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Beyond the neutron bomb

PRESIDENT Carter's decision to defer further work on the neutron bomb is being variously interpreted as a fine gesture towards unblocking log-jams in disarmament, a surrender to Soviet pressure or yet another sign of vacillation in the White House. In fact, his decision owes as much as anything to European politics, and vacillation is as much on the eastern as the western side of the Atlantic.

The neutron bomb, its history going back to the 'clean' bombs much talked of in the early 1960s, is a weapon that delivers a large dose of immediate radiation but a relatively small amount of blast and long-term radioactivity. It is thus of most use in battlefield contexts where the requirement is to eliminate the opposition without defiling the territory they occupy. If ever there were to be a battle between NATO and Warsaw Pact forces, continental Europe, and more specifically Germany, could be the only location for the foreseeable future.

The United States, seeing a remorseless build-up of forces in Eastern Europe, has been trying to get West Germany and, to a lesser extent the United Kingdom, to show some enhusiasm for the weapon, as it could hardly be sold to the American public on domestic needs. The enthusiasm has been slow in forthcoming—not from the military but from politicians who found it too vexed an issue for an unequivocal endorsement. So, without total support from his NATO allies, Mr Carter has cut his losses.

Even though this interpretation portrays the President as less of a bringer of peace to all the world than do some other interpretations, there is still an opportunity, in the deferment and probable cancellation of the neutron bomb, for the cause of disarmament to profit. The neutron bomb was cause for concern on two counts: it was yet another example of the vertical proliferation—more and more sophisticated weaponry—that non-nuclear countries find so offensive; and it provided a stepping stone across the gap between conventional and nuclear warfare. We have cause to be grateful that these two concerns have been allayed. We also have cause to be grateful that Mr Carter has broken away from conventional doctrine that new weapons must be used as bargaining chips in negotiations. But now the onus is on the Soviet Union to respond to this unilateral measure with some imaginative gesture of its own. □

Classified information

ON the right is one advertisement that has never appeared in this, or in any other form in *Nature*. The top people in Britain's scientific administration are appointed after a discreet process of sounding out feeling—one almost expects a puff of Pontifical smoke to emerge over Whitehall after the selection has been made. The high calibre of the holders of the posts could, however, be used as clear evidence that the system works.

So it does at present. But there is a lot to be said for casting the net wider. There are many excellent scientists working in unspectacular backwaters who might perform these jobs very well. There are many younger scientists whose interest in science policy should be stimulated in the same way that the United States government brings people to Washington in their thirties. There is a vast number of British scientists working abroad who might bring some very different perspectives to these posts.

It would still be open to the government to choose someone nominated from within the system, of course. But a lot might be learnt by making the selection process a little more accessible.