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## Award-winning news analyst, commentator Cokie Roberts packs Calvin College for January Series

By Cynthia Price

The law firm of Barnes and Thornburg picked a winner with its sponsorship of internationally-known journalist and commentator Cokie Roberts at the Calvin College January Series of lectures. Roberts drew an overflow crowd on Jan. 16.

Roberts is a person who has spent a lifetime speaking her mind.

With understated humor and ever-present common sense, she continued that tradition in her January Series presentation.

Roberts also impressed the audience with a comprehensive knowledge that stems both from being a self-professed “nerd” who does things like listen to all the tapes from Lyndon Baines Johnson’s White House years, and from having “been there” at important national events almost since her birth.

Roberts was born Mary Martha Corinne Morrison Claiborne Boggs in 1943. She is the daughter of Hale Boggs, a Democrat who served in Congress from 1941-1943 and 1946-1972, ending as Majority Leader of the House when an airplane he was in disappeared over Alaska; and Lindy Boggs, who won a special election to take over from her husband in the House in 1973, serving there until 1991, and who was also the U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican from 1997 to 2001.

Cokie Boggs added Roberts to her lengthy name in 1966 when she married Steven Roberts, a professor and fellow journalist with whom she still writes a weekly column.

The New Orleans native and Wellesley College Political Science major now is a political commentator for ABC News, including appearing on the roundtable in This Week with George Stephanopoulos, and a contributing senior news analyst for National Public Radio. She is also the author or co-author of five books.

The awards and honors accorded Roberts include three Emmy awards, the Edward R. Murrow Award, the Everett McKinley Dirksen Award for coverage of Congress, induction into the Broadcasting and Cable Hall of Fame, and inclusion in the list of the 50 greatest women in the history of broadcasting by the American Women in Radio and Television.

Evidence of why Roberts won all of these honors was abundant at her lecture on “An Insider’s View of Washington, D.C.,” as well as in her rapid but thoughtful responses to audience questions, which come not only from the people gathered at Calvin College but from remote sites where the lectures are shown, including such places as Chicago, San Jose, Calif., Wyckoff, N.J., and Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Two themes kept emerging: one is that those who govern should regard their job as “solving problems” and not just winning elections, and the other is, “We’re all in this together.”

She decried the partisanship that has punched holes in both of those concepts. Like presidential scholar and best-selling author Jon Meacham, who spoke in December at an event sponsored by Gerald R. Ford Museum and Grand Valley State University, Roberts acknowledged that this is not the most partisan time in our history.

Roberts found the 1850s was a far more divisive time, and talked about the canefight on the floor of Congress between Charles Sumner and Preston Brooks. However, she warned, “Remember, those years ended in civil war – so they’re not exactly ones we want to emulate.”

Also like Meacham, Roberts felt that a contributor to the deterioration of cooperation between parties was the lack of social interaction between members of Congress. In fact, one of the books she signed after her January presentation, *Founding Mothers: the Women Who Raised Our Nation*, published in 2004, concerns the role of women in such “civilizing” social activity.

Roberts feels that the tendency of U.S. representatives and senators to leave their families home in their

districts has been detrimental. She attributes this in part to the sentiment that doing so exempts them from being considered “Washington insiders.”

The role of women is clearly important to Roberts, and she maintains a bit of sarcasm about it. While reciting statistics on partisan voting patterns, she said, “In 2008, people asked, when did white men stop being the majority? Actually, they never were, they just always acted like it.” She later replied to a question about women running for office by strongly encouraging them, and added, “My advice is work harder and be smarter than the guys – but it’s not hard.” The audience laughed and applauded.

Shortly after that, Roberts told the audience that she realizes such outspoken behavior prevents her from running for office herself.

Returning repeatedly to the contention that partisanship must be set aside, Roberts recalled the last interview she had with President Gerald Ford. He told her, “You know, Cokie, when your father was majority leader of the House and I was minority leader, we’d go to the Press Club and I’d say, what are we going to argue about?” The political disagreements were genuine, “we really didn’t agree and we were the leaders of our parties, but we were friends,” Roberts spoke on that very conversation and attitude at Betty Ford’s funeral, asked to do so by the former first lady before she died.

When asked about how it was to be a woman starting out in a career in the early 1960s, Roberts acknowledged that it was difficult, but that if you had millions of viewers, politicians “wouldn’t care if you had three heads.” Ever practical, Roberts said her standard for news was “dinner:” the hope that stories would be completed in time for her to go home to her husband and two children.

Acknowledging that her Catholic faith often gets her through the day, Roberts also said that her husband’s Jewish rituals have influenced their lives and those of her children and six grandchildren. The couple wrote *Our Haggadah: Uniting Traditions for Interfaith Families* in 2011.