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When Campaigns Were (Mostly) Fun

Wednesday, September 13, 2000

President and Mrs. Ford, distinguished panelists, faculty, students, friends of the University and members of the media, this is the kind of program that we envisioned when the Loosemore Auditorium was designed. Richard Norton Smith, a maestro of the political scene, has brought us all together in this event jointly sponsored by the Gerald R. Ford Foundation and Grand Valley State University, and his first event since joining the University faculty as a Distinguished Professor.

There is no more appropriate time for panel discussions on the theme “When Campaigns Were (Mostly) Fun” than in the heat of our national Presidential campaign. As the morning’s welcomer, you might expect the President of the University, but I have another qualification. I remember a campaign that was really fun. I was a senior in Holland High School in 1948. Holland, then, was in Michigan’s 5th Congressional District and Jerry Ford, a veteran, a young lawyer from Grand Rapids, came to town campaigning. In the primary, which was the election in the 5th District he challenged and defeated the incumbent Congressman.

Can you imagine Jerry Ford an upstart? He pulled it off, and the rest is history. The fact that it was Senator Arthur Vandenberg's home Congressional district added some luster. We who were teenage political activists had a new hero. There are only a few of us in this room who remember the campaign of '48', a campaign that really that really was fun. Now we are going to hear about more of them from experts. The first expert who will introduce the subject and the panelists is the person who organized today's symposium as he has so many interesting exhibits and symposia over the years, Richard Norton Smith, Director of the Gerald R. Ford Foundation and Distinguished Professor of History at Grand Valley State University.