive data. Such efforts have to be well planned so they are completed on time for the decisionmakers. The longer an assignment takes to complete, the more difficult it is to assure effectiveness in the decision process. I intend to examine closely how GAO carries out its work to see if we cannot streamline procedures.

I am concerned about how long we often take to do our work--in some cases it is just too long. I will to give this matter close attention.

There are also factors external to GAO which should not be ignored. For example, the Federal government needs to concentrate on improving its financial management activities. While GAO has been a leader in this area, I think we should be doing more to convince officials in the executive branch of the need for improving their financial operations. The GAO has done good work in looking at operations of the Defense Department, but it is critical that we increase our efforts in this area over the next several years given the massive amount of additional dollars that will be spent by DOD. I want to make sure that we will do so in an effective and efficient manner.

I am also aware that there has been discussion about how GAO carries out the bid protest function within our Office of the General Counsel. I want to begin a dialogue with all interested parties toward implementing whatever changes may be appropriate.

The computer is an essential tool for effective program management within the executive branch; it is also essential for effective GAO audits of agency operations that use computers. We need to enhance our ability to review the computer-assisted operations of executive branch agencies. There is also good potential for improving our own capacity to do work through the use of computers.

During confirmation hearings I was asked for my views on what the role of GAO should be. Specifically, the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee noted that GAO had evolved from an agency with almost sole interest in accounting and bookkeeping to a much more diverse agency with an active role in overall good government. The Committee asked me if I expected this trend to continue, or whether I felt GAO should return its focus to more basic accounting functions.

It would be a mistake to turn the clock back. Improving accounting and financial management in the executive branch is certainly important and I intend to pay special attention toward bringing about needed changes. But the role of the GAO is a broader one. This Committee, in its Report on the GAO Act of 1979 (No. 96-425) noted that, "The broad spectrum of emerging problems and the complex issues of economic, social, and military and political significance facing the Congress, has led to a refocusing of GAO's attention from the traditional finance and accounting activities to assessments of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of agency and program management and operation." GAO's role, as defined in various statutes, has evolved with the increasing needs of the Congress for objective information and analysis covering the complex issues it deals with.

The Committee noted that as Congress assumed greater leadership in establishing national policy it was necessary to increase its direction and control over executive branch expenditures as a means of promoting a sound Federal budget and a healthy economy.

It then stated that:

"This cannot be done effectively without increased oversight by the Congress with the assistance of the GAO.

It is essential that GAO in carrying out these responsibilities be given the proper support and direction to ensure its responsiveness to the Congress."

I wanted to highlight those passages as a means of assuring this Committee that I fully support the continued development of GAO as a valuable source of information and analysis to the Congress.

I will need to spend time on problems that affect the morale and well-being of the GAO staff. From my discussions, it is clear to me that GAO staff have concerns regarding the pay cap, the lack of promotions, and the administrative burdens the Office has placed on them. But I have no doubt that we have an exceptional staff of dedicated professionals who want to do a good job. I will see to it that we maintain that dedication and professionalism so that we can be proud of the service we give to the Congress and the American taxpayer.

This concludes my prepared statement. I know the Committee has many specific questions and issues it wants to address and I would be pleased to respond to your questions.