

No law in the jungle

Mr Eugene Rostow's departure from the Reagan Administration whatever the reasons, is a setback.

DURING President Johnson's time, Mr Eugene Rostow was widely considered to be something of a hawk, a common fate of conservative Democrats in the 1960s. It is therefore ironical that Mr Rostow should now have been forced out of his post as director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency after several months during which he has been more frequently accused of being too doveish (see page 189, this issue). Even though the *New York Times* was last week telling its readers that Mr Rostow's departure had been precipitated by his willingness to modify President Reagan's proposal that the intermediate nuclear weapons negotiations at Geneva should aim at the "zero option", it has been clear for months that Mr Rostow's authority would be steadily undermined by the unwillingness of the US Senate to let him appoint his chosen deputy, a struggle in which neither the White House nor the State Department seems to have shown much interest.

What happens next is anybody's guess, but what has happened in the past few days should suggest ways in which the United States (whatever the colour of the administration) could more effectively conduct negotiations on arms control. One of the perennial problems of Washington is that responsibility does not lie where it belongs. The secretaries in charge of the most powerful departments of state frequently find themselves outgunned and even undermined by the small group of close advisers by whom the president for the time being is surrounded. How much more difficult must it be for somebody in Mr Rostow's old shoes? For while the arms control agency is titularly a free-living organism, in the sense that the Congress looks into its affairs as if it were autonomous, the enabling legislation requires the agency often to behave as if it were part of the State Department. The result is that either the agency functions forthrightly and independently, thus making the cause of arms control prosper but running the risk of giving offence to the State Department, or it gives no offence but gets little done. Either way, the result is unsatisfactory.

This is why it has been clear that, whatever the value of the fiction that the agency is autonomous during other administrations there is no reason to think that it is compatible with President Reagan's way of running things. Indeed, in the wake of Mr Rostow's departure, and because of Washington's new-found understanding of the importance of meeting public opinion on arms control, three contradictory signals have been put out from Washington — a successor to Mr Rostow has been appointed, suggesting business as usual; it is being said that the Secretary of State, Mr George Shultz, will take a closer interest in arms control; and it is also being said that President Reagan will make the subject his personal concern. On the face of things, this is a recipe for the repetition of disaster.

The moral is plainly what it has been for several months — the arms control agency should be made unambiguously part of the State Department, with responsibility for its health and welfare squarely on the shoulders of the Secretary of State. The belief that the cause of arms control could only be magnified by the existence of a separate agency with responsibility for arms control is denied by the long delay, at the beginning of the Reagan Administration, before Mr Rostow's appointment and the public demonstration since that even a powerful holder of that office can be thrown to the wolves if the price of keeping him is too great. The separate existence of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency is as much a hazard for the cause of arms control as it is a way of institutionalizing the cause.

In the jungle fighting of the past few days, the most serious casualty is likely to have been not Mr Rostow but the prospect that the Reagan Administration, slowly waking to the need to respond to what Mr Andropov has been saying about arms control, might have been persuaded by the momentum of events to make a constructive or even an imaginative response. Now, it is more likely to be pleading for time in which to consider all the newly

presented options, also to consider what Mr George Bush will learn on the European journey not yet begun and, ideally, also to win some kind of resolution of domestic questions such as where to put the MX missiles (and how to pay for whatever solution seems best in 1983). By then, unfortunately, a great deal will have happened in Europe. The general election in West Germany is, for example, barely six weeks away.

Seeing morning stars

The BBC should abandon its plan to peddle astrology. What people need is reality.

AT A TIME when the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), thinking itself threatened by cable television, refers to the merits of the principle of "public service broadcasting" with every breath, it has astonished even its friends by hiring an astrologer as part of its breakfast-television team. This service, begun this week, anticipates by two weeks a commercially supported breakfast show. The corporation's explanation of its venture into astrology, in no way a defence, is that there are many people who will not start the day without knowing what the stars hold for them. This is yet another snook cocked at the memory of Lord Reith, the corporation's founder and first director-general, whose posthumous influence until recently kept the corporation's broadcast output innocent of news of horse-race betting (but now there is a tipster on Radio 4). What would he have made of the peddling of horoscopes every morning?

The corporation claims that its man, once dubbed "astrologer royal" on the grounds that his advice had been sought by a member of the British royal family, is the "best in the business". By what measure, pray tell? How is it possible to judge the success



of predictions which, even when by accident correct, are based on falsehood? How does Reith's institution plan to grapple with the unpalatable truth that the stars do not influence behaviour. People born at the same minute of the same day do not share a common fate. People killed by the same bolt of lightning are not born on the same day. Those who strike up a friendship because they happen both to be Sagittarians must be supposed to be deficient in the ways of courtship or conversation. And those who think otherwise are a pernicious influence in society. So what price, now, public broadcasting?

The truth is, of course, that the competition for audiences takes precedence over principle. Elsewhere, it must already seem anomalous that the established public broadcasting service should put out what would be unthinkable in a country in which church and state were separated — the *BBC Hymn Book*. Is it just possible that the corporation, now aware that Britain is less homogeneous than it used to be, equates astrology with the Christian and other religions that now occupy its frequent "God slots"? The identity is false. Astrology is sheer superstition, all the more pernicious because so many people think otherwise. Broadcasting astrology over monopoly-run air waves, without explaining that people are being hoodwinked, is a public disservice, however successfully it may win an audience for breakfast television. But to that end, astrology is probably only the thin end of the wedge. Why not advice on cooking for the Vegan diet, on how to talk to plants or communicate with the dead?