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Free speech expert to give address

O'Neil to focus on Bill of Rights

By Tammy Batey
Emerald Reporter

Robert O'Neil, founding director of the Thomas Jefferson Center for Protection of Free Expression in Charlottesville, Va. and an expert on free speech, will address this year's graduating class during commencement ceremonies June 9 at Autzen Stadium.

The right of free speech is vital, O'Neil said, but it is often perceived as not being important.

"It often seems like someone else's problem until what you face becomes personal, when there are things you can't say or a book publishing is inhibited," he said. "It's best seen in personal terms, but even people who don't experience it personally (agree) the underlying principle is vital to a society that relies on the flow of information."

"For example, our elections are founded on the deep commitment on free flow of information and distrust of federal restriction of information," he said.

University President Myles Brand said he believed O'Neil's speech would be timely be-

cause of the current debate over free speech on this campus.

"Since the campus is now engaged in discussing issues of First Amendment rights, I thought it would be very appropriate to have an expert come to talk to us about it," Brand said.

O'Neil said he hopes graduates will remember that this year marks the 200th anniversary of the creation of the Bill of Rights, adding that his address, which he hasn't titled yet, will focus on that anniversary.

The last year has been an "extraordinarily active time for the First Amendment," O'Neil said. The issue of freedom of speech and expression has come up repeatedly, he said. Examples include the controversy over the lyrics of rap group 2 Live Crew, restriction of media coverage during the gulf war and the recent Supreme Court decision regarding abortion counseling.

Issues of free speech have also popped up on college campuses with debate over "hate speech," O'Neil said.

O'Neil began his career as a law clerk to U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan in the early 1960s. His teaching career took off in 1963 at the



Robert O'Neil

University of California at Berkeley, where he chaired the university's committee on academic freedom. His students included Oregon Attorney General Dave Frohnmayer, he said.

He went on to become provost of the University of Cincinnati, vice president of Indiana University of Bloomington, and president of the University of Wisconsin before serving as president of the University of Virginia for five years.

The Thomas Jefferson Center, which opened last fall, has two main objectives. One is to conduct research on freedom of expression issues, and the other is to get actively involved in promoting free expression through litigation and legislation.

O'Neil recently chaired the Markle Foundation Commission on Media Coverage of Presidential Elections.

He has written several books, including *Free Speech: Responsible Communication Under Law*, *The Rights of Public Employees*, and *Classrooms in the Crossfire*.



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Michael Dorris is the bestselling author of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* and *The Broken Cord*. Louise Erdrich, his wife, is the bestselling author of *Love Medicine* and *The Beet Queen*.

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