

The Administration's lukewarm reaction to the new Communist peace proposals in the face of what appears to be a deteriorating military situation in South Vietnam lends some weight to the fear expressed by Dr. Daniel Ellsberg, self-acknowledged purveyor of the Pentagon papers, that the nation may be faced with "a replay of the year 1964."

That was a year, the Pentagon documents reveal, in which the United States Government brushed aside possible opportunities for peace and laid plans for wider United States participation in the Vietnam war because officials believed it was essential to prevent a Communist takeover in Saigon.

Then as now, Administration officials publicly expressed confidence in the ability of the South Vietnamese to fend for themselves although there were strong private doubts that Saigon's forces could long endure without substantial outside help. Similar doubts surfaced the other day in Saigon as Col. David H. Hackworth, a combat veteran of five years in Vietnam and the most decorated United States officer of the Indochina war, prepared to leave Vietnam and the Army.

"Vietnamization," Colonel Hackworth said, "is a word which must be a product of Madison Avenue. It's a public-relations dream. I haven't seen an improvement in ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam)." Echoing Dr. Ellsberg's foreboding, the Colonel predicted that by 1973, after the American forces have pulled out, "We'll find ourselves with a situation comparable to 1964."

In view of the reverses South Vietnamese troops have suffered this year so far in Laos, Cambodia and more recently in the Mekong Delta and near the DMZ, Colonel Hackworth may be overoptimistic. These warning signals and the revealed history of the early sixties should alert the country to the danger of a new military crisis at any time in Southeast Asia. Such a crisis would pose grave dangers for diminishing American forces and excruciating decisions for the President.

It is clear that President Nixon has learned one lesson from President Johnson's experience—he is not likely to respond to a crisis with a massive reintroduction of ground forces. But it is not so clear that the President has abandoned the blind faith in American air power that so dramatically failed his predecessor. The United States continues to bomb heavily throughout Indochina. The President has repeatedly threatened to renew wide-scale bombing of North Vietnam if American forces are placed in jeopardy.

To avoid such a replay of 1964, it is essential now to grasp opportunities for peace that were then slighted. The latest Communist peace proposals do not, of course, guarantee against an ultimate Communist takeover in Saigon. Nor do they assure such an outcome. But they certainly deserve to be fully explored. They appear to offer the United States an opportunity to extricate its troops and prisoners in safety from this misadventure in Southeast Asia, leaving the future of Vietnam to the Vietnamese—which is what should have been done in the first place.