INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ

April 28, 1969
Dr. Grosvenor introduces Mr. McDowell and interview is on Grosvenor Tape 1 and 2

G: Dr. Frantz, this Bart McDowell, of our senior editorial staff here at the National Geographic, who made this trip to Europe with Vice President Johnson and helped him with the manuscript which is published, and who became very fond of the Vice President. I think he has a number of anecdotes and some information about his trip, which I think will be helpful to you.

F: Did you also make that first trip that he made to Senegal?

Mc: No. The only one trip with him.

F: Why don't you move around here and let's talk a minute?

Mc: Very good.

F: We're not in that big a hurry, are we?

Mc: No, definitely not.

F: Well, start with the beginning, how you came to go along, and I'll just let you take the reins.

Mc: Dr. Grosvenor had committed the magazine to a story. I think he probably already has it on the tape, how he approached him on it.

F: He thinks at a garden party.

Mc: That's right. I believe it was Harry Byrd's party, where he said, "The next trip you make, please let us know; we'll send somebody in. We'd like to do an article."

I was the one that was picked to go, rather abruptly, toward the tail end of the summer. It seems to me we left on Labor Day, ahead of schedule, which is typical--impetuous--off to Europe. My own position on it, I wasn't, of course, filing any daily stories on the thing. I was to take notes along the way, particularly listening to both the Johnsons, all three of the Johnsons, because Lynda Bird was along too, and get their reactions ,

simply be Boswell to their Johnson along the way. Then we could shape up with a certain body of research a skeleton manuscript that they in turn could use as a springboard to make their own and use as a writing tablet. So that's essentially the approach we had.

I had a fair amount of time, not perhaps as much as I'd have liked, with all three of them. Of course Mrs. Johnson and Lynda Bird were more accessible because they had less substantive work to do, but I did have a few very nice visits with the then-Vice President a couple of times in a completely informal fashion on the plane, where he would talk and sort of ramble freely.

A couple of anecdotes here. I grabbed up my notes and one time I started a letter to my children on about my own fortieth birthday,which was on this trip. I got to the point on this trip where I could predict when he would lose his temper. I thought that was pretty good. I compared notes with Liz Carpenter, who of course was superb at reading the moods. He was so much like Melville Grosvenor here, he reminded me very much--not necessarily in the way the mind works but the way the heart works, the moods. Of course I've worked very closely with Dr. Grosvenor over the years. It was curious to me, the same kind of enthusiastic, full-speed ahead behaviour, and then a sudden frustration, or under pressure, and he would tend to lose his temper--grow very frustrated first and bottle it up for awhile and hold in, and then finally it would explode.

F: That was enough of that.

Mc: Yes. This was very curious to me. As the trip went on, he had a good press to begin with, and then when he got to Rovaniemi in Finland--this was after several days of very, very strenuous travel, crossing these east-west time zones, and a schedule right down to the comfort station

stop. And of course he got no sleep. At Rovaniemi, north of the Arctic Circle there, or just about on the Arctic Circle--

F: You better spell that for my secretary--

Mc: Well--

G: Here it is.

Mc: It's Rovaniemi. We call it Lapland, but it really isn't Lapland. I think that's a near mistake here in the Geographic.

There had been an incident that had been misinterpreted by the local press. They had jumped on him about having some youngsters walk on the grave of the Finnish unknown soldier, so he had been criticized, without really realizing this was what had happened. But he had a bad press, or what he felt was a bad press, and was terribly distraught and depressed by it; then had blown up at Turku the next day at the University there, the old University, the castle there.

Then the pendulum had gone the other way, and he was so restrained. In fact he said so. He said to some of the reporters, I heard him, "Well, now you cussed me on shaking all these hands yesterday. I'm just going to do everything very quietly." So he moved through with hurt feelings and in a very introverted fashion for this whole day in Turku. This kind of swing of the pendulum back and forth, under pressure.

I looked at the schedule and I talked to Liz Carpenter and I said, "I'll bet you that we have the same kind of thing happen on September 10th, when we go from Finland when we leave Helsinki in the morning and go to Bodo in Norway, and go on to Oslo that evening." I said, "That's a terrible schedule; here's a man--essentially two capitals and one important other city all in one day. The pressure is really going to be on him. He takes his leave of one head of state and jumps to the next and I bet

you he'll feel crowded again. You're going to see some more fireworks." And indeed this happened. The same sort of thing. Just the irritations of traveling and pressures and then he'd work it off.

Then he does another thing that's interesting. After blowing up at somebody, he feels bad about it, and then does something very nice for them--not a formal apology, verbalized apology, but gives them a gift, or he takes them to lunch, or pours them a special drink or something as a peace offering.

G: Who were the people he got mad at, did you say?

Mc: Just at whoever's around, whoever's around at the time that the fireworks go off.

F: At that moment.

Mc: Right.

F: It's almost indiscriminate.

Mc: Yes, it is, it can be. He got mad at a couple of the correspondents in one fashion; in another it was a translator named Buck Backe, I think is his name. He's in the Foreign Service, serving as a translator. Another time he blew up at a little secretary, whose name I forget, who was traveling along the way. But it was just some imperfection in the schedule or some goof, or just impatience. And then, great contrition afterwards and real effort to make things smooth again.

Well, in the course of this pressured day, he told one right interesting story on the plane. He came back on the flight, I guess from Helsinki to Bodo, and he was talking to two or three of us there, reminiscing about his days as Majority Leader during the Eisenhower years, when he was first elected Majority Leader. He said that one Senator changed his vote--the way this came up, he was talking about his conversations

with President Kekkonen of Finland and at that time the Finns were interested--or the Russians--were interested in building an oil pipeline to Helsinki. The U.S. government didn't want this to happen, one more tie to Russia for Finland, and wanted the Finns to resist. So he, Lyndon Johnson, in talking about Kekkonen, reported to us in the conversation on the plane, he said, "Now I really held his feet to the fire on this," and he said, "And I really know how to hold feet to the fire." He said, "I learned as Majority Leader. Right after I was elected Majority Leader a senator came to me who had promised me his vote on a bill and he said, "I'm sorry Lyndon, but I had to switch my vote at the last minute! He said "John L. Lewis came to me and told me that I simply had to do this and so I changed my vote!" So said the Vice President, "I knew Lewis was important in his state and so I didn't say anything further, I understood."

"And there was another Senator standing at my elbow," he said, "and he turned to me after the first man had gone and said, 'Lyndon, you'll never be a Majority Leader like Joe Robinson unless you learn a lesson right now.'"

And he said, "What's that lesson?"

He said, "You've got to be hard on some people."

Said the Vice President, "Nobody likes to feel he's a failure, and so I determined right then that I would never made that mistake again." At that point he said from there on whenever that senator or any other senator defected on a vote, he would hold their feet to the fire. Which I thought was right interesting--when did he learn to be a hard man. It was obvious he enjoyed the reputation of being a man who could hold feet to the fire.

Then he told the story of his first meeting with a Vice President,

that he later told during the presidential campaign, I think, at Santa Barbara.

G: Was that Nixon?

Mc: No, with Dawes.

G: With whom?

Mc: Charlie Dawes.

F: With a vice president.

Mc: The first Vice President he ever saw.

G: Oh, Charles Dawes.

Mc: This was 1924, I think he said. During the campaign, it came up in the course of the campaign, he was working as an elevator operator in the Flatiron Building. They gave them two hours off to go see the Vice President when he was in town, and in order to arrange this he had to work an additional eight hours, I believe he said, which he did. He had to go back at night and work eight hours in order to get this special time off to see Vice President Dawes. But the fact that he had seen him made a great impression on him.

Another little story he told at the same time was about Pat Neff in Texas, and how a letter that Pat Neff had routinely written to him or to his mother--to the family in any case--Pat Neff apparently did all but use mimeograph machine on high school graduates congratulating them and mentioning those who had done well, spurring them on to go to the University. At one time he, Lyndon, was talking to his mother about whether he should go on to school. And his mother said, "Now you must remember Governor Neff's letter to you, and how he had all this faith in you to go on to school." And Lyndon said he thought that that clinched the argument of his mother, and for that reason he had always been careful to write letters

to the graduating seniors of the high school classes in his own congressional district. And later of course, as senator, to all of them he could to encourage them to go on to school.

F: Wonderful, wonderful.

Mc: That's three of them. He would get his feelings hurt by the press and he was very careful to read all his clippings. He got what the press boys were doing to him each day. He'd get what they did yesterday every morning.

And I guess it was about the time of this Rovaniemi incident and the New York Times man had made some reference to how this was not received well, or some such point. I had mentioned the fact that September 10th, I expected him to have a blow-up again because it was a crowded day and we were going to have more fireworks. I had mentioned to Liz Carpenter that that was my birthday and, "wouldn't you know, we'll undoubtedly have fireworks on my birthday." So she had made a mental note, quite unknown to me, to get me a birthday cake made and LBJ was going to present it to me. This I found out well afterwards. The cake was baked somewhere along the way, I guess in Helsinki, and they carried it with them to and from the plane. But when he got the bad press he figured it would look like an attempt to butter up or bribe the press if he started singling out any member of the press for a birthday cake and whatnot, and so he got cold feet about the whole thing. Apparently the stewards carried this cake on and off the plane waiting for him to get around to presenting it until the icing soured! It was never presented, it was never presented at all.

F: You never had your birthday.

Mc: I didn't have, or eat it.

I don't know when it was on the trip--I would suspect it was about

Saturday, the 14th of September, when we came into Copenhagen because I had been fairly close, you know, seeing a good bit of him before that, and he seemed very relaxed, barring a few times when the schedule got out of hand. But he certainly hadn't seemed like a worried man. Then he went into eclipse on Sunday, the 15th, and no one saw him at all. He cancelled all of his sight-seeing himself that day.

Tape 2

F: You were telling about Bobby Baker.

Mc: Yes. Now as to when it was that he found out that the case was coming up, was tipped off about it. . .It was of course well after everybody had gotten home before I found out about the Bobby Baker case.

F: You could just look back and reconstruct.

Mc: That's right. But there was a change in his personality and in his schedule when we arrived in Copenhagen. He went into his hotel room, closed the door, and spent the day on the telephone,according to George Reedy. We assumed that it was on--heaven knows what! He was getting restless or he was tired of his trip and eager to get home. Mrs. Johnson went ahead with her schedule and went on the canal tour and went out to a castle, and we visited a mink farm and all sorts of other things. I'm sure you have a copy.

F: Did he cancel things that day?

Mc: He cancelled, yes, he cancelled. Whatever plans that were on the docket for him, he scratched and spent the entire day locked up in his room. That evening he went to the park. What's the name of the park there in Copenhagen?

F: Tivoli?

Mc: Tivoli. The famous last night at Tivoli, and he marched with a famous band there. Here was this lighthearted park atmosphere and sort of carnival touch all around, and he was as grim as a pallbearer as he marched down.

I know Kurt Wentzel remarked on this. I remarked on it. I thought, yes, the whole thing was just out of whack. He had spent the whole day on the phone, and here when he finally emerged to march in this little light-hearted parade, he was obviously very grim and preoccupied. He left early.

G: I would think he would be.

Mc: Yes, Of course, later this made sense. Then he curtailed the schedule and we spent instead of two days, just a fraction of one day in Reykjavik in Iceland on the way home. The Greenland part of the trip was completely cancelled. Well that had never been definite because we were afraid of weather there--getting in and not getting out. So the fact that Greenland was scratched didn't cause any concern, but the fact that Iceland was such a truncated trip caused some criticism.

F: I was going to say, did this bring criticism in Reykjavik?

Mc: It did. In fact they said, "This is not an official visit. This is just an official stopover." This was one of the comments from a newsman there in Iceland.

F: But newsmen generally were still in the dark as to why--

Mc: Totally, no one--that I heard--made any comment.

F: But you could sense the change in the whole party?

Mc: Indeed, a great change.

And then, curiously enough--here he had been preoccupied and worried and frowning--he made I think the most graceful speech of the entire trip that evening in Reykjavik, with the President of Iceland--handed a real nosegay of extemporaneous compliments to the President and had the whole crowd in the palm of his hand. It was the neatest job of easy toastmastering that I've ever seen, and certainly the easiest thing that he had done on that whole trip. Now here again, this makes no great sense, except here's

a man who under real pressure who apparently can bounce back with amazing resilience. And that night, immediately after the dinner party, we all flew back to the USA.

F: Did the plan of the trip make sense? You kind of criss-crossed up and down and went into places that, you know, are not geographically household names.

Mc: Of course this was all very carefully worked out in advance. It was all planned meticulously in advance.

F: Why did you go places like Bodo? Turku, I can understand.

Mc: Rovaniemi of course is an interesting thing of and by itself. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or the Grave of the Unknown Soldier is there. And there is a model city done by a very famous architect and city planner of Finland. It gives a certain geographic breadth to the trip to get up above the Arctic Circle near Lapland. This gave it the flavor of being a country-wide tour instead of just a capital tour. I think that's striven for. Bodo was a town that was much battered by the Germans during the war and had been rebuilt and it was important to fishing, so there was a flavor of having toured Norway and not just Oslo, when he made the stop.

F: Was there a stopover for the old Murmansk run?

Mc: No, it was definitely not, because it was all occupied.

F: It was occupied by that time, that's right.

Mc: But it was burned, because it was a wooden city. It burned quickly as I recall. That's why it needed rebuilding.

F: What kind of impressions did you come home with from this trip--of the President and his family?

Mc: I was absolutely delighted with Lady Bird Johnson. I think she is one of the sweetest and most genuinely sweet people, with more native phrase-making

ability than any of the journalists on the trip.

F: She'd be a good copywriter, wouldn't she?

Mc: Absolutely great, just lovely, and it just pours out--in addition to being very sweet and thoughtful.

Lynda, bright and pretty, then a 19-year old with a good deal of poise for a teenager, quite amazing. Not the polished young lady she is now, but still a lot of verve.

LBJ--well, all the things that put other people off don't put me off because you see I am a Texan and he sounds just like all my kinfolks. So the accent does not put me off; it endears him to me. But here's a man who is a very formidable personality. He can reduce me to stuttering. He looks you in the eye and he doesn't just look you in the eye; it is the way an ophthalmologist does--he studies your retina. This is a very impressive personality.

F: I've noticed that in receiving lines, whereas most politicians hand you on, he just stands there and glares at you.

On your trip to Finland and the Scandinavian countries, did you have any personal contact with the President?

Mc: Yes. The evening in Oslo, after a hard day of travel and two different stops, Liz Carpenter had asked Kurt Wentzel and me to come by the Vice President's suite before dinner for a drink and then we were to go to dinner. Now it had been a rough day. He had had an unhappy incident coming in on the plane. The newspapermen had gone on strike in Oslo in mid-speech.

F: The Norwegian, you mean?

Mc: The Norwegian press had been given a position that was very bad. It was against the light and on the wrong side of where the action was, and in

anger they had all put their cameras down and refused to take pictures. Anyway, the press had been alienated. He was in a testy mood at that stage and he was tired and testy. Apparently reservations had been made to go dancing and dining some place away from the hotel. He wanted to spend the evening in the hotel itself. Well, when confronted with these plans he lost his temper and said, "No, sir," and fairly well vetoed things. Then the entire group went downstairs to what we thought was the main dining room where, reputedly, they had an orchestra.

F: He went with you?

Mc: Oh yes, he and Mrs. Johnson and the whole party--Horace Busby, and Liz Carpenter--Bess Abell did not go; she bowed out, and several others of the official party. Wentzel and I were the only two members of the press I guess that were at this particular thing. Perhaps fifteen people went down to what we thought was the official dining room which turned out to be the coffee shop. Well, the Vice President requested the people to move tables together so the whole group could sit down together. The Norwegian maitre d' said it was not possible and refused to.

F: Did he know this was the Vice President?

Mc: The Vice President reminded him who was in the party, and which party this was, and still the head waiter said, "No, please go downstairs instead." There was a great communication gap here. Finally, the Vice President said, "If they won't move the tables, we can." So he picked up one end of the table and told me to pick up the other and we began to move tables around of varying height and so on, and finally got a place to eat.

Then afterwards we discovered that the orchestra was downstairs and that this was what they really were trying to do, was get us to go

downstairs where the tables had been set for us. But it was very typical of the sort of "take things in your own hands" temper, and this is what happened.

F: Did you see evidence of his just going sort of away from the formalized tour and seeing people, nondescript people, of no particular importance?

Mc: Yes. He enjoyed very much the handshaking bit. Especially I think this is true in Finland where there were great crowds of people around the hotel all the time. Whenever he came out or went in, there were always throngs and he got their names and did a great deal of handshaking very effectively.

I remember once in Norway, though, his hands were all bloody; he showed them to me. One hand was all swollen. At that point; he had what looked like little skin cancers on the top of his hands, I believe he later had them removed after he was President, but they were all roughed up and his knuckles were actually bleeding because he said the Norwegian boys all wanted to shake hands so hard. He said, "They all want to bring me to my knees," and apparently there they really shook and meant it.

But generally he was very effective with the handshaking. In Helsinki he went through the market and shook hands everywhere and was a great success. He went for a tour in Bodo, Norway, a housing development; he always tried to relate these things to his own experience. He compared the houses there to a house that he and Lady Bird had had in Corpus Christi, Texas, when they were first married. I think he said something like, "$14 a month!" Now they didn't live in Corpus when they were first married, did they?

F: They lived in Austin when they were first married.

Mc: Yes. But there was a Corpus Christi place where they were familiar with

paying rent. He was comparing it to a rent in Corpus Christi. Maybe this was an early housing project of FDR's or something.

F: Maybe.

Mc: I remember this. Wherever he visited he would try to relate this to his own experience. If it was a health program he would talk about the hospital he was a member of the board of. I know Dr. Janet Travell there in Hyannis Port, just as we were leaving that time, she was having dinner with us--

F: Now what time was this?

Mc: This was as we left on this trip on Labor Day of 1963.

F: You left from Hyannis Port?

Mc: We went from here but stopped briefly for him to see the President. By the way Kurt Wentzel took pictures of them, of the two Presidents, together at that particular meeting.

F: Did the President, President Kennedy, that is, come out to greet your group?

Mc: No. There was a helicopter--a small hard-core group that went to the summer White House there at Hyannis Port, I think only two photographers as I recall, Frank Mutoe and Kurt Wentzel were the two that went, on a sort of pool basis, along with the Johnsons. Then they returned to the Air Force base and that's where we had dinner.

F: Now you had a separate press plane, did you?

Mc: No, we were all in the same plane.

F: All in the same plane.

Mc: Right.

F: So you got to see him a fair amount then between stops.

Mc: Exactly.

F: He'd come back and visit with you?

Mc: Frequently. Frequently he was back in our end of the plane.

F: Just talking?

Mc: Yes, just come back and would reminisce and talk at length. He, for example, had passes to the U.S. Senate, to the Vice President's gallery, and he would fill them out for your children, for any number of the press people on the plane. The signature "Lyndon B. Johnson" was forged by some secretary in his office, but then in his own hand he would fill out the name of your child, and you'd end up with a semi-forgery on these things. But he did this and he presented us, at the end of the trip, with cigarette lighters with the Vice Presidential seal and the occasion, Scandinavian trip and the dates, for keepsakes. But a great deal of the time just shooting the breeze. He liked to have people around to talk to.

F: Was the feeling among the reporters that time that he might be dropped in '64? Do you remember?

Mc: I don't recall it was this. Now, this was before the Bobby Baker case. I don't think so. I don't recall any. This reached a crescendo then a month later when Kennedy was indeed asked in a press conference just before the assassination, would he be the candidate? But at that stage of the game, before the Bobby Baker case I don't think there was any hint of this.

F: Was there any noticeable difference between his approach to, say, the crowned heads of Scandinavia and the kind of ordinary people he ran into? Did he more or less follow the same procedure with both types?

Mc: He handled the royalty very smoothly. He's pretty much himself under any circumstances. He's apt to be smooth or rough depending on his mood rather than the person he's meeting. I didn't see any great--I wasn't eavesdropping on the royal conversations or anything--Horace Busby was.

Busby became quite the favorite of the Scandinavian crowned heads, I think, and was always making circuits with the palace crowd. I got a bit of a playback from Mrs. Johnson on their meetings with the Danish royal family. The young princess who later married King Constantine of Greece was much taken with the fact that Lynda Bird was engaged then to be married--not her husband, not the betrothal that took, but the other-- and was saying, "Well, if Lynda Bird can, why can't I, Daddy?" to her father, the King. The pressure was there. Apparently it was very nice as I got the playback from Mrs. Johnson from this luncheon in the country, the informality of it. In fact, it was really just two families with teenage youngsters meeting.

F: Talking about--

Mc: Similar problems.

F: Right.

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