

Donald B. Verrilli Jr.

2019 commencement speaker

Vice Provost Shoulson, Dean Fisher, distinguished faculty, alumni, family and friends, and members of the University of Connecticut graduating Class of 2019, thank you. When I prepared my remarks, what I was going to say at this moment was “thank you for allowing me to share this glorious Connecticut spring morning with you,” because I had checked the weather forecast...

But you know, it is a glorious morning, weather aside. I've been fortunate to be part of quite a few commencement ceremonies in recent years. And they are always a special time and it's always a great honor and privilege to be a part of one. And it's a special privilege for me to be a part of this one, to be able to return to the state where I grew up and I still all these years later consider home.

So, let me start with a heartfelt congratulations to each and every one of you in the graduating class. I know how hard you worked to get where you are today. In fact, I have a daughter who is just finishing up her first year in law school. So, I have spent the last year vicariously reliving every moment of agony and stress of the first-year experience. And it really reinforced for me just how hard law school can be, just how much of a challenge it can be. And thankfully, all that is now behind you.

You've put in the long hours, you've surmounted all the obstacles, you have made it to the finish line and today is a day for savoring your accomplishments. You've earned the right to feel the joy that I hope every single one of you feels, and to bask in the love and the pride of so many of your family and friends who are here today to celebrate with you.

But of course, they didn't invite me here to pat you on the back. They invited me here to talk to you about what comes next. In a few minutes, you're going to process up here and they're going to put a diploma in your hands and boom, you are a lawyer, you are a member of this profession. So what's that going to mean to you? Or maybe the better way to ask the question is: what are you going to make that mean to you?

You could decide that what it means is that you have a good way to make a living. You'll find a good job, you'll provide a secure foundation for your family, you'll live comfortably and you'll be a highly respected member of your community. And if that's what it means for you that's totally fine. You have earned that.

Or you could find your fulfillment in legal craft. You can hone your cross examinations until they are sparkling things of beauty, or write the most elegant appellate briefs, or devise the most sophisticated merger strategies. That's just fine, too. You can find great satisfaction in a job well done as a lawyer.

But being a lawyer can mean a good deal more than that. When you join this profession, you connect yourself up to something bigger than yourself. And that's what I want to talk about this morning.

If you look up when you climb the stairs to the main entrance of the Supreme Court, what you see chiseled into stone into the marble frieze above you is the phrase: "equal justice under law." Under law. Or think about the majestic words of the preamble to our Constitution: "We the People in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, provide for the common defense, ensure domestic tranquility, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity do ordain and establish this Constitution." What do we do in order to form a more perfect Union to establish justice to secure the blessings of liberty? We establish a Constitution, we establish law.

So, right now probably you're thinking, well gee, they've picked Captain Obvious to deliver the commencement address. Of course it's law. And you know, maybe you're right about that. And that's because most of the time these fundamental commitments operate in the background. We take them more or less for granted, we don't think about them very much.

We're a government of laws and not men. Check. No man is above the law. Check. All are equal before the law regardless of race gender or creed. Sure. We do equal justice to poor and rich alike, of course we do.

But that is most of the time, it is not all of the time. Sometimes events test what we really believe in. And that is because our Constitution and our laws and fundamental ideals that I just rattled off are just words on a page. And the courts that enforce them are just human institutions like any other.

The world's most oppressive regimes have Constitutions. They have laws, they have courts, and very often their Constitutions and their laws proclaim the exact same commitments to fundamental rights and to the rule of law as ours do. What ultimately separates us from those kinds of regimes is whether we really believe in the words on a page, and whether we make the sacrifices that a real commitment to those values demands.

We can say all we want that we're a government of laws and not men, or that we believe in equal justice under the law, but what matters is what we do, not just what we say. And in this country's history, when it mattered most, it has been lawyers who have stepped forward to lead the way. To define in words, and more importantly in actions, what it means to be the people that we aspire to be.

James Madison and Alexander Hamilton at the founding of our country. Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. Thurgood Marshall in the civil rights struggle, and so many others.

So as I see it, this is one of those times in which these values can't just operate in the background. They have been thrust into the foreground. As I see it, whether we are going to define ourselves in the way that we always have, as a people living under a common set of ideals and principles established in our Constitution, is up for grabs right now.

So I think it's particularly important right now to remind ourselves that the United States of America is most of all an idea. We're not defined by common ethnic or racial identity or geographic borders. Not by blood and soil, as the marchers in Charlottesville chanted. We're not a country only for those who can trace their ancestry back for centuries.

We're a nation of immigrants. My great-grandfather was a shepherd who came to this country 140 years ago, from a rural village in Italy with no education and no money. But like so many millions of others who came to this country, and who are coming to this country today, he started a business. He put his daughters as well as his sons through college. He faced prejudice, he became a proud American anyway and he launched a family that has tried over the generations to make a difference.

Many of you in this audience, I am sure, share a similar story. As was true with my great-grandfather, to be an American is, above all, to share a faith and common purpose, a common set of principles, no matter who you are, or where you or your ancestors came from, how they got here, or how much money they have.

We do believe in the rule of law. We do believe that no one is above the law. We do believe in equal justice under law, that is what America is all about. This, at least, is what I believe, and it is why I am concerned right now.

We are witnessing attacks that I have not seen in my lifetime on the integrity and independence of the Department of Justice, on the integrity and independence of the judiciary, on the freedom of the press, on the idea that all persons are equal before the law, an idea that this country is for everyone. Really on the rule of law itself.

And I also see the enormous toll that this pressure is taking. More and more people believe that the system is rigged, that our institutions are corrupt, that our Constitution and laws really are just words on a page, just tools to be manipulated in the service of selfish interests. But America only works when we maintain a common faith and common ideals to bind us together. And that faith is what's being tested right now.

Now, I said before that lawyers have been the ones who stepped up to lead the way at these crucial moments in our history. So now maybe you're thinking that I'm asking you to be the next Alexander Hamilton or Abraham Lincoln or Thurgood Marshall.

Well, yes I am.

When you take your place in the world, the work that you do every day will give you the chance to prove to your clients, your communities and your country that our principles are not just words on a page. Your work is what will make those principles real. Your work is what will show your clients, your communities, your country that they should have faith. And this is something that each of you can do right now.

When you battle a landlord to make sure that your clients can live in a home where the plumbing works, the ceiling isn't caving in and the doors lock, that's an act of faith in what we believe in. Your work shows clients that they have rights the law will respect, that they matter and they are not powerless to change their world.

When you battle the Veterans Administration to make sure that a vet gets the care she deserves to treat mental illness or drug addiction, that's an act of faith. It tells that veteran, your client, that she matters, that she deserves the treatment you are fighting for and that she has some control over her world.

When you work tirelessly to dig up the facts that prove a man's innocence and free him from death row or when you fight to stop a deportation that rips a family apart, those are acts of faith.

When you devote yourself as a prosecutor to achieving a measure of justice for victims of sexual assault or to root out corruption, those are acts of faith.

Even when you fight those fights and you lose, and I can tell you from experience, you are going to lose sometimes. You're even going to lose some that you should win. That's still an act of faith. The client knows that someone cared enough to fight about her and to fight for her rights.

What's really critical is that each time you fight one of these fights, you don't just fight to give your clients a sense of dignity and control over their world, as important as that is. Every time you fight one of these fights, you stand up for the rule of law. Every one of these fights is an act of faith in the rule of law. It is a statement that we are all equal before the law, that no one is above the law.

So this work, the work that you do as lawyers every day, is the best possible response to the challenge we face right now. It is work that helps form a more perfect union, establish justice, promote domestic tranquility, provide for the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. It is the most important work you can do.

Now, let me say, I realize that some of you listening to this see things the way I do. And some of you listening to this do not. Some of you may think that the fears I express are exaggerated, or that my criticisms are wrong or unfair. Maybe you're right. I don't think so, but you have every right to disagree. But whatever you think, whether you agree or whether you disagree, what I implore each of you is to care.

To care about the rule of law, to do what you can to make sure that that fundamental ideal that is inscribed above the entrance to the Supreme Court: "equal justice under law" is real and not just sterile words carved in stone.

So I do hope that every member of the legal profession will take a stand for the rule of law. What we believe in, our Constitution, is precious. It defines who we are, don't let it be turned into mere words on a page. Every one of us has it in our power to reaffirm our faith in those defining principles. And I hope that every one of us here today can find a way to go out and do that.

So let me close now where I started. Today is a glorious day. I really hope you enjoy it, you enjoy the recognition of everything you've achieved, you enjoy the love of your family and friends, that you enjoy everything about it.

Because tomorrow you go to work to save America.

Thank you.

