A Press Conference with Napoleon

Moderator: Welcome to a very special edition of "Meet the Press." We have with us today that internationally famous and distinguished statesman, Napoleon Bonaparte. Joining us to direct questions to our guest is a distinguished panel of journalists. Each has gained prominence for a unique style of interview:

Barbara Walters, formerly a writer and anchor on NBC's "Today" show and ABC's 20/20, and now with "The View"

Ellen Lee DeGeneres is an American stand-up comedian, actress, and currently the Emmy Award-winning host of the syndicated talk show The Ellen DeGeneres Show.

Another panelist is Stephen Tyrone Colbert, who is a comedian, satirist, actor, and writer known for his ironic style, on his TV show "The Colbert Report".

Completing our panel is Phillip Calvin McGraw, best known as Dr. Phil, is an American television personality, psychologist and author who is the host of the psychology themed television show Dr. Phil.

We welcome all of you, and at this time we introduce today's guest. On this special edition, Napoleon Bonaparte. His rise to fame as the leader of France was swift. When he was twenty he was an obscure lieutenant in the French Army. By his thirtieth birthday, he was conqueror of half of Europe. He had himself declared Emperor of France but ruled only a short time, for five years later he was a lonely exile. His death a few years later remains shrouded in mystery and a source of controversy among contemporary historians.

Welcome, Emperor.

We begin our questions with Dr. Phil

Dr. Phil: Sir, it's a great pleasure to be able to ask you questions about your life and times. Would you begin by telling us a bit about your childhood. Did you grow up in France?

Napoleon: Before I answer your question, I must comment on the introduction by the moderator. Sir, I was never an "obscure" lieutenant. At all times I was the focus of attention, no matter what the situation. Now, as to my childhood. It was not pleasant. I was born in Corsica, a tiny island off the coast of Italy. Life was hard there, and one learned quickly what must be done to survive. My family was large, and my father had a difficult time feeding so many. We were of noble birth, but that is of little comfort when one is hungry. At an early age I decided that wealth and power were more important than ancestral background. So at ten years of age, I managed to get a scholarship that permitted me to attend military school in France, first at Brienne and then in Paris.

Dr. Phil: Did you enjoy military school? Did you feel right off that a career as a soldier was meant for you?

Napoleon: I was always lonely during my military training, so perhaps that is why I threw myself into a career where I could rise to power. Young people can be very cruel, and I was often humiliated when I went to school. Looking back, I can see that they had much to ridicule. I had a clumsy Italian accent when I tried to speak French, and if that wasn't enough, the other students knew I was poor and had had no training in manners. There is nothing more humiliating than poverty. One feels so frustrated and powerless.
Moderator: And now a question from Ellen DeGeneres

Ellen DeGeneres: Can you capsule for us the early events in your military career that brought you to prominence politically?

Napoleon: Well, Ellen, those events were in the last days of the Revolution. I understand you have had some experience in covering revolutions, so you know that popularity for one faction or another, one group or another, waxes and wanes. It was the same with our revolution. Those who were in power lost favor, were executed by the new group, who in turn lost popularity, and were sent to the guillotine by the new leadership. At the same time France was besieged by foreign enemies. In 1793 I drove the British fleet from the French port of Toulon.

Ellen DeGeneres: Excuse me, your highness, but there are some historians who say your participation was not that crucial to the victory of that encounter.

Napoleon: Great men, always have hostile critics who misinterpret the situation. In this case, there would not have been victory without me. It was barely two years later that I was responsible for saving the Convention from an attacking mob. And in regard for my obvious leadership ability, the Directory gave me command of our forces who were engaged against the Austrians in Italy.

Barbara Walters: Emperor Bonaparte, I must interrupt to say that we have learned that your appointment to this command was directly due to the influence of your marriage to Josephine de Beauharnais, whom you knew to be in favor with the members of the Directory. In fact, we suggest you married her to further your political ambitions.

Napoleon: Miss Walters, that will remain the conjecture of historians, and if you choose to believe it, I will not dissuade you. I will say Josephine and I knew our motives and expressed our feelings to each other candidly. Such matters are not discussed with outsiders.

Barbara Walters: Very well sir. Let's talk then a bit about another area of your career. You vanquished the Austrians and succeeded in giving France command of most of northern Italy. How did you persuade the Directors to give you the command in the Middle East?

Napoleon: A very good question, madam. It gives me an opportunity to tell you about the military strategy which I possess. I have been called a military genius, and who am I to argue with accurate statement of fact? But let me return to the campaign in Egypt and Syria. I knew that England depended heavily on trade in the East, and it was my idea to weaken trade by military encounter in the area. It was a brilliant decision, for not only was our military campaign victorious, but we made a tremendous scientific advancement.

Stephen Colbert: I presume you are talking about the discovery of the stone in Rosetta by one of your officers.

Napoleon: Exactly. We were in the town of Rosetta, which is very near the mouth of the Nile, when the stone was brought to me. I immediately knew the value, for I could see at least two, possibly three kinds of inscriptions. It was in 1821 the scholar Jean-François Champollion announced that because of the Rosetta Stone, he had deciphered demotic, the alphabetical form of Egyptian writing.

Ellen DeGeneres: But, sir, your military campaign was not really all that much of a victory, was it? In actuality, didn't Admiral Nelson destroy the French fleet while it was anchored in Abukir Bay? Didn't he leave you without supplies and without communications to France?

Napoleon: The English delayed my plans only slightly. I did leave my army in the area, though, and returned to France so that I could personally relay the true state of events. The people of France recognized from my glorious reports that we did have great victories, regardless of the boasts of the English.
Ellen DeGeneres: You were able to seize the government in 1799, when the Directory was being blamed for the defeats of the French Army by the Second Coalition of European powers, specifically Great Britain, Austria and Russia. After the coup d'état you had a new constitution drawn up, providing for four legislative bodies and three executives, called consuls. You yourself were First Consul. How did this period differ from the rule you exercised later as emperor?

Napoleon: A shrewd question—actually, there was not much difference. I was in total control at all times. It was more a question of semantics, of language. I could direct and supervise from the government in Paris, without appearing to be an absolute dictator. I achieved this control primarily by controlling local government—I made appointments which had previously been filled by elections. I made spectacular diplomatic and military moves which assured the end of hostilities—by 1802, even Great Britain had agreed to stop fighting. We annexed Belgium, some areas of Germany and portions of northern Italy and set up republics which were friendly, and also dependent on France. So for the first time in ten years, we, the French, were at peace with all our neighbors.

Barbara Walters: But it was a short peace.

Napoleon: True. But in that time I could continue the reforms of the Revolution. You know, I have always considered myself a “son of the Revolution,” and there was still much to be done. And of course, all of it was approved by the people. I established the special elections called plebiscites. After each of my reforms, I asked the people to vote as to whether or not they approved of my actions, and each plebiscite election revealed that millions approved, while only a handful of malcontents voted no.

Moderator: Members of the press and Emperor Bonaparte, I must tell you that we are running short of time. Please make your questions and answers more specific, so that we might cover all points before we conclude. Dr. Phil do you have an additional question for the emperor?

Dr. Phil: Thank you. I do. Emperor, could you tell us about a few of the social reforms of which you're most proud?

Napoleon: Certainly. You must remember that the Revolution had brought about a mixture of reform—there was some return to the laws of the Old Regime, and some innovative and new legalities. I asked a group of lawyers to create a simpler, more uniform system and they came up with what we called the Napoleonic Code. We applied it not only to France but to all territory where our power extended. And I take pride in saying it is the basis for legal systems of most of the nations of Western Europe, and of course that territory you call the state of Louisiana in the United States. The code offers religious toleration, abolition of feudalism and, of course, legal equality for all classes.

Then of course there was the religious question, always a delicate issue. I negotiated a treaty, the Concordant of 1801, in which I acknowledged the Pope as head of the Catholic Church in France. It also allowed Catholics to worship in public. Though this gave the appearance of a preferred position, I also granted freedom of worship to Protestants, and decreed that the government would pay the salaries of both Catholic and Protestant clergy.

Stephen Colbert: Didn't you also institute a public works program and a system of public education?

Napoleon: I am most proud of both of these—the building of elementary and secondary schools, colleges and the national department of education guaranteed that my ideas and philosophies could be perpetuated by the young.

Stephen Colbert: And the public works system?

Napoleon: Yes, it was necessary. Highways had to be built, and harbors and canals improved. We continued to beautify this lovely city of Paris and thirty of our highways led straight from the city of lights to the borders of neighboring countries. This was most useful for moving armies, though we hoped war would not be necessary. All of these projects created jobs and stimulated our economy.

Barbara Walters: Emperor, you say you did not want war. Yet most of your rule is characterized by war, by constant aggression toward other countries...
Napoleon: I resent that statement, it is not consistent with the reality of the situation.

Barbara Walters: But surely, Emperor Napoleon, you must agree that history has portrayed your desire for world conquest and total power accurately. Even your coronation suggests your compulsion to take control.

Napoleon: You refer to the incident in which I took the crown from the hands of the Pope and placed it upon my head, and then crowned the Empress Josephine myself. Well, I suppose it is a matter of interpretation. As for war, it was necessary. Surely, you have read of the many battles, of the continued agitation of the British who sought to be masters of the globe, with their infernal control of the oceans and their stubborn refusal to retreat from Spain and Portugal. Even the Russians would not see my point of view. France had to have more territory. When we marched into Russia and took Moscow, instead of surrendering, the Russians set fire to their one-time capital. We had no food supply then, and winter set in. The retreat was grim and nearly as bloody as the battle to take Moscow. But it would not have happened if Alexander I had not betrayed me and thrown open his ports to British traders in the first place.

Moderator: I must again caution about time, Sir. Please make your answers shorter and more to the point. Ellen do you have another question?

Ellen DeGeneres: A short question, Emperor. Why did you abdicate your throne?

Napoleon: There was nothing else I could do. The French people had grown weary of fighting—defeat does that to a country, and we had been forced to withdraw west of the Rhine after our defeat at Leipzig. But you have read of that. I was sent into exile on my beloved Elba, but it was only a respite, a gamble for time. I knew France would need me again.

Dr. Phil: I don’t think I would have put it quite that way, but you did indeed return to France for three months, March through June of 1815. What did you have in mind?

Napoleon: I saw that those who had allied against me, led by Great Britain of course, were quarreling and indecisive about the territories they had acquired. I invaded Belgium and planned to take them by surprise. But of course, you know that I encountered the Duke of Wellington and his forces at Waterloo. After that defeat, the British sent me to St. Helena, where I spent the last six years of my life.

I used the time to write of my many glorious years serving France. I tried to explain that I’d only become a dictator to restore order and to make sure that the reforms of the Revolution were put into place. My critics say my zeal for power cost Europe, with warring countries left heavily in debt. There was a great toll in human lives: three or four million men died in battle, and millions more were crippled or maimed. It would have been a different story if people had not resisted my ideas. How glorious could have been the future of France and the countries of Europe had they only obeyed me!

Moderator: I’m sorry we’re out of time. Thank you all for attending, and thank you, Emperor, and you, our panel, for appearing on “Meet the Press.”