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Odd ways with neutron bombs

That President Ronald Reagan has taken the decision on neutron bombs from which his predecessor shrank in 1979 is no great surprise. But the National Security Council's advice last week — with Secretary of State Alexander Haig apparently dissenting — will reverberate for several months to come. Although the Administration's plan is that the neutron weapons, when manufactured, should be stockpiled in the United States and not shipped to Europe, several democratic European governments will find that circumstance of very little help in dealing with their own electors. The only potential battlefield in which neutron weapons might have a place is in Central Europe but there they could be a powerful reinforcement of the tactical nuclear weapons, euphemistically called "theatre weapons", now or soon to be deployed. It is understandable that Mr Reagan should resist the notion that European governments should hold some kind of veto over the munitions policy of the United States, but it is not merely insensitive of him but dangerous to the cohesion of the chief alliance in which the United States is engaged, to behave as if European opinions are irrelevant.

Scepticism about the feasibility and effectiveness of neutron weapons has by now been largely dissipated. If it is possible to make a high-yield thermonuclear weapon by using a fission bomb to detonate a fusion mixture in such a way that the neutrons produced cause fast fission in a casing made of, say, uranium-238, why not play the same trick within a casing of beryllium, so multiplying the yield of neutrons? The only wonder is that something like this can be done within the diameter of eight-inch howitzer shells. And given the penetrating power of energetic neutrons, there is probably something in the claim that neutron weapons would be relatively more damaging than fission weapons to people rather than property — which is not to say that tanks or other battlefield equipment would remain in working order, ready to be turned against their original owners once the dead (and dying) bodies had been removed. So why is there so much opposition in Europe to what seems to be a sensible improvement of military technology?

Part of the reaction against neutron weapons springs from the widespread conviction that, because all nuclear weapons are abominations, the addition of a new design to existing armouries must be a calamity. The argument is mistaken. European defence is for the time being based on the assumption that nuclear weapons would have to be used in a serious conflict, even if the consequence might be the widespread destruction of European life and property. Neutron weapons, less damaging than "ordinary" nuclear weapons and more easily directed against military personnel, should therefore be more acceptable to European opinion. That is the simple counter-argument. It does not fully meet the subtle European complaint that the availability of relatively usable nuclear weapons will encourage their earlier use in any future European conflict. But that argument cuts both ways. The earlier use of comparatively safe nuclear weapons might just as well serve to prevent a more damaging exchange of nuclear weapons at a later stage as to invite early nuclear retaliation. In the bizarre logic of the nuclear battlefield, in which strategic nuclear weapons are intended to stay forever in wonderland, neutron weapons are a blessing and not a curse.

Unfortunately, especially for President Reagan and for those politicians in Western Europe who must now learn to live with last week's decision, this is not the end of the argument. Protests against the manufacture of neutron weapons may be inconsistent with the assumptions on which the defence of Western Europe is

based, but this does not mean that they count for nothing — especially at the European ballot box. For the past three years, since Chancellor Helmut Schmidt courageously put his political head on the block by saying that he would allow neutron weapons in West Germany (without foreseeing that President Carter would find it politic to stab him in the back), it has been plain that the wayward trend of the past few years in European opinion will be countered only by a resumption of negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union on nuclear armaments. These negotiations are, in any case, necessary for other and more compelling reasons, the need in Western Europe to modify strategic stand-off by flexibility in East and West European relations chief among them. In the past few weeks, the United States Secretary of State, followed with a needless show of diffidence by the Administration of which he is a part, has been talking hopefully of a resumption of the negotiations on the Salt II treaty (still in limbo) later in the year. (The diffidence is needless because the Administration has no choice.) Has this brave prospect now disappeared?

The most cynical reading of last week's decision on neutron weapons is that it is not (as *Pravda* and the Soviet news agency TASS have been saying) a proof that the United States is not serious about negotiations on strategic weapons but, rather, that it is the opposite — a preparation for Mr Haig's promised talks. For what could be more astute than to stake a claim to the right to deploy neutron weapons in Europe so as to increase the range of possible concessions during a negotiation? The trouble is that last week's meeting of the National Security Council — perhaps the most fully reported on record — seems to have been more iconoclast than that. And even if the underlying calculation is machiavellian, it is wrong. While the Netherlands (reluctantly a potential host for United States cruise missiles and Pershing II missiles in 1983 or thereabouts) still lacks a government, with the danger that the democratic and electoral rot might spread (Belgium?) and with the West German defence budget rising less quickly than expected, the United States Administration may find that it cannot hold the ring in Western Europe, even until Mr Haig's target date later in the year, if it fails to reckon with its allies' ballot boxes, not just with its own. That is a penalty of being a superpower, as the Soviet Union has found in Poland.

Stanford's patent prize

Is Stanford University just lucky? Or unlucky? Or do the problems stemming from its exploitation of the Boyer-Cohen patent, which goes to the root of many present attempts to make a commercial success of genetic manipulation, derive simply from its good sense, over several decades, in recruiting faculty members with skill, imagination and flair? The answer is yes on all three counts.

When universities of all kinds are under serious financial pressures, one that finds itself blessed with what may be a substantial source of revenue in the 1980s (until the patent runs out) will be the envy of both private and public universities in the United States and elsewhere. Even so, it is unlikely that Stanford would have sought the invidious position of being the first university in the United States to have patented a scientific discovery that is already of outstanding importance in research laboratories (where patent protection entails no restriction) and may yet be the basis of a new industry.