

Reagan has found a neat way of shifting the immediate burden of awkward choice from the White House to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which will have to confirm or deny his suspension of aircraft sales to Israel. Sooner or later, however, the buck will come to rest again in the Oval Office. At some point, the Administration will have to devise a new anti-proliferation policy — the Carter version is too inflexible, and ideologically unsuited to this Administration. With the Tamuz raid fresh in people's minds, Mr Reagan will be repeatedly reminded (by Arab states if not by his voters) that the aircraft which carried out the raid on Tamuz were supplied by the United States and would have suited well for the delivery of nuclear weapons. Does it make sense, people will be asking, that the United States should resist the proliferation of nuclear weapons but be prepared to supply

delivery systems to putative nuclear powers such as Israel? And how can the United States, which has invested a vast amount of political capital in the past few years in the good cause of persuading other states to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, now give Israel (which has not signed) a licence to undercut that policy? It is not as if Israel's supporters, in the United States and elsewhere, seriously consider that Israel's safety depends on the undefined threat of retaliation with nuclear weapons. The supporters of Israel's continued independence would indeed be more robust — and more numerous — if there were not the continually nagging fear that help would be used eccentrically, even illegally. This is why the time has come for Israel to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty — and for the United States to ensure that it is done.

Cheque-book academics in trouble

Stanford University seems ready to take a cautious step towards an accommodation between the principles of the academic life and the wish of some academics to turn their expertise to profit. The proposals (see page 526), on which the Stanford faculty will be asked to decide in a few months' time, have been made necessary by the apparently ceaseless spawning of commercial companies aiming to exploit genetic manipulation for commercial purposes and which include academic researchers as stockholders or even as entrepreneurs. The objective is to avoid as far as possible the conflicts of interest that arise when academics individually, or a university corporately, become dependent on commercial enterprises. The method is simple enough, almost deceptively so. The university will not (if the proposals are accepted) take an equity interest in commercial enterprises in which members of the faculty have a similar interest, while individual teachers will be required to disclose their outside interest whenever asked to do so by some more senior person, a dean or even the president of the university.

The university's proposed act of self-denial is virtually a replica of the decision reached at Harvard last October, when the faculty there persuaded the university administration not to go ahead with a proposal to accept (without payment) a block of shares in a genetic engineering company being organized by Professor Mark Ptashne. The arguments then, as now at Stanford, were straightforward. With a substantial minority stake in a successful business, a university may find it hard to avoid giving those who are nurturing the golden goose unfair advantages (compared with colleagues) in matters such as appointments or even the allocation of space. This, however, is the least of the worries likely to confront universities with equity stakes in companies. What, for example, would happen if such a company were in financial trouble? Would it be possible for a university to resist pleas for just a little help, a little cash perhaps, or forbearance with bills inconveniently receivable? Harvard and now Stanford are right to decide that the risks are too great to be stomachable. Neither university has so far taken a view on the propriety of the role of academics as spare-time entrepreneurs.

The obvious reason is that most university faculties would be hopelessly divided on any such proposition. So much is clear from the way in which Stanford has sidled up to the proposition — not yet agreed — that members of the faculty should disclose their outside interests to the academic administration whenever it seems possible that a conflict of interest has arisen. Why wait until then? Why not simply agree that academics have a duty to disclose all their business interests to their immediate colleagues, not merely to august administrators with an ear for gossip? The obvious drawback in the arrangement now proposed at Stanford is that academics with outside interests (not necessarily commercial) are not the best placed to decide that a conflict has arisen with their academic responsibilities. Colleagues are likely to be more sensitive. They should be given the right to express reasonable doubts, no doubt within a framework of understanding that the process of innovation is often furthered by

means of links, consultancy agreements for example, between academics and industry.

Stanford, then, should opt for full disclosure, at the level of the department, of academics' outside interests. The outcome would probably be surprisingly dull. Most people, it would emerge, have modest consultancy arrangements with the odd company or two, consider themselves ill-rewarded for the advice they give and make up for that by skimping on what they do. Only occasionally would it emerge that an academic's commitment to some commercial company was offensive, perhaps because of being exclusive to one external organization, perhaps (and worse) because it endangered the proper balance of a research programme or the education of graduate students.

What, against this background, is to be made of the growing company of academic entrepreneurs, the people who help to start commercial companies, often by telling the tale of the promise hidden in their research to the moneybags who must in the end provide what is called the "venture capital"? The fashion, in the past few months, for taking on this role has been most conspicuous in the application of molecular biology but is unlikely to be thus restricted for very long. Now that molecular biologists have shown how it is possible to make paper fortunes when a go-go enterprise is launched on an unsuspecting stock market, it is unlikely that computer scientists, organic chemists and people in general will hang back. The simple truth, however, is that there is a difference between a consultant — a *per diem* person — and one who helps to start a company. The former can walk away from disaster with an easy conscience; the latter must redouble his efforts when disaster threatens. The conclusion must surely be that an academic who opts for the role of entrepreneur must at the same time opt out of tenure. In the last resort, the argument must go, the faculty cannot reasonably command such a person's loyalty.

In the United States, the seemingly regulation of these questions would be simpler if it had not in the past few years been complicated by the amendments of the Patents and Trademarks Act. In the old days, the outcome of a federally-sponsored research programme was in the public domain and thus up for grabs from anybody with the wit to recognize its importance. Now, universities at which research projects are undertaken have a right, even a responsibility, to patent what they can and to exploit it commercially. The result is often a nonsense, tacitly acknowledged as such in the burgeoning field of monoclonal antibodies (see page 525). The snag is that universities by their constitution are not much good at playing patent agents, but (given the continuing threat of shrinking funds) awkwardly eager to do so. The message seems to have spread quickly to teaching staffs. All concerned (the federal agencies in the United States included) should brood on what they have done before things go too much further. Elsewhere, in Britain for example, academics will soon be envying what seems to be the luxury of making money decisions. But worrying about earning money can be as sapping of scholarship as knowing that there is none.