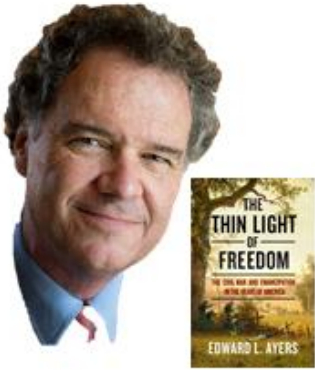


# Author Ayers will lecture at SIUE



SIUE • Segue Friday, February 23, 2018

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Department of Historical Studies, the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), and the SIUE Emeriti Faculty Association, are honored to welcome Edward Ayers, PhD, a renowned American historian, author, professor and president emeritus at the University of Richmond.

At 5:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 28, Ayers will present "Lincoln, Race and Slavery," at the Department of Historical Studies' inaugural Abraham Lincoln Memorial Lecture in the Abbott Auditorium in Lovejoy Library. Parking in Lot A (behind the library) is free to the public after 5 p.m.

On this week's episode of Segue, the weekly radio program that explores the lives and work of the people at SIUE, Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, and Erik Alexander, PhD, assistant professor of historical studies, have a conversation with Ayers in preparation for his upcoming trip to campus.

This episode of Segue will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Feb. 25, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

Ayers earned a bachelor's from the University of Tennessee, as well as master's and doctoral degrees from Yale University. In 1980, he joined the faculty of the University of Virginia (UVA), the same institution where Alexander attended for his master's and doctoral studies. Ayers also served as dean of UVA's College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, until he was appointed president of the University of Richmond, where he served until 2015.

His book, "In the Presence of Mine Enemies: The Civil War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863," was awarded the Bancroft Prize and Beveridge Awards in 2004. His latest work, "The Thin Line of Freedom: The Civil War and Emancipation in the Heart of America," was recently awarded the 2018 Lincoln Prize and has received critical acclaim.

Among his numerous projects, Ayers is a pioneer in the field of the digital humanities. He created a digital archive, called The Valley of the Shadow, at the dawn of the World Wide Web that revealed the history in both the North and South during the Civil War. While at the University of Richmond, he spearheaded the Digital Scholarship Lab, which helps show trends and patterns dynamically throughout American History. In 2013, he was honored with the National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama at the White House.

"We are pleased to have you here at SIUE and hear you speak on the subject of Abraham Lincoln, slavery and race," Budzban says. "Tell us about the work you have done with your two books and how they connect with your message on campus."

"Well, it took me 25 years to write them, mainly because we were building the large digital archive," Ayers replies. "I wrote volume one when I was in your shoes, Greg, as dean of the College of Arts and Science at UVA. When I was appointed president at the University of Richmond, I found it hard to find the time to write volume two."

“‘The Thin Line of Freedom’ finishes the story begun by ‘In the Presence of Mine Enemies,’ and when you put the two together, you have the entire story of the Civil War and the reconstruction era told from the viewpoints of the people who lived it on the ground.”

Through his work, Ayers has come to understand that people who lived in the North and South during the Civil War had perspectives that often go overlooked when studying American history.

“We all seem to have settled on past stories. One thing I try to do when lecturing around the country is to argue with everyone I am speaking with,” Ayers says. “We need to understand fully what Abraham Lincoln was up against during this time. I learned from Erik Alexander that the northern democrats were strong throughout the war and afterward, and Lincoln had difficulty persuading anyone who wasn’t a republican to vote for him in 1864.

“This doesn’t diminish Lincoln, but instead, this makes us appreciate him even more. The saving of the United States and the destruction of slavery didn’t come along easily, and it is not just engrained in our American DNA to be free. There were close calls.”

Unlike some works that explore the Civil War, Ayers’ latest book expands long after the war’s end in 1865.

“What do you gain in perspective and understanding by pulling the story even further forward into the 1870s?” Alexander inquires.

“By ending research in 1865, it’s easy to have a triumphal vision. Everyone shakes hands, says, ‘good game,’ and goes home because the North won!” Ayers jokes. “Those very same people who fought in the war were fighting the next day about what providing people with freedom means and what a reunified United States looked like.

“We can’t understand the Civil War if we don’t understand the consequences, and we don’t understand Reconstruction if we don’t understand how devastating and unanticipated this war was.”

Throughout the course of the trio’s conversation, the scholars share that the consequences of the Civil War still remain prevalent in America today. In August 2017, rallies at UVA garnered worldwide attention after a far-right group gathered to oppose the removal of a statue of confederate General Robert E. Lee.

“People imagine these statues rising out of the blood-soaked soil of the confederacy, but instead, they were put up for entirely different reasons,” Ayers explains. “If you don’t reckon honestly with your history, it comes back. Why on earth would I want to focus on a time 150 years in our past and instead find something else to worry about? [I do this] because the war is still pulsing in our nation.”

*By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications*