

4-10-2009

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Recommended Citation

University Marketing and Communications, "04/10/2009 - Presidential Historian and Biographer Next Speaker in EIU Edgar Series" (2009). 2009. 53.

https://thekeep.eiu.edu/press_releases_2009/53

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Presidential Historian, Biographer Next Speaker in EIU Edgar Series

Apr-10-2009

Historian and biographer Richard Norton Smith has a mantra. "There's no excuse for a dull book, a dull museum or a dull speech," he says. "Especially when dealing with history -- the most fascinating subject I know."

Campus and community residents will have the opportunity to see Smith practice what he preaches as the fourth speaker in the Edgar Lecture Series, hosted at Eastern Illinois University. His talk, "The Triumph of Politics: Abraham Lincoln at 200," will begin at 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 21, at The Theatre, located in the Doudna Fine Arts Center.

Admission is free and open to the public. A public reception will follow in the building's concourse.

The Edgar Lecture Series, established in 2007 by former Illinois Governor Jim Edgar and his wife, Brenda, in continuing support of their alma mater, allows the university to host two speakers a year -- one in the fall and one in the spring. Lectures are to focus primarily on state government and shall address current issues in state government and their historical implications.

The Edgars personally launched the series, with the former governor and first lady speaking in the fall and spring, respectively, of the 2007-2008 academic year. Mike Lawrence, Edgar's former press secretary and senior policy adviser, spoke in Fall 2008.

Smith first met Edgar nearly a decade ago while serving as the director of the Gerald R. Ford Museum in Grand Rapids, Mich. A few years later, as the founding director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Smith was able to "spend a fair amount of time" with the former governor since Edgar, at the time, was serving as president of the ALPLM Foundation. He continues to serve on the board of directors.

The two men's association was "one of the most pleasant parts" of the job, Smith said, adding that he was delighted to have been invited as a speaker in the Edgar Lecture Series.

Smith hopes to both educate and entertain his audience as he discusses Lincoln who, the historian says admiringly, "was someone who never stopped growing."

"Lincoln was still very much a work in progress" -- personally, politically and morally -- even toward the end of his presidency, Smith added.

Consider, for example, that Lincoln led the country during the Civil War. But as a young man, Lincoln spent less than three months in the military, serving first as a captain and later a private, during the Black Hawk War in his adopted state of Illinois. His lack of military experience was evident when, as president, Lincoln went through general after general before achieving success with Ulysses S. Grant.

And "the country paid a price" for his earlier decisions, Smith said.

Additionally, even at the end of his life, Lincoln continued to rethink some of his own prejudices. Over time, the war had essentially evolved from a fight over states' rights to a conflict over human rights. During his final public speech, Lincoln spoke of blacks' right to vote -- a radical idea for the time. A young man -- an actor by the name of John Wilkes Booth -- was in attendance and, reportedly, was quoted as commenting to companions, "That's the last speech he'll ever make."

Smith, who currently serves as scholar-in-residence at George Mason University in suburban Washington D.C., maintains an "unstuffy approach to the past," which has made him a familiar face to viewers of ABC, C-SPAN and the "News Hour with Jim Lehrer." A 1975 Harvard graduate, he is the author of eight books; his "Thomas E. Dewey and His Times" was a finalist for the 1983 Pulitzer Prize.

He is presently working on a full-scale biography of New York Governor and Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller.

Between 1987 and 2001, Smith served as director of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in West Branch, Iowa; the Dwight D. Eisenhower Center in Abilene, Kan.; the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and the Reagan Center for Public Affairs in Simi Valley, Calif.; and the Gerald R. Ford Museum and Library in Grand Rapids and Ann Arbor, Mich. respectively.

While in Grand Rapids, Smith became especially close to former President Gerald Ford, who personally asked Smith to deliver Ford's final eulogy. Smith did so upon Ford's death in January 2007.

In 2001, Smith became director of the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas, where he supervised construction of the institute's landmark home and launched several high profile programs. In October 2003, he was appointed founding director of the ALPLM in Springfield; during this same period, he served as executive director of a revitalized Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation, which

Springfield ; during this same period, he served as executive director of a revitalized Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Foundation, which doubled its endowment under his leadership.