would suit the need if the coinage had not been devalued, notably by the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. In present circumstances, an agreement finally to negotiate a German peace treaty 44 years after the event would probably do instead. A corollary would be an eventual agreement to remove national forces from foreign soil.

But economic problems will be at the front of Gorbachev's mind. This year's dramatic changes have revealed what may be their own roots — the virtual industrial bankruptcy of the Soviet bloc. It is a curious business. Shortages of consumer goods and food have been commonplace for years, but the failure of Soviet industry to modernize its processes and products has brought widespread demoralization that will not quickly be lifted even if the struggling cooperative movement (one of Gorbachev's initiatives) enjoys a fairer wind than hitherto. Nor will joint ventures with Western companies or a relaxation of the strategic embargo (which should be tried) work quickly.

Can Bush help? Not easily. Despite obvious comparisons with the post-war circumstances that evoked the Marshall Plan, President Bush has no constituency for repeating this gesture on behalf of the Soviet bloc, and in any case the generosity of the United States is constrained by the federal deficit. Nor would a huge loan from an institution such as the International Monetary Fund be of much help if the money were spent by the planners in Moscow in the same old ways. The more important need is for an institution organized like the World Bank, lending money for specified and well-defined projects, but focused on Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Western Europe, the chief beneficiary of the new arrangements, should stump up most of the capital. Why not?

There is also an even more urgent need — help against the privations of the winter now beginning. The Soviet Union has ten times as many people as Poland, and is at least as badly supplied with food and housing, while the means to keep warm will be put in hazard by the rash of strikes at coalmines in the past several weeks. That one common thread in the complaints of Soviet miners (who do a dirty job) is of the lack of soap is a vivid proof that the shortages are rudimentary. Can Bush do anything to help? Goodness knows. Only the Soviet government can tell. But if there is an identifiable way in which short-term credits could help, Bush should use his influence (and the creative accountancy of his budget director) to create them — and should use the opportunity to pin down Gorbachev on the pace of economic reform in the Soviet Union. Last week's tenfold devaluation of the rouble is a step in the right direction, but only a small one. (Its chief effect will be to give the Soviet treasury the benefits of the black market in foreign currency.) State-subsidized prices are a more serious distortion of reality and, for elementary reasons, the immediate causes of many of the shortages. But it would be a shame if the prospect of a more cheerful world than anybody has believed possible for half a century were dimmed for the lack of $10,000 million or so. □

Fetal tissue wrangle

The US government's decision to continue its moratorium on fetal tissue transplants is sqeamish and damages NIH.

Dr Louis Sullivan, the US Secretary of Health and Human Services, who superintends the doings of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), has dug himself into a deep pit by deciding to continue the ban on the exploratory use with federal funds of fetal tissue transplants (see opposite). Not that the decision is surprising. The US administration, like Dr Sullivan himself, is in a cleft stick about abortion, the source of fetal tissue. It is alarmed at the unknown influence of anti-abortionists on its electoral support and also fearful that a successful appeal to the Supreme Court by anti-abortionists could land it with a bruising need to carry legislation through the Congress. So it seeks not to give offence.

The circumstances of Dr Sullivan's ban closely resemble those in which the British Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, a few weeks ago intervened to prevent the use of public funds for the study of British sexual behaviour. While not disputing the need for data bearing on the rate of spread of AIDS, she behaved as if public support for the project would imply public approval of the practices, some of them sexual, by which AIDS spreads. But the government said it would not object if the project were supported privately (which, thanks to the farsightedness of the Wellcome Trust, it has been). Dr Sullivan has washed his hands of the fetal tissue issue in exactly the same illogical way, but the consequences will be serious.

It is not as if there are no precedents in the field. Earlier this year, the British Department of Health and Medical Research Council published a set of proposals for regulating work with fetal tissue that command general respect; briefly, ethical committees should give their prior consent to all proposed procedures, and money should not change hands. Anti-abortionists might complain that the rules institutionalize abortion, but are constrained from doing so by the fear of seeming to blackball what could be valuable therapeutic techniques. The truth is that the question of whether abortion should continue to be allowed, and in what circumstances, is a separate question that must be decided separately.

Meanwhile, whatever the future for the use of fetal tissue transplants in the treatment of congenital diseases, it will be disasterous if NIH cannot contribute to the research needed to find out. NIH is the only agency in the United States whose purse is long enough to support the substantial and well-controlled studies required both to explore the techniques that might be used and to determine their effectiveness. Dr Sullivan's squeamishness, while burdening charities with the need to support research and offering private hospitals a market for untried procedures, will seriously undermine the reputation of NIH for intellectual independence. □