

Nuclear secrets: no clear frontiers

WHAT is a military secret? And how does it lose its secret status? Until a few years ago, the answers to these questions were thought to be relatively straightforward — a secret was information with the word 'secret' stamped on it; it ceased being a secret when the word 'secret' was removed. But the public, or at least a portion of it, is no longer quite so trusting of military judgement and recently even the holy of holies — details on the construction of nuclear weapons — has been violated in various publications, most notably the article on hydrogen bombs by Howard Morland that has just appeared in *The Progressive*, and the long open letter to US Senator Charles Percy from Charles Hansen, a Californian computer programmer whose pastime is the study of nuclear weapons.

Publication of these documents has been accompanied by some ringing statements about press freedom. For instance, in printing the Hansen letter, the *Chicago Tribune's* Publisher Stanton Cook declared: "We are convinced it contains no secret information that would in any way jeopardise the national security. We are confident that the information was gathered from public records available to any researcher . . . The government's attempt to muzzle a private citizen and the press (is) repugnant to the First Amendment's guarantees of free speech and press . . ."

Now Mr Cook is right (or almost) on two counts. It is indeed possible to accumulate information that is in the public domain and come up with some sound conclusions concerning the design of nuclear weapons. And the revelations of the last month are certainly not going to put the United States at risk — at least in the near future. But to go on to claim freedom of speech and of the press as justification for broadcasting of nuclear weapons data could, just conceivably, be a serious misuse of these fine but not absolute principles.

Consider first the question of the accumulation of public information. There is a serious danger in the view that something

is either totally in the public domain or totally secret. There is almost no secret which cannot be deduced if a researcher is prepared to devote enough time, effort and money to the sifting and collating of evidence. The only thing the holder of secrets can do is to make it immensely difficult to extract those secrets. There is thus no great merit in the case that a secret is no longer a secret when it can be deduced from the public domain. It may still be worth keeping the price of learning the secret very high.

But, it may be argued, there is no point in keeping the secret any longer, either because the US government shouldn't be making nuclear weapons (as Mr Morland might argue) or because the US government should go on making weapons, but for other people to know how won't harm the United States (as Mr Cook might argue).

This is to act in ignorance of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The treaty to which the United States is party, declares that nuclear-weapons states will not in any way assist, encourage or induce any non-nuclear-weapon state to acquire nuclear weapons. It is, of course, debatable whether the two documents in question do 'in any way assist', but simply because there are sincerely held views that they do, there seem powerful reasons why the narrower question of American security should yield to the broader one of global non-proliferation.

None of this should be seen as a blanket endorsement of military secrecy, much of which is preposterous and merely classifies material of low quality to protect it from critical scrutiny by outsiders. Nor should it be seen as in any way a retreat from the view that matters of nuclear policy (as opposed to hardware) are inadequately debated in public, because of the paucity of policy information available, particularly in the United Kingdom. It is simply a statement that in a difficult field where there are no clear frontiers, the case for the recent publications is not as strong as might seem at first sight. □

Overpaid humanitarians

MANY scientists in Britain speak with justifiable resentment about the tax-free salaries that employees of international organisations command. People subjected to no more privation than to live in another country (and sometimes not even to have to learn the language) are frequently paid sums which seem grotesque by continental European and US standards, let alone by those of poverty-stricken Britain.

The latest post to come to our attention is that of Chief of Public Information for an 'International Humanitarian Organisation in Geneva' (which prefers to remain anonymous).

The holder of this position will, to be sure, have to be fluent in French and English, and will have to act as spokesman for the organisation running a department of fifteen. The annual salary is round \$55,000 to \$60,000 — net.

There are highly dedicated information officers in many national humanitarian organisations around the world who count themselves lucky to receive a quarter of this sum — gross. International organisations, particularly those connected with humanitarian aims, have gravely lost their sense of direction when they offer enormous salaries. □