Remarks on Receiving the Jefferson Medal in the Rotunda

There is no greater honor for a Charlottesville girl than to be honored in this way and in this place. My grandparents – whose lives were completely and utterly entwined with the life of this great university – are here with us in spirit. Their love and pride, and that of my entire family, surrounds me.

My career in law has been Jeffersonian in spirit, if not in consequence or magnitude, in my efforts to integrate law with political science – specifically international law and international relations. Jefferson certainly knew his politics. Consider his account of the war power. His was no formal understanding purely of separation of powers. He understood and used human incentives.

As Jefferson wrote to Madison from Paris, in September, 1789, referring to the constitutional clauses putting the responsibility and power to embark on war in Congress rather than in the Executive: "We have given, in example, one effectual check to the dog of war, by transferring the power of letting him loose from the Executive to the Legislative body, from those who are to spend to those who are to pay." His words are wiser than ever today, even if that leash has not proved as short as Jefferson anticipated. It is our task today, as it falls to all citizens repeatedly as our republic moves forward, to continually adjust and adapt and align the formal constraints of law with the political incentives of its subjects.

Today we celebrate Jefferson as much more than a lawyer. We could of course honor him as a horticulturist, archaeologist, naturalist, author, and inventor. But I look to and admire Jefferson above all as a builder. He was, after all, both an architect and a framer.

He built structures of brick, like this beautiful building in this glorious university.

But he also built structures of mighty words – words that resonate and that have reached higher and farther through the centuries. “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.” That is the engine that powered not just our revolution, but two centuries of striving to live up to its ideals, both here and around the world.
And he built structures that transformed those words into law – words backed by the authority and the legitimacy of the state and the people. Not sterile, dessicated structures, but institutions infused with the values and passions of the people accepting their constraints and using their opportunities.

Those are the greatest buildings of all, and their architects are, like Jefferson himself, our greatest public servants. Here, alongside an architect as distinguished as Zaha Hadid and a public servant as distinguished as Alan Greenspan, in Mr. Jefferson’s Rotunda, I am honored, moved, and deeply grateful.