He was sought as a protege by William James and was an assistant to George Santayana. He held membership in Theodore Roosevelt’s braintrust and helped draft Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points. He lived long enough to receive a Princeton honorary degree alongside Bob Dylan and Coretta Scott King. By the time of his death, in 1974, Walter Lippmann had come to know eleven American presidents personally and, it seems, nearly every other prominent figure in the twentieth century. Within his profession of journalism, Lippmann was for decades regarded as without peer, as the most eminent of the eminent—James Reston, himself a towering figure in modern American journalism, called him “the most influential columnist of his day, or any other day I knew anything about.” Lippmann’s syndicated column, “Today and Tomorrow,” ran for thirty-six years, at times in as many as 200 American newspapers. Never before or since has there been a column that was read with such attention not only in the halls of power in Washington but in foreign chancelleries the world around. Never before or since has there been a journalist who had such automatic entree to the offices—and the homes—of the most important statesmen and influential personages of his lifetime. Lippmann met with Churchill in London, with de Gaulle in Paris, with Khrushchev in the Crimea, with Nehru in New Delhi. All the while, he served as an adviser to American presidents. Even at the tail-end of his career, in the 1960s, Lippmann was a fixture in the Kennedy White House, and, later, the recipient of a Presidential Medal of Freedom from Lyndon B. Johnson and a frequent dinner guest of Johnson in the Executive Mansion.
Then one day, in 1965, the Johnson dinner invitations stopped coming. The reason was the Vietnam War and the bitter feud that had developed between the president and the journalist over the former’s decision to Americanize the conflict. Lippmann had opposed U.S. military involvement in Vietnam from the start, from the time Dwight D. Eisenhower considered intervention to relieve the beleaguered French troops at Dienbienphu in 1954. He had counseled John F. Kennedy against expanding the American assistance program to South Vietnam in the early 1960s, and had made the same pitch, with increased urgency, after Johnson ascended to the presidency in late 1963. Nevertheless, Johnson and his advisers opted in 1965 to escalate dramatically the U.S. presence in the conflict, to, in effect, Americanize the war. Lippmann attacked the decision, privately and in print, and he became steadily more critical of the war and of Johnson in the years that followed. In 1964, on the eve of the presidential election, Lippmann had extolled the president as “a man for this season”; two years later, he privately called Johnson “the most disagreeable individual ever to have occupied the White House.” Likewise, Johnson, who had used to brag that he had just “had lunch with Lippmann,” before long took to telling salacious jokes about the journalist and calling him senile and a coward. In the spring of 1967, Lippmann retired the “Today and Tomorrow” column and left Washington. Many said he departed because he could no longer bear living in the same town as Lyndon Johnson.3

It is a fascinating story, this acrimonious falling out between two men who were opposites in just about every conceivable way—background, temperament, interests, lifestyle—but whose paths crossed at the very pinnacle of American public life. For students of the Vietnam War, however, this personal feud is less important than what lay

---