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From The Sublime...

By ANTHONY LEWIS

Daniel Ellsberg appeared in Miami Beach during the Republican convention, an unwelcome ghost. He produced for the press copies of a memorandum prepared at the end of 1968, at Henry Kissinger's request, for President-elect Nixon. The paper, done by a private group of experts under Ellsberg's chairmanship, set out the possible options for a new administration in Vietnam.

It is all history now. But Vietnam is the one example of history that not only repeats itself but seemingly hardly ever changes, so there is some sour relevance in looking back at what the experts thought four years ago.

The paper first analyzed American official opinion on the war, which it said fell into two camps. One group was made up of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the American command and the Embassy in Saigon, some C.I.A. people and most high officials of the State Department. This group, the authors of the paper said, believed as follows:

"Hanoi is negotiating currently from a sense of weakness and failure . . . enemy losses in 1968 have irreversibly weakened those forces . . . [they] can no longer carry out an effective offensive on the scale of Tet 1968 . . . the South Vietnamese Government is strengthening rapidly, so much as to discourage enemy hopes of ultimate political victory after U.S. departure."

In the second group, as the analysts saw it, were Secretary of Defense Clifford and most of the men in his office, some C.I.A. people and a few State Department officials.

They called the reported improvement in the Saigon Government and its army "conjectural and doubtful."

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They were skeptical about talk of weakness on the Communist side, or of inability to keep fighting. They saw no chance of an American-South Vietnamese victory, even if there were such escalations as "forays into Cambodia and Laos" or "expanded bombing of North Vietnam."

The analysts said facts available in

Washington could be used to support either side. But they warned: "In the past, high-level evaluations both in Saigon and Washington have commonly suffered from a strong optimistic bias. There are strong bureaucratic and psychological pressures toward this, and they can be assumed to be operating today (and next year). . . ."

There followed seven policy options. Six called for varying combinations of military and diplomatic action to achieve some political result—from outright victory to a compromise settlement. The seventh option was unilateral withdrawal of all American forces.

At that point, according to the options paper, the seventh course had "no advocates within the U.S. Government." Indeed, Ellsberg himself did not support it. In his recent book, "Papers on the War," he states frankly that he then favored trying to negotiate in Paris a mutual withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese forces.

But the paper listed the arguments made by those, outside official ranks, who favored an unconditional American exit. They argued that the war was "unwinnable in acceptable ways . . . our efforts cannot resolve the political problems that are at the heart of this war. We should therefore cut our losses and avoid unknown additional risks while we can, and devote resources and energies to other activities."

The proponents of this last option said a new Administration would be in a position to adopt it: the American public and other countries would accept withdrawal as the better part of wisdom after doing all we could on Saigon's behalf. But they warned that it was important for Mr. Nixon to act quickly lest he get "locked in" to a continuing war.

How familiar it all sounds, now: fatuous optimism believed, the new Administration doggedly following the objectives of the old by new means. In fact, according to Ellsberg, the seventh option was regarded as so outlandish that it was never even considered; it was deleted before a revised version of the paper was pre-

presented to the National Security Council in January 1969.

There is no use trying to reconstruct what might have been in early 1969. What makes the memorandum so painful to read is the sense that it all may happen again—now and in the next four years.

The other day high officials of the Air Force told some reporters in Washington that Hanoi was still getting needed military supplies despite all the American bombing and mining. They said American involvement in the war could, therefore, last several more years.

President Nixon brought up himself, at his next press conference, what he called "some report out of the Air Force to the effect that we probably would be bombing in North Vietnam two or three years from now." The man who four years ago promised to end the war, and since then has ordered more bombs dropped on Indochina than anyone has on any targets over any period of history, had a one-sentence comment:

"That, of course, is quite ridiculous."