Whether you like him or not, I’ve often said, Lyndon B. Johnson was one of the most interesting presidents we’ve ever had. He could be a dignified gentleman, a crude guy, a friendly fellow and a sadistic person, a big talker but a good absorber, too, a workaholic but also a hilarious fun-maker, and, above all, a hard-working political leader who would fight as hard as he had to in order to get legislation passed that he thought would make the United States a better country. “My father was naughty,” admitted his daughter, Luci, in an interview with Ken Herman, a writer for the Austin American Statesman, on April 3, 2011. “I’m sure his mother sent him to the corner on more than one occasion. And for good reason, too.”

Lyndon Johnson was eager to learn what people thought about the issues when he was president. Sometimes, when entertaining guests at the White House, he turned the meeting after dinner into a kind of classroom with himself as the instructor. He started things off by passing a basket around containing slips of paper marked either “speaker” or “writer” for his guests to pick out. The people who got the papers marked “speaker” were expected to tell him what was on their minds that evening. Those who happened to take out the papers marked “writer” were expected to write him letters discussing the issues that concerned them the most, to which he would respond by phone or mail. Once the papers were distributed, he called on the “speakers,” from one table after another, and listened quietly to what they said about the economy, education, civil rights, medical programs, and foreign policy.
One evening, a business executive came up with some criticism of Johnson’s style. “Mr. President,” he said, “we’ve heard these briefings and we’ve seen the people in your cabinet. They are very talented, very bright, very wise people. But they all look very tired. Mr. President, in business in our company we require that our top executives each go away and take at least a month of vacation a year. I suggest that you insist on that for your people.”

Johnson frowned fiercely as the man was talking, for he didn’t like to be lectured. When the man finished giving the president his advice, the room remained quiet until Johnson motioned for the next speaker to say something. The businessman had hit a sore spot on Johnson. He was irritated when people told him that he overworked the people on his staff. He worked hard himself—he was a workaholic—and he saw no reason why the people working for him shouldn’t work hard too. Zephyr Wright, his cook, once told him, “Anybody who works for you for a long time has to love you, because you kill yourself and everybody else too.”

In November 1963, when Johnson became president after the assassination of President Kennedy, reporters preparing stories about Johnson for their newspapers found it almost impossible to dig up anything about his hobbies. Johnson “has no daily routine of relaxation,” concluded the Associated Press, “but at the end of the day, he liked to sit and talk.”

Once, when someone mentioned hobbies to Johnson, he exclaimed: “Hobbies!!! What in hell are hobbies? I’ve got too much work to do to have hobbies!” He did, to be sure, take time off now and then to board the presidential yacht, the Honey Fitz, with his wife and friends, and cruise down to Mount Vernon and back. He also liked spending vacations at the Johnson ranch in Texas. But his work as president was usually on his mind when he was supposed to be relaxing. He talked politics when he was playing golf with various Congressmen. And when he went to a baseball game, he had presidential problems on his mind so much that he hardly paid any attention to the game going on. “On such days,” recalled George Reedy, one of his press secretaries, “I sat at home praying that television cameras would not catch him with his back turned to the field in deep conversation about a tax bill or an upcoming election while a triple play was in process or when a cleanup hitter had just knocked a home run with the bases loaded.” One of Johnson’s friends summed it all up: “Sports, entertainment, movies—he couldn’t have cared less.”

Until Johnson’s heart attack in 1975, just after becoming the youngest Senate majority leader in history, his habits were those of a “Type A” personality. He smoked three or four packs of cigarettes a day, gulped down his food, and was always in a hurry. Once, his aides persuaded
him to see someone in the oval office for a brief moment. And when the visitor ended up staying twenty minutes, Johnson was furious. “Hell,” he stormed afterward, “by the time a man scratches his ass, clears his throat, and tells me how smart he is, we’ve already wasted fifteen minutes!” Johnson gave up smoking after his heart attack, and he slowed down for a while, but he was soon back to his breakneck speed and lengthy work days.

According to George Reedy, LBJ “knew of no innocent form of recreation”: The only sanctified activity was hard work to achieve clearly defined goals; the only recreation was frenetic activity that made one forget the problems of the day; and the only true happiness was the oblivion he could find in Scotch or in sleep. The concept of reading for the sake of contemplation, of community activity for the sake of sharing joy, of conversation for the sake of human contact was totally foreign to his psyche. He did understand dimly that other people had some interests outside of their direct work, but he thought of such interests as weakness, and, if they included classical music or drama, mere snobbery practiced by “the Eastern Establishment.”

Still, Johnson was no couch potato. He actually did some swimming in the White House pool, and in the outdoor pool on the ranch in Texas. But he usually had at least one person with him so he could talk politics while moving around in the water. He enjoyed horseback riding on his ranch, too, but of course he was doing his job as a ranch owner, not having fun when he made the rounds. Above all, though, Johnson liked to dance. He was a good ballroom dancer, and there’s no reason to believe he talked politics with his attractive partners on the dance floor. “He had a good sense of the rhythm,” observed one social columnist, “and did a smooth fox trot.” He was “a marvelous dancer,” said singer Edie Adams, who had been at one of the presidential parties. “You don’t find dancers like that any more. Usually they’re sort of milquetoast fellows, but he knew exactly where he was going. . . . I thought, ‘Gee, that’s good. This is the strong man we’ve got up here running the country. I like that!’”

When Johnson was in the Senate, he did a little golfing, but he didn’t take it seriously. He was the devotee, it was said, of the “Hit-Till-You’re-Happy School of Golf.” He had a swing that looked like he was chopping wood or was trying to kill a rattlesnake, and he always hit as many shots as he wanted, until he made one he liked. One observer said Johnson played by his own rules: he “flattered, cajoled, needled, scolded, belittled, and sweet-talked the golf balls” the way he did his colleagues in the Senate.

In the spring of 1964, a few months after Johnson became president, Jack Valenti, one of his aides, suggested taking a little time off from work to play some golf with him. Johnson hadn’t played in a
long time, and he was reluctant to interrupt his work to play golf with Valenti. But when Valenti proposed inviting some senators to join him, Johnson’s eyes lit up. “That’s a helluva idea,” he cried. “This can be a new forum for me to browbeat these guys.” When a newspaper reported that LBJ liked golf because he had a zest for walking, Valenti said it was “a zest for politicking.” People teased Johnson about his golfing, but he didn’t seem to mind. “I don’t have a handicap,” he once said. “I’m all handicap.” One golf pro said the president “didn’t play very well, but he had a hell of a good time. He would josh around, kidding whoever was with him. He’d make comments to the other players—of a personal nature.”

When the Vietnam War became increasingly unpopular with the American people, Johnson decided to give up the game. He told his aides that if people saw him on the golf links while American boys were dying in Asia, they would “eat me alive.” Then, in the late summer of his last year in office, he announced, for the fun of it, at a White House dinner, that he was planning to give up alcohol and return to golf. “This is alarming, if true,” wrote James Reston mischievously in his New York Times column, “for in the present state of the world and the presidency it really should be the other way around.” Golf, Reston went on to say, was a form of self-torment, invented by the Scots, along with whiskey, to make people suffer: “To substitute golf for ‘whiskey’s old prophetic aid’ is a puzzle and could be a calamity. And to do it as an escape from agony is the worst miscalculation since the start of the Vietnam War. Golf is not an escape from agony. It is itself an agony.” Golf was never an “agony” for Johnson, but it was not a major pleasure either. Swimming and dancing were also minor indulgences. Johnson’s greatest enjoyment was his 410-acre ranch outside Johnson City in South Texas. He liked to go boating on the Pedernales River, which ran in front of his ranchhouse. Sometimes he even went fishing for bass and catfish in the ponds and lakes of the surrounding area. More fun for him, though, was taking people—friends, reporters, White House aides—on tours of his ranch. Like Johnson himself, the tours were fast-paced, a bit rowdy, and at times challenging. They usually included a trip to the ramshackle cabin, which he claimed was his humble birthplace (like Lincoln’s), even though he knew it wasn’t. He also liked to show off the horses and cattle they encountered as he careened around the place, sometimes at ninety miles per hour.

Johnson liked to have special fun on the ranch with people on his staff, and with men he was considering for a position in his administration. In July 1965, he invited Joseph H. Califano Jr., whom he planned to make his adviser on domestic affairs, for a little visit, so he could size him up. First came a swim. After breakfast, Johnson asked Califano to join him in the pool. When Califano got in the water, Johnson asked
solemnly, “Are you ready to help your president?” Replied Califano, “It would be an honor and a privilege.” There was more talking than swimming after the exchange, but Califano seems to have held his own with the president.

After the pool came a drive around the ranch, followed by a car and a station wagon containing some Secret Service agents. While LBJ drove and talked, he helped himself generously to the Cutty Sark, ice, and soda in a large white foam cup, and whenever he wanted a refill, he slowed down, held his left hand out of the car window, and started shaking the cup with the ice in it. Then one of the Secret Service men rushed up, took the cup, ran back to the station wagon, asked another agent to refill it, and then took it back to Johnson as the car continued moving slowly along.

The afternoon for Califano was more vigorous. Johnson persuaded him to do some water-skiing on a nearby lake. Johnson’s main objective, as he drove the speed boat up and down the lake, was to propel Califano off the skis into the water. “He drove faster and faster,” Califano recalled, “zigging and zagging around the lake… The faster he drove and twisted, the more I was determined to stay. He threw me once. He was going so fast that I thought I’d split in two when I flew off the skis and hit the water. Determined to prove myself, I got back up and managed not to fall again.”

But Johnson wasn’t through with Califano. After the skiing, Johnson took Califano for a ride around the lake in a small blue car, with his secretary, Vicky McCammon, sitting next to him in front, and Califano in the back seat. At one point, the car reached a steep incline at the edge of the lake and started rolling down toward the water. “The brakes don’t work!” Johnson yelled frantically. “The brakes won’t hold! We’re going under!” The car then splashed into the lake, and Califano started to get out. Just then the car leveled, and he realized that they were in an amphibious car, and in no danger at all. As they putted along the lake, Johnson started teasing Califano. “Vicky,” he said to his secretary, “did you see what Joe did? He didn’t give a damn about his president. He just wanted to save his own skin and get out of the car.”

It turned out that Johnson was fond of playing this trick on visitors. He especially enjoyed trying it out on young married couples, to see whether the husband would try to save his own life before helping his wife survive. It wasn’t a very nice prank, but then Johnson’s sense of humor wasn’t always very nice. Still, he ended up hiring Califano to be his adviser on domestic affairs, and Califano was ready to do the president’s bidding.

Many people regarded Johnson as a “Texas Hill Philistine.” But he sponsored federal aid to the Arts and Humanities while he was in office. The “desire for beauty,” he declared in one of his speeches in
May 1964, was as important as “the needs of the body.” He may have believed this; he loved the countryside where his ranch was located. But art and literature played a small part in his life. He never read novels or poems, and he had little interest in opera, ballet, and symphonic music. He knew little about painting and sculpture, and he wasn’t much of a play-goer or movie fan, either.

But he did like Western art—pictures of cowboys and scenes in the part of Texas he knew. He also liked Western music—“Wagon Wheels” and “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” In the summer of 1965, he and Lady Bird hosted a festival of the arts at the White House, attended by scores of artists and writers who presented poetry readings, dance recitals, art exhibitions, and film screenings. It wasn’t Johnson’s domain, but, like George Washington, he thought the government ought to encourage art and literature.

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FROM A LECTURE, “LYNDON JOHNSON’S DIVERIONS,” BASED ON