

Soviet Union ratified the Outer Space Treaty in 1967, they have been bound not to put nuclear weapons or other "weapons of mass destruction" into orbits about the Earth. The treaty also requires them not to establish military bases on celestial bodies. Would that injunction apply to a space station occupied exclusively by the military? Or to a satellite equipped to knock out other people's satellites but which contained no people, only instruments? The Soviet Union should come clean about the objectives of its massive programme. The terrestrial arms race is uncomfortable enough. The prospect of a race to put flesh on the bones of science fiction is alarming. Meanwhile, the odds are shortening that President Ronald Reagan, due to greet the next return of the shuttle *Columbia* at Edwards Air Force Base in California on 2 July, will not merely proclaim that the shuttle is a going concern but that the United States will embark on the next logical step, the building of a space station. As Kennedy did before him, Reagan may find that the Soviet Union's activities justify an expanded programme in the United States.

Academic suicide

The University of London now has a plan for its future; but will it survive that long?

The University of London seems well on the way to making an even greater hash of its affairs than seemed likely a few months ago (see *Nature* 14 January, p.86). For the past year, it has been clear that the consequences of the British government's reduction of support for universities, the limits imposed by the University Grants Committee on the number of students to be allowed at individual universities and the effect on the income of universities of frightening away students from overseas would be especially damaging for the largest British university and, because of its federal constitution, administratively the most complicated. But none of that can excuse the way in which the university has let time slip through its fingers until last week when, with the deadline approaching for deciding how it should finance itself next year, the university's senate was jockeyed into accepting a plan for the future whose analytical foundations are, to say the least of it, shaky and whose academic implications are unknown. The only virtue in the way in which the university has managed its affairs is that this sorry tale may serve as a warning to other academic institutions.

What has happened in the University of London is a kind of pantomime. Two years ago, the then vice-chancellor, seeing the way the wind was blowing, set up a Committee on Academic Organization under an independent chairman. The plan was to recommend a strategy for the university as a whole. Halfway through this undertaking, however, a new vice-chancellor gave the committee narrower terms of reference and set up six other committees, again with independent chairmen, to suggest how the pattern of teaching in different fields of study should be reorganized. (One committee went off on the wrong tack, preferring terms of reference other than those given to it; mercifully, with a different chairman; a set of recommendations has been cobbled together just in time.) Inevitably, these subject committees have produced proposals for moving the teaching of various subjects from one place to another in the federated university which are inevitably in conflict with each other, so yet another committee — called the Joint Planning Committee — was asked to make sense of them and of the volume of comment and special pleading with which the university was deluged. That committee concludes, in its report, that the recommendations of the six subject committees were often based "on inadequate information" (ill-informed) or "cannot be justified in the light of the facts" (or in simple language are wrong). Searching, nevertheless, for some straw at which to clutch, the committee seems to have seized on one of the recurrent themes in the recommendations of the subsidiary committees — physics, or classics, or economics, should be taught at fewer sites. So why not simply concentrate the whole of the university, now spread

between a dozen non-medical colleges, on a smaller number of places, say five or six? This is the proposal that the senate of the university found itself having to accept last week.

The most curious feature of the affair is that this radical decision has been reached with hardly any discussion in the university as a whole of the academic implications, let alone the implications for those who work in and for the university. And what is now intended will create further internal contradictions within what is already a sufficiently cumbersome academic machine. The university grew to its present size like Topsy, by the enthusiastic accretion of almost any college, large or small, willing to join the fold. As a result, it now consists of an exceedingly inhomogeneous collection of establishments, some large and some small, some academically excellent, some less so. Two are for practical purposes specialized in the scientific fields. One (Birkbeck College) specializes in part-time students. One small college is not in London at all but in Surrey, while there are agricultural and veterinary colleges in Kent and Hertfordshire respectively. The tidy administration of such a motley collection of establishments is acknowledged to be impossible. Since the late 1960s, the university has chosen to make a virtue out of diversity, letting its separate parts run themselves without much reference to the centre. Now, by a simple show of hands, that policy has been turned on its head. The committee whose recommendations will shape the future of the university pays the usual lip-service to diversity before recommending that it should be done away with.

The university's problem is uniquely difficult — which is all the more reason why it should have been dealt with intelligently. Given that the pressure on the university's finances is likely to continue more or less indefinitely, a measure of concentration is clearly in the long run prudent. Some of the London colleges, seeing the way the wind is blowing, are already making mergers among themselves. The merger (or disappearance) of the rest will now no doubt be forced by the decisions taken centrally by the university on the distribution of funds among its several parts in the years immediately ahead. In the process, it is inevitable that much damage will be done. Many of the shotgun marriages the university is now committed to arranging will be marriages of incompatibles. Undergraduate teaching will become more specialized, and more uniform. The pattern of research will be changed in an arbitrary fashion. And the end result will be a federation of colleges so much more like each other that the advantages of federation will melt away. If the arrangements now agreed are pushed through, it cannot be long before the various parts of the University of London go their separate ways. Is that what is intended?

The peculiar characteristic of the damage that academics repeatedly inflict upon themselves is that it is always done at the eleventh hour (and sometimes the thirteenth). In London, an acceptable solution may already be beyond reach. But that possibility does not mean that it is pointless to look for a better solution. A few clarifying assumptions are obvious starting points. The Imperial College of Science and Technology, in all but name a university in its own right, is rightly acknowledged to be too important to be enmeshed in the financial administration of the University of London (whence the convention that it deals separately with the University Grants Committee); it should now be invited to go its own way. The London School of Economics, smaller but equally distinguished and important, should be given some spell of time, say ten years, to grow at the expense of the parts of the university now under threat and then also politely booted out. The rump would be three kinds of colleges — large or largeish place such as University College, smaller colleges concerned principally with the education of undergraduates, and a rag-bag of specialist institutions training veterinarians or assisting with research in outlandish languages. There is ample evidence that each kind of place is valued; what makes their administration impossible is that they are all lumped together. So why not replace them with three (or even more) different universities? When the University of Paris, as now reconstituted, consists of thirteen separate institutions, is it necessary that the largest city in Britain should be condemned to having only one?