Doris Kearns Goodwin

By CATE HALL

The author of one of President Obama’s favorite books visited Emory & Henry College where she held an exclusive question and answers session for students and spoke at a keynote as part of the College’s 175th anniversary celebration.

Doris Kearns Goodwin is a Pulitzer Prize winner as well as a presidential historian. She has appeared on TV as a part of shows such as The Oprah Winfrey Show, Meet the Press, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.

Goodwin received her B.A at Colby College and her PhD in Government at Harvard University. She spent some time teaching at Harvard before deciding to write full time and be at home with her three sons.

Her fascination with history began when she worked as a White House intern under L. B. Johnson when she was 24. “That was back before the Monica Lewinsky scandal made everything complicated.” She remembers dancing with Johnson during a party one night and that he told Goodwin he wanted her to work as his intern. “I had written an article against LBJ explaining how to remove him from power, and I wasn’t sure what he would say when he found out.” It didn’t faze him, and she grew to know him well. “LBJ would talk right in front of you. You could hardly breathe.” He would have his interns and even important people follow him into the bathroom to continue conversations rather than continue them after. Goodwin describes Johnson as a womanizer. “I was constantly chatting about boyfriends even when I didn’t have any.”

Goodwin has written four presidential historical books about F. Roosevelt, L.B. Johnson, Fitzgerald and Kennedys as well as Abraham Lincoln. “When you write about a certain period in time you begin to feel like you live with these people. I go to sleep with them and wake up with them. I’m talking to Abe and Mary and my kids think I’m crazy. You feel as if you are living in a different era.”

One of the greatest assistants Goodwin has had while working on her books has been letters. “Letters are intimate and allow you to know the emotions of the people. I don’t know what’s going to happen in 200 years when historians write about our time. There is such a lack of letters and diaries; everything is done through email.”

Her book *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* has become quite popular. When Barack Obama was still way behind Hilary Clinton in Spring 2007, he called Goodwin. “I answer my cell phone and the man on the other end says ‘Hello, this is Barack Obama. I just finished reading Team of Rivals and we need to talk.” He was inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s tactic of inviting his rivals to become members of his presidential cabinet. He was fascinated by Lincoln’s temperament and by his ability to not retaliate and his ability to be sensitive to others. “When Obama became president and he named Hilary Clinton as Secretary of State, the term Team of Rivals became almost a branded term,” Goodwin said.

Team of Rivals is set to become a film produced by Steven Spielberg in 2012. “It’s a whole new experience to have something made into a movie. I met Speilburg in 2000. He’s always wanted to make a movie about Lincoln. “

During the Keynote Address, Goodwin focused on Abraham Lincoln and the process of putting his top rivals into office beside him.

All together, Lincoln only completed about 12 months of school, but he would scour the area for books. Upon finding one he would not eat or sleep. “He grew up with the thought that if he could accomplish something great he would live on forever.” Goodwin says that throughout Lincoln’s career, he never made any permanent enemies. When he decided to put his competitors into the cabinet, he said “The times are in peril, these are the strongest most able bodied men and I must have them by my side.”

Goodwin discussed the different leadership qualities that made Lincoln a great president. He was able to listen to different points of view and people were free to disagree with him without any fear of punishment. He had the ability to learn on the job and to do so quickly. Lincoln had a willingness to share credit for success even when he had done all the work. “He created what is often called an emotional bank account within his cabinet; a reservoir of good feelings.” He also had a willingness to share blame with others regardless of who was to blame. He was aware of his own weaknesses; one of which was his habit of giving people too many 2nd chances. Lincoln was always able to control his emotions. Instead of blasting a person immediately, he would write a letter to that person and then set it aside. He would usually never mail the letters but only use them as a venting tool. Finally, President Abraham Lincoln knew how to relax. He is said to have gone to the theater over 100 times. He was a gifted story teller and had a great sense of humor. He felt that laughter was the greatest way to relax.

Goodwin is currently working on a new book which will be available sometime in 2012.