

# SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

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IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE RURAL )  
DEVELOPMENT RURAL HOUSING SERVICE, )  
Petitioner, )  
v. ) No. 22-846  
REGINALD KIRTZ, )  
Respondent. )  
- - - - -

Pages: 1 through 94  
Place: Washington, D.C.  
Date: November 6, 2023

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Petitioner, )

v. ) No. 22-846

REGINALD KIRTZ, )

Respondent. )

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Washington, D.C.

Monday, November 6, 2023

The above-entitled matter came on for oral argument before the Supreme Court of the United States at 10:04 a.m.

APPEARANCES:

BENJAMIN W. SNYDER, Assistant to the Solicitor General, Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.; on behalf of the Petitioner.

NANDAN M. JOSHI, ESQUIRE, Washington, D.C.; on behalf of the Respondent.

1	C O N T E N T S	
2	ORAL ARGUMENT OF:	PAGE:
3	BENJAMIN W. SNYDER, ESQ.	
4	On behalf of the Petitioner	3
5	ORAL ARGUMENT OF:	
6	NANDAN M. JOSHI, ESQ.	
7	On behalf of the Respondent	52
8	REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF:	
9	BENJAMIN W. SNYDER, ESQ.	
10	On behalf of the Petitioner	92
11		
12		
13		
14		
15		
16		
17		
18		
19		
20		
21		
22		
23		
24		
25		

1  
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P R O C E E D I N G S

(10:04 a.m.)

CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We'll hear argument this morning in Case 22-846, Department of Agriculture Rural Development Rural Housing Service versus Kirtz.

Mr. Snyder.

ORAL ARGUMENT OF BENJAMIN W. SNYDER  
ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER

MR. SNYDER: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it please the Court:

The question in this case is whether Congress unambiguously waived the sovereign immunity of the United States when it amended the Fair Credit Reporting Act in 1996 to provide that any person who violates FCRA's requirements is liable for money damages.

The answer to that question is no. To start, there's no basis for claiming that Congress has expressly waived sovereign immunity. For all of Respondent's emphasis on following the literal text of the statute, he ultimately has to concede that nothing in FCRA addresses sovereign immunity directly.

Instead, Respondent is asking this

1 Court to read an unwritten waiver into the  
2 statute on the theory that every time Congress  
3 creates a cause of action that applies to both  
4 sovereign and non-sovereign defendants, it must  
5 implicitly intend to eliminate sovereign  
6 immunity.

7           But that argument is wrong for two  
8 reasons. First, it's fundamentally inconsistent  
9 with the nature of sovereign immunity.  
10 Sovereign immunity is a defense that, by  
11 definition, has effect only when there is a  
12 cause of action that would otherwise impose  
13 liability. So, if every cause of action that  
14 covers a sovereign also waived that sovereign's  
15 immunity, the defense would never matter. That  
16 cannot be right.

17           This Court has therefore followed a  
18 narrower rule under which courts may infer a  
19 waiver of sovereign immunity from a cause of  
20 action only if Congress has referred to  
21 sovereign defendants in the cause of action  
22 itself using language that would be effectively  
23 negated if sovereign immunity remained available  
24 and that therefore shows Congress's intent to  
25 displace the presumptively available defense.

1                   But there's nothing like that here.  
2                   And as the Court's decision in *Employees* shows,  
3                   the mere use of a general term defined elsewhere  
4                   in the statute isn't enough to eliminate the  
5                   sovereign immunity defense.

6                   Second, it's in any event far from  
7                   clear that these causes of action apply to the  
8                   United States at all. Even the court of appeals  
9                   recognized that FCRA's criminal provision uses  
10                  "person" in a sense that does not include  
11                  federal agencies, and it's plausible to  
12                  interpret the nearby civil causes of action in  
13                  the same way.

14                  I welcome the Court's questions.

15                  JUSTICE THOMAS: Mr. Snyder, the --  
16                  putting aside sovereign immunity, the statute  
17                  refers to -- defines a person as any individual,  
18                  et cetera, and any government or governmental  
19                  subdivision or agency. Putting aside the issue  
20                  of sovereign immunity, wouldn't that suggest  
21                  that it applies to the -- the U.S. Government?

22                  MR. SNYDER: So we accept that that's  
23                  a plausible reading.

24                  JUSTICE THOMAS: So, if -- if it does  
25                  that as explicitly as it does, why doesn't --

1 isn't that sufficient to waive sovereign  
2 immunity?

3 MR. SNYDER: So -- so two answers to  
4 that, Justice Thomas. We don't think that it  
5 unambiguously covers the United States. And I  
6 -- I'd say our argument on that front is under  
7 the Court's decision in Utility Air. I would  
8 say that's the best decision for that part of  
9 our argument.

10 You're asking, even if I assume that  
11 1681n and o use "person" in a sense that does  
12 cover the United States, does that also take the  
13 analytically distinct step of waiving sovereign  
14 immunity.

15 And so putting aside the Utility Air  
16 argument for a moment, on that argument, we  
17 would say no because all the text of the statute  
18 does is create a cause of action and it does so  
19 using a general word that, on hypothesis, covers  
20 both sovereign and non-sovereign defendants.  
21 But there's nothing necessarily implicit in that  
22 to show that Congress must have intended to  
23 waive the defenses that all defendants covered  
24 by that cause of action would have available  
25 under ordinary background principles.

1           So I don't think anyone would think  
2           it's strange, for example, if a defendant who's  
3           covered by the plain text of the cause of action  
4           but who violated FCRA more than five years ago  
5           were to assert a statute of limitations defense.  
6           That doesn't negate anything in the cause of  
7           action.

8           And similarly here, the fact that,  
9           again, on hypothesis, some defendants covered by  
10          the cause of action would be able to assert a  
11          sovereign immunity defense doesn't negate  
12          anything in the statutory language that Congress  
13          used in adopting that cause of action.

14          Now it is a different --

15          JUSTICE KAGAN: I'm not sure I  
16          understand that, Mr. Snyder. I mean, suppose  
17          that we just take the definition and we plug it  
18          into n and o. What would your answer be then?

19          MR. SNYDER: So, if the Court were to  
20          plug all of the words from the definition into n  
21          and o specifically, then the only -- the only  
22          purpose of those words in n and o, the words  
23          referring to governmental entities, would be to  
24          make clear that Congress is authorizing recovery  
25          against sovereign defendants.



1 JUSTICE KAGAN: So your answer then  
2 would be that there is not sovereign immunity?

3 MR. SNYDER: Yes. Our answer would be  
4 that even though Congress has not directly  
5 addressed sovereign immunity that unless --

6 JUSTICE KAGAN: Yeah, I mean, it falls  
7 into the whole line of cases where Congress has  
8 authorized a cause of action against the  
9 government, and we say, well, that's  
10 inconsistent with the recognition of sovereign  
11 immunity. Sovereign immunity would negate the  
12 very cause of action that Congress has created,  
13 right? Those are the line of cases that we  
14 discussed just last year.

15 And what you're saying to me is, yes,  
16 if you plug the definition into n and o, the  
17 liability provisions, those cases would -- you  
18 know, the same answer would follow?

19 MR. SNYDER: Yes, that's correct.

20 JUSTICE KAGAN: Okay. So then -- then  
21 why does it make a difference that they're not  
22 plugged in to n and o but instead -- you know,  
23 the definition has a lot, a lot, a lot of words,  
24 right? There's a person, there's a corporation,  
25 there's an association, there's an enterprise,

1 et cetera, et cetera. You can see why Congress  
2 didn't want to say that every time Congress  
3 meant to refer to a lot of different entities.

4 So -- but, you know, it's statutory  
5 interpretation 101 that we take a defined term,  
6 we plug the definition in, and that's what the  
7 meaning of the statute is. So that's what the  
8 meaning of the statute is.

9 MR. SNYDER: So, Justice Kagan, if the  
10 question here were just what the meaning of the  
11 words in the cause of action were, I -- I would  
12 agree with you. So last term, in *Lac du*  
13 *Flambeau*, for example, there was an express  
14 waiver of sovereign immunity that made  
15 absolutely clear that what Congress was  
16 intending to do was waive sovereign immunity,  
17 and it did so on behalf of governmental units  
18 and then defined governmental units elsewhere in  
19 the statute. And this sort of subbing in the --  
20 the words from the definition into the waiver of  
21 sovereign immunity would have worked perfectly  
22 there because all you were asking was what do  
23 the words that Congress used mean.

24 But, here, you're not asking just what  
25 do the words mean; you're asking about the --

1 the necessary logical implication of what  
2 Congress has done.

3 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, the -- the  
4 necessary logical implication of what Congress  
5 has done is authorize a suit against people,  
6 persons, as defined in the definitions section.  
7 Then you go to the definitions section, and then  
8 you discover that what Congress has done is  
9 authorize a suit against natural persons,  
10 enterprises, and governments.

11 MR. SNYDER: So, respectfully, Justice  
12 Kagan, I don't think that's right. At the time  
13 that Congress adopted that definition, the one  
14 thing we know is that it wasn't doing so for  
15 purposes of allowing civil recovery against  
16 everyone covered by "persons" because the  
17 statute didn't authorize recovery against  
18 persons at the time.

19 JUSTICE JACKSON: Right, but then --  
20 then there was the amendment. So why -- why  
21 can't we assume from that that Congress was  
22 trying to reach all of the defined entities?

23 MR. SNYDER: I -- so I think maybe  
24 that would be a plausible reading of the  
25 statute, but in order to find a waiver of

1 sovereign immunity, you have to conclude that  
2 it's the only plausible reading of the statute.  
3 So just --

4 JUSTICE JACKSON: And why -- why isn't  
5 it not the only plausible -- I mean, Congress  
6 amended the statute clearly to expand liability.  
7 Do you -- do you concede that?

8 MR. SNYDER: Yes, we agree with that.

9 JUSTICE JACKSON: All right. And  
10 it -- and it expanded liability by substituting  
11 the previous terms, which were narrower, you  
12 know, specifically referencing only "any  
13 consumer reporting agency or user of  
14 information," it expanded liability by striking  
15 that and putting in the word "person" and -- or  
16 "any person," and "any person" is elsewhere  
17 defined in the statute to include government.

18 So what is not clear about Congress's  
19 intention to expand liability to include  
20 government?

21 MR. SNYDER: So -- so we do have this  
22 other argument about whether it's clear that  
23 Congress actually intended "person" to include  
24 the government, and I -- I do eventually want to  
25 get to that.

1           But just, I think you're asking me to  
2     assume that "person" takes the statutory  
3     definition in 1681n and o and why isn't that  
4     enough to show that Congress must have intended  
5     to waive sovereign immunity.

6           And my answer is that it's not unusual  
7     for Congress to create a cause of action that  
8     applies to a range of defendants, some of whom  
9     will still have defenses from other background  
10    principles of the law.

11           Now, in the cases that this Court was  
12    referring to in the Financial Oversight and  
13    Management Board --

14           JUSTICE GORSUCH: Counsel, I -- I'm  
15    sorry --

16           JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Wouldn't --

17           JUSTICE GORSUCH: -- to interrupt, but  
18    I -- I -- I just want to understand the nature  
19    of your argument in responses to my colleagues.

20           It could be one of two things it seems  
21    to me. One -- one, it might be that n and o  
22    don't take the definition, or, two, they do take  
23    the definition and that's still insufficient.

24           Which is it?

25           MR. SNYDER: We are making both of

1 those arguments. The -- the argument --

2 JUSTICE GORSUCH: Arguing in the  
3 alternative?

4 MR. SNYDER: Yes, we're arguing --

5 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Right.

6 MR. SNYDER: -- in the alternative.

7 So, if you -- even if you accept, as the -- the  
8 questions so far have asked me to assume, that  
9 "person" covers the United States, in that  
10 circumstance, you're in exactly the same  
11 situation that --

12 JUSTICE GORSUCH: Let's deal with the  
13 first argument, just -- just that they don't  
14 take the definition. I want to understand that  
15 because this Court, as Justice Kagan has alluded  
16 to, has said that it's virtually conclusive -- I  
17 think Sturgeon a few years ago we said that --  
18 virtually conclusive that the definition  
19 applies.

20 MR. SNYDER: Yes. So we -- we accept  
21 that ordinarily, statutory definitions make a  
22 great deal of difference, but this Court has  
23 also --

24 JUSTICE GORSUCH: More than a great  
25 deal of difference. We've said they're

1 virtually conclusive.

2 MR. SNYDER: Yes. But this Court has  
3 also rejected the idea that you always just plug  
4 in the terms wherever the -- the defined term  
5 appears in the statute. I think the Court's  
6 decision in Utility Air is really significant on  
7 this and, in particular, the structure of the  
8 Court's reasoning in that decision.

9 So Utility Air involved provisions of  
10 the Clean Air Act that applied to facilities  
11 that emitted any air pollutant, and EPA had  
12 concluded that those provisions unambiguously  
13 applied to facilities that emitted greenhouse  
14 gases because the Act-wide definition of "air  
15 pollutant" included greenhouse gases.

16 JUSTICE GORSUCH: Why -- we -- we've  
17 read all that. I -- I guess I'm wondering, why  
18 isn't it virtually conclusive here?

19 MR. SNYDER: So the reason is that  
20 just as in Utility Air, there were other  
21 provisions of the Act that used "air pollutant"  
22 in a sense narrower than its defined meaning.

23 JUSTICE GORSUCH: And there may be  
24 other provisions in which it's more narrowly  
25 applied here, but why does that pertain to n and

1 o, is my question.

2 MR. SNYDER: So I'm being too slow --

3 JUSTICE GORSUCH: I'm --

4 MR. SNYDER: -- in getting to this.

5 But --

6 JUSTICE GORSUCH: You are.

7 MR. SNYDER: -- in Utility Air --

8 JUSTICE GORSUCH: Let's get to the  
9 statute before us.

10 MR. SNYDER: In -- so --

11 JUSTICE KAGAN: Utility Air -- may I?

12 JUSTICE GORSUCH: Please.

13 (Laughter.)

14 JUSTICE KAGAN: Utility Air was a very  
15 special case in which the Court decided that if  
16 you just plugged the definition in, the entire  
17 regulatory scheme would collapse.

18 MR. SNYDER: So the first part of the  
19 Court's decision --

20 JUSTICE KAGAN: So all I'm saying --

21 MR. SNYDER: -- in Utility Air --

22 JUSTICE KAGAN: -- is that that's, you  
23 know, nowhere near this case. I mean, I  
24 understand that the government likes sovereign  
25 immunity and that waivers of sovereign immunity



1 are, you know, not all that common. But this is  
2 not a Utility Air scheme where, essentially, the  
3 Court found that it was inconsistent with the  
4 entire rest of the statutory scheme.

5 Recognizing a cause of action here is  
6 not inconsistent with the entire rest of the  
7 statutory scheme.

8 I'm sorry about that, Justice Gorsuch.

9 JUSTICE GORSUCH: Well, no, that --  
10 that -- no, I appreciate that. And -- and  
11 that's -- that's my question too. So, please.

12 MR. SNYDER: So even the court of  
13 appeals recognized that 1681q does not use  
14 "person" in a sense --

15 JUSTICE GORSUCH: I -- I understand.  
16 We're talking about n and o here, though,  
17 counsel.

18 MR. SNYDER: So, if you accept that --

19 JUSTICE GORSUCH: And let me put it  
20 this way. I'm sorry to repeat the question, but  
21 this is where I get stuck.

22 It doesn't seem to me inconceivable --  
23 maybe -- maybe -- maybe you've got an argument  
24 -- that a rational Congress might, to protect  
25 consumers, in FCRA, which is all about false

1 reporting about consumers' debts and  
2 delinquencies, say that the government should  
3 turn square corners too, just like other private  
4 credit reporting agencies, and that when it  
5 falsely reports a consumer's debt, it should --  
6 it should pay that, n and o.

7           Again, let's talk about n and o.  
8 Let's not talk about q. Let's not talk about  
9 Utility Air. Let's talk about n and o. You  
10 have to come up, it seems to me, with some  
11 argument that it's inconceivable Congress would  
12 have wanted to do that sort of thing.

13           MR. SNYDER: Respectfully, Justice  
14 Gorsuch, I -- I think our task is to show that  
15 it's plausible that that's not what Congress did  
16 here. That's what the clear statement rule  
17 requires. And we think that because Congress  
18 has --

19           JUSTICE GORSUCH: That's the second  
20 step. We're still on the first step. What do n  
21 and o mean?

22           MR. SNYDER: So we don't think that n  
23 and o clearly cover the United States. Congress  
24 has used the word "person" in other parts of  
25 the -- of the statute in ways that do not cover

1 the United States, and we think it is therefore  
2 plausible to think that when Congress used the  
3 word "person" in n and o, it was also using n  
4 and o in a sense --

5 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: What are your best  
6 examples of that?

7 MR. SNYDER: So we think 1681q, I know  
8 I've been asked not to talk about that, but --

9 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: You can talk about  
10 it with me.

11 (Laughter.)

12 MR. SNYDER: We think that 1681q  
13 clearly uses "person" in a sense that does not  
14 use the Act-wide definition. Even the court of  
15 appeals recognized that it would not be  
16 reasonable to think that Congress authorized  
17 criminal prosecutions of the United States just  
18 through the bare use of the word "person" and  
19 that it must have meant something narrower  
20 there.

21 JUSTICE JACKSON: But why -- why --  
22 why is that a definitional change? I mean, I  
23 think the problem that I'm having is that A, in  
24 the definitions, the text of this statute says  
25 that the definitions apply throughout the entire

1 subchapter.

2 And I understand your point about q,  
3 but why isn't that just a carve-out? They're  
4 just saying that, you know, certain categories  
5 of persons can't have criminal prosecution, but  
6 it's not a change in the definition of "person."

7 MR. SNYDER: I -- I -- I guess that's  
8 not the way I read that provision. I think that  
9 the statutes in both Utility Air and Employees  
10 had similar provisions that said this definition  
11 applies everywhere. In Utility Air, the Court  
12 said but we know that Congress didn't always use  
13 the defined term in a sense that carried its  
14 defined meaning, and so, when it appears in the  
15 provision at issue, it's not unambiguous that --

16 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Counsel --

17 MR. SNYDER: -- it carries that  
18 meaning.

19 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Counsel --

20 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- can I --

21 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- can I --

22 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Go ahead.

23 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- can I go back  
24 to q? Because I was -- I don't know why it's  
25 incongruous or why it suggests a problem. I

1 went back and researched the Clean Water Act,  
2 the Safe Drinking Water Act, and the  
3 Agricultural Adjustment Act. At least three --  
4 I didn't canvass the universe -- include a  
5 criminal provision that applies to the United  
6 States that's nearly identical to this one. It  
7 says imprisonment and/or fine.

8           So I don't know why copying what has  
9 been used in other acts for which there's no  
10 question that there's a waiver of sovereign  
11 immunity, why the fact that they refer to  
12 imprisonment or -- and fine means that somehow  
13 sovereign immunity wasn't waived.

14           MR. SNYDER: So --

15           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: It's a common  
16 provision written exactly like this one is, and  
17 in those acts, we've never said their existence  
18 calls into question the waiver of sovereign  
19 immunity.

20           MR. SNYDER: So I -- I'm not sure, are  
21 you referring to criminal provisions in those  
22 other statutes?

23           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Yes, yes.

24           MR. SNYDER: So I -- I think the  
25 significant thing about the criminal provisions

1 elsewhere in the -- the Code, my friend has  
2 pointed to just one, that when Congress has  
3 wanted to accomplish that really unusual result,  
4 it has been just crystal-clear that that's --

5 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: No. That's what  
6 I'm saying to you. Read the -- the best example  
7 is the Clean Air Act. It's virtually identical  
8 to this one. It basically says any person who  
9 violates the Act -- and there's no doubt that  
10 the person is the government -- is subject to  
11 imprisonment or a fine.

12 So it's written identically to this  
13 provision. So, if I have that as text and I see  
14 it in other statutes, I don't know why reading  
15 it here would be incongruous to me or suggest  
16 that somehow Congress didn't intend "person" to  
17 mean exactly what it means.

18 MR. SNYDER: So -- so, Justice  
19 Sotomayor, even the court of appeals recognized  
20 --

21 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, it may --

22 MR. SNYDER: -- I mean, you did not  
23 recognize it --

24 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- it may have  
25 recognized it, but what I'm saying to you is I

1 don't.

2 MR. SNYDER: So accepting that, let  
3 me -- let me maybe turn wisely to other -- other  
4 points of our argument.

5 (Laughter.)

6 MR. SNYDER: 1681u(j), which is the  
7 provision where Congress really did want to  
8 authorize civil actions against the federal  
9 agencies --

10 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Is that the FBI  
11 one?

12 MR. SNYDER: That's the FBI one. And  
13 it refers explicitly to the FBI. Again, I'm not  
14 going to suggest --

15 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well --

16 MR. SNYDER: -- that that's absolutely  
17 --

18 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- yeah, that one  
19 is also difficult for me because that provision  
20 is an exemption from the Act basically  
21 permitting the FBI to do things and consumer  
22 agencies to do things that otherwise might  
23 violate the statute, and it's now saying, okay,  
24 we've given you an exemption, but we're going to  
25 keep you liable if you step outside the terms of

1 this exemption, and it sets forth the terms of  
2 that liability.

3 I don't know why that is the same  
4 thing -- why that's illogical or suggests  
5 incongruity with a waiver of sovereign immunity  
6 for other violations of the Act.

7 MR. SNYDER: So, Justice Sotomayor,  
8 the only -- the only point we're making about  
9 that provision is that when we -- we know that  
10 Congress wanted to address civil liability of  
11 federal agencies, it said so expressly.

12 JUSTICE ALITO: Mr. Snyder --

13 MR. SNYDER: And that's --

14 JUSTICE ALITO: I'm sorry, finish your  
15 answer.

16 MR. SNYDER: My answer is going to  
17 have three more parts.

18 JUSTICE ALITO: Sure.

19 MR. SNYDER: So --

20 JUSTICE ALITO: Go ahead.

21 (Laughter.)

22 JUSTICE ALITO: I'll wait.

23 MR. SNYDER: -- the -- if you want to  
24 jump in, but the -- the --

25 JUSTICE ALITO: I'll wait.



1           MR. SNYDER: -- the -- the next thing  
2           that I'd point to is that reading 1681n and o to  
3           use the Act-wide definition would render those  
4           provisions plainly unconstitutional as applied  
5           to unconsenting states under this Court's  
6           decision --

7           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, that's all  
8           right. We had the same problem in the Kimel  
9           case, and in the Kimel case, we had three layers  
10          of reference to the waiver of sovereign  
11          immunity, and we didn't require magic words. We  
12          just figured out what the definition was, even  
13          though it referred to another statute and the  
14          other statute referred to a different provision.  
15          And yet, no magic words were required.

16          And in Kimel, we had exactly the same  
17          thing. The government argued that it was  
18          incongruous to permit suits against the state  
19          because the states hadn't waived their sovereign  
20          immunity. But that's a different constitutional  
21          provision.

22          MR. SNYDER: So, in Kimel, there was  
23          language in the cause of action itself that was  
24          there only for the purpose of authorizing  
25          suits --

1 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, assuming we  
2 buy your first argument that any person who is  
3 negligent doesn't mean the sovereign, if it's  
4 negligent, is responsible. We have to take that  
5 first step, right?

6 MR. SNYDER: So that -- just to be  
7 clear, that's not our first argument. Our first  
8 argument is that even if you think the cause of  
9 action covers both sovereign and non-sovereign  
10 defendants, as this Court recognized in  
11 Employees, the -- the question of whether the  
12 government -- or the Congress has lifted the  
13 sovereign immunity defense is analytically  
14 distinct from it. So --

15 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: It is analytically  
16 distinct. It can't lift state sovereignty. So  
17 it can't do it here either.

18 MR. SNYDER: So, in Employees, the  
19 Court assumed that Congress would be able to  
20 lift sovereign immunity. That was -- that was  
21 before '75.

22 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, that was --  
23 Employees is an old case, 1973, analyzed in a  
24 very different way with a lot of different  
25 issues.

1           MR. SNYDER: So, Justice Sotomayor,  
2 respectfully, I disagree with that. I mean, I  
3 think this idea that Employees and Parden are  
4 sort of of a piece in the bad old days, I just  
5 don't think that's a plausible description of  
6 those cases. So, if you --

7           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: We'll let the  
8 other side answer that. I don't want to  
9 monopolize you. So --

10           MR. SNYDER: Just briefly on that, I  
11 mean, in College Savings Bank, the opinion for  
12 the Court by Justice Scalia said -- points out  
13 that Employees was written by one of the Parden  
14 dissenters over the solitary dissent of Parden's  
15 author and that it began the Court's retreat  
16 from Parden. So I think Employees is entirely  
17 consistent with this modern -- this Court's  
18 modern approach to sovereign immunity.

19           The -- the other two parts of the  
20 answer that I promised Justice Alito I was going  
21 to get out, we would -- we think it's  
22 significant that the 1996 amendments occurred  
23 just months after Seminole Tribe. The idea that  
24 Congress adopted this plainly unconstitutional  
25 statute without saying anything at all in the

1 statute itself or the legislative history we  
2 don't think is plausible.

3 We also think it's significant that  
4 these were adopted at different points in time,  
5 so you don't have Congress adopting a cause of  
6 action applicable to persons and then saying at  
7 the same time that for those purposes, we want  
8 this -- "persons" to include the United States.

9 And then, finally, we think there are  
10 a number of other statutes where, as with FCRA,  
11 Congress has defined "person" to include the  
12 United States, but then, in the causes of  
13 action, when it's wanted to authorize recovery  
14 against the United States, it hasn't just relied  
15 on that general definition of "person." It has  
16 said in RCRA, for example, that suit is  
17 authorized against any person, comma, including  
18 the United States.

19 And, Justice Kagan, to go back to  
20 where we started with why that is different from  
21 a case where Congress has just -- I realize I've  
22 -- I skipped over Justice Alito, but --

23 JUSTICE ALITO: That's okay. That's  
24 fine.

25 MR. SNYDER: -- that --

1 JUSTICE KAGAN: Long ago.

2 MR. SNYDER: -- that --

3 JUSTICE KAGAN: In fact, before you  
4 start talking to me --

5 JUSTICE ALITO: This is a --

6 JUSTICE KAGAN: -- I'd like Justice  
7 Alito to answer his quest- --

8 (Laughter.)

9 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, this is --

10 JUSTICE KAGAN: -- to ask his  
11 question.

12 JUSTICE ALITO: -- this may be a  
13 frolic and a detour, but have there been real  
14 cases in which the United States has criminally  
15 prosecuted itself?

16 MR. SNYDER: I am not aware of any.

17 JUSTICE ALITO: I mean, if -- if such  
18 a case came here, what would -- it's Monday  
19 morning.

20 (Laughter.)

21 JUSTICE ALITO: I'm having trouble  
22 getting a grasp on this. How would this work?  
23 You would be arguing on one side and one of your  
24 colleagues would be on the other side, and you'd  
25 be arguing against each other?

1           MR. SNYDER: I think that's right. I  
2 mean, it's a pretty incongruous idea. We think  
3 that if Congress wanted that result, it would  
4 have made it much clearer than just using the  
5 word "person."

6           Again, though, the reason that it  
7 matters why Congress uses just "person" or  
8 instead addresses the -- the sovereign in the  
9 cause of action itself is that when Congress  
10 uses references to the sovereign itself in the  
11 cause of action, the only purpose those words  
12 can serve is to authorize recovery against the  
13 sovereign.

14           And so, in Financial Oversight and  
15 Management Board, the Court said that when  
16 Congress has expressly authorized suits in that  
17 way, it would effectively negate the statutory  
18 language to allow the assertion of a sovereign  
19 immunity defense. And in that circumstance, the  
20 Court has been willing to infer that Congress  
21 must have intended to waive sovereign immunity.

22           JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, it does negate  
23 the statutory language if you do the normal  
24 thing that we do in interpreting statutes, which  
25 is plug in the definition into the provision

1 that uses the defined term.

2 So, here, plug in the definition to n  
3 and o, and then it negates the statutory  
4 language in the same way that it does in all  
5 those other cases. So I've said that before.

6 Here's what I really want to ask.  
7 What does "person" mean if it doesn't mean that?

8 MR. SNYDER: So we think that, just as  
9 we think in 1681q it means its ordinary  
10 definition, so too in n and o, we think it has  
11 -- it carries its ordinary --

12 JUSTICE KAGAN: What is its ordinary  
13 definition? Does it include individuals?

14 MR. SNYDER: It includes individuals.

15 JUSTICE KAGAN: Does it include  
16 partnerships?

17 MR. SNYDER: It includes partnerships.

18 JUSTICE KAGAN: Corporations?

19 MR. SNYDER: Yes.

20 JUSTICE KAGAN: Trusts?

21 MR. SNYDER: Yes.

22 JUSTICE KAGAN: Estates?

23 MR. SNYDER: Yes.

24 JUSTICE KAGAN: Cooperatives?

25 MR. SNYDER: Yes.

1 JUSTICE KAGAN: Associations?

2 MR. SNYDER: Yes.

3 JUSTICE KAGAN: Other entities?

4 MR. SNYDER: Yes, but not governments.

5 JUSTICE KAGAN: Just not government.

6 I mean, that's a strange way to read a defined  
7 term, right? We'll take every part of the  
8 defined term and plug it in but not plug in this  
9 last listed thing before you get to the residual  
10 term.

11 MR. SNYDER: So that's what we think  
12 Congress did in 1861q, and we think it's  
13 plausible to think that it did the same thing in  
14 1861n and o.

15 But, to the point you made before  
16 that, I mean, yes, if we --

17 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, how about the  
18 point I'm making now?

19 MR. SNYDER: That is my answer, that  
20 we think that it carries a meaning other than  
21 its defined one, just as "air pollutant" in  
22 Utility Air carried a meaning other than its  
23 defined one, just as "person" in 1681q carries a  
24 meaning other than its defined one.

25 JUSTICE KAGAN: But we're taking the



1 entire definition, except we're striking  
2 "government." We're taking the entire  
3 definition, except for one word, two words,  
4 "governmental subdivision or government," four  
5 words.

6 MR. SNYDER: Yes, because that is the  
7 ordinary meaning of "person." It is --

8 JUSTICE JACKSON: Okay. But --

9 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Why -- why are you  
10 doing that? I mean, why -- put aside the  
11 ordinary meaning of "person."

12 MR. SNYDER: We're doing that because  
13 we think it's plausible to read the civil  
14 liability provisions in the same way that it  
15 would be plausible to read the criminal  
16 liability provisions.

17 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Well, I thought  
18 you were doing that because of sovereign  
19 immunity and it's important to protect the fisc  
20 of the United States against ambiguous  
21 derogations of sovereign immunity.

22 MR. SNYDER: So we're also doing it  
23 for that reason. We think that that's where  
24 the -- the --

25 JUSTICE KAGAN: But Congress can waive

1 sovereign immunity, and the question is whether  
2 Congress has done so.

3 MR. SNYDER: Yes. And nothing in the  
4 statute -- may I finish?

5 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Sure.

6 MR. SNYDER: Nothing in the statute  
7 says anything about sovereign immunity. You can  
8 only do that from implication. And we think,  
9 logically, the fact that Congress didn't specify  
10 sovereign defendants in the cause of action  
11 itself means that implication is not available  
12 here.

13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We'll afford  
14 you a couple minutes for rebuttal.

15 MR. SNYDER: Thank you.

16 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, Mr.  
17 Snyder.

18 JUSTICE KAGAN: Wait.

19 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Whoa, whoa.

20 (Laughter.)

21 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice  
22 Thomas?

23 Justice Alito? No? Sure?

24 JUSTICE GORSUCH: I do have one  
25 question. So putting aside what n and o mean --

1 we've gone around that tree -- your -- your --  
2 your second argument was that Congress needs to  
3 be clearer than even that to waive sovereign  
4 immunity. Even that wouldn't be enough.

5           And I guess I wonder why. I certainly  
6 understand -- this is kind of a first principles  
7 question. I certainly understand the clear  
8 statement rule this Court has developed to  
9 protect the Eleventh Amendment and state  
10 sovereign immunity, separate sovereigns.

11           But, here, we have the sovereign  
12 itself speaking, right? It's not waiving  
13 someone else's immunity. It's not purporting to  
14 strip another entity of its protections under  
15 the Constitution. It's Congress, which has  
16 control over the federal fisc, itself deciding.  
17 And I -- so -- so I wonder why the clear  
18 statement rule would be appropriate in those  
19 circumstances.

20           MR. SNYDER: So two answers to that,  
21 Justice Gorsuch. The first is that Respondent's  
22 argument has exactly the same effect in terms of  
23 Congress's meaning as to states and in terms of  
24 its effect as to Indian tribes and foreign  
25 nations. If you rule against the United States

1 here, you will necessarily be saying that it  
2 waived sovereign immunity for them too.

3 JUSTICE GORSUCH: You're -- you're --  
4 you're just fighting my question. I'm saying it  
5 is different. It is one thing to waive a tribe,  
6 a state, a foreign government's immunity.  
7 Congress purport to exercise that power under  
8 the Constitution, an extraordinary power. It's  
9 permissible sometimes, but, generally, we think  
10 of as inconsistent with the structure of our  
11 Constitution, and that's why we have  
12 traditionally required a clear statement rule.

13 It's less clear to me what  
14 justifications we have for requiring magic words  
15 to waive sovereign immunity when it's the  
16 sovereign itself opening itself up to suit.

17 MR. SNYDER: So we, of course, don't  
18 think it's magic words, but that's not your  
19 question. This Court has repeatedly said that  
20 it applies the same standard when evaluating --

21 JUSTICE GORSUCH: I'm -- I'm -- I'm  
22 asking why.

23 MR. SNYDER: So the Court has  
24 identified a number of justifications for --

25 JUSTICE GORSUCH: What do you think

1 it's saying?

2 MR. SNYDER: -- the clear statement.  
3 I'd combine two.

4 JUSTICE GORSUCH: Okay.

5 MR. SNYDER: First, as Federalist 81  
6 said way back at the founding, it was well  
7 established then that the sovereign could not be  
8 haled into court without its consent.

9 And, second, tracing all the way back  
10 to Blackstone, it was well settled that courts  
11 should not interpret statutes to apply to the  
12 sovereign unless that was the only permissible  
13 reading.

14 And so, by the middle of the 19th  
15 Century, courts had recognized that in light of  
16 those two principles, you couldn't read a  
17 congressional enactment to waive sovereign  
18 immunity unless that was the only plausible  
19 reading, and, of course, by now, this Court has  
20 repeated that so many times that it's a  
21 well-established background principle against  
22 which Congress legislates.

23 JUSTICE GORSUCH: Thank you.

24 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice  
25 Kavanaugh?

1 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Just on the clear  
2 statement rule part of your argument, so that  
3 part, I mean, we said that sometimes the better  
4 interpretation of a statute will not necessarily  
5 prevail because of the clear statement rule.

6 So even assuming the -- the  
7 interpretation of the statute doesn't -- is  
8 against you, the better interpretation, you can  
9 still prevail under the clear statement rule?

10 MR. SNYDER: Yes, that's absolutely  
11 right. We just need a --

12 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. So that's  
13 the starting point. And then, for the why, you  
14 know, ultimately, it's money that Congress has  
15 the power to appropriate, right? And we want to  
16 be careful about that.

17 MR. SNYDER: Yes, we think that's  
18 correct.

19 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. And that's  
20 basic separation of powers?

21 MR. SNYDER: Yes, absolutely.

22 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. So how much  
23 would it cost here if you were to lose this  
24 case?

25 MR. SNYDER: So we don't have a

1 precise estimate of that, Justice Kavanaugh. I  
2 will say that there is a -- a case pending in  
3 the Seventh Circuit right now that's being held  
4 for this case in -- in which the plaintiff has  
5 attempted to assert a class action.

6 We understand that the damages if they  
7 were to prevail would be in the millions of  
8 dollars. I don't know exactly what that would  
9 be, but Congress would have anticipated that the  
10 potential liability here would be significant, I  
11 think.

12 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And punitive  
13 damages too, right?

14 MR. SNYDER: So we, of course, don't  
15 think those would be available. But I -- I  
16 think, if you accepted that this is clear enough  
17 --

18 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: If you accept  
19 their argument down the line, punitive damages  
20 could be available?

21 MR. SNYDER: That's correct.

22 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. And then,  
23 on Employees, you've mentioned that case. And  
24 that case seems structurally -- I mean, I'm  
25 going to ask a lot to the other side about this

1 -- seems structurally similar to this statute,  
2 how this one developed.

3 But the other side basically says  
4 don't pay attention to Employees, and I think  
5 Justice Sotomayor alluded to that, because it's  
6 old, a 1973 case. So I want your response to  
7 that.

8 MR. SNYDER: So, I mean, first, we  
9 don't think this is how this Court treats  
10 precedents. Again, as I said, we think that  
11 this Court has reaffirmed Employees and  
12 recognized that Employees began the retreat from  
13 Parden, but even just looking at the text of  
14 Employees, I think it's consistent with the  
15 argument and the distinctions that I'm drawing  
16 today.

17 The Court there said that the cause of  
18 action by its literal terms covered state  
19 agencies, but it recognized that the relevant  
20 question was whether Congress had intend --  
21 intended to bring the states to heel by lifting  
22 their immunity. So it recognized that was a  
23 distinct question, and then it said Congress  
24 wouldn't have done that silently.

25 And, in particular, it said that if



1 Congress had intended to do that, it would have  
2 done one of two things. It -- it either would  
3 have addressed immunity expressly, or it would  
4 have amended the cause of action, and in that  
5 context, what that would have meant was adding a  
6 specific reference to state agencies to the  
7 cause of action.

8 And because Congress hadn't done  
9 either of those things, the Court in *Employees*  
10 found there wasn't a clear waiver. We think the  
11 same thing is true here.

12 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: So then, to pick  
13 up on Justice Kagan's questions earlier, if you  
14 see *Employees* on one side of the line and you  
15 see cases like *Kimel* on the other side of the  
16 line, where the -- where the reference to the  
17 public entities is in the cause of action  
18 itself, that's slicing it pretty thin.

19 Like, what sense does that make or  
20 what principle would undergird sticking to  
21 *Employees* in the way that you're advocating?

22 MR. SNYDER: So I think, in the cases  
23 like *Kimel*, there's a superfluity argument that  
24 unless you hold that Congress has waived  
25 sovereign immunity, that text in the cause of

1 action will do absolutely no work. And so the  
2 Court has said Congress wouldn't have  
3 effectively negated that and has been willing to  
4 infer a waiver of immunity.

5 But Respondent has conceded that our  
6 interpretation doesn't produce any superfluity  
7 here. So even if you think that probably  
8 members of Congress intended to waive sovereign  
9 immunity, there's no necessary implication that  
10 they must have. And under the clear statement  
11 rule and under Employees, that's enough to rule  
12 for us.

13 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Can you give me  
14 just one quick example of how it's not  
15 superfluous --

16 MR. SNYDER: So --

17 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- if you were to  
18 prevail here?

19 MR. SNYDER: -- so "person" would  
20 cover entities other -- private parties other  
21 than credit reporting agencies that furnish  
22 information to those credit reporting agencies.

23 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: No, the coverage  
24 of government, how the coverage of government  
25 wouldn't be superfluous even if you were to

1 prevail here.

2 MR. SNYDER: So the coverage of  
3 government ensures that the government can  
4 obtain credit reports. I mean, the -- the  
5 coverage of government was there before the  
6 cause of action, so the one thing we know is  
7 that the coverage of government is not there in  
8 order to allow recovery under the cause of  
9 action.

10 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Thank you.

11 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice  
12 Barrett?

13 JUSTICE BARRETT: In Employees, are we  
14 bound as a part of the holding the methodology  
15 applied by the case? Because it seems to me  
16 like that's what you're arguing, that this is  
17 the methodology that the case employed, and so  
18 we must follow the same methodology as -- so is  
19 that part of the holding?

20 MR. SNYDER: I -- I think that is part  
21 of the holding. I mean, the other thing I would  
22 say here is that when you're talking about  
23 implications, the -- the cause of action doesn't  
24 expressly say anything about sovereign immunity.  
25 So you can only find a waiver by thinking that

1 in adopting that cause of action, Congress must  
2 also have intended to create a waiver.

3 And if you were a member of Congress  
4 and you looked at Employees and you said: All  
5 right, I've got a -- a cause of action that  
6 applies to a general term, if I define that  
7 general term somewhere else in a way that it  
8 covers sovereigns, will that lead to a waiver of  
9 sovereign immunity.

10 JUSTICE BARRETT: So Employees is part  
11 of the backdrop against which Congress  
12 legislated in its methodology?

13 MR. SNYDER: So, I -- I mean, I think  
14 it makes it plausible to think that members of  
15 Congress would not have understood just the bare  
16 creation of a broad cause of action as  
17 sufficient to take the analytically distinct  
18 step of waiving sovereign immunity.

19 JUSTICE BARRETT: Okay. Second  
20 question. Q is your best argument. If it  
21 wasn't in the statute, would you lose?

22 MR. SNYDER: No. If -- if it wasn't  
23 in the statute, we would still have exactly the  
24 same argument under Employees, and things like  
25 the fact that 1681n and O would be

1 unconstitutional as applied to the states, I  
2 think, would still give us a --

3 JUSTICE BARRETT: Well, unless the  
4 states waive their sovereign immunity.

5 MR. SNYDER: Yes. I mean, of course,  
6 you could say the same thing about application  
7 to federal agencies, that there are some federal  
8 agencies as to which Congress has waived all  
9 immunity.

10 And so, if you want to just read 1681n  
11 and o as creating causes of action that apply  
12 when there's a waiver from someone else --  
13 somewhere else, you can do that with the federal  
14 government too.

15 But my understanding of Respondent's  
16 argument is that Congress was intending to  
17 eliminate sovereign immunity in 1681n and o, and  
18 if that's right, then Congress is acting  
19 blatantly unconstitutionally with respect to the  
20 states and didn't say anything at all about the  
21 Seminole Tribe decision from just a few months  
22 earlier. We think that's unlikely.

23 JUSTICE BARRETT: Last question.  
24 Where are you getting the definition that you  
25 gave Justice Kagan when she asked you what

1 "person" would mean there? Is that just kind of  
2 what ordinary people would understand? Is that  
3 the Dictionary Act?

4 MR. SNYDER: It's both. I mean, I  
5 think the Dictionary Act definition comports  
6 with how an informed legal reader would  
7 understand the word "person" in most places, and  
8 we think that that -- that understanding makes  
9 sense in 1681q, so we think it makes sense that  
10 Congress could have plausibly used it in the  
11 same sense nearby in n and o.

12 JUSTICE BARRETT: Thank you, Mr.  
13 Snyder.

14 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice  
15 Jackson?

16 JUSTICE JACKSON: So I guess I  
17 perceive Employees as being structurally  
18 dissimilar in relevant ways in light of its  
19 amendment history, and so I'm hoping that you  
20 can comment on that.

21 I mean, it seems to me that what  
22 happened in Employees, to the extent that there  
23 was some uncertainty about what Congress did, it  
24 was because Congress amended the definitions  
25 section, right, to include governments, and that

1 definitions section applied to a whole host of  
2 things in the statute, the duties, the  
3 liabilities, or whatnot, and so there was  
4 palpable uncertainty on the Court's part as to  
5 whether expanding -- what was it -- employers to  
6 include government actually affected a waiver of  
7 liability with respect to the liability section.

8           It seems to me here, when we have the  
9 amendment to the liability section expanding, as  
10 you conceded previously, the liability section  
11 to include other entities by use of the term  
12 "person" that had been previously defined to  
13 include government, we're actually accomplishing  
14 a different result.

15           It seems to me there isn't the same  
16 kind of uncertainty in the relevant situation of  
17 whether or not they intended to expand  
18 liability, which is what we need for the purpose  
19 of a waiver.

20           Can you comment on that?

21           MR. SNYDER: Sure. So -- so two  
22 things in response. The first is that I -- I  
23 think this Court has ordinarily said you just  
24 look at the statute as it exists. I mean,  
25 Respondent has said you should look at it as it

1 exists today.

2 JUSTICE JACKSON: But that's not what  
3 happened in Employees. So, if we're going to go  
4 with Employees, which -- which is what you --  
5 you're saying, we're going with that  
6 methodology, they didn't just do a plain text.  
7 They were talking about what Congress's intent  
8 was, isn't it strange that Congress amended it  
9 and didn't amend the liability provision. And  
10 what I'm saying is, here, they did.

11 MR. SNYDER: So I -- I think, if you  
12 want to look at that timing, I think the timing  
13 actually cuts the other way because, in  
14 Employ -- in Employees, what Congress was doing  
15 was taking a statute that already authorized  
16 civil liability against -- against employers and  
17 saying we want state agencies to be employers  
18 for purposes of this statute. We're going to --  
19 we're going to cover them under the same  
20 definition that until now has covered all  
21 employers.

22 And so, in that circumstance, it might  
23 have been reasonable to think that Congress  
24 intended state agencies to be covered in exactly  
25 the same way as all other employers because



1 Congress was specifically focused on state  
2 agencies. And yet --

3 JUSTICE JACKSON: Yes, but it wasn't  
4 focused on liability for this purpose. That's  
5 my only point. Can I ask you another question?

6 I guess I hear you suggesting that  
7 there has to be an express mention of the  
8 federal government in the provision. So I'm  
9 wondering, is the government not conceding that  
10 we have said that you can satisfy the clear  
11 statement rule by implication?

12 MR. SNYDER: No, we accept that you  
13 can establish it by implication. As the Court  
14 said in College Savings Bank, it has to be  
15 overwhelming implication.

16 JUSTICE JACKSON: Right. But -- so an  
17 implication could occur when what? In other  
18 words, it seems to me here that there is no  
19 mention of sovereign immunity, so we're  
20 operating in implication land. The implication  
21 is coming from the creation of a cause of action  
22 that applies to the government. You're arguing  
23 as to whether or not it applies to the  
24 government. No, you're not?

25 MR. SNYDER: No, we're not arguing --

1 so --

2 JUSTICE JACKSON: Okay.

3 MR. SNYDER: -- we have a different  
4 action about what whether the cause of action  
5 applies to the government.

6 JUSTICE JACKSON: I see.

7 MR. SNYDER: But this part of the  
8 argument --

9 JUSTICE JACKSON: Okay.

10 MR. SNYDER: -- we say even if you  
11 think "person" includes the government, all that  
12 does is show that the cause of action applies to  
13 the government.

14 JUSTICE JACKSON: And isn't that  
15 enough to be the implication?

16 MR. SNYDER: No.

17 JUSTICE JACKSON: Why?

18 MR. SNYDER: Because the fact that you  
19 have a cause of action that covers a particular  
20 defendant doesn't speak one way or the other to  
21 whether that defendant may have particular  
22 available defenses. No one would think it's  
23 strange that this cause of action applies to  
24 private parties that violated FCRA more than  
25 five years ago. By its plain terms, it

1 absolutely permits that.

2 JUSTICE JACKSON: I -- I don't  
3 understand that. I mean, we're -- we're talking  
4 -- we start from the standpoint of, has there  
5 been a waiver of sovereign immunity? That's the  
6 question that we're asking to begin with.  
7 That's why we're engaged in this exercise.

8 So, when we start there, I'm not sure  
9 I understand whether or not there are other  
10 defenses available doing any work with respect  
11 to us trying to determine whether sovereign  
12 immunity has been waived.

13 MR. SNYDER: So this Court said in  
14 Meyer that the question of the -- the cause of  
15 action and the question of the defense of  
16 sovereign immunity are analytically distinct.  
17 And that's the --

18 JUSTICE JACKSON: So then there's no  
19 implication on the basis of the cause of action.

20 MR. SNYDER: No, there can be  
21 implication. I -- I know that I'm drawing fine  
22 lines, but, logically, there is an implication  
23 that Congress intends to waive sovereign  
24 immunity if it creates a cause of action that  
25 applies only to sovereign defendants or that

1 expressly names sovereign defendants.

2 JUSTICE JACKSON: So it has to be  
3 explicit with respect to -- it can't be that  
4 they do so by naming all these other entities  
5 and adding in government. Is that your point?  
6 It has to either be stand-alone just the word  
7 "government" in the "person" definition, or it  
8 has to be written "government" in the actual  
9 1618n?

10 MR. SNYDER: Yes, because that is the  
11 only circumstance in which the statutory text  
12 that -- that refers to "government" would have  
13 no effect if the government were able to assert  
14 sovereign immunity.

15 JUSTICE JACKSON: And where have we  
16 said that before?

17 MR. SNYDER: So I read the Court's  
18 decision in Financial Oversight and Management  
19 Board to say that. I think that's the only way  
20 that you can reconcile cases like Kimel on the  
21 one hand and Employees on the other, is to say  
22 that Congress distinguishes in this way.

23 And if you look at statutes like RCRA  
24 and the MPRSA that we point to at pages 22 to 24  
25 of our brief, Congress has done what we've said

1 it could have done here. Congress has said it's  
2 authorizing suit against any person, comma,  
3 including the United States. We agree --

4 JUSTICE JACKSON: All right.

5 MR. SNYDER: -- that that gives rise  
6 to the implication.

7 JUSTICE JACKSON: Thank you.

8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,  
9 counsel.

10 Mr. Joshi.

11 ORAL ARGUMENT OF NANDAN M. JOSHI

12 ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENT

13 MR. JOSHI: Mr. Chief Justice, and may  
14 it please the Court:

15 The Fair Credit Reporting Act imposes  
16 civil liability on any person that negligently  
17 or willfully fails to comply with FCRA's  
18 requirements. It expressly defines "person" to  
19 include any government agency. The term  
20 "person" is equivalent to its definition, and  
21 when FCRA's definition of "person" is plugged  
22 into FCRA's civil liability provisions, those  
23 provisions create causes of action against  
24 federal agencies that are clear and specific  
25 enough to waive sovereign immunity.

1           Congress was not required to state  
2     that "persons" include federal agencies a second  
3     time in the cause of action to make its intent  
4     clear. Congress knew what it was doing when it  
5     amended FCRA in 1996. When it did so, it  
6     consistently used the term "person" to describe  
7     both who would be subject to FCRA's substantive  
8     duties and who would be subject to FCRA's  
9     enforcement mechanisms.

10           Interpreting "person" to mean  
11     something different in the enforcement  
12     provisions would make FCRA's substantive duties  
13     completely unenforceable against governmental  
14     furnishers.

15           Moreover, Congress knew how to and did  
16     choose words to alter the scope of liability  
17     where it wanted to do so. Thus, where  
18     Section 1681n generally provides for damages  
19     against "any person," 1681n(a)(1)(B) creates a  
20     special remedy for certain violations by a  
21     natural person. That was a -- an amendment in  
22     1996 as well.

23           Congress also expressly limited the  
24     government's liability in FCRA's sister statute  
25     in the Consumer Credit Protection Act. It did

1 not do so in FCRA, indicating that Congress  
2 intended no such limitation.

3 I welcome the Court's questions.

4 JUSTICE THOMAS: Counsel, the --  
5 there's much discussion about Employees, and I'd  
6 like you to address that, what the government  
7 argued, but I'd also like you to consider  
8 addressing whether or not the -- what's  
9 necessary to -- for the government to abrogate  
10 state sovereign immunity, whether that standard  
11 is the same as the standard for waiving its own  
12 sovereign immunity.

13 MR. JOSHI: Sure. So, on Employees, I  
14 think the best sort of empirical evidence of its  
15 continuing force are the five courts of appeals  
16 that have addressed this very issue, the  
17 question of whether FCRA waives sovereign  
18 immunity.

19 That -- there's a 3-2 circuit split on  
20 that. The government has raised Employees in  
21 each one of those cases. Not one single court,  
22 not even the two that agree with the  
23 government's position, thought Employees was  
24 worth discussing. It's too out -- I -- I  
25 suggest that's because it's -- the analysis does

1 not comport with how the Court reads statutes in  
2 the modern era.

3 Employees, as I read it, was telling  
4 Congress how to craft an amendment to make its  
5 intent clear. The modern -- the -- sort of the  
6 current way the Court discerns congressional  
7 intent is to look at the provisions as a whole,  
8 the amending provisions, as well as the original  
9 provisions, and construe them together. And  
10 Employees is inconsistent with that.

11 The other thing to point --

12 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: I'm sorry. I -- I  
13 -- I don't understand that, really, looking at  
14 Employees, because it relies on the text of the  
15 provision and says that because the addition of  
16 public employees -- employers was in a separate  
17 definitional provision, that wasn't good enough.

18 And then the dissent echoes your  
19 argument. Justice Brennan's dissent says that  
20 it's the sheerest sort of ritualism to suggest  
21 that Congress excluded the states from 16(b)  
22 suits by not expressly referring to the states  
23 in 16(b). In other words, Justice Brennan was  
24 saying you're being too textualist, majority  
25 opinion, in -- in how you're going about this.



1 And the majority said -- I read it as  
2 establishing a principle -- well, we're going to  
3 draw the line here. If it's just in the  
4 definitional section, that's not good enough for  
5 a waiver.

6 MR. JOSHI: So Employees started off  
7 by looking at the legislative history to discern  
8 what Congress wanted to do when it amended the  
9 FLSA in 1966.

10 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: The -- the  
11 principle rested on the text. I mean, I  
12 acknowledge that then it went on to the  
13 legislative history. It might have had an even  
14 looser standard for waiver of sovereign immunity  
15 than we now apply. But, even under that looser  
16 standard, the Court said no, no waiver.

17 MR. JOSHI: Well, the -- the textual  
18 part of Employees --

19 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And so a fortiori  
20 --

21 MR. JOSHI: Yeah.

22 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- you're in  
23 trouble if -- if we take Employees seriously.  
24 At least I want you to respond to that.

25 MR. JOSHI: Sure. I -- I do think the

1 text -- the textual part of Employees, which  
2 indicated the Court would find it surprising, I  
3 think that's the exact quote, if Congress chose  
4 to amend the FLSA but did not amend it in this  
5 way. Now the Court says that Congress does not  
6 have -- have to use magic words and it doesn't  
7 have to use a magic structure, I would say,  
8 doesn't have to state its intent in any  
9 particular way.

10 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Well, do you still  
11 agree there's a clear statement rule that can  
12 override the better reading of the text?

13 MR. JOSHI: There is a clear statement  
14 rule. We don't fight that. I don't think --

15 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Can it -- can it  
16 override the better reading of the text?  
17 Because that is the meaning --

18 MR. JOSHI: Yes. No, we --

19 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- of a clear  
20 statement rule.

21 MR. JOSHI: -- we don't question that  
22 there has to be one plausible meaning of the  
23 text in order for us to prevail.

24 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. I think --

25 MR. JOSHI: But let me just --

1 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- I interrupted  
2 you before you answered Justice Thomas's --

3 MR. JOSHI: Yeah. Well, the other --

4 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- question about  
5 federal versus states, so you go ahead.

6 MR. JOSHI: Sure. Well, the last  
7 thing I would point out about Employees before I  
8 turn to federal versus state is that a critical  
9 part of Employees was that the government could  
10 -- the federal government could still enforce  
11 the FLSA against the states. The government's  
12 argument here takes us a step further and says  
13 no one, not even the federal government or the  
14 state governments, can enforce Employees against  
15 any governmental furnishers because the term  
16 "person" does not apply -- the definition of  
17 "person" does not apply to 1681s, which is the  
18 administrative enforcement provision. So this  
19 would be a step beyond Employees.

20 On the federal versus state issue,  
21 Congress -- I don't think there's a different  
22 textual standard in this Court's cases between  
23 waiving sovereign immunity and abrogating state  
24 immunity. It's simply that what Seminole Tribe  
25 and its progeny hold is that where there's a

1 conflict between what Congress wants and what  
2 the state wants, the state wins absent -- unless  
3 the -- it's in a few discrete areas where the  
4 Constitution abrogates state sovereign immunity  
5 or it's a Fourteenth Amendment case.

6 But, if this statute were in the  
7 Fourteenth Amendment context, I think this  
8 language would be sufficient to abrogate state  
9 sovereign immunity just as it waives federal  
10 sovereign immunity.

11 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Counsel, it --  
12 I think it's an unavoidable consequence of your  
13 interpretation that the statute authorizes  
14 criminal prosecution of the United States.

15 Now, if there were such a prosecution  
16 and the United States were convicted, what would  
17 the pre-sentencing report look like?

18 (Laughter.)

19 MR. JOSHI: So, as a technical matter,  
20 I -- I would say the proper defendant in a FCRA  
21 action would be an agency, not the United States  
22 itself. That said, I don't think this Court has  
23 squarely held how far the federal -- the absence  
24 of criminal liability for federal -- for  
25 governmental entities extends. Last year, in

1 Halk Bank, you -- I think you said that criminal  
2 law can apply to foreign states and their arms.  
3 I don't -- I don't think you've said that in the  
4 context of domestic agencies.

5 In Bennett versus Spear, you suggested  
6 that perhaps agencies could be criminally --  
7 criminally liable or civilly liable for failing  
8 to -- to adhere to a biological opinion.

9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So -- so you  
10 agree that your -- your reading of the statute  
11 leads to that result, that -- that a criminal  
12 prosecution can be brought against the United  
13 States, whether it's through a United States  
14 agency or the nation as a whole?

15 MR. JOSHI: That -- that is one  
16 reading. This -- this Court -- I mean, I can't  
17 say it's absurd since this Court has not said it  
18 -- it's absurd previously. That said, I -- I --  
19 the easier path I think for this Court would be  
20 to follow what Judge Katsas said in the D.C.  
21 Circuit in the Mowrer decision, what Judge  
22 Krause said below, which is that any contextual  
23 reason you might have for disregarding an  
24 otherwise controlling statutory definition in  
25 the criminal context is unique to the criminal

1 context.

2 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, but how --

3 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Why is that?

4 JUSTICE KAGAN: -- does that work? I  
5 mean, n and o and q are all added at the same  
6 time. We can add s to that too because s raises  
7 its own anomalies. They're all -- they're all  
8 enacted at the same time. And -- and they're  
9 all different kinds of liability provisions.

10 And you're essentially saying -- and  
11 you're right that Judge Krause said this below,  
12 Judge Katsas said it, but you're saying, well,  
13 you -- you know, it fits with n and o, so we'll  
14 use one interpretation there. It doesn't fit  
15 with q, so we'll use a different interpretation  
16 there.

17 MR. JOSHI: So -- so one correction.  
18 Q stems from the original 1970 act that enacted  
19 the definition of "person." The 1996 Act,  
20 Congress amended the civil liability provision  
21 and amended the administrative enforcement  
22 provision to extend -- authorize enforcement  
23 against persons. But it didn't -- it didn't add  
24 in the term "person" in 1681q in 1996. That's  
25 --

1 JUSTICE KAGAN: Okay.

2 MR. JOSHI: It enhanced the penalties  
3 in the definition. With that said, each --  
4 there's no -- I think, well, the civil -- q  
5 rests as sort of a stand-alone self-contained  
6 provision. It doesn't interact with the rest of  
7 the FC -- the rest of the FCRA in any way.

8 It contains its own substantive  
9 prohibition and its own criminal penalties,  
10 whereas you have the liability provisions and  
11 the enforcement provisions, which are designed  
12 to enforce the substantive --

13 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: But you're --

14 MR. JOSHI: -- provisions of FCRA.

15 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- to pick up on  
16 the Chief Justice's question, it's not just  
17 criminal prosecution against the United States,  
18 it's punitive damages against the United States,  
19 very unusual. State and federal enforcement  
20 against the United States would be contemplated  
21 if we took your interpretation.

22 There's an express waiver in another  
23 provision that was enacted months earlier, the  
24 government says that's an anomaly. The Privacy  
25 Act is a carefully reticulated scheme for

1 imposing liability on the government for Privacy  
2 Act violations. They're saying that you would  
3 create this anomaly.

4 So there's a string of anomalies that  
5 the other -- that the government says would be  
6 created by -- by your position.

7 MR. JOSHI: Well, I think the only one  
8 that qualifies as even a debatable anomaly would  
9 be 1681q. The government -- it just doesn't --  
10 I don't think they've made any --

11 JUSTICE JACKSON: I thought your --

12 MR. JOSHI: -- case about what --

13 JUSTICE JACKSON: -- I thought the  
14 answer was that it's not that the definition is  
15 shrinking or expanding provision by provision  
16 the definition of "person," that you can have  
17 this group of entities that are defined  
18 statutorily as persons and that carries  
19 throughout the whole statute.

20 But there may be various provisions in  
21 which subsets of persons are carved out because  
22 they have other defenses. I mean, just because  
23 "person" is there doesn't mean that, you know,  
24 every person will automatically and always be  
25 subject to the entirety of that separate



1 provision.

2 As the government said, they could  
3 have separate defenses. They could have other  
4 reasons why they're not subject to criminal  
5 liability even though they're still persons for  
6 the purpose of the statute.

7 So, if that's happening, then the  
8 government's observation that in certain parts  
9 of the statute persons are not going to -- to --  
10 or governments, even though they're persons, are  
11 not going to be subject to that part of the  
12 statute, it seems to me, doesn't really help  
13 their argument because, as Justice Gorsuch said,  
14 we don't see even that happening in n and o,  
15 which is really all that is at issue here.

16 MR. JOSHI: Right. I think the  
17 government argument really tries to focus on  
18 provisions away from n and o because there is no  
19 textual basis in looking at n and o for not  
20 applying the definition as written.

21 JUSTICE JACKSON: And there's no real  
22 basis for suggesting that -- that  
23 notwithstanding the statute saying that  
24 "persons" is defined in this way throughout the  
25 entirety of the provision, sometimes it's not

1 really defined this way.

2           It seems to me that is an implausible  
3 reading of the text of the statute that very  
4 clearly defines the term and says it applies  
5 everywhere.

6           So, if it's not actually operative in  
7 certain places, it's not because the definition  
8 has changed. It's because something else is  
9 going on that would prevent that consequence  
10 occurring in that particular circumstance.

11           MR. JOSHI: I think that's right. For  
12 example, in 1681g, subsection g, Congress has an  
13 expressed alternative definition of "person" for  
14 purposes of that provision. That doesn't mean  
15 somehow n and o become ambiguous in terms of  
16 where the definition applies.

17           JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Do you -- do you  
18 --

19           CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, it's not  
20 only --

21           JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- do you think --

22           CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: -- that you  
23 think that it's right, but under our sovereign  
24 immunity precedent, that has to be the only way  
25 of reading it?

1           In other words, there's no other way  
2 and all these other areas where "person" doesn't  
3 actually mean person the way it's defined in the  
4 statute but means much less, and there's not  
5 just one, there's two, there's three, and you  
6 have to say that changing the reading of  
7 "person" is the only way you could read that  
8 because, if it isn't, then there is -- then  
9 sovereign immunity, it seems, is implicit in the  
10 statute in a way that other provisions may not  
11 be.

12           MR. JOSHI: Well, I -- assuming the --  
13 the hypothetical, which is that there are  
14 variations in what "person" means throughout the  
15 statute --

16           CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: It's not my  
17 hypothetical, but go ahead.

18           MR. JOSHI: Yes. The -- the fact  
19 remains, if the Court's going to depart from the  
20 otherwise controlling definition, it looks to  
21 something else in the statute that provides a  
22 countervailing argument.

23           For example, Utility Air was brought  
24 up. The Court looked to provisions of the  
25 statute that said, if we apply the definition of

1 "air pollutant" to these provisions, we have an  
2 unworkable statute.

3 And to the extent you conclude that  
4 "person" doesn't apply to 1681q because that's  
5 unworkable or improbable that Congress intended  
6 to extend criminal liability this far, that is a  
7 -- that is an argument, an interpretation that  
8 would be limited to 1681q.

9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, you say  
10 in the statute, but I guess the argument is that  
11 there can be limitations outside the statute  
12 that would apply as well.

13 And I'm thinking in particular of our  
14 decision in the Bond case, the -- the -- the  
15 chemical on the doorknob that is under one  
16 interpretation, perhaps literal interpretation  
17 of the statute would be covered by the Chemical  
18 Weapons Treaty. And we said that sometimes  
19 arguments like, well, that seems pretty  
20 implausible can trump what would otherwise be a  
21 pretty precise reading of the statutory  
22 language.

23 MR. JOSHI: Well, that's right. I  
24 think Bond -- Bond is a good foil for this case.  
25 The Court found -- your opinion for the Court

1 found that the statute was ambiguous. And, I  
2 mean, I agree that if this statute is ambiguous,  
3 then the -- the sovereign immunity canon favors  
4 the government.

5 But if -- but the -- the -- there, the  
6 definition the Court called improbably broad,  
7 there's nothing improbably broad about defining  
8 "person" to include the government. The Court  
9 has said, if Congress wants to not have the  
10 ordinary meaning of "person" applied --

11 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, I -- I  
12 would have thought -- sorry to interrupt, but  
13 I -- I would have thought it's -- the  
14 improbability comes from the argument that this  
15 would mean you can prosecute the United States,  
16 it can mean that you can get damages from the  
17 United States and so on and so forth.

18 MR. JOSHI: Well, even if prosecuting  
19 the United States is improbable, seek --  
20 obtaining damages from the United States is not  
21 improbable. Congress waived sovereign immunity  
22 in a number of statutes.

23 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, it's  
24 pretty improbable for the statute to authorize  
25 the FTC to seek damages from the United States,

1 which is what it does.

2 MR. JOSHI: Well, the Equal Credit  
3 Opportunity Act, I think, does the same thing.  
4 It set up the same sort of enforcement  
5 mechanism. There are other -- there are other  
6 statutory schemes that authorize  
7 intergovernmental liability, our Resource  
8 Conservation Recovery Act --

9 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: You -- keep going.

10 MR. JOSHI: No. I -- I --

11 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Okay. You -- you  
12 said at the beginning and I think just now that  
13 Congress knew what it was doing when it amended  
14 the Act. But I don't think it realized that it  
15 was imposing this liability. If you look at the  
16 CBO, Congressional Budget Office, reports,  
17 there's no mention of anything, any liability  
18 like this.

19 And they carefully analyze how much  
20 the additional costs would be for the executive  
21 branch in enforcement and the judicial branch in  
22 handling the additional cases. So -- and the  
23 CBA -- CBO score, as you know and anyone  
24 familiar with that process knows, is very  
25 important for Congress. So I -- I don't think

1 it's right to say Congress knew what it was  
2 doing.

3 You may -- could still win without  
4 that, but I think that's not -- not correct,  
5 unless you want to respond to that in some way.

6 MR. JOSHI: Well -- well, I don't  
7 think the CBO is itself Congress. And Congress  
8 --

9 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Correct.

10 MR. JOSHI: I mean, what -- what is --

11 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: But they do -- do  
12 you challenge that Congress relies on the CBO  
13 score when it's doing legislation?

14 MR. JOSHI: No, it's -- it's -- it's  
15 part --

16 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Yeah.

17 MR. JOSHI: -- of the committee  
18 reports.

19 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Yeah, I think you  
20 have to acknowledge that.

21 MR. JOSHI: I -- I accept the  
22 proposition that the legislative history doesn't  
23 say one thing or another about sovereign  
24 immunity.

25 The -- the -- the legislative history

1 does talk about the purpose of the statute, and  
2 that is consistent with a conclusion that  
3 Congress wanted to hold the government liable  
4 just as any private furnisher of information  
5 would be for -- for failing to comply with their  
6 FCRA duties.

7 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Can I -- can I  
8 also, on a different tack, Justice Gorsuch  
9 raised an important question, I thought, about  
10 federal versus state sovereign immunity, and you  
11 heard I -- I mentioned separation of powers.

12 My understanding was that the reason  
13 we have that is because taxpayer money is -- is  
14 valuable and we should be sure it's been  
15 appropriated before we funnel a bunch of money  
16 out of the Treasury. That's both to ensure that  
17 money can be spent on other programs because  
18 it's not limitless money in the Treasury, and  
19 it's to ensure otherwise that taxes aren't  
20 raised. So we have to be very careful before we  
21 overstep, as basic separation of powers.

22 Do you dispute any of that?

23 MR. JOSHI: Not at all. You have two  
24 principles that are designed to protect that  
25 interest. One is the sovereign immunity canon.



1 So, if the -- a statute is ambiguous, the  
2 sovereign immunity canon would say even the  
3 government gets the benefit of ambiguities even  
4 if that's not the best reading of the statute.

5 And the second one is the specificity  
6 requirement, so a broad statute cannot waive  
7 sovereign immunity. The -- the statute must  
8 discuss governmental entities specifically,  
9 which the definition here does.

10 JUSTICE GORSUCH: Counsel, I guess I'm  
11 a little confused why -- I mean, I can  
12 understand that you don't need to make the  
13 argument to prevail in your view, but I -- I'm  
14 not sure I understand your response to Justice  
15 Kavanaugh from first principles.

16 Sovereign immunity serves many  
17 important purposes in respecting other  
18 institutions, states, tribes, foreign  
19 governments. It's inherent in our  
20 constitutional design, embodied in the Tenth  
21 Amendment even, for example.

22 But, when it comes -- if we're worried  
23 about protecting the federal fisc, I would have  
24 thought that the answer might be Congress is in  
25 the best position to do that. Article I gives

1       them power over the federal fisc. And we have  
2       no license to expand or contract its  
3       instructions artificially but follow them in --  
4       instead faithfully.

5                   MR. JOSHI: I mean, that's right. At  
6       bottom, this is a policy choice for Congress to  
7       make.

8                   JUSTICE GORSUCH: One would have  
9       thought.

10                  JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Why is there a  
11       clear statement rule then?

12                  MR. JOSHI: Well, just as with other  
13       policy choices, the Court -- if the -- the area  
14       is a particularly sensitive one, the Court wants  
15       --

16                  JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Why -- why -- why  
17       is it sensitive?

18                  JUSTICE GORSUCH: What isn't  
19       sensitive?

20                  JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Why -- why is it  
21       sensitive? Focus on that if you could.

22                  MR. JOSHI: Well, I -- I think the  
23       Court takes holding the government liable,  
24       especially for damages, seriously. So it wants  
25       -- doesn't want to construe ambiguous text in --

1 in a way that may be different than Congress  
2 understood ambiguous text. But, when the text  
3 is clear, that's a different matter altogether.

4 When there's only one plausible  
5 interpretation of the text under traditional  
6 rules of statutory interpretation, the Court  
7 shouldn't be applying a different interpretation  
8 of the statute.

9 JUSTICE KAGAN: Some of our cases have  
10 suggested that the reason we have a clear  
11 statement rule is to, in this area, prevent the  
12 waiver of sovereign immunity accidentally, you  
13 know, that there has to be -- it can't be  
14 through inadvertence that Congress has waived  
15 sovereign immunity.

16 So you could look at this statute and  
17 especially the q problem and so forth and say  
18 that the waiver was -- was accidental, it was  
19 inadvertent, and that's exactly what the clear  
20 statement rule tries to prevent. So what would  
21 -- what -- what would be your best counter to  
22 that?

23 MR. JOSHI: So I have two counters.  
24 One is about statutory interpretation. One is  
25 FCRA-specific.

1           The first one is I -- I -- I don't see  
2 how you have a workable principle of statutory  
3 interpretation that looks behind clear text to  
4 say, did Congress really mean this?

5           So, for example, if the 1996 Act had  
6 reenacted the definition of "person" word for  
7 word, if the committee report had said we're  
8 doing this because we want to make clear the  
9 government is liable, this -- the words of the  
10 U.S. Code would be exactly the same. But, under  
11 a rule that looks behind the text, the -- the  
12 outcome would be completely different.

13           And the FCRA-specific argument is -- I  
14 mean, here, you have a situation, as I mentioned  
15 in my opening, Congress didn't just sort of make  
16 a single amendment to the -- to FCRA. It  
17 amended the civil liability provision to extend  
18 to persons in Section 2412 of the 1996  
19 amendment. On the very next page on the very  
20 next section, 2413, it used the word "person" to  
21 extend furnisher obligations onto those who  
22 furnish information to consumer reporting  
23 agencies.

24           And I think it -- it's fairly  
25 implausible that when Congress turned the page,

1 it somehow, using the same word, intended a  
2 different definition of the term to apply.

3 JUSTICE ALITO: Could I ask you a  
4 couple questions about Employees? First,  
5 suppose that Employees had decided the very  
6 issue that is before us now. Would you say that  
7 we should disregard it because it used an  
8 outmoded method of statutory interpretation?

9 MR. JOSHI: Well, if Employees had  
10 decided the Fair Credit Reporting Act, I think  
11 there was an argument for statutory stare  
12 decisis that might still apply to the FLSA, but  
13 since -- since that doesn't apply here, I -- I  
14 would -- I think the Court should and has in the  
15 past in the case of implied causes of action,  
16 has rejected prior methods of interpretation  
17 that -- that had become outmoded.

18 JUSTICE ALITO: And was that a "yes"  
19 or a "no"?

20 MR. JOSHI: I --

21 JUSTICE ALITO: Or maybe?

22 MR. JOSHI: -- may have lost the  
23 thought on the original question, but I --

24 JUSTICE ALITO: Yeah. If it involved  
25 the very question that is before us now --

1 MR. JOSHI: Yeah.

2 JUSTICE ALITO: -- would -- do you  
3 think we should -- we would disregard it or we  
4 should disregard it because we disagree with the  
5 method of statutory interpretation?

6 MR. JOSHI: If it's the very question  
7 in a different statute, my answer would be the  
8 same. The Court should not follow *Employees* and  
9 should instead apply -- read the statute the way  
10 it currently reads statutes.

11 JUSTICE ALITO: Okay. That's my -- I  
12 think you -- you went into my second question.  
13 Suppose that the statute is different, but the  
14 structure -- the wording and the structure in  
15 all relevant respects is the same. Do you think  
16 we should disregard it because of its method of  
17 statutory interpretation?

18 MR. JOSHI: Yes, I think you should.  
19 When -- now, when you say the same, there are a  
20 lot of differences between the statute there and  
21 here, but just to answer your hypothetical, you  
22 shouldn't follow a method of interpretation that  
23 you had rejected previously in -- in construing  
24 a new statute.

25 JUSTICE ALITO: There are a lot of

1 important decisions from the 1970s and the 1980s  
2 that use a method of statutory interpretation  
3 that is probably not the one that we would use  
4 if those questions came before us today. You  
5 think we -- we should just disregard all those?  
6 They're all fair game? Are they all fair game?

7 MR. JOSHI: I -- I -- I think the --  
8 it's open to certainly litigants to argue that  
9 the Court should -- the statutes say something  
10 different.

11 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, the answer to  
12 that question has got to be no, right, Mr.  
13 Joshi?

14 (Laughter.)

15 JUSTICE KAGAN: I mean, we're not  
16 going to throw out all our precedents because  
17 we've decided that there's a better way to  
18 interpret statutes.

19 MR. JOSHI: No. No, that's right. I  
20 mean, I'm not talking about an over --

21 JUSTICE KAGAN: So you have to be  
22 saying that this is a different statute, and you  
23 are saying that it has a different structure,  
24 right?

25 MR. JOSHI: I'm saying both of those

1 things. I -- I -- maybe I misread the --  
2 misunderstood the hypothetical.

3 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: I didn't think you  
4 said it had a different structure. I thought  
5 you said that the methodology used --

6 MR. JOSHI: No, the statute had --

7 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- a methodology  
8 --

9 MR. JOSHI: Well, the statute has a  
10 different structure because, in Employees, the  
11 government could still enforce the FLSA against  
12 states. That was an important part of the  
13 Employees decision.

14 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: What do you do --  
15 you've treated Employees as if it's this one-off  
16 outlier, but then, in subsequent cases, like  
17 Union Gas, it seems like the same principles,  
18 accepted by all nine justices there, in other  
19 words, the specific reference to states in the  
20 original Act in Union Gas, the Court goes out of  
21 its way to say that alone -- in the definitional  
22 provisions, that alone would not have been good  
23 enough to do it and cites -- cites Employees.

24 And then, in College Savings Bank, the  
25 Court makes a big point that Employees started



1 the retreat from Parden, which was a much looser  
2 standard for waiver of sovereign immunity. So  
3 it's not an out -- you know, it's not just this  
4 case has never been cited again.

5 MR. JOSHI: It hasn't been cited for  
6 the statutory interpretation point, I think,  
7 until -- in any subsequent -- since the late  
8 '80s. I think, in -- in Union Gas, you're --  
9 you're correct, the statute was written  
10 differently. There was additional language in  
11 the definitions section that -- that -- that was  
12 dispositive to the Court's analysis there.

13 So the Court didn't have to sort of  
14 reach out and, you know, try to address the  
15 question the Court might have to address here,  
16 which is how viable is that sort of method of  
17 interpretation. And --

18 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: By method of  
19 interpretation -- I just want to get back to  
20 this because I -- I -- it mentions the text and  
21 it mentions this principle we don't lightly  
22 interpret the text to waive sovereign immunity.  
23 And then there's nothing else that would suggest  
24 -- in the history of it, suggest a waiver  
25 either. I don't -- that sounds like an opinion

1 you could write now and has been written now.

2 MR. JOSHI: Well, there's nothing in  
3 Employees that sort of grapples with why the  
4 statutory definition in that case was not --  
5 does not meet the clear statement standard.

6 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: I thought it said  
7 because the reference to government, to public  
8 employee -- employers was not in the -- in the  
9 cause of action provision.

10 MR. JOSHI: Well, that -- that -- if  
11 that's how Employees is read, then that is  
12 inconsistent, I would argue, with what the Court  
13 has said since, which is that Congress can state  
14 its intent in any way it wants.

15 And if you simply foreclose use of  
16 statutory definitions in -- in -- in Congress's  
17 ability to state -- state its intent, I think --

18 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: It's a thin line,  
19 but the line has been between in the cause of  
20 action provision itself is the explicit  
21 reference and in a separate definitional  
22 provision, as in -- as in Employees and  
23 mentioned in Union Gas as well, that's  
24 different.

25 Now that's a thin line. I might not

1 have come up with that if I were starting from  
2 scratch, but --

3 JUSTICE JACKSON: But is it -- is it  
4 really a line at all? I mean, what if -- what  
5 if we have the definition provision in -- the  
6 definition provision next to the cause of action  
7 provision?

8 I mean, here, it's in a, fine. But  
9 you can imagine a world in which they write  
10 1681n and 1 is the provision that says any  
11 person willfully, et cetera, and 2 is "person"  
12 means, and they list out the statute, list out  
13 the entities.

14 I mean, I -- I think it's -- it's so  
15 fine a line that it probably is nonexistent  
16 from -- from the standpoint of really  
17 understanding what's going on.

18 MR. JOSHI: I do think it's a fairly  
19 arbitrary line if you hold onto it, if you can  
20 say -- you try to refashion Employees into the  
21 modern era and say this is the line we're going  
22 to draw in terms of telling Congress how it  
23 needs to write a statute, do not put your --  
24 your -- identify your -- the government's -- any  
25 governments in the statutory definition, put it

1 in the cause of action, then that's -- that's --  
2 that's one thing.

3 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: It's a --

4 MR. JOSHI: But --

5 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- it's a good  
6 point. It's exactly the Brennan dissent, but I  
7 said that before, but, yeah.

8 MR. JOSHI: But the -- I mean, once  
9 again, I would point out that none of the courts  
10 of appeals that have addressed this issue read  
11 Employees that way. They --

12 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Well, two of --

13 MR. JOSHI: Two of them don't even --

14 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: -- two of the --

15 MR. JOSHI: -- cite -- cite it.

16 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Yeah, they don't  
17 cite it. And in at least one, D.C., it wasn't  
18 even raised. I'm not sure what happened there.

19 MR. JOSHI: It -- it was raised in the  
20 oral argument in D.C.

21 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Yeah, but not in  
22 the briefs. It wasn't raised.

23 MR. JOSHI: Right. That's right.  
24 That's the only court that it wasn't in the  
25 briefs.

1                   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Now us setting  
2     forth a statement like that, you need to do  
3     this, would be contrary to our -- all the  
4     jurisprudence in which we say you don't need  
5     magic words, correct?

6                   MR. JOSHI: I think so. I mean, the  
7     way I see it is that the Court is reluctant to  
8     tell Congress how to craft legislative language  
9     because that is inherently tied to policymaking,  
10    which is inherently an Article I type of  
11    function.

12                   And so even though the Court, you  
13    know, will interpret the words Congress does  
14    use, it -- it's not going to tell Congress, for  
15    example, if you list out sovereigns in a  
16    definition, you better include Indian tribes or  
17    else we're going to assume you don't mean it.

18                   It's going to -- what -- what's --  
19    what the Court's going to do, as it did in Lac  
20    du Flambeau, is to say we're going to take the  
21    words Congress has given us and we're going to  
22    interpret it. If it's ambiguous, the government  
23    gets the benefit of the doubt. If it's not  
24    ambiguous, we're going to give the text its  
25    plain meaning.

1                   And -- and this text is not ambiguous.

2                   JUSTICE JACKSON: Do -- do you -- do  
3 you take any stock on the amendment history? I  
4 mean, you know, I -- I appreciate the plain  
5 meaning, we just look at the statute and see  
6 what it says, and maybe, in that world, it is  
7 parallel to Employees.

8                   But Employees seemed to put some stock  
9 in the amendment history as it analyzed what was  
10 going on, saying that it -- it was surprised  
11 that Congress had not amended the cause of  
12 action.

13                   And, here, we have an amendment  
14 history that shows that Congress was amending  
15 the cause of action. And so, if our ultimate  
16 question is how do we -- how and whether we  
17 should be implying some kind of intention on  
18 Congress's part to extend the cause of action to  
19 government, is the amendment history relevant at  
20 all?

21                   MR. JOSHI: Well, I think it  
22 definitely is relevant that Congress amended the  
23 cause -- cause of action. Even if you take  
24 Employees at face value, that should be  
25 sufficient. I think the other things that go

1 along with that are the fact that Congress  
2 amended the cause of action at the same time it  
3 imposed substantive duties on governments.

4           And I think the other thing to keep in  
5 mind is that governments are not strangers to  
6 the FCRA. Congress accommodates the  
7 government's interests throughout the statute,  
8 creating exemptions for them, for example, in  
9 the national security area, exemptions in terms  
10 of the adverse action response requirements that  
11 apply to persons, the government in the -- in  
12 the -- in the context of national security,  
13 Congress has created an exemption for them.

14           And then I would indicate again in --  
15 in other -- other statutes in the Consumer  
16 Credit Protection Act, Congress knew how -- it  
17 showed it knows how to create exemptions for the  
18 government. TILA, the -- the Truth in Lending  
19 Act, extends liability to all creditors.  
20 Congress said we don't want -- even though the  
21 government is a creditor as defined in that  
22 statute, we don't want liability to be imposed,  
23 so we're going to create a carve-out for that  
24 for the government.

25           In the Equal Credit Opportunity Act,

1 Congress enacted that without any exceptions for  
2 the government two years later in 1976, and --  
3 and that was an act two years -- one year after  
4 Employees.

5 In 1976, they said we don't want  
6 punitive damages to be imposed on the  
7 government, so it carved out a --

8 JUSTICE JACKSON: Thank you.

9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,  
10 counsel.

11 Justice Thomas?

12 Justice Alito?

13 JUSTICE ALITO: Just assume for the  
14 sake of argument that "person" in q does not  
15 include the government. Could you just give me  
16 your best answer to the argument that n and o  
17 should be treated the same way?

18 MR. JOSHI: N and o deal with civil  
19 liability, which deals with the substantive  
20 provisions of the statute, all of which use  
21 "person" consistently to include the government.  
22 It's a different context entirely.

23 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice  
24 Sotomayor?

25 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Do you think q



1 doesn't deal with the government because the  
2 government can't be jailed, or do you think it  
3 doesn't include the government for what other  
4 reason?

5 MR. JOSHI: We would -- if that -- if  
6 the case were before me, I would say it includes  
7 the government because Congress did not create  
8 an exemption like it did in the Truth in Lending  
9 Act for governmental criminal liability.

10 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Correct. And  
11 there's all sorts of statutes that I mentioned  
12 earlier, the Clean Water Act being the primary  
13 one, where the government is included in the  
14 criminal provision, and it speaks about jailing  
15 and imprisonment.

16 MR. JOSHI: Right.

17 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And we just  
18 don't imply -- we just don't apply the jailing  
19 part because you can't jail a corporate entity,  
20 correct, or a --

21 MR. JOSHI: It would be the same  
22 analysis for corporate entities and the  
23 government. The --

24 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So there's -- it's  
25 not that you're reading "person" differently in

1 q. You're just saying that some remedies can't  
2 be applied?

3 MR. JOSHI: I think -- I think that's  
4 right. There are a number of ways to deal with  
5 q. I don't think it's just we have arguments in  
6 the alternative, including the ones adopted  
7 below which say that q is -- does not have --  
8 does not speak to the civil liability  
9 provisions.

10 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: That --

11 MR. JOSHI: But --

12 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- that too, but  
13 --

14 MR. JOSHI: But, I mean, I -- I would  
15 say the better reading is to apply the statute  
16 as written. If there are problematic  
17 applications in a particular criminal  
18 proceeding, a court can deal with that at that  
19 time. The court doesn't -- usually doesn't  
20 avoid a plain language reading of the statute to  
21 avoid -- to avoid potential pitfalls down the  
22 line if that's what the statute says.

23 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: All right.

24 MR. JOSHI: However, the Court doesn't  
25 have to address, I think, the complicated

1 question of criminal liability because --  
2 because of the alternative that was adopted  
3 below, which is -- which is to say the concerns  
4 are unique to the criminal context and do not  
5 apply to civil liability or the substantive  
6 duties of FCRA.

7 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice Kagan?  
8 Justice Gorsuch?  
9 Justice Kavanaugh?

10 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Just on that last  
11 point, I don't understand how we could not  
12 address it if the argument, as Justice Alito  
13 posited, is that -- that if "person" does not  
14 include government there, that shows that  
15 there's some plausible readings of "person" that  
16 would include government elsewhere. I mean --

17 MR. JOSHI: Well, you would address it  
18 by saying, even if it doesn't include -- even if  
19 "person" doesn't include governments in 1681q,  
20 as the courts below have said, that has no  
21 bearing on 1681n and o.

22 It's not plausible to infer the  
23 absence of -- of the definition in the criminal  
24 context -- I'm sorry, the absence of the  
25 application of the definition in the criminal

1 context to the -- to the civil context. You  
2 need a -- you need a different reason.

3 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: And that includes  
4 punitive damages?

5 MR. JOSHI: Yes, punitive damages is  
6 also a clear statement rule requirement. So,  
7 if -- if the Court finds -- I don't think  
8 there's a different standard there for punitive  
9 damages. In fact, 1681u(j), which the  
10 government relies on, has -- has a provision for  
11 punitive damages.

12 JUSTICE KAVANAUGH: Thank you.

13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice  
14 Barrett?

15 JUSTICE BARRETT: No.

16 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Justice  
17 Jackson?

18 JUSTICE JACKSON: No.

19 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,  
20 counsel.

21 MR. JOSHI: Thank you.

22 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Mr. Snyder,  
23 we'll give you three minutes.

24

25

1 REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF BENJAMIN W. SNYDER  
2 ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER

3 MR. SNYDER: Thank you. A few quick  
4 points.

5 First, Justice Kagan -- as Justice  
6 Kagan suggested, one of the purposes for the  
7 clear statement rule is to make sure that  
8 Congress has specifically considered the  
9 question of whether it wants to waive sovereign  
10 immunity and addressed that.

11 One of the reasons to require specific  
12 references to sovereign entities in the cause of  
13 action itself is to make sure that Congress has  
14 made that conscious decision.

15 Now my friend acknowledged that there  
16 is a specificity requirement. He just thinks  
17 that it's satisfied here in the Act-wide  
18 definition. The problem with that understanding  
19 is that it -- it asks for specificity about the  
20 wrong thing.

21 The definition that Congress adopted  
22 in 1970 does make clear that in some references,  
23 the FCRA does cover the government, but it  
24 doesn't make clear that Congress was  
25 specifically focused on waiving Congress -- the

1 United States' sovereign immunity because it had  
2 nothing to do with liability at the time it was  
3 adopted.

4           There was also a suggestion that  
5 perhaps the word "person" means every -- or  
6 means the same thing in all parts of the  
7 statute, but there are just defenses that exist  
8 under the criminal provision perhaps that would  
9 exempt the government from liability there.

10           We think that's right. We just think  
11 that the same thing is true with 1681n and o,  
12 that the fact that "person" in those provisions  
13 might include the sovereign does not answer the  
14 separate question of whether the sovereign has  
15 defenses to civil liability any more than it  
16 answers the question of whether the sovereign  
17 might have defenses to criminal liability.

18           And, finally, my friend tried to  
19 distinguish Employees. I -- I think, as Justice  
20 Kavanaugh alluded to, his arguments sound a lot  
21 like the dissent in Employees, which accused the  
22 majority opinion of engaging in ritualism by  
23 focusing very carefully on exactly what was and  
24 was not in the statutory text. But, of course,  
25 this Court's decisions today focus the -- follow

1 the approach that the majority took there, not  
2 the dissent.

3 And -- and one other distinction that  
4 he attempted to draw was that in Employees, the  
5 statute allowed for enforcement by the FTC.  
6 But, of course, that's Respondent's position as  
7 well. He thinks that FCRA is enforceable by the  
8 FTC.

9 So, if you decide that "person"  
10 includes the United States throughout the rest  
11 of the Act, FCRA is on all fours with Employees,  
12 and -- and we would win even on that -- that  
13 understanding.

14 Thank you.

15 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,  
16 counsel.

17 The case is submitted.

18 (Whereupon, at 11:22 a.m., the case  
19 was submitted.)

20

21

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25

## Official - Subject to Final Review

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>1</b></p> <p><b>1</b> [1] 82:10  <b>10:04</b> [2] 1:16 3:2  <b>101</b> [1] 9:5  <b>11:22</b> [1] 94:18  <b>16(b)</b> [2] 55:21,23  <b>1618n</b> [1] 51:9  <b>1681g</b> [1] 65:12  <b>1681n</b> [10] 6:11 12:3 24:2  43:25 44:10,17 53:18 82:  10 90:21 93:11  <b>1681n(a)(1)(B)</b> [1] 53:19  <b>1681q</b> [1] 16:13 18:7,12  30:9 31:23 45:9 61:24 63:  9 67:4,8 90:19  <b>1681s</b> [1] 58:17  <b>1681u(j)</b> [2] 22:6 91:9  <b>1861n</b> [1] 31:14  <b>1861q</b> [1] 31:12  <b>1966</b> [1] 56:9  <b>1970</b> [2] 61:18 92:22  <b>1970s</b> [1] 78:1  <b>1973</b> [2] 25:23 39:6  <b>1976</b> [2] 87:2,5  <b>1980s</b> [1] 78:1  <b>1996</b> [8] 3:15 26:22 53:5,22  61:19,24 75:5,18  <b>19th</b> [1] 36:14</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>2</b></p> <p><b>2</b> [1] 82:11  <b>2023</b> [1] 1:12  <b>22</b> [1] 51:24  <b>22-846</b> [1] 3:4  <b>24</b> [1] 51:24  <b>2412</b> [1] 75:18  <b>2413</b> [1] 75:20</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>3</b></p> <p><b>3</b> [1] 2:4  <b>3-2</b> [1] 54:19</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>5</b></p> <p><b>52</b> [1] 2:7</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>6</b></p> <p><b>6</b> [1] 1:12</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>7</b></p> <p><b>75</b> [1] 25:21</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>8</b></p> <p><b>80s</b> [1] 80:8  <b>81</b> [1] 36:5</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>9</b></p> <p><b>92</b> [1] 2:10</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>A</b></p> <p><b>a.m</b> [3] 1:16 3:2 94:18  <b>ability</b> [1] 81:17  <b>able</b> [3] 7:10 25:19 51:13  <b>above-entitled</b> [1] 1:14  <b>abrogate</b> [2] 54:9 59:8</p>	<p><b>abrogates</b> [1] 59:4  <b>abrogating</b> [1] 58:23  <b>absence</b> [3] 59:23 90:23,  24  <b>absent</b> [1] 59:2  <b>absolutely</b> [6] 9:15 22:16  37:10,21 41:1 50:1  <b>absurd</b> [2] 60:17,18  <b>accept</b> [7] 5:22 13:7,20 16:  18 38:18 48:12 70:21  <b>accepted</b> [2] 38:16 79:18  <b>accepting</b> [1] 22:2  <b>accidental</b> [1] 74:18  <b>accidentally</b> [1] 74:12  <b>accommodates</b> [1] 86:6  <b>accomplish</b> [1] 21:3  <b>accomplishing</b> [1] 46:13  <b>accused</b> [1] 93:21  <b>acknowledge</b> [2] 56:12 70:  20  <b>acknowledged</b> [1] 92:15  <b>Act</b> [31] 3:15 14:10,21 20:1,  2,3 21:7,9 22:20 23:6 45:3,  5 52:15 53:25 61:18,19 62:  25 63:2 69:3,8,14 75:5 76:  10 79:20 86:16,19,25 87:3  88:9,12 94:11  <b>Act-wide</b> [4] 14:14 18:14  24:3 92:17  <b>acting</b> [1] 44:18  <b>action</b> [62] 4:3,12,13,20,21  5:7,12 6:18,24 7:3,7,10,13  8:8,12 9:11 12:7 16:5 24:  23 25:9 27:6,13 29:9,11  33:10 38:5 39:18 40:4,7,  17 41:1 42:6,9,23 43:1,5,  16 44:11 48:21 49:4,4,12,  19,23 50:15,19,24 52:23  53:3 59:21 76:15 81:9,20  82:6 83:1 85:12,15,18,23  86:2,10 92:13  <b>actions</b> [1] 22:8  <b>acts</b> [2] 20:9,17  <b>actual</b> [1] 51:8  <b>actually</b> [6] 11:23 46:6,13  47:13 65:6 66:3  <b>add</b> [2] 61:6,23  <b>added</b> [1] 61:5  <b>adding</b> [2] 40:5 51:5  <b>addition</b> [1] 55:15  <b>additional</b> [3] 69:20,22 80:  10  <b>address</b> [7] 23:10 54:6 80:  14,15 89:25 90:12,17  <b>addressed</b> [5] 8:5 40:3 54:  16 83:10 92:10  <b>addresses</b> [2] 3:24 29:8  <b>addressing</b> [1] 54:8  <b>adhere</b> [1] 60:8  <b>Adjustment</b> [1] 20:3  <b>administrative</b> [2] 58:18  61:21</p>	<p><b>adopted</b> [7] 10:13 26:24  27:4 89:6 90:2 92:21 93:3  <b>adopting</b> [3] 7:13 27:5 43:  1  <b>adverse</b> [1] 86:10  <b>advocating</b> [1] 40:21  <b>affected</b> [1] 46:6  <b>afford</b> [1] 33:13  <b>agencies</b> [19] 5:11 17:4 22:  9,22 23:11 39:19 40:6 41:  21,22 44:7,8 47:17,24 48:2  52:24 53:2 60:4,6 75:23  <b>agency</b> [5] 5:19 11:13 52:  19 59:21 60:14  <b>ago</b> [4] 7:4 13:17 28:1 49:  25  <b>agree</b> [7] 9:12 11:8 52:3 54:  22 57:11 60:10 68:2  <b>Agricultural</b> [1] 20:3  <b>AGRICULTURE</b> [2] 1:3 3:  5  <b>ahead</b> [4] 19:22 23:20 58:5  66:17  <b>Air</b> [22] 6:7,15 14:6,9,10,11,  14,20,21 15:7,11,14,21 16:  2 17:9 19:9,11 21:7 31:21,  22 66:23 67:1  <b>ALITO</b> [26] 23:12,14,18,20,  22,25 26:20 27:22,23 28:5,  7,9,12,17,21 33:23 76:3,18,  21,24 77:2,11,25 87:12,13  90:12  <b>allow</b> [2] 29:18 42:8  <b>allowed</b> [1] 94:5  <b>allowing</b> [1] 10:15  <b>alluded</b> [3] 13:15 39:5 93:  20  <b>alone</b> [2] 79:21,22  <b>already</b> [1] 47:15  <b>alter</b> [1] 53:16  <b>alternative</b> [5] 13:3,6 65:  13 89:6 90:2  <b>altogether</b> [1] 74:3  <b>ambiguities</b> [1] 72:3  <b>ambiguous</b> [10] 32:20 65:  15 68:1,2 72:1 73:25 74:2  84:22,24 85:1  <b>amend</b> [3] 47:9 57:4,4  <b>amended</b> [14] 3:14 11:6 40:  4 45:24 47:8 53:5 56:8 61:  20,21 69:13 75:17 85:11,  22 86:2  <b>amending</b> [2] 55:8 85:14  <b>amendment</b> [15] 10:20 34:  9 45:19 46:9 53:21 55:4  59:5,7 72:21 75:16,19 85:  3,9,13,19  <b>amendments</b> [1] 26:22  <b>analysis</b> [3] 54:25 80:12  88:22  <b>analytically</b> [5] 6:13 25:13,  15 43:17 50:16</p>	<p><b>analyze</b> [1] 69:19  <b>analyzed</b> [2] 25:23 85:9  <b>and/or</b> [1] 20:7  <b>anomalies</b> [2] 61:7 63:4  <b>anomaly</b> [3] 62:24 63:3,8  <b>another</b> [5] 24:13 34:14 48:  5 62:22 70:23  <b>answer</b> [19] 3:18 7:18 8:1,  3,18 12:6 23:15,16 26:8,20  28:7 31:19 63:14 72:24 77:  7,21 78:11 87:16 93:13  <b>answered</b> [1] 58:2  <b>answers</b> [3] 6:3 34:20 93:  16  <b>anticipated</b> [1] 38:9  <b>appeals</b> [6] 5:8 16:13 18:  15 21:19 54:15 83:10  <b>APPEARANCES</b> [1] 1:18  <b>appears</b> [2] 14:5 19:14  <b>applicable</b> [1] 27:6  <b>application</b> [2] 44:6 90:25  <b>applications</b> [1] 89:17  <b>applied</b> [9] 14:10,13,25 24:  4 42:15 44:1 46:1 68:10  89:2  <b>applies</b> [16] 4:3 5:21 12:8  13:19 19:11 20:5 35:20 43:  6 48:22,23 49:5,12,23 50:  25 65:4,16  <b>apply</b> [19] 5:7 18:25 36:11  44:11 56:15 58:16,17 60:2  66:25 67:4,12 76:2,12,13  77:9 86:11 88:18 89:15 90:  5  <b>applying</b> [2] 64:20 74:7  <b>appreciate</b> [2] 16:10 85:4  <b>approach</b> [2] 26:18 94:1  <b>appropriate</b> [2] 34:18 37:  15  <b>appropriated</b> [1] 71:15  <b>arbitrary</b> [1] 82:19  <b>area</b> [3] 73:13 74:11 86:9  <b>areas</b> [2] 59:3 66:2  <b>aren't</b> [1] 71:19  <b>argue</b> [2] 78:8 81:12  <b>argued</b> [2] 24:17 54:7  <b>Arguing</b> [7] 13:2,4 28:23,  25 42:16 48:22,25  <b>argument</b> [48] 1:15 2:2,5,8  3:4,8 4:7 6:6,9,16,16 11:  22 12:19 13:1,13 16:23 17:  11 22:4 25:2,7,8 34:2,22  37:2 38:19 39:15 40:23 43:  20,24 44:16 49:8 52:11 55:  19 58:12 64:13,17 66:22  67:7,10 68:14 72:13 75:13  76:11 83:20 87:14,16 90:  12 92:1  <b>arguments</b> [4] 13:1 67:19  89:5 93:20  <b>arms</b> [1] 60:2  <b>around</b> [1] 34:1</p>	<p><b>Article</b> [2] 72:25 84:10  <b>artificially</b> [1] 73:3  <b>aside</b> [5] 5:16,19 6:15 32:  10 33:25  <b>asks</b> [1] 92:19  <b>assert</b> [4] 7:5,10 38:5 51:  13  <b>assertion</b> [1] 29:18  <b>Assistant</b> [1] 1:19  <b>association</b> [1] 8:25  <b>Associations</b> [1] 31:1  <b>assume</b> [6] 6:10 10:21 12:  2 13:8 84:17 87:13  <b>assumed</b> [1] 25:19  <b>assuming</b> [3] 25:1 37:6 66:  12  <b>attempted</b> [2] 38:5 94:4  <b>attention</b> [1] 39:4  <b>author</b> [1] 26:15  <b>authorize</b> [9] 10:5,9,17 22:  8 27:13 29:12 61:22 68:24  69:6  <b>authorized</b> [5] 8:8 18:16  27:17 29:16 47:15  <b>authorizes</b> [1] 59:13  <b>authorizing</b> [3] 7:24 24:24  52:2  <b>automatically</b> [1] 63:24  <b>available</b> [8] 4:23,25 6:24  33:11 38:15,20 49:22 50:  10  <b>avoid</b> [3] 89:20,21,21  <b>aware</b> [1] 28:16  <b>away</b> [1] 64:18</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>B</b></p> <p><b>back</b> [6] 19:23 20:1 27:19  36:6,9 80:19  <b>backdrop</b> [1] 43:11  <b>background</b> [3] 6:25 12:9  36:21  <b>bad</b> [1] 26:4  <b>Bank</b> [4] 26:11 48:14 60:1  79:24  <b>bare</b> [2] 18:18 43:15  <b>Barrett</b> [9] 42:12,13 43:10,  19 44:3,23 45:12 91:14,15  <b>basic</b> [2] 37:20 71:21  <b>basically</b> [3] 21:8 22:20 39:  3  <b>basis</b> [4] 3:19 50:19 64:19,  22  <b>bearing</b> [1] 90:21  <b>become</b> [2] 65:15 76:17  <b>began</b> [2] 26:15 39:12  <b>begin</b> [1] 50:6  <b>beginning</b> [1] 69:12  <b>behalf</b> [9] 1:21,22 2:4,7,10  3:9 9:17 52:12 92:2  <b>behind</b> [2] 75:3,11  <b>below</b> [5] 60:22 61:11 89:7  90:3,20  <b>benefit</b> [2] 72:3 84:23</p>
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## Official - Subject to Final Review

<p><b>BENJAMIN</b> [5] 1:19 2:3,9 3:8 92:1 <b>Bennett</b> [1] 60:5 <b>best</b> [9] 6:8 18:5 21:6 43: 20 54:14 72:4,25 74:21 87: 16 <b>better</b> [7] 37:3,8 57:12,16 78:17 84:16 89:15 <b>between</b> [4] 58:22 59:1 77: 20 81:19 <b>beyond</b> [1] 58:19 <b>big</b> [1] 79:25 <b>biological</b> [1] 60:8 <b>Blackstone</b> [1] 36:10 <b>blatantly</b> [1] 44:19 <b>Board</b> [3] 12:13 29:15 51: 19 <b>Bond</b> [3] 67:14,24,24 <b>both</b> [9] 4:3 6:20 12:25 19: 9 25:9 45:4 53:7 71:16 78: 25 <b>bottom</b> [1] 73:6 <b>bound</b> [1] 42:14 <b>branch</b> [2] 69:21,21 <b>Brennan</b> [2] 55:23 83:6 <b>Brennan's</b> [1] 55:19 <b>brief</b> [1] 51:25 <b>briefly</b> [1] 26:10 <b>briefs</b> [2] 83:22,25 <b>bring</b> [1] 39:21 <b>broad</b> [4] 43:16 68:6,7 72:6 <b>brought</b> [2] 60:12 66:23 <b>Budget</b> [1] 69:16 <b>bunch</b> [1] 71:15 <b>buy</b> [1] 25:2</p>	<p>6:18,24 7:3,6,10,13 8:8,12 9:11 12:7 16:5 24:23 25:8 27:5 29:9,11 33:10 39:17 40:4,7,17,25 42:6,8,23 43: 1,5,16 48:21 49:4,12,19,23 50:14,19,24 53:3 81:9,19 82:6 83:1 85:11,15,18,23, 23 86:2 92:12 <b>causes</b> [6] 5:7,12 27:12 44: 11 52:23 76:15 <b>CBA</b> [1] 69:23 <b>CBO</b> [4] 69:16,23 70:7,12 <b>Century</b> [1] 36:15 <b>certain</b> [4] 19:4 53:20 64:8 65:7 <b>certainly</b> [3] 34:5,7 78:8 <b>cetera</b> [4] 5:18 9:1,1 82:11 <b>challenge</b> [1] 70:12 <b>change</b> [2] 18:22 19:6 <b>changed</b> [1] 65:8 <b>changing</b> [1] 66:6 <b>chemical</b> [2] 67:15,17 <b>CHIEF</b> [28] 3:3,10 33:5,13, 16,21 36:24 42:11 45:14 52:8,13 59:11 60:9 62:16 65:19,22 66:16 67:9 68:11, 23 87:9,23 90:7 91:13,16, 19,22 94:15 <b>choice</b> [1] 73:6 <b>choices</b> [1] 73:13 <b>choose</b> [1] 53:16 <b>chose</b> [1] 57:3 <b>Circuit</b> [3] 38:3 54:19 60: 21 <b>circumstance</b> [5] 13:10 29:19 47:22 51:11 65:10 <b>circumstances</b> [1] 34:19 <b>cite</b> [3] 83:15,15,17 <b>cited</b> [2] 80:4,5 <b>cites</b> [2] 79:23,23 <b>civil</b> [16] 5:12 10:15 22:8 23:10 32:13 47:16 52:16, 22 61:20 62:4 75:17 87:18 89:8 90:5 91:1 93:15 <b>civilly</b> [1] 60:7 <b>claiming</b> [1] 3:19 <b>class</b> [1] 38:5 <b>Clean</b> [4] 14:10 20:1 21:7 88:12 <b>clear</b> [36] 5:7 7:24 9:15 11: 18,22 17:16 25:7 34:7,17 35:12,13 36:2 37:1,5,9 38: 16 40:10 41:10 48:10 52: 24 53:4 55:5 57:11,13,19 73:11 74:3,10,19 75:3,8 81:5 91:6 92:7,22,24 <b>clearer</b> [2] 29:4 34:3 <b>clearly</b> [4] 11:6 17:23 18: 13 65:4 <b>Code</b> [2] 21:1 75:10 <b>collapse</b> [1] 15:17 <b>colleagues</b> [2] 12:19 28:</p>	<p>24 <b>College</b> [3] 26:11 48:14 79: 24 <b>combine</b> [1] 36:3 <b>come</b> [2] 17:10 82:1 <b>comes</b> [2] 68:14 72:22 <b>coming</b> [1] 48:21 <b>comma</b> [2] 27:17 52:2 <b>comment</b> [2] 45:20 46:20 <b>committee</b> [2] 70:17 75:7 <b>common</b> [2] 16:1 20:15 <b>completely</b> [2] 53:13 75: 12 <b>complicated</b> [1] 89:25 <b>comply</b> [2] 52:17 71:5 <b>comport</b> [1] 55:1 <b>comports</b> [1] 45:5 <b>concede</b> [2] 3:23 11:7 <b>conceded</b> [2] 41:5 46:10 <b>conceding</b> [1] 48:9 <b>concerns</b> [1] 90:3 <b>conclude</b> [2] 11:1 67:3 <b>concluded</b> [1] 14:12 <b>conclusion</b> [1] 71:2 <b>conclusive</b> [4] 13:16,18 14:1,18 <b>conflict</b> [1] 59:1 <b>confused</b> [1] 72:11 <b>Congress</b> [133] 3:13,20 4: 2,20 6:22 7:12,24 8:4,7,12 9:1,2,15,23 10:2,4,8,13,21 11:5,23 12:4,7 16:24 17: 11,15,17,23 18:2,16 19:12 21:2,16 22:7 23:10 25:12, 19 26:24 27:5,11,21 29:3,7, 9,16,20 31:12 32:25 33:2,9 34:2,15 35:7 36:22 37:14 38:9 39:20,23 40:1,8,24 41:2,8 43:1,3,11,15 44:8, 16,18 45:10,23,24 47:8,14, 23 48:1 50:23 51:22,25 52: 1 53:1,4,15,23 54:1 55:4, 21 56:8 57:3,5 58:21 59:1 61:20 65:12 67:5 68:9,21 69:13,25 70:1,7,12 71:3 72:24 73:6 74:1,14 75:4, 15,25 81:13 82:22 84:8,13, 14,21 85:11,14,22 86:1,6, 13,16,20 87:1 88:7 92:8,13, 21,24,25 <b>Congress's</b> [6] 4:24 11:18 34:23 47:7 81:16 85:18 <b>congressional</b> [3] 36:17 55:6 69:16 <b>conscious</b> [1] 92:14 <b>consent</b> [1] 36:8 <b>consequence</b> [2] 59:12 65:9 <b>Conservation</b> [1] 69:8 <b>consider</b> [1] 54:7 <b>considered</b> [1] 92:8 <b>consistent</b> [3] 26:17 39:14</p>	<p>71:2 <b>consistently</b> [2] 53:6 87: 21 <b>Constitution</b> [4] 34:15 35: 8,11 59:4 <b>constitutional</b> [2] 24:20 72:20 <b>construe</b> [2] 55:9 73:25 <b>construing</b> [1] 77:23 <b>consumer</b> [5] 11:13 22:21 53:25 75:22 86:15 <b>consumer's</b> [1] 17:5 <b>consumers</b> [1] 16:25 <b>consumers'</b> [1] 17:1 <b>contains</b> [1] 62:8 <b>contemplated</b> [1] 62:20 <b>context</b> [11] 40:5 59:7 60:4, 25 61:1 86:12 87:22 90:4, 24 91:1,1 <b>contextual</b> [1] 60:22 <b>continuing</b> [1] 54:15 <b>contract</b> [1] 73:2 <b>contrary</b> [1] 84:3 <b>control</b> [1] 34:16 <b>controlling</b> [2] 60:24 66: 20 <b>convicted</b> [1] 59:16 <b>Cooperatives</b> [1] 30:24 <b>copying</b> [1] 20:8 <b>corners</b> [1] 17:3 <b>corporate</b> [2] 88:19,22 <b>corporation</b> [1] 8:24 <b>Corporations</b> [1] 30:18 <b>correct</b> [9] 8:19 37:18 38: 21 70:4,9 80:9 84:5 88:10, 20 <b>correction</b> [1] 61:17 <b>cost</b> [1] 37:23 <b>costs</b> [1] 69:20 <b>couldn't</b> [1] 36:16 <b>Counsel</b> [11] 12:14 16:17 19:16,19 52:9 54:4 59:11 72:10 87:10 91:20 94:16 <b>counter</b> [1] 74:21 <b>counters</b> [1] 74:23 <b>countervailing</b> [1] 66:22 <b>couple</b> [2] 33:14 76:4 <b>course</b> [6] 35:17 36:19 38: 14 44:5 93:24 94:6 <b>COURT</b> [70] 1:1,15 3:11 4: 1,17 5:8 7:19 12:11 13:15, 22 14:2 15:15 16:3,12 18: 14 19:11 21:19 25:10,19 26:12 29:15,20 34:8 35:19, 23 36:8,19 39:9,11,17 40:9 41:2 46:23 48:13 50:13 52: 14 54:21 55:1,6 56:16 57: 2,5 59:22 60:16,17,19 66: 24 67:25,25 68:6,8 73:13, 14,23 74:6 76:14 77:8 78: 9 79:20,25 80:13,15 81:12 83:24 84:7,12 89:18,19,24</p>	<p>91:7 <b>Court's</b> [17] 5:2,14 6:7 14: 5,8 15:19 24:5 26:15,17 46:4 51:17 54:3 58:22 66: 19 80:12 84:19 93:25 <b>courts</b> [6] 4:18 36:10,15 54: 15 83:9 90:20 <b>cover</b> [6] 6:12 17:23,25 41: 20 47:19 92:23 <b>coverage</b> [5] 41:23,24 42: 2,5,7 <b>covered</b> [8] 6:23 7:3,9 10: 16 39:18 47:20,24 67:17 <b>covers</b> [7] 4:14 6:5,19 13:9 25:9 43:8 49:19 <b>craft</b> [2] 55:4 84:8 <b>create</b> [8] 6:18 12:7 43:2 52:23 63:3 86:17,23 88:7 <b>created</b> [3] 8:12 63:6 86:13 <b>creates</b> [3] 4:3 50:24 53:19 <b>creating</b> [2] 44:11 86:8 <b>creation</b> [2] 43:16 48:21 <b>Credit</b> [11] 3:15 17:4 41:21, 22 42:4 52:15 53:25 69:2 76:10 86:16,25 <b>creditor</b> [1] 86:21 <b>creditors</b> [1] 86:19 <b>criminal</b> [26] 5:9 18:17 19: 5 20:5,21,25 32:15 59:14, 24 60:1,11,25,25 62:9,17 64:4 67:6 88:9,14 89:17 90:1,4,23,25 93:8,17 <b>criminally</b> [3] 28:14 60:6,7 <b>critical</b> [1] 58:8 <b>crystal-clear</b> [1] 21:4 <b>current</b> [1] 55:6 <b>currently</b> [1] 77:10 <b>cuts</b> [1] 47:13</p>
<b>C</b>		<b>D</b>		
<p><b>called</b> [1] 68:6 <b>calls</b> [1] 20:18 <b>came</b> [3] 1:14 28:18 78:4 <b>cannot</b> [2] 4:16 72:6 <b>canon</b> [3] 68:3 71:25 72:2 <b>canvass</b> [1] 20:4 <b>careful</b> [2] 37:16 71:20 <b>carefully</b> [3] 62:25 69:19 93:23 <b>carried</b> [2] 19:13 31:22 <b>carries</b> [5] 19:17 30:11 31: 20,23 63:18 <b>carve-out</b> [2] 19:3 86:23 <b>carved</b> [2] 63:21 87:7 <b>Case</b> [27] 3:4,12 15:15,23 24:9,9 25:23 27:21 28:18 37:24 38:2,4,23,24 39:6 42:15,17 59:5 63:12 67:14, 24 76:15 80:4 81:4 88:6 94:17,18 <b>cases</b> [15] 8:7,13,17 12:11 26:6 28:14 30:5 40:15,22 51:20 54:21 58:22 69:22 74:9 79:16 <b>categories</b> [1] 19:4 <b>cause</b> [53] 4:3,12,13,19,21</p>	<p><b>D.C</b> [6] 1:11,20,22 60:20 83: 17,20 <b>damages</b> [15] 3:17 38:6,13, 19 53:18 62:18 68:16,20, 25 73:24 87:6 91:4,5,9,11 <b>days</b> [1] 26:4 <b>deal</b> [7] 13:12,22,25 87:18 88:1 89:4,18 <b>deals</b> [1] 87:19 <b>debatable</b> [1] 63:8 <b>debt</b> [1] 17:5 <b>debts</b> [1] 17:1 <b>decide</b> [1] 94:9 <b>decided</b> [4] 15:15 76:5,10 78:17 <b>deciding</b> [1] 34:16 <b>decision</b> [13] 5:2 6:7,8 14: 6,8 15:19 24:6 44:21 51: 18 60:21 67:14 79:13 92: 14 <b>decisions</b> [2] 78:1 93:25 <b>decisis</b> [1] 76:12 <b>defendant</b> [4] 7:2 49:20,21</p>			

## Official - Subject to Final Review

<p>59:20  <b>defendants</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 4:4,21 6:20,23 7:9,25 12:8 25:10 33:10 50:25 51:1  <b>defense</b> <sup>[9]</sup> 4:10,15,25 5:5 7:5,11 25:13 29:19 50:15  <b>defenses</b> <sup>[9]</sup> 6:23 12:9 49:22 50:10 63:22 64:3 93:7,15,17  <b>define</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 43:6  <b>defined</b> <sup>[23]</sup> 5:3 9:5,18 10:6,22 11:17 14:4,22 19:13,14 27:11 30:1 31:6,8,21,23,24 46:12 63:17 64:24 65:1 66:3 86:21  <b>defines</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 5:17 52:18 65:4  <b>defining</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 68:7  <b>definitely</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 85:22  <b>definition</b> <sup>[58]</sup> 4:11 7:17,20 8:16,23 9:6,20 10:13 12:3,22,23 13:14,18 14:14 15:16 18:14 19:6,10 24:3,12 27:15 29:25 30:2,10,13 32:1,3 44:24 45:5 47:20 51:7 52:20,21 58:16 60:24 61:19 62:3 63:14,16 64:20 65:7,13,16 66:20,25 68:6 72:9 75:6 76:2 81:4 82:5,6,25 84:16 90:23,25 92:18,21  <b>definitional</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 18:22 55:17 56:4 79:21 81:21  <b>definitions</b> <sup>[9]</sup> 10:6,7 13:21 18:24,25 45:24 46:1 80:11 81:16  <b>delinquencies</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 17:2  <b>depart</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 66:19  <b>DEPARTMENT</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 1:3,20 3:4  <b>derogations</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 32:21  <b>describe</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 53:6  <b>description</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 26:5  <b>design</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 72:20  <b>designed</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 62:11 71:24  <b>determine</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 50:11  <b>detour</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 28:13  <b>developed</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 34:8 39:2  <b>DEVELOPMENT</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 1:4 3:5  <b>Dictionary</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 45:3,5  <b>difference</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 8:21 13:22,25  <b>differences</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 77:20  <b>different</b> <sup>[32]</sup> 7:14 9:3 24:14,20 25:24,24 27:4,20 35:5 46:14 49:3 53:11 58:21 61:9,15 71:8 74:1,3,7 75:12 76:2 77:7,13 78:10,22,23 79:4,10 81:24 87:22 91:2,8  <b>differently</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 80:10 88:25  <b>difficult</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 22:19</p>	<p><b>directly</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 3:24 8:4  <b>disagree</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 26:2 77:4  <b>discern</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 56:7  <b>discerns</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 55:6  <b>discover</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 10:8  <b>discrete</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 59:3  <b>discuss</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 72:8  <b>discussed</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 8:14  <b>discussing</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 54:24  <b>discussion</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 54:5  <b>displace</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 4:25  <b>dispositive</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 80:12  <b>dispute</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 71:22  <b>disregard</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 76:7 77:3,4,16 78:5  <b>disregarding</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 60:23  <b>dissent</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 26:14 55:18,19 83:6 93:21 94:2  <b>dissenters</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 26:14  <b>dissimilar</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 45:18  <b>distinct</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 6:13 25:14,16 39:23 43:17 50:16  <b>distinction</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 94:3  <b>distinctions</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 39:15  <b>distinguish</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 93:19  <b>distinguishes</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 51:22  <b>doing</b> <sup>[12]</sup> 10:14 32:10,12,18,22 47:14 50:10 53:4 69:13 70:2,13 75:8  <b>dollars</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 38:8  <b>domestic</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 60:4  <b>done</b> <sup>[9]</sup> 10:2,5,8 33:2 39:24 40:2,8 51:25 52:1  <b>doorknob</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 67:15  <b>doubt</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 21:9 84:23  <b>down</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 38:19 89:21  <b>draw</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 56:3 82:22 94:4  <b>drawing</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 39:15 50:21  <b>Drinking</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 20:2  <b>du</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 9:12 84:20  <b>duties</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 46:2 53:8,12 71:6 86:3 90:6</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>E</b></p> <p><b>each</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 28:25 54:21 62:3 23 88:12  <b>earlier</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 40:13 44:22 62:23 88:12  <b>easier</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 60:19  <b>echoes</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 55:18  <b>effect</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 4:11 34:22,24 51:13  <b>effectively</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 4:22 29:17 41:3  <b>either</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 25:17 40:2,9 51:6 80:25  <b>Eleventh</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 34:9  <b>eliminate</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 4:5 5:4 44:17  <b>else's</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 34:13  <b>elsewhere</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 5:3 9:18 11:16 21:1 90:16  <b>embodied</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 72:20  <b>emitted</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 14:11,13  <b>emphasis</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 3:21</p>	<p><b>empirical</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 54:14  <b>Employ</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 47:14  <b>employed</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 42:17  <b>employee</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 81:8  <b>Employees</b> <sup>[65]</sup> 5:2 19:9 25:11,18,23 26:3,13,16 38:23 39:4,11,12,14 40:9,14,21 41:11 42:13 43:4,10,24 45:17,22 47:3,4,14 51:21 54:5,13,20,23 55:3,10,14,16 56:6,18,23 57:1 58:7,9,14,19 76:4,5,9 77:8 79:10,13,15,23,25 81:3,11,22 82:20 83:11 85:7,8,24 87:4 93:19,21 94:4,11  <b>employers</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 46:5 47:16,17,21,25 55:16 81:8  <b>enacted</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 61:8,18 62:23 87:1  <b>enactment</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 36:17  <b>enforce</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 58:10,14 62:12 79:11  <b>enforceable</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 94:7  <b>enforcement</b> <sup>[10]</sup> 53:9,11 58:18 61:21,22 62:11,19 69:4,21 94:5  <b>engaged</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 50:7  <b>engaging</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 93:22  <b>enhanced</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 62:2  <b>enough</b> <sup>[10]</sup> 5:4 12:4 34:4 38:16 41:11 49:15 52:25 55:17 56:4 79:23  <b>ensure</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 71:16,19  <b>ensures</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 42:3  <b>enterprise</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 8:25  <b>enterprises</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 10:10  <b>entire</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 15:16 16:4,6 18:25 32:1,2  <b>entirely</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 26:16 87:22  <b>entirety</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 63:25 64:25  <b>entities</b> <sup>[14]</sup> 7:23 9:3 10:22 31:3 40:17 41:20 46:11 51:4 59:25 63:17 72:8 82:13 88:22 92:12  <b>entity</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 34:14 88:19  <b>EPA</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 14:11  <b>Equal</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 69:2 86:25  <b>equivalent</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 52:20  <b>era</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 55:2 82:21  <b>especially</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 73:24 74:17  <b>ESQ</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 2:3,6,9  <b>ESQUIRE</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 1:22  <b>essentially</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 16:2 61:10  <b>establish</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 48:13  <b>established</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 36:7  <b>establishing</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 56:2  <b>Estates</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 30:22  <b>estimate</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 38:1  <b>et</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 5:18 9:1,1 82:11  <b>evaluating</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 35:20  <b>Even</b> <sup>[36]</sup> 5:8 6:10 8:4 13:7 16:12 18:14 21:19 24:12</p>	<p>25:8 34:3,4 37:6 39:13 41:7,25 49:10 54:22 56:13,15 58:13 63:8 64:5,10,14 68:18 72:2,3,21 83:13,18 84:12 85:23 86:20 90:18,18 94:12  <b>event</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 5:6  <b>eventually</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 11:24  <b>everyone</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 10:16  <b>everywhere</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 19:11 65:5  <b>evidence</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 54:14  <b>exact</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 57:3  <b>exactly</b> <sup>[12]</sup> 13:10 20:16 21:17 24:16 34:22 38:8 43:23 47:24 74:19 75:10 83:6 93:23  <b>example</b> <sup>[11]</sup> 7:2 9:13 21:6 27:16 41:14 65:12 66:23 72:21 75:5 84:15 86:8  <b>examples</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 18:6  <b>except</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 32:1,3  <b>exceptions</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 87:1  <b>excluded</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 55:21  <b>executive</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 69:20  <b>exempt</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 93:9  <b>exemption</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 22:20,24 23:1 86:13 88:8  <b>exemptions</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 86:8,9,17  <b>exercise</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 35:7 50:7  <b>exist</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 93:7  <b>existence</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 20:17  <b>exists</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 46:24 47:1  <b>expand</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 11:6,19 46:17 73:2  <b>expanded</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 11:10,14  <b>expanding</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 46:5,9 63:15  <b>explicit</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 51:3 81:20  <b>explicitly</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 5:25 22:13  <b>express</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 9:13 48:7 62:22  <b>expressed</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 65:13  <b>expressly</b> <sup>[9]</sup> 3:20 23:11 29:16 40:3 42:24 51:1 52:18 53:23 55:22  <b>extend</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 61:22 67:6 75:17,21 85:18  <b>extends</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 59:25 86:19  <b>extent</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 45:22 67:3  <b>extraordinary</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 35:8</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>F</b></p> <p><b>face</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 85:24  <b>facilities</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 14:10,13  <b>fact</b> <sup>[10]</sup> 7:8 20:11 28:3 33:9 43:25 49:18 66:18 86:1 91:9 93:12  <b>failing</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 60:7 71:5  <b>fails</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 52:17  <b>Fair</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 3:15 52:15 76:10 78:6,6  <b>fairly</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 75:24 82:18  <b>faithfully</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 73:4</p>	<p><b>falls</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 8:6  <b>false</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 16:25  <b>falsely</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 17:5  <b>familiar</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 69:24  <b>far</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 5:6 13:8 59:23 67:6  <b>favors</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 68:3  <b>FBI</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 22:10,12,13,21  <b>FC</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 62:7  <b>FCRA</b> <sup>[18]</sup> 3:23 7:4 16:25 27:10 49:24 53:5 54:1,17 59:20 62:7,14 71:6 75:16 86:6 90:6 92:23 94:7,11  <b>FCRA's</b> <sup>[9]</sup> 3:16 5:9 52:17,21,22 53:7,8,12,24  <b>FCRA-specific</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 74:25 75:13  <b>federal</b> <sup>[22]</sup> 5:11 22:8 23:11 34:16 44:7,7,13 48:8 52:24 53:2 58:5,8,10,13,20 59:9,23,24 62:19 71:10 72:23 73:1  <b>Federalist</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 36:5  <b>few</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 13:17 44:21 59:3 92:3  <b>fight</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 57:14  <b>fighting</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 35:4  <b>figured</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 24:12  <b>finally</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 27:9 93:18  <b>Financial</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 12:12 29:14 51:18  <b>find</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 10:25 42:25 57:2  <b>finds</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 91:7  <b>fine</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 20:7,12 21:11 27:24 50:21 82:8,15  <b>finish</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 23:14 33:4  <b>First</b> <sup>[17]</sup> 4:8 13:13 15:18 17:20 25:2,5,7,7 34:6,21 36:5 39:8 46:22 72:15 75:1 76:4 92:5  <b>fisc</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 32:19 34:16 72:23 73:1  <b>fit</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 61:14  <b>fits</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 61:13  <b>five</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 7:4 49:25 54:15  <b>Flambeau</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 9:13 84:20  <b>FLSA</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 56:9 57:4 58:11 76:12 79:11  <b>focus</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 64:17 73:21 93:25  <b>focused</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 48:1,4 92:25  <b>focusing</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 93:23  <b>foil</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 67:24  <b>follow</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 8:18 42:18 60:20 73:3 77:8,22 93:25  <b>followed</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 4:17  <b>following</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 3:22  <b>force</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 54:15  <b>foreclose</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 81:15  <b>foreign</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 34:24 35:6 60:2 72:18  <b>forth</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 23:1 68:17 74:17 84:2</p>
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## Official - Subject to Final Review

<p><b>fortiori</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 56:19  <b>found</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 16:3 40:10 67:25 68:1  <b>founding</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 36:6  <b>four</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 32:4  <b>fours</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 94:11  <b>Fourteenth</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 59:5,7  <b>friend</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 21:1 92:15 93:18  <b>frolic</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 28:13  <b>front</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 6:6  <b>FTC</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 68:25 94:5,8  <b>function</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 84:11  <b>fundamentally</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 4:8  <b>funnel</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 71:15  <b>furnish</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 41:21 75:22  <b>furnisher</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 71:4 75:21  <b>furnishers</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 53:14 58:15  <b>further</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 58:12</p>	<p>19 82:25 86:3,5 90:19  <b>grapples</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 81:3  <b>grasp</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 28:22  <b>great</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 13:22,24  <b>greenhouse</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 14:13,15  <b>group</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 63:17  <b>guess</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 14:17 19:7 34:5 45:16 48:6 67:10 72:10</p>	<p><b>implication</b> <sup>[16]</sup> 10:1,4 33:8,11 41:9 48:11,13,15,17, 20,20 49:15 50:19,21,22 52:6  <b>implications</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 42:23  <b>implicit</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 6:21 66:9  <b>implicitly</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 4:5  <b>implied</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 76:15  <b>imply</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 88:18  <b>implying</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 85:17  <b>important</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 32:19 69:25 71:9 72:17 78:1 79:12  <b>impose</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 4:12  <b>imposed</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 86:3,22 87:6  <b>imposes</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 52:15  <b>imposing</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 63:1 69:15  <b>imprisonment</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 20:7,12 21:11 88:15  <b>improbability</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 68:14  <b>improbable</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 67:5 68:19, 21,24  <b>improbably</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 68:6,7  <b>inadvertence</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 74:14  <b>inadvertent</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 74:19  <b>include</b> <sup>[25]</sup> 5:10 11:17,19, 23 20:4 27:8,11 30:13,15 45:25 46:6,11,13 52:19 53:2 68:8 84:16 87:15,21 88:3 90:14,16,18,19 93:13  <b>included</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 14:15 88:13  <b>includes</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 30:14,17 49:11 88:6 91:3 94:10  <b>including</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 27:17 52:3 89:6  <b>inconceivable</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 16:22 17:11</p>	<p>8 43:2 46:17 47:24 54:2 67:5 76:1  <b>intending</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 9:16 44:16  <b>intends</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 50:23  <b>intent</b> <sup>[8]</sup> 4:24 47:7 53:3 55:5,7 57:8 81:14,17  <b>intention</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 11:19 85:17  <b>interact</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 62:6  <b>interest</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 71:25  <b>interests</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 86:7  <b>intergovernmental</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 69:7  <b>interpret</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 5:12 36:11 78:18 80:22 84:13,22  <b>interpretation</b> <sup>[26]</sup> 9:5 37:4,7,8 41:6 59:13 61:14,15 62:21 67:7,16,16 74:5,6,7, 24 75:3 76:8,16 77:5,17,22 78:2 80:6,17,19  <b>interpreting</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 29:24 53:10  <b>interrupt</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 12:17 68:12  <b>interrupted</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 58:1  <b>involved</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 14:9 76:24  <b>isn't</b> <sup>[11]</sup> 5:4 6:1 11:4 12:3 14:18 19:3 46:15 47:8 49:14 66:8 73:18  <b>issue</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 5:19 19:15 54:16 58:20 64:15 76:6 83:10  <b>issues</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 25:25  <b>itself</b> <sup>[16]</sup> 4:22 24:23 27:1 28:15 29:9,10 33:11 34:12, 16 35:16,16 40:18 59:22 70:7 81:20 92:13</p>	<p><b>Justice</b> <sup>[27]</sup> 1:20 3:3,10 5:15,24 6:4 7:15 8:1,6,20 9:9 10:3,11,19 11:4,9 12:14, 16,17 13:2,5,12,15,24 14:16,23 15:3,6,8,11,12,14,20, 22 16:8,9,15,19 17:13,19 18:5,9,21 19:16,19,20,21, 22,23 20:15,23 21:5,18,21, 24 22:10,15,18 23:7,12,14, 18,20,22,25 24:7 25:1,15, 22 26:1,7,12,20 27:19,22, 23 28:1,3,5,6,6,9,10,12,17, 21 29:22 30:12,15,18,20, 22,24 31:1,3,5,17,25 32:8, 9,17,25 33:5,13,16,18,19, 21,21,23,24 34:21 35:3,21, 25 36:4,23,24,24 37:1,12, 19,22 38:1,12,18,22 39:5 40:12,13 41:13,17,23 42:10,11,11,13 43:10,19 44:3, 23,25 45:12,14,14,16 47:2 48:3,16 49:2,6,9,14,17 50:2,18 51:2,15 52:4,7,8,13 54:4 55:12,19,23 56:10,19, 22 57:10,15,19,24 58:1,2,4 59:11 60:9 61:2,3,4 62:1, 13,15 63:11,13 64:13,21 65:17,19,21,22 66:16 67:9 68:11,23 69:9,11 70:9,11, 16,19 71:7,8 72:10,14 73:8, 10,16,18,20 74:9 76:3,18, 21,24 77:2,11,25 78:11,15, 21 79:3,7,14 80:18 81:6,18 82:3 83:3,5,12,14,16,21 84:1 85:2 87:8,9,11,12,13,23, 23,25 88:10,17,24 89:10, 12,23 90:7,7,8,9,10,12 91:3,12,13,13,15,16,16,18,19, 22 92:5,5 93:19 94:15  <b>Justice's</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 62:16  <b>justices</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 79:18  <b>justifications</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 35:14,24</p>
<p><b>G</b>  <b>game</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 78:6,6  <b>Gas</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 79:17,20 80:8 81:23  <b>gases</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 14:14,15  <b>gave</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 44:25  <b>General</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 1:20 5:3 6:19 27:15 43:6,7  <b>generally</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 35:9 53:18  <b>gets</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 72:3 84:23  <b>getting</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 15:4 28:22 44:24  <b>give</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 41:13 44:2 84:24 87:15 91:23  <b>given</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 22:24 84:21  <b>gives</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 52:5 72:25  <b>GORSUCH</b> <sup>[30]</sup> 12:14,17 13:2,12,24 14:16,23 15:3,6, 8,12 16:8,9,15,19 17:14,19 33:24 34:21 35:3,21,25 36:4,23 64:13 71:8 72:10 73:8,18 90:8  <b>got</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 16:23 43:5 78:12  <b>government</b> <sup>[77]</sup> 5:18,21 8:9 11:17,20,24 15:24 17:2 21:10 24:17 25:12 31:5 32:2,4 41:24,24 42:3,3,5,7 44:14 46:6,13 48:8,9,22,24 49:5,11,13 51:5,7,8,12,13 52:19 54:6,9,20 58:9,10,13 62:24 63:1,5,9 64:2,17 68:4,8 71:3 72:3 73:23 75:9 79:11 81:7 84:22 85:19 86:11, 18,21,24 87:2,7,15,21 88:1, 2,3,7,13,23 90:14,16 91:10 92:23 93:9  <b>government's</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 35:6 53:24 54:23 58:11 64:8 82:24 86:7  <b>governmental</b> <sup>[10]</sup> 5:18 7:23 9:17,18 32:4 53:13 58:15 59:25 72:8 88:9  <b>governments</b> <sup>[10]</sup> 10:10 31:4 45:25 58:14 64:10 72:</p>	<p><b>H</b>  <b>haled</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 36:8  <b>Halk</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 60:1  <b>hand</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 51:21  <b>handling</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 69:22  <b>happened</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 45:22 47:3 83:18  <b>happening</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 64:7,14  <b>hear</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 3:3 48:6  <b>heard</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 71:11  <b>heel</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 39:21  <b>held</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 38:3 59:23  <b>help</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 64:12  <b>history</b> <sup>[11]</sup> 27:1 45:19 56:7,13 70:22,25 80:24 85:3,9, 14,19  <b>hold</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 40:24 58:25 71:3 82:19  <b>holding</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 42:14,19,21 73:23  <b>hoping</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 45:19  <b>host</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 46:1  <b>HOUSING</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 1:4 3:5  <b>However</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 89:24  <b>hypothesis</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 6:19 7:9  <b>hypothetical</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 66:13,17 77:21 79:2</p>	<p><b>I</b>  <b>idea</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 14:3 26:3,23 29:2  <b>identical</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 20:6 21:7  <b>identically</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 21:12  <b>identified</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 35:24  <b>identify</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 82:24  <b>illogical</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 23:4  <b>imagine</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 82:9  <b>immunity</b> <sup>[9]</sup> 3:14,21,24 4:6,9,10,15,19,23 5:5,16,20 6:2,14 7:11 8:2,5,11,11 9:14,16,21 11:1 12:5 15:25, 25 20:11,13,19 23:5 24:11, 20 25:13,20 26:18 29:19, 21 32:19,21 33:1,7 34:4,10, 13 35:2,6,15 36:18 39:22 40:3,25 41:4,9 42:24 43:9, 18 44:4,9,17 48:19 50:5,12, 16,24 51:14 52:25 54:10, 12,18 56:14 58:23,24 59:4, 9,10 65:24 66:9 68:3,21 70:24 71:10,25 72:2,7,16 74:12,15 80:2,22 92:10 93:1  <b>implausible</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 65:2 67:20 75:25</p>	<p><b>J</b>  <b>JACKSON</b> <sup>[29]</sup> 10:19 11:4, 9 18:21 32:8 45:15,16 47:2 48:3,16 49:2,6,9,14,17 50:2,18 51:2,15 52:4,7 63:11,13 64:21 82:3 85:2 87:8 91:17,18  <b>jail</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 88:19  <b>jailed</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 88:2  <b>jailing</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 88:14,18  <b>JOSHI</b> <sup>[76]</sup> 1:22 2:6 52:10, 11,13 54:13 56:6,17,21,25 57:13,18,21,25 58:3,6 59:19 60:15 61:17 62:2,14 63:7,12 64:16 65:11 66:12,18 67:23 68:18 69:2,10 70:6, 10,14,17,21 71:23 73:5,12, 22 74:23 76:9,20,22 77:1,6, 18 78:7,13,19,25 79:6,9 80:5 81:2,10 82:18 83:4,8,13, 15,19,23 84:6 85:21 87:18 88:5,16,21 89:3,11,14,24 90:17 91:5,21  <b>Judge</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 60:20,21 61:11, 12  <b>judicial</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 69:21  <b>jump</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 23:24  <b>jurisprudence</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 84:4</p>	<p><b>K</b>  <b>KAGAN</b> <sup>[42]</sup> 7:15 8:1,6,20 9:9 10:3,12 13:15 15:11, 14,20,22 27:19 28:1,3,6,10 29:22 30:12,15,18,20,22, 24 31:1,3,5,17,25 32:25 33:18 44:25 61:2,4 62:1 74:9 78:11,15,21 90:7 92:5,6  <b>Kagan's</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 40:13  <b>Katsas</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 60:20 61:12  <b>KAVANAUGH</b> <sup>[67]</sup> 12:16 13:5 18:5,9 19:16,20,27, 32,9,17 33:19 36:25 37:1, 12,19,22 38:1,12,18,22 40:12 41:13,17,23 42:10 55:12 56:10,19,22 57:10,15, 19,24 58:1,4 61:3 62:13,15 65:17,21 69:9,11 70:9,11, 16,19 71:7 72:15 73:10,16, 20 79:3,7,14 80:18 81:6,18</p>

## Official - Subject to Final Review

83:3,5,12,14,16,21 90:9,10 91:3,12 93:20 keep [3] 22:25 69:9 86:4 Kimel [7] 24:8,9,16,22 40: 15,23 51:20 kind [4] 34:6 45:1 46:16 85: 17 kinds [1] 61:9 KIRTZ [2] 1:7 3:6 knows [2] 69:24 86:17 Krause [2] 60:22 61:11	lines [1] 50:22 list [3] 82:12,12 84:15 listed [1] 31:9 literal [3] 3:22 39:18 67:16 litigants [1] 78:8 little [1] 72:11 logical [2] 10:1,4 logically [2] 33:9 50:22 Long [1] 28:1 look [9] 46:24,25 47:12 51: 23 55:7 59:17 69:15 74:16 85:5 looked [2] 43:4 66:24 looking [4] 39:13 55:13 56: 7 64:19 looks [3] 66:20 75:3,11 looser [3] 56:14,15 80:1 lose [2] 37:23 43:21 lost [1] 76:22 lot [9] 8:23,23,23 9:3 25:24 38:25 77:20,25 93:20	mentions [2] 80:20,21 mere [1] 5:3 method [7] 76:8 77:5,16,22 78:2 80:16,18 methodology [7] 42:14,17, 18 43:12 47:6 79:5,7 methods [1] 76:16 Meyer [1] 50:14 middle [1] 36:14 might [12] 12:21 16:24 22: 22 47:22 56:13 60:23 72: 24 76:12 80:15 81:25 93: 13,17 millions [1] 38:7 mind [1] 86:5 minutes [2] 33:14 91:23 misread [1] 79:1 misunderstood [1] 79:2 modern [5] 26:17,18 55:2, 5 82:21 moment [1] 6:16 Monday [2] 1:12 28:18 money [6] 3:17 37:14 71: 13,15,17,18 monopolize [1] 26:9 months [3] 26:23 44:21 62: 23 Moreover [1] 53:15 morning [2] 3:4 28:19 most [1] 45:7 Mower [1] 60:21 MPRSA [1] 51:24 much [6] 29:4 37:22 54:5 66:4 69:19 80:1 must [9] 4:4 6:22 12:4 18: 19 29:21 41:10 42:18 43:1 72:7	negated [2] 4:23 41:3 negates [1] 30:3 negligent [2] 25:3,4 negligently [1] 52:16 never [3] 4:15 20:17 80:4 new [1] 77:24 next [4] 24:1 75:19,20 82:6 nine [1] 79:18 non-sovereign [3] 4:4 6: 20 25:9 none [1] 83:9 nonexistent [1] 82:15 normal [1] 29:23 nothing [9] 3:23 5:1 6:21 33:3,6 68:7 80:23 81:2 93: 2 notwithstanding [1] 64: 23 November [1] 1:12 nowhere [1] 15:23 number [4] 27:10 35:24 68: 22 89:4	25 oral [6] 1:15 2:2,5 3:8 52: 11 83:20 order [3] 10:25 42:8 57:23 ordinarily [2] 13:21 46:23 ordinary [8] 6:25 30:9,11, 12 32:7,11 45:2 68:10 original [4] 55:8 61:18 76: 23 79:20 other [59] 11:22 12:9 14:20, 24 17:3,24 20:9,22 21:14 22:3,3 23:6 24:14 26:8,19 27:10 28:24,25 30:5 31:3, 20,22,24 38:25 39:3 40:15 41:20,20 42:21 46:11 47: 13,25 48:17 49:20 50:9 51: 4,21 55:11,23 58:3 63:5,22 64:3 66:1,1,2,10 69:5,5 71: 17 72:17 73:12 79:18 85: 25 86:4,15,15 88:3 94:3 otherwise [6] 4:12 22:22 60:24 66:20 67:20 71:19 out [16] 24:12 26:12,21 54: 24 58:7 63:21 71:16 78:16 79:20 80:3,14 82:12,12 83: 9 84:15 87:7 outcome [1] 75:12 outlier [1] 79:16 outmoded [2] 76:8,17 outside [2] 22:25 67:11 over [5] 26:14 27:22 34:16 73:1 78:20 override [2] 57:12,16 Oversight [3] 12:12 29:14 51:18 overstep [1] 71:21 overwhelming [1] 48:15 own [4] 54:11 61:7 62:8,9
<b>L</b> Lac [2] 9:12 84:19 land [1] 48:20 language [11] 4:22 7:12 24: 23 29:18,23 30:4 59:8 67: 22 80:10 84:8 89:20 last [7] 8:14 9:12 31:9 44: 23 58:6 59:25 90:10 late [1] 80:7 later [1] 87:2 Laughter [9] 15:13 18:11 22:5 23:21 28:8,20 33:20 59:18 78:14 law [2] 12:10 60:2 layers [1] 24:9 lead [1] 43:8 leads [1] 60:11 least [3] 20:3 56:24 83:17 legal [1] 45:6 legislated [1] 43:12 legislates [1] 36:22 legislation [1] 70:13 legislative [6] 27:1 56:7,13 70:22,25 84:8 Lending [2] 86:18 88:8 less [2] 35:13 66:4 liabilities [1] 46:3 liability [45] 4:13 8:17 11:6, 10,14,19 23:2,10 32:14,16 38:10 46:7,9,10,18 47:9, 16 48:4 52:16,22 53:16,24 59:24 61:9,20 62:10 63:1 64:5 67:6 69:7,15,17 75: 17 86:19,22 87:19 88:9 89: 8 90:1,5 93:2,9,15,17 liable [7] 3:17 22:25 60:7,7 71:3 73:23 75:9 license [1] 73:2 lift [2] 25:16,20 lifted [1] 25:12 lifting [1] 39:21 light [2] 36:15 45:18 lightly [1] 80:21 likes [1] 15:24 limitation [1] 54:2 limitations [2] 7:5 67:11 limited [2] 53:23 67:8 limitless [1] 71:18 line [14] 8:7,13 38:19 40:14, 16 56:3 81:18,19,25 82:4, 15,19,21 89:22	<b>M</b> made [5] 9:14 29:4 31:15 63:10 92:14 magic [7] 24:11,15 35:14, 18 57:6,7 84:5 majority [4] 55:24 56:1 93: 22 94:1 Management [3] 12:13 29: 15 51:18 many [2] 36:20 72:16 matter [4] 1:14 4:15 59:19 74:3 matters [1] 29:7 mean [60] 7:16 8:6 9:23,25 11:5 15:23 17:21 18:22 21: 17,22 25:3 26:2,11 28:17 29:2 30:7,7 31:6,16 32:10 33:25 37:3 38:24 39:8 42: 4,21 43:13 44:5 45:1,4,21 46:24 50:3 53:10 56:11 60: 16 61:5 63:22,23 65:14 66: 3 68:2,15,16 70:10 72:11 73:5 75:4,14 78:15,20 82: 4,8,14 83:8 84:6,17 85:4 89:14 90:16 meaning [17] 9:7,8,10 14: 22 19:14,18 31:20,22,24 32:7,11 34:23 57:17,22 68: 10 84:25 85:5 means [9] 20:12 21:17 30: 9 33:11 66:4,14 82:12 93: 5,6 meant [3] 9:3 18:19 40:5 mechanism [1] 69:5 mechanisms [1] 53:9 meet [1] 81:5 member [1] 43:3 members [2] 41:8 43:14 mention [3] 48:7,19 69:17 mentioned [5] 38:23 71:11 75:14 81:23 88:11	<b>N</b> names [1] 51:1 naming [1] 51:4 NANDAN [3] 1:22 2:6 52: 11 narrower [4] 4:18 11:11 14: 22 18:19 narrowly [1] 14:24 nation [1] 60:14 national [2] 86:9,12 nations [1] 34:25 natural [2] 10:9 53:21 nature [2] 4:9 12:18 near [1] 15:23 nearby [2] 5:12 45:11 nearly [1] 20:6 necessarily [3] 6:21 35:1 37:4 necessary [4] 10:1,4 41:9 54:9 need [7] 37:11 46:18 72:12 84:2,4 91:2,2 needs [2] 34:2 82:23 negate [5] 7:6,11 8:11 29: 17,22	<b>O</b> obligations [1] 75:21 observation [1] 64:8 obtain [1] 42:4 obtaining [1] 68:20 occur [1] 48:17 occurred [1] 26:22 occurring [1] 65:10 Office [1] 69:16 Okay [16] 8:20 22:23 27:23 32:8 36:4 37:12,19,22 38: 22 43:19 49:2,9 57:24 62: 1 69:11 77:11 old [3] 25:23 26:4 39:6 once [1] 83:8 one [55] 10:13 12:20,21,21 20:6,16 21:2,8 22:11,12,18 26:13 28:23,23 31:21,23, 24 32:3 33:24 35:5 39:2 40:2,14 41:14 42:6 49:20, 22 51:21 54:21,21 57:22 58:13 60:15 61:14,17 63:7 66:5 67:15 70:23 71:25 72: 5 73:8,14 74:4,24,24 75:1 78:3 83:2,17 87:3 88:13 92:6,11 94:3 one-off [1] 79:15 ones [1] 89:6 only [25] 4:11,20 7:21,21 11:2,5,12 23:8,8 24:24 29: 11 33:8 36:12,18 42:25 48: 5 50:25 51:11,19 63:7 65: 20,24 66:7 74:4 83:24 open [1] 78:8 opening [2] 35:16 75:15 operating [1] 48:20 operative [1] 65:6 opinion [6] 26:11 55:25 60: 8 67:25 80:25 93:22 Opportunity [2] 69:3 86:	<b>P</b> PAGE [3] 2:2 75:19,25 pages [1] 51:24 palpable [1] 46:4 parallel [1] 85:7 Parden [5] 26:3,13,16 39: 13 80:1 Parden's [1] 26:14 part [19] 6:8 15:18 31:7 37: 2,3 42:14,19,20 43:10 46:4 49:7 56:18 57:1 58:9 64: 11 70:15 79:12 85:18 88: 19 particular [8] 14:7 39:25 49:19,21 57:9 65:10 67:13 89:17 particularly [1] 73:14 parties [2] 41:20 49:24 partnerships [2] 30:16,17 parts [5] 17:24 23:17 26:19 64:8 93:6 past [1] 76:15 path [1] 60:19 pay [2] 17:6 39:4

## Official - Subject to Final Review

<p><b>penalties</b> [2] 62:2,9  <b>pending</b> [1] 38:2  <b>people</b> [2] 10:5 45:2  <b>perceive</b> [1] 45:17  <b>perfectly</b> [1] 9:21  <b>perhaps</b> [4] 60:6 67:16 93:5,8  <b>permissible</b> [2] 35:9 36:12  <b>permit</b> [1] 24:18  <b>permits</b> [1] 50:1  <b>permitting</b> [1] 22:21  <b>person</b> [73] 3:16 5:10,17 6:11 8:24 11:15,16,16,23 12:2 13:9 16:14 17:24 18:3,13,18 19:6 21:8,10,16 25:2 27:11,15,17 29:5,7 30:7 31:23 32:7,11 41:19 45:1,7 46:12 49:11 51:7 52:2,16,18,20,21 53:6,10,19,21 58:16,17 61:19,24 63:16,23,24 65:13 66:2,3,7,14 67:4 68:8,10 75:6,20 82:11,11 87:14,21 88:25 90:13,15,19 93:5,12 94:9  <b>persons</b> [17] 10:6,9,16,18 19:5 27:6,8 53:2 61:23 63:18,21 64:5,9,10,24 75:18 86:11  <b>pertain</b> [1] 14:25  <b>Petitioner</b> [6] 1:5,21 2:4,10 3:9 92:2  <b>pick</b> [2] 40:12 62:15  <b>piece</b> [1] 26:4  <b>pitfalls</b> [1] 89:21  <b>places</b> [2] 45:7 65:7  <b>plain</b> [6] 7:3 47:6 49:25 84:25 85:4 89:20  <b>plainly</b> [2] 24:4 26:24  <b>plaintiff</b> [1] 38:4  <b>plausible</b> [18] 5:11,23 10:24 11:2,5 17:15 18:2 26:5 27:2 31:13 32:13,15 36:18 43:14 57:22 74:4 90:15,22  <b>plausibly</b> [1] 45:10  <b>please</b> [4] 3:11 15:12 16:11 52:14  <b>plug</b> [9] 7:17,20 8:16 9:6 14:3 29:25 30:2 31:8,8  <b>plugged</b> [3] 8:22 15:16 52:21  <b>point</b> [16] 19:2 23:8 24:2 31:15,18 37:13 48:5 51:5,24 55:11 58:7 79:25 80:6 83:6,9 90:11  <b>pointed</b> [1] 21:2  <b>points</b> [4] 22:4 26:12 27:4 92:4  <b>policy</b> [2] 73:6,13  <b>policymaking</b> [1] 84:9  <b>pollutant</b> [5] 14:11,15,21 31:21 67:1  <b>posited</b> [1] 90:13</p>	<p><b>position</b> [4] 54:23 63:6 72:25 94:6  <b>potential</b> [2] 38:10 89:21  <b>power</b> [4] 35:7,8 37:15 73:1  <b>powers</b> [3] 37:20 71:11,21  <b>pre-sentencing</b> [1] 59:17  <b>precedent</b> [1] 65:24  <b>precedents</b> [2] 39:10 78:16  <b>precise</b> [2] 38:1 67:21  <b>presumptively</b> [1] 4:25  <b>pretty</b> [5] 29:2 40:18 67:19,21 68:24  <b>prevail</b> [7] 37:5,9 38:7 41:18 42:1 57:23 72:13  <b>prevent</b> [3] 65:9 74:11,20  <b>previous</b> [1] 11:11  <b>previously</b> [4] 46:10,12 60:18 77:23  <b>primary</b> [1] 88:12  <b>principle</b> [6] 36:21 40:20 56:2,11 75:2 80:21  <b>principles</b> [7] 6:25 12:10 34:6 36:16 71:24 72:15 79:17  <b>prior</b> [1] 76:16  <b>Privacy</b> [2] 62:24 63:1  <b>private</b> [4] 17:3 41:20 49:24 71:4  <b>probably</b> [3] 41:7 78:3 82:15  <b>problem</b> [5] 18:23 19:25 24:8 74:17 92:18  <b>problematic</b> [1] 89:16  <b>proceeding</b> [1] 89:18  <b>process</b> [1] 69:24  <b>produce</b> [1] 41:6  <b>progeny</b> [1] 58:25  <b>programs</b> [1] 71:17  <b>prohibition</b> [1] 62:9  <b>promised</b> [1] 26:20  <b>proper</b> [1] 59:20  <b>proposition</b> [1] 70:22  <b>prosecute</b> [1] 68:15  <b>prosecuted</b> [1] 28:15  <b>prosecuting</b> [1] 68:18  <b>prosecution</b> [5] 19:5 59:14,15 60:12 62:17  <b>prosecutions</b> [1] 18:17  <b>protect</b> [4] 16:24 32:19 34:9 71:24  <b>protecting</b> [1] 72:23  <b>Protection</b> [2] 53:25 86:16  <b>protections</b> [1] 34:14  <b>provide</b> [1] 3:15  <b>provides</b> [2] 53:18 66:21  <b>provision</b> [37] 5:9 19:8,15 20:5,16 21:13 22:7,19 23:9 24:14,21 29:25 47:9 48:8 55:15,17 58:18 61:20,22 62:6,23 63:15,15 64:1,25</p>	<p>65:14 75:17 81:9,20,22 82:5,6,7,10 88:14 91:10 93:8  <b>provisions</b> [30] 8:17 14:9,12,21,24 19:10 20:21,25 24:4 32:14,16 52:22,23 53:12 55:7,8,9 61:9 62:10,11,14 63:20 64:18 66:10,24 67:1 79:22 87:20 89:9 93:12  <b>public</b> [3] 40:17 55:16 81:7  <b>punitive</b> [8] 38:12,19 62:18 87:6 91:4,5,8,11  <b>purport</b> [1] 35:7  <b>purporting</b> [1] 34:13  <b>purpose</b> [7] 7:22 24:24 29:11 46:18 48:4 64:6 71:1 47:18 65:14 72:17 92:6  <b>put</b> [5] 16:19 32:10 82:23,25 85:8  <b>putting</b> [5] 5:16,19 6:15 11:15 33:25</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Q</b></p> <p><b>qualifies</b> [1] 63:8  <b>quest</b> [1] 28:7  <b>question</b> [39] 3:12,18 9:10 15:1 16:11,20 20:10,18 25:11 28:11 33:1,25 34:7 35:4,19 39:20,23 43:20 44:23 48:5 50:6,14,15 54:17 57:21 58:4 62:16 71:9 76:23,25 77:6,12 78:12 80:15 85:16 90:1 92:9 93:14,16  <b>questions</b> [6] 5:14 13:8 40:13 54:3 76:4 78:4  <b>quick</b> [2] 41:14 92:3  <b>quote</b> [1] 57:3</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>R</b></p> <p><b>raised</b> [6] 54:20 71:9,20 83:18,19,22  <b>raises</b> [1] 61:6  <b>range</b> [1] 12:8  <b>rational</b> [1] 16:24  <b>RCRA</b> [2] 27:16 51:23  <b>reach</b> [2] 10:22 80:14  <b>read</b> [16] 4:1 14:17 19:8 21:6 31:6 32:13,15 36:16 44:10 51:17 55:3 56:1 66:7 77:9 81:11 83:10  <b>reader</b> [1] 45:6  <b>reading</b> [19] 5:23 10:24 11:2 21:14 24:2 36:13,19 57:12,16 60:10,16 65:3,25 66:6 67:21 72:4 88:25 89:15,20  <b>readings</b> [1] 90:15  <b>reads</b> [2] 55:1 77:10  <b>reaffirmed</b> [1] 39:11  <b>real</b> [2] 28:13 64:21  <b>realize</b> [1] 27:21  <b>realized</b> [1] 69:14</p>	<p><b>really</b> [12] 14:6 21:3 22:7 30:6 55:13 64:12,15,17 65:1 75:4 82:4,16  <b>reason</b> [8] 14:19 29:6 32:23 60:23 71:12 74:10 88:4 91:2  <b>reasonable</b> [2] 18:16 47:23  <b>reasoning</b> [1] 14:8  <b>reasons</b> [3] 4:8 64:4 92:11  <b>REBUTTAL</b> [3] 2:8 33:14 92:1  <b>recognition</b> [1] 8:10  <b>recognize</b> [1] 21:23  <b>recognized</b> [10] 5:9 16:13 18:15 21:19,25 25:10 36:15 39:12,19,22  <b>Recognizing</b> [1] 16:5  <b>reconcile</b> [1] 51:20  <b>recovery</b> [7] 7:24 10:15,17 27:13 29:12 42:8 69:8  <b>reenacted</b> [1] 75:6  <b>refashion</b> [1] 82:20  <b>refer</b> [2] 9:3 20:11  <b>reference</b> [6] 24:10 40:6,16 79:19 81:7,21  <b>references</b> [3] 29:10 92:12,22  <b>referencing</b> [1] 11:12  <b>referred</b> [3] 4:20 24:13,14  <b>referring</b> [4] 7:23 12:12 20:21 55:22  <b>refers</b> [3] 5:17 22:13 51:12  <b>REGINALD</b> [1] 1:7  <b>regulatory</b> [1] 15:17  <b>rejected</b> [3] 14:3 76:16 77:23  <b>relevant</b> [6] 39:19 45:18 46:16 77:15 85:19,22  <b>relied</b> [1] 27:14  <b>relies</b> [3] 55:14 70:12 91:10  <b>reluctant</b> [1] 84:7  <b>remained</b> [1] 4:23  <b>remains</b> [1] 66:19  <b>remedies</b> [1] 89:1  <b>remedy</b> [1] 53:20  <b>render</b> [1] 24:3  <b>repeat</b> [1] 16:20  <b>repeated</b> [1] 36:20  <b>repeatedly</b> [1] 35:19  <b>report</b> [2] 59:17 75:7  <b>Reporting</b> [9] 3:15 11:13 17:1,4 41:21,22 52:15 75:22 76:10  <b>reports</b> [4] 17:5 42:4 69:16 70:18  <b>require</b> [2] 24:11 92:11  <b>required</b> [3] 24:15 35:12 53:1  <b>requirement</b> [3] 72:6 91:6 92:16</p>	<p><b>requirements</b> [3] 3:16 52:18 86:10  <b>requires</b> [1] 17:17  <b>requiring</b> [1] 35:14  <b>researched</b> [1] 20:1  <b>residual</b> [1] 31:9  <b>Resource</b> [1] 69:7  <b>respect</b> [4] 44:19 46:7 50:10 51:3  <b>respectfully</b> [3] 10:11 17:13 26:2  <b>respecting</b> [1] 72:17  <b>respects</b> [1] 77:15  <b>respond</b> [2] 56:24 70:5  <b>Respondent</b> [7] 1:8,23 2:7 3:25 41:5 46:25 52:12  <b>Respondent's</b> [4] 3:21 34:21 44:15 94:6  <b>response</b> [4] 39:6 46:22 72:14 86:10  <b>responses</b> [1] 12:19  <b>responsible</b> [1] 25:4  <b>rest</b> [5] 16:4,6 62:6,7 94:10  <b>rested</b> [1] 56:11  <b>rests</b> [1] 62:5  <b>result</b> [4] 21:3 29:3 46:14 60:11  <b>reticulated</b> [1] 62:25  <b>retreat</b> [3] 26:15 39:12 80:1  <b>rise</b> [1] 52:5  <b>ritualism</b> [2] 55:20 93:22  <b>ROBERTS</b> [25] 3:3 33:5,13,16,21 36:24 42:11 45:14 52:8 59:11 60:9 65:19,22 66:16 67:9 68:11,23 87:9,23 90:7 91:13,16,19,22 94:15  <b>rule</b> [21] 4:18 17:16 34:8,18,25 35:12 37:2,5,9 41:11,11 48:11 57:11,14,20 73:11 74:11,20 75:11 91:6 92:7  <b>rules</b> [1] 74:6  <b>RURAL</b> [4] 1:3,4 3:5,5</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>S</b></p> <p><b>Safe</b> [1] 20:2  <b>sake</b> [1] 87:14  <b>same</b> [36] 5:13 8:18 13:10 23:3 24:8,16 27:7 30:4 31:13 32:14 34:22 35:20 40:11 42:18 43:24 44:6 45:11 46:15 47:19,25 54:11 61:5,8 69:3,4 75:10 76:1 77:8,15,19 79:17 86:2 87:17 88:21 93:6,11  <b>satisfied</b> [1] 92:17  <b>satisfy</b> [1] 48:10  <b>Savings</b> [3] 26:11 48:14 79:24  <b>saying</b> [25] 8:15 15:20 19:4 21:6,25 22:23 26:25 27:6 35:1,4 36:1 47:5,10,17 55:</p>
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## Official - Subject to Final Review

<p>24 61:10,12 63:2 64:23 78:22,23,25 85:10 89:1 90:18</p> <p><b>says</b> <sup>[15]</sup> 18:24 20:7 21:8 33:7 39:3 55:15,19 57:5 58:12 62:24 63:5 65:4 82:10 85:6 89:22</p> <p><b>Scalia</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 26:12</p> <p><b>scheme</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 15:17 16:2,4,7 62:25</p> <p><b>schemes</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 69:6</p> <p><b>scope</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 53:16</p> <p><b>score</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 69:23 70:13</p> <p><b>scratch</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 82:2</p> <p><b>Second</b> <sup>[8]</sup> 5:6 17:19 34:2 36:9 43:19 53:2 72:5 77:12</p> <p><b>section</b> <sup>[12]</sup> 10:6,7 45:25 46:1,7,9,10 53:18 56:4 75:18,20 80:11</p> <p><b>security</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 86:9,12</p> <p><b>see</b> <sup>[9]</sup> 9:1 21:13 40:14,15 49:6 64:14 75:1 84:7 85:5</p> <p><b>seek</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 68:19,25</p> <p><b>seem</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 16:22</p> <p><b>seemed</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 85:8</p> <p><b>seems</b> <sup>[14]</sup> 12:20 17:10 38:24 39:1 42:15 45:21 46:8,15 48:18 64:12 65:2 66:9 67:19 79:17</p> <p><b>self-contained</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 62:5</p> <p><b>Seminole</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 26:23 44:21 58:24</p> <p><b>sense</b> <sup>[11]</sup> 5:10 6:11 14:22 16:14 18:4,13 19:13 40:19 45:9,9,11</p> <p><b>sensitive</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 73:14,17,19,21</p> <p><b>separate</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 34:10 55:16 63:25 64:3 81:21 93:14</p> <p><b>separation</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 37:20 71:11,21</p> <p><b>seriously</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 56:23 73:24</p> <p><b>serve</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 29:12</p> <p><b>serves</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 72:16</p> <p><b>SERVICE</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 1:4 3:6</p> <p><b>set</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 69:4</p> <p><b>sets</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 23:1</p> <p><b>settling</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 84:1</p> <p><b>settled</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 36:10</p> <p><b>Seventh</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 38:3</p> <p><b>sheerest</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 55:20</p> <p><b>shouldn't</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 74:7 77:22</p> <p><b>show</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 6:22 12:4 17:14 49:12</p> <p><b>showed</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 86:17</p> <p><b>shows</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 4:24 5:2 85:14 90:14</p> <p><b>shrinking</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 63:15</p> <p><b>side</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 26:8 28:23,24 38:25 39:3 40:14,15</p> <p><b>significant</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 14:6 20:25 26:22 27:3 38:10</p>	<p><b>silently</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 39:24</p> <p><b>similar</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 19:10 39:1</p> <p><b>similarly</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 7:8</p> <p><b>simply</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 58:24 81:15</p> <p><b>since</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 60:17 76:13,13 80:7 81:13</p> <p><b>single</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 54:21 75:16</p> <p><b>sister</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 53:24</p> <p><b>situation</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 13:11 46:16 75:14</p> <p><b>skipped</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 27:22</p> <p><b>slicing</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 40:18</p> <p><b>slow</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 15:2</p> <p><b>SNYDER</b> <sup>[120]</sup> 1:19 2:3,9 3:7,8,10 5:15,22 6:3 7:16,19 8:3,19 9:9 10:11,23 11:8,21 12:25 13:4,6,20 14:2,19 15:2,4,7,10,18,21 16:12,18 17:13,22 18:7,12 19:7,17 20:14,20,24 21:18,22 22:2,6,12,16 23:7,12,13,16,19,23 24:1,22 25:6,18 26:1,10 27:25 28:2,16 29:1 30:8,14,17,19,21,23,25 31:2,4,11,19 32:6,12,22 33:3,6,15,17 34:20 35:17,23 36:2,5 37:10,17,21,25 38:14,21 39:8 40:22 41:16,19 42:2,20 43:13,22 44:5 45:4,13 46:21 47:11 48:12,25 49:3,7,10,16,18 50:13,20 51:10,17 52:5 91:22 92:1,3</p> <p><b>Solicitor</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 1:19</p> <p><b>solitary</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 26:14</p> <p><b>somehow</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 20:12 21:16 65:15 76:1</p> <p><b>someone</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 34:13 44:12</p> <p><b>sometimes</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 35:9 37:3 64:25 67:18</p> <p><b>somewhere</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 43:7 44:13</p> <p><b>sorry</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 12:15 16:8,20 23:14 55:12 68:12 90:24</p> <p><b>sort</b> <sup>[12]</sup> 9:19 17:12 26:4 54:14 55:5,20 62:5 69:4 75:15 80:13,16 81:3</p> <p><b>sorts</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 88:11</p> <p><b>SOTOMAYOR</b> <sup>[29]</sup> 19:19,21,23 20:15,23 21:5,19,21,24 22:10,15,18 23:7 24:7 25:1,15,22 26:1,7 39:5 84:1 87:24,25 88:10,17,24 89:10,12,23</p> <p><b>sound</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 93:20</p> <p><b>sounds</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 80:25</p> <p><b>sovereign</b> <sup>[104]</sup> 3:13,20,24 4:4,5,9,10,14,19,21,23 5:5,16,20 6:1,13,20 7:11,25 8:2,5,10,11 9:14,16,21 11:1 12:5 15:24,25 20:10,13,18 23:5 24:10,19 25:3,9,13,20 26:18 29:8,10,13,18,21 32:18,21 33:1,7,10 34:3,10,11</p>	<p>35:2,15,16 36:7,12,17 40:25 41:8 42:24 43:9,18 44:4,17 48:19 50:5,11,16,23,25 51:1,14 52:25 54:10,12,17 56:14 58:23 59:4,9,10 65:23 66:9 68:3,21 70:23 71:10,25 72:2,7,16 74:12,15 80:2,22 92:9,12 93:1,13,14,16</p> <p><b>sovereign's</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 4:14</p> <p><b>sovereigns</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 34:10 43:8 84:15</p> <p><b>sovereignty</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 25:16</p> <p><b>speaking</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 34:12</p> <p><b>speaks</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 88:14</p> <p><b>Spear</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 60:5</p> <p><b>special</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 15:15 53:20</p> <p><b>specific</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 40:6 52:24 79:19 92:11</p> <p><b>specifically</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 7:21 11:12 48:1 72:8 92:8,25</p> <p><b>specificity</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 72:5 92:16,19</p> <p><b>specify</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 33:9</p> <p><b>spent</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 71:17</p> <p><b>split</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 54:19</p> <p><b>square</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 17:3</p> <p><b>squarely</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 59:23</p> <p><b>stand-alone</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 51:6 62:5</p> <p><b>standard</b> <sup>[9]</sup> 35:20 54:10,11 56:14,16 58:22 80:2 81:5 91:8</p> <p><b>standpoint</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 50:4 82:16</p> <p><b>stare</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 76:11</p> <p><b>start</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 3:19 28:4 50:4,8</p> <p><b>started</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 27:20 56:6 79:25</p> <p><b>starting</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 37:13 82:1</p> <p><b>state</b> <sup>[25]</sup> 24:18 25:16 34:9 35:6 39:18 40:6 47:17,24 48:1 53:1 54:10 57:8 58:8,14,20,23 59:2,2,4,8 62:19 71:10 81:13,17,17</p> <p><b>statement</b> <sup>[20]</sup> 17:16 34:8,18 35:12 36:2 37:2,5,9 41:10 48:11 57:11,13,20 73:11 74:11,20 81:5 84:2 91:6 92:7</p> <p><b>STATES</b> <sup>[48]</sup> 1:1,16 3:14 5:8 6:5,12 13:9 17:23 18:1,17 20:6 24:5,19 27:8,12,14,18 28:14 32:20 34:23,25 39:21 44:1,4,20 52:3 55:21,22 58:5,11 59:14,16,21 60:2,13,13 62:17,18,20 68:15,17,19,20,25 72:18 79:12,19 94:10</p> <p><b>States</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 93:1</p> <p><b>statute</b> <sup>[83]</sup> 3:22 4:2 5:4,16 6:17 7:5 9:7,8,19 10:17,25 11:2,6,17 14:5 15:9 17:25 18:24 22:23 24:13,14 26:</p>	<p>25 27:1 33:4,6 37:4,7 39:1 43:21,23 46:2,24 47:15,18 53:24 59:6,13 60:10 63:19 64:6,9,12,23 65:3 66:4,10,15,21,25 67:2,10,11,17 68:1,2,24 71:1 72:1,4,6,7 74:8,16 77:7,9,13,20,24 78:22 79:6,9 80:9 82:12,23 85:5 86:7,22 87:20 89:15,20,22 93:7 94:5</p> <p><b>statutes</b> <sup>[14]</sup> 19:9 20:22 21:14 27:10 29:24 36:11 51:23 55:1 68:22 77:10 78:9,18 86:15 88:11</p> <p><b>statutorily</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 63:18</p> <p><b>statutory</b> <sup>[26]</sup> 7:12 9:4 12:2 13:21 16:4,7 29:17,23 30:3 51:11 60:24 67:21 69:6 74:6,24 75:2 76:8,11 77:5,17 78:2 80:6 81:4,16 82:25 93:24</p> <p><b>stems</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 61:18</p> <p><b>step</b> <sup>[8]</sup> 6:13 17:20,20 22:25 25:5 43:18 58:12,19</p> <p><b>sticking</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 40:20</p> <p><b>still</b> <sup>[12]</sup> 12:9,23 17:20 37:9 43:23 44:2 57:10 58:10 64:5 70:3 76:12 79:11</p> <p><b>stock</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 85:3,8</p> <p><b>strange</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 7:2 31:6 47:8 49:23</p> <p><b>strangers</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 86:5</p> <p><b>striking</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 11:14 32:1</p> <p><b>string</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 63:4</p> <p><b>strip</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 34:14</p> <p><b>structurally</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 38:24 39:1 45:17</p> <p><b>structure</b> <sup>[8]</sup> 14:7 35:10 57:7 77:14,14 78:23 79:4,10</p> <p><b>stuck</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 16:21</p> <p><b>Sturgeon</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 13:17</p> <p><b>subbing</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 9:19</p> <p><b>subchapter</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 19:1</p> <p><b>subdivision</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 5:19 32:4</p> <p><b>subject</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 21:10 53:7,8 63:25 64:4,11</p> <p><b>submitted</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 94:17,19</p> <p><b>subsection</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 65:12</p> <p><b>subsequent</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 79:16 80:7</p> <p><b>subsets</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 63:21</p> <p><b>substantive</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 53:7,12 62:8,12 86:3 87:19 90:5</p> <p><b>substituting</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 11:10</p> <p><b>sufficient</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 6:1 43:17 59:8 85:25</p> <p><b>suggest</b> <sup>[7]</sup> 5:20 21:15 22:14 54:25 55:20 80:23,24</p> <p><b>suggested</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 60:5 74:10 92:6</p> <p><b>suggesting</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 48:6 64:22</p>	<p><b>suggestion</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 93:4</p> <p><b>suggests</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 19:25 23:4</p> <p><b>suit</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 10:5,9 27:16 35:16 52:2</p> <p><b>suits</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 24:18,25 29:16 55:22</p> <p><b>superfluity</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 40:23 41:6</p> <p><b>superfluous</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 41:15,25</p> <p><b>suppose</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 7:16 76:5 77:13</p> <p><b>SUPREME</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 1:1,15</p> <p><b>surprised</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 85:10</p> <p><b>surprising</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 57:2</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>T</b></p> <hr/> <p><b>tack</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 71:8</p> <p><b>task</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 17:14</p> <p><b>taxes</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 71:19</p> <p><b>taxpayer</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 71:13</p> <p><b>technical</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 59:19</p> <p><b>Tenth</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 72:20</p> <p><b>term</b> <sup>[18]</sup> 5:3 9:5,12 14:4 19:13 30:1 31:7,8,10 43:6,7 46:11 52:19 53:6 58:15 61:24 65:4 76:2</p> <p><b>terms</b> <sup>[11]</sup> 11:11 14:4 22:25 23:1 34:22,23 39:18 49:25 65:15 82:22 86:9</p> <p><b>text</b> <sup>[27]</sup> 3:22 6:17 7:3 18:24 21:13 39:13 40:25 47:6 51:11 55:14 56:11 57:1,12,16,23 65:3 73:25 74:2,2,5 75:3,11 80:20,22 84:24 85:1 93:24</p> <p><b>textual</b> <sup>[4]</sup> 56:17 57:1 58:22 64:19</p> <p><b>textualist</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 55:24</p> <p><b>theory</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 4:2</p> <p><b>there's</b> <sup>[37]</sup> 3:19 5:1 6:21 8:24,24,25,25 20:9,10 21:9 40:23 41:9 44:12 50:18 54:5,19 57:11 58:21,25 62:4,22 63:4 64:21 66:1,4,5,5 68:7 69:17 74:4 78:17 80:23 81:2 88:11,24 90:15 91:8</p> <p><b>therefore</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 4:17,24 18:1</p> <p><b>they've</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 63:10</p> <p><b>thin</b> <sup>[3]</sup> 40:18 81:18,25</p> <p><b>thinking</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 42:25 67:13</p> <p><b>thinks</b> <sup>[2]</sup> 92:16 94:7</p> <p><b>THOMAS</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 5:15,24 6:4 33:22 54:4 87:11</p> <p><b>Thomas's</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 58:2</p> <p><b>though</b> <sup>[8]</sup> 8:4 16:16 24:13 29:6 64:5,10 84:12 86:20</p> <p><b>three</b> <sup>[5]</sup> 20:3 23:17 24:9 66:5 91:23</p> <p><b>throughout</b> <sup>[6]</sup> 18:25 63:19 64:24 66:14 86:7 94:10</p> <p><b>throw</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 78:16</p> <p><b>tied</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 84:9</p> <p><b>TILA</b> <sup>[1]</sup> 86:18</p>
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## Official - Subject to Final Review

<p><b>timing</b> [2] 47:12,12  <b>today</b> [4] 39:16 47:1 78:4 93:25  <b>together</b> [1] 55:9  <b>took</b> [2] 62:21 94:1  <b>tracing</b> [1] 36:9  <b>traditionally</b> [1] 74:5  <b>traditionally</b> [1] 35:12  <b>Treasury</b> [2] 71:16,18  <b>treated</b> [2] 79:15 87:17  <b>treats</b> [1] 39:9  <b>Treaty</b> [1] 67:18  <b>tree</b> [1] 34:1  <b>Tribe</b> [4] 26:23 35:5 44:21 58:24  <b>tribes</b> [3] 34:24 72:18 84:16  <b>tried</b> [1] 93:18  <b>tries</b> [2] 64:17 74:20  <b>trouble</b> [2] 28:21 56:23  <b>true</b> [2] 40:11 93:11  <b>trump</b> [1] 67:20  <b>Trusts</b> [1] 30:20  <b>Truth</b> [2] 86:18 88:8  <b>try</b> [2] 80:14 82:20  <b>trying</b> [2] 10:22 50:11  <b>turn</b> [3] 17:3 22:3 58:8  <b>turned</b> [1] 75:25  <b>two</b> [20] 4:7 6:3 12:20,22 26:19 32:3 34:20 36:3,16 40:2 46:21 54:22 66:5 71:23 74:23 83:12,13,14 87:2,3  <b>type</b> [1] 84:10</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>U</b></p> <p><b>U.S</b> [2] 5:21 75:10  <b>ultimate</b> [1] 85:15  <b>ultimately</b> [2] 3:23 37:14  <b>unambiguous</b> [1] 19:15  <b>unambiguously</b> [3] 3:13 6:5 14:12  <b>unavoidable</b> [1] 59:12  <b>uncertainty</b> [3] 45:23 46:4,16  <b>unconsenting</b> [1] 24:5  <b>unconstitutional</b> [3] 24:4 26:24 44:1  <b>unconstitutionally</b> [1] 44:19  <b>under</b> [18] 4:18 6:6,25 24:5 34:14 35:7 37:9 41:10,11 42:8 43:24 47:19 56:15 65:23 67:15 74:5 75:10 93:8  <b>undergird</b> [1] 40:20  <b>understand</b> [17] 7:16 12:18 13:14 15:24 16:15 19:2 34:6,7 38:6 45:2,7 50:3,9 55:13 72:12,14 90:11  <b>understanding</b> [6] 44:15 45:8 71:12 82:17 92:18 94:13  <b>understood</b> [2] 43:15 74:2</p>	<p><b>unenforceable</b> [1] 53:13  <b>Union</b> [4] 79:17,20 80:8 81:23  <b>unique</b> [2] 60:25 90:4  <b>UNITED</b> [34] 1:1,16 3:14 5:8 6:5,12 13:9 17:23 18:1,17 20:5 27:8,12,14,18 28:14 32:20 34:25 52:3 59:14,16,21 60:12,13 62:17,18,20 68:15,17,19,20,25 93:1 94:10  <b>units</b> [2] 9:17,18  <b>universe</b> [1] 20:4  <b>unless</b> [7] 8:5 36:12,18 40:24 44:3 59:2 70:5  <b>unlikely</b> [1] 44:22  <b>until</b> [2] 47:20 80:7  <b>unusual</b> [3] 12:6 21:3 62:19  <b>unworkable</b> [2] 67:2,5  <b>unwritten</b> [1] 4:1  <b>up</b> [7] 17:10 35:16 40:13 62:15 66:24 69:4 82:1  <b>user</b> [1] 11:13  <b>uses</b> [5] 5:9 18:13 29:7,10 30:1  <b>using</b> [5] 4:22 6:19 18:3 29:4 76:1  <b>Utility</b> [15] 6:7,15 14:6,9,20 15:7,11,14,21 16:2 17:9 19:9,11 31:22 66:23</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>V</b></p> <p><b>valuable</b> [1] 71:14  <b>value</b> [1] 85:24  <b>variations</b> [1] 66:14  <b>various</b> [1] 63:20  <b>versus</b> [6] 3:6 58:5,8,20 60:5 71:10  <b>viable</b> [1] 80:16  <b>view</b> [1] 72:13  <b>violate</b> [1] 22:23  <b>violated</b> [2] 7:4 49:24  <b>violates</b> [2] 3:16 21:9  <b>violations</b> [3] 23:6 53:20 63:2  <b>virtually</b> [5] 13:16,18 14:1,18 21:7</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>W</b></p> <p><b>wait</b> [3] 23:22,25 33:18  <b>waive</b> [17] 6:1,23 9:16 12:5 29:21 32:25 34:3 35:5,15 36:17 41:8 44:4 50:23 52:25 72:6 80:22 92:9  <b>waived</b> [11] 3:13,20 4:14 20:13 24:19 35:2 40:24 44:8 50:12 68:21 74:14  <b>waiver</b> [26] 4:1,19 9:14,20 10:25 20:10,18 23:5 24:10 40:10 41:4 42:25 43:2,8 44:12 46:6,19 50:5 56:5,14,16 62:22 74:12,18 80:2,</p>	<p>24  <b>waivers</b> [1] 15:25  <b>waives</b> [2] 54:17 59:9  <b>waiving</b> [6] 6:13 34:12 43:18 54:11 58:23 92:25  <b>wanted</b> [8] 17:12 21:3 23:10 27:13 29:3 53:17 56:8 71:3  <b>wants</b> [7] 59:1,2 68:9 73:14,24 81:14 92:9  <b>Washington</b> [3] 1:11,20,22  <b>Water</b> [3] 20:1,2 88:12  <b>way</b> [37] 5:13 16:20 19:8 25:24 29:17 30:4 31:6 32:14 36:6,9 40:21 43:7 47:13,25 49:20 51:19,22 55:6 57:5,9 62:7 64:24 65:1,24 66:1,3,7,10 70:5 74:1 77:9 78:17 79:21 81:14 83:11 84:7 87:17  <b>ways</b> [3] 17:25 45:18 89:4  <b>Weapons</b> [1] 67:18  <b>welcome</b> [2] 5:14 54:3  <b>well-established</b> [1] 36:21  <b>whatnot</b> [1] 46:3  <b>whereas</b> [1] 62:10  <b>Whereupon</b> [1] 94:18  <b>wherever</b> [1] 14:4  <b>whether</b> [20] 3:12 11:22 25:11 33:1 39:20 46:5,17 48:23 49:4,21 50:9,11 54:8,10,17 60:13 85:16 92:9 93:14,16  <b>who's</b> [1] 7:2  <b>Whoa</b> [2] 33:19,19  <b>whole</b> [5] 8:7 46:1 55:7 60:14 63:19  <b>whom</b> [1] 12:8  <b>will</b> [8] 12:9 35:1 37:4 38:2 41:1 43:8 63:24 84:13  <b>willfully</b> [2] 52:17 82:11  <b>willing</b> [2] 29:20 41:3  <b>win</b> [2] 70:3 94:12  <b>wins</b> [1] 59:2  <b>wisely</b> [1] 22:3  <b>without</b> [4] 26:25 36:8 70:3 87:1  <b>wonder</b> [2] 34:5,17  <b>wondering</b> [2] 14:17 48:9  <b>word</b> [14] 6:19 11:15 17:24 18:3,18 29:5 32:3 45:7 51:6 75:6,7,20 76:1 93:5  <b>wording</b> [1] 77:14  <b>words</b> [25] 7:20,22,22 8:23 9:11,20,23,25 24:11,15 29:11 32:3,5 35:14,18 48:18 53:16 55:23 57:6 66:1 75:9 79:19 84:5,13,21  <b>work</b> [4] 28:22 41:1 50:10 61:4</p>	<p><b>workable</b> [1] 75:2  <b>worked</b> [1] 9:21  <b>world</b> [2] 82:9 85:6  <b>worried</b> [1] 72:22  <b>worth</b> [1] 54:24  <b>write</b> [3] 81:1 82:9,23  <b>written</b> [8] 20:16 21:12 26:13 51:8 64:20 80:9 81:1 89:16</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Y</b></p> <p><b>year</b> [3] 8:14 59:25 87:3  <b>years</b> [5] 7:4 13:17 49:25 87:2,3</p>
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