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The End Of the Affair

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By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, May 20—For four years most of the press and other natural skeptics in Washington suspended their disbelief when it came to Henry Kissinger. He had three qualities that were in desperately short supply at the top of the Nixon Administration: intelligence, humor and accessibility. He was worth seeing, and he could be seen.

Mr. Kissinger used his talents and his position shrewdly in these relationships. He gave liberal critics the impression that he really sympathized with their position. He played to their egos by seeking their understanding and support for his difficult role in a conservative Government.

All of that is not quite yet in the past tense, but that is the way things are moving. Henry Kissinger's extraordinary status in Washington has been shaken.

The immediate reason is Mr. Kissinger's behavior in the matter of wiretapping his own staff members. Not only did he have the tapping done; when that fact caught up with him, he tried to explain it away in a series of inconsistent statements that, to put it politely, were attempts to deceive.

When first asked about the tapping Mr. Kissinger gave a long and evasive answer. Then he indicated that he had had nothing to do with ordering

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the taps but knew about them and had sometimes read the transcripts. Next, in an interview, he said specifically that he had discussed security problems with F.B.I. chief J. Edgar Hoover but had not asked for "any particular form of investigation" nor suggested "that any particular individual be investigated." Justice Department officials finally said that Mr. Kissinger had asked for the taps and named some men he wanted tapped.

The alleged security reason for undertaking the wiretapping is also revealing. It was a report in The New

York Times in 1969 that American planes were bombing Cambodia—a fact that was hardly a secret to the Communists but that was embarrassing to the Nixon Administration when disclosed to the American people.

In his defense, Mr. Kissinger's friends have put it out that he wanted his staff members tapped to protect them from doubts being pressed by the security men. One of his senior aides, Mr. Kissinger has told people, had an F.B.I. file "this thick." But any actual security violations would surely have been flagged by those in charge of the investigation. Why did Mr. Kissinger personally read transcripts of the home telephone conversations of his assistants and their wives? One must suppose that he wanted to catch any hints of flagging personal loyalty.

The whole business is distasteful in the extreme. It is a sad example of what we are learning from Watergate—the degraded standards of honor in our official life.

But Henry Kissinger is part also of the deeper problem disclosed by Watergate: the centralization of power in the Presidency, in disregard of law and institutions. In all but name he has been Secretary of State—but one who operates without any feeling of responsibility toward Congress and without the wise, if irritating, restraints of bureaucracy.

No doubt it will be said that, unlike others on the White House staff, Mr. Kissinger meant well. But well-meaning men are even more dangerous when they abuse power. Mr. Kissinger's plausibility enabled him to play a large role in advancing the extremely dangerous notion that what the President wants is above the law.

Before he left for his talks in Paris with Le Duc Tho, Mr. Kissinger conveyed a plea for just a little more Congressional toleration of the bombing in Cambodia: It was our only way to make the North Vietnamese comply with the Vietnam peace agreement.

There in concentrated form was the disregard for fact and law that has so wounded this country. For by the accounts of our own embassy in Phnompenh it is overwhelmingly a civil war in Cambodia. We have intervened to keep the losing side afloat, at terrible cost to the Cambodians. It is the United States that is most massively violating the call for an end to foreign intervention in Cambodia—and violating, every day, the United States Constitution.

When the history of this time is written, Mr. Kissinger will get due credit for his part in the two major Nixon accomplishments that will be set against the black pages: the rap-

prochement with China and the Soviet Union. But Mr. Kissinger will also go down as the salesman of an endless war—a better salesman than a more openly right-wing figure would have been. And he will share in responsibility for the resulting strains on American institutions.

A high-ranking friend has been calling the press and pleading that Henry Kissinger is a national asset and ought to be protected. Mr. Kissinger is in many ways an exceptional person. He is entitled now to compassion—but no longer to toleration.