The Not So Great Writ: Constitution Lite for State Prisoners

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Introduction

Following up on a previous piece describing the limiting effect of confining federal habeas relief to violations of “clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court,”¹ this brief essay focuses on a particular set of cases to examine further the constraints the Court has placed on the grant of relief to state prisoners. Over the past six terms (October, 2009 to June, 2014), and continuing into the current term, the Court has issued summary, per curiam reversal of grants of federal habeas corpus relief by circuit courts of appeals at the behest of wardens, without briefing or oral argument, in seventeen cases, including seven involving death sentences.² By contrast, in only five cases did the Court reverse denials of habeas relief per curiam, and those cases presented highly unusual circumstances.³ Shining a bright light on cases in which the Court saw fit to undo a determination by a federal court of appeals that a state prisoner had been deprived of his constitutional rights reveals the extent to which the Great Writ has been diminished by the Court’s restrictive reading of the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA). State prisoners are entitled to relief from federal courts, it appears, only for the most blatant violations of their rights – they must be content with Constitution lite.⁴

The summary reversals of cases in which a panel of one of the circuit courts of appeal, the courts directly below the Supreme Court, found merit in petitioners’ claims continue the trend of interpreting AEDPA in a way that makes it virtually impossible to overcome the deference now due to state court rejections of constitutional claims. To understand the dramatic changes wrought by the Supreme Court’s interpretation of AEDPA, it is useful to recall the position of state prisoners seeking redress of their constitutional rights before that statute was enacted. Petitioners who had followed the proper procedures (giving state courts opportunity to rule on their federal claims, not procedurally defaulting them, and overcoming any harmless error argument) had the right to have a federal court decide, viewing the question de novo, whether their constitutional rights were violated in the state court proceedings. Now, state prisoners have only two ways of securing de novo federal court review of federal constitutional claims alleged to have been wrongly decided by the state court: through a grant of certiorari on direct review

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² See Appendix A for a listing of the cases reversing grants of habeas relief.
³ See Appendix B for a listing of the cases reversing denials of relief and the discussion below at nn. 136-40.
⁴ While this essay does not directly engage with the ongoing debate about the role of federal habeas review prompted by Nancy King and Joseph Hoffmann’s book HABEAS FOR THE 21 ST CENTURY: USES, ABUSES, AND THE FUTURE OF THE GREAT WRIT (University of Chicago Press, 2011), the reader will correctly infer that the author’s sympathies lie with those who, unlike King and Hoffmann, still see a significant role for federal courts in ensuring the protection of constitutional rights in state courts. See, e.g., Justin Marceau, Challenging the Habeas Process Rather than the Result, 69 Wash. & Lee L. Rev. 85 (2012).
(with the Court hearing about 75 cases per year of more than 7,000 petitions filed) or by overcoming a finding of procedural default.⁵

In all other cases, federal courts, rather than granting relief to defendants who suffered a constitutional violation that prejudiced them, instead are limited to deciding whether the state courts’ refusal to acknowledge the constitutional violation represented such an unreasonable application of clearly established Supreme Court law that no rational jurist would agree with the state court. The extent to which Congress actually intended, when it enacted AEDPA, to cause such a dramatic shift in habeas jurisprudence is subject to debate.⁶ But even assuming the legitimacy of the new regime, the way the Supreme Court has handled cases in which circuit courts granted relief to state prisoners should raise concerns about the diminished protection of constitutional rights.

The cases examined for this essay demonstrate the Court’s continuing substantive restrictions on the federal habeas remedy for state prisoners, as well as displaying its low regard for that remedy by the use of summary procedure and a highly dismissive tone. First, the Court’s definition of what law it has “clearly established” is disconcertingly narrow, requiring that the Supreme Court confronted on a prior occasion, in which it had granted its notoriously parsimonious certiorari review on direct appeal, essentially the same set of facts presented by the habeas petitioner. Second, building on its increasing deference to any determinations by state courts on the merits of the constitutional claims, the Court appears to require such a determination to be basically irrational to warrant federal relief – if any “fairminded jurist” could arrive at the same conclusion, habeas is precluded.

In terms of process, the Court issues these reversals without so much as hearing the respondent – the habeas petitioner who prevailed in the Court of Appeals – on the merits of why the grant of relief should be affirmed. On petitions by wardens, to which prisoners respond only to urge the Court not to grant review, the Court is summarily reversing decisions on the basis that those decisions were so clearly in error as to occasion no debate, even when dissenting justices disagree. In addition, the per curiam opinions are written in a tone more appropriate to scold a

⁵ When a state court relies on an independent and adequate state ground, such as failure to raise appropriate objections, to deny relief on a constitutional claim, rather than addressing the merits, federal courts that find either “cause and prejudice” for the default or a showing of actual innocence may address the issue of whether the petitioner’s rights were violated de novo. See Murray v. Carrier, 477 U.S. 478 (1986); House v. Bell, 547 U.S. 518 (2006). One scholar views that potential avenue for relief as showing that the Court has a logical approach to the habeas remedy consistent with notions of fault comparable to those applied to constitutional torts. See Aziz Z. Huq, Habeas and the Roberts Court, 81 Univ. of Chicago L. Rev. 101 (2014). On the other hand, it could be seen as perverse to provide a benefit to petitioners who failed to adhere to state procedural rules.


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naughty child than to address an institution one step below the Supreme Court. The language in the opinions in some of these cases reflects a disdain not only of the petitioners, but of the courts of appeals that granted their petitions, hardly in keeping with the significant constitutional rights at stake. Finally, the few cases in which the Court uses summary reversal when habeas relief was denied display a quite different pattern.

Clearly established law

The Supreme Court has continued its pattern, first announced in Carey v. Musladin,\(^7\) of narrowly defining what law has been so “clearly established” as to warrant habeas relief after a state court has denied the federal constitutional claim on the merits. Two consequences, both harmful to the protection of constitutional rights, flow from this approach. First, interpretation of the provisions of the Constitution designed to ensure the fairness of criminal convictions and sentences is placed entirely in the hands of the Supreme Court, with the lower federal courts playing virtually no role. Given the Court’s limited review of cases on certiorari review of direct appeals, the opportunity to clarify or expand constitutional protections is vanishingly small. Second, failure to apply the constitutional principles developed in the context of appellate review to defendants, who may well have raised those challenges on direct appeal, but whose petitions for writ of certiorari were (as most are) denied, results in a stark differentiation, sometimes literally involving life or death, between prisoners whose cases are identical except for the timing of the Supreme Court’s recognition of the constitutional violation. True, that difference has long been accepted as the price to pay in postconviction proceedings out of concern for finality and comity,\(^8\) but when the petitioner unsuccessfully raised the claim on direct review, the result seems particularly unfair. Moreover, using the mechanism of summary reversal, without briefing or oral argument, for making that critical decision suggests that the cost is disproportionate to any possible benefit achieved.

One of the Court’s most recent cases emphasizing the requirement that habeas relief is precluded in the absence of its own clearly established law illustrates the problem. In White v. Woodall,\(^9\) over three dissents,\(^10\) the Court reversed the Sixth Circuit’s grant of habeas relief to a Kentucky petitioner who had pled guilty to capital murder, kidnapping, and rape and been sentenced to death. The court of appeals had concluded that the trial judge’s failure, upon request, to give the jury a no-adverse-inference instruction from the defendant’s failure to testify at the penalty phase of his trial violated law that had been clearly established in a series of Supreme Court precedents.\(^11\) When the defendant had raised this federal constitutional issue on

\(^7\) 549 U.S. 70 (2006).
\(^10\) 134 S. Ct. at 1707 (Breyer, Ginsburg and Sotomayor, JJ., dissenting).
\(^11\) The Sixth Circuit concluded that the Kentucky Supreme Court had unreasonably rejected the defendant’s Fifth Amendment claim based on clearly established law set forth in three Supreme Court cases. Woodall v. White, 685 F.3d 574, 578-79 (6th Cir. 2012). In Carter v. Kentucky, 450 U.S. 288, 303 (1981), the Court held that a defendant is entitled to a “no adverse inference” instruction during the guilt phase of a trial. This Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination was extended from the guilt to the penalty phase of a capital trial in Estelle v. Smith, 451 U.S. 454, 462-63 (1981). Finally, the Court determined that the “rule against negative inferences at a criminal trial applies with equal force at sentencing,” even where a defendant pled guilty. Mitchell v. United States, 526 U.S. 314, 329 (1999).
direct appeal, the Kentucky Supreme Court rejected it,12 and the Supreme Court denied the petition for certiorari.13 That denial, one of almost 2,000 issued that day,14 turned out to have sealed the defendant’s fate under the Court’s current regime governing habeas review. Had the Court granted certiorari, it might well have determined that the trial court did indeed violate the defendant’s rights under the Fifth Amendment by refusing to issue a no-adverse-inference instruction. Indeed, Justice Scalia’s opinion for the Court denying relief to Mr. Woodall acknowledged as much: “Perhaps the logical next step from [the Supreme Court precedents] would be to hold that the Fifth Amendment requires a penalty-phase no-adverse-inference instruction in a case like this one; perhaps not. . . . The appropriate time to consider the question as a matter of first impression would be on direct review, not in a habeas case governed by Sec. 2254(d)(1).”15

The Court in no way acknowledged that at the “appropriate time,” the Court had denied review, as it does in all but a minuscule number of cases in which certiorari is sought on direct appeal. The Court thereby summarily relegated the defendant to “Constitution lite,” the watered-down version of constitutional protections available to state prisoners on federal habeas review. As long as the specific facts of a petitioner’s case are, in the eyes of a majority of the Supreme Court, sufficiently different from the precedents so that the “clearly established law” does not encompass them, no habeas relief is permitted. Even if some of the justices on the Court (three, in Woodall’s case) agree with the circuit court that Supreme Court precedents had clearly established the constitutional principle on which the petitioner relies, the state prisoner is without a remedy for its violation, and his execution can be carried out.16

In addition to characterizing the holdings of Supreme Court cases quite narrowly, the Court in Woodall foreclosed a basis for federal habeas relief that had been assumed to be available since Section 2254 was first interpreted in Williams v. Taylor.17 Justice O’Connor had included among possible “unreasonable application” scenarios one in which “the state court either unreasonably extends a legal principle from our precedent to a new context where it should not apply or unreasonably refuses to extend that principle to a new context where it should apply.”18 The Court now rejected that possibility, asserting that the “unreasonable-refusal-to-extend rule” had

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12 Woodall v. Commonwealth, 63 S.W.3d 104, 115 (Ky. 2001) (distinguishing each of the Supreme Court cases on its facts).
14 See 537 U.S. 812-945, listing the cert. petitions denied on October 7, 2002.
15 White v. Woodall, 134 S. Ct. at 1707.
16 Three dissenting justices in another recent case, in which the Sixth Circuit had granted habeas on the ground that the defendant prisoner was “in custody” when he was taken to a prison conference room, noted the stark difference between direct review and review of a decision on federal habeas:

> Given this Court’s controlling decisions on what counts as “custody” for Miranda purposes, I agree that the law is not “clearly established” in respondent Fields’s favor. See, e.g., Maryland v. Shatzer, 559 U.S. 105, 106 (2010); Thompson v. Keohane, 516 U.S. 99, 112 (1995). But I disagree with the Court’s further determination that Fields was not in custody under Miranda.

> Were the case here on direct review, I would vote to hold that Miranda precludes the State’s introduction of Fields’s confession as evidence against him.

18 Id. at 407.
never been endorsed by a majority of the Court. The Court acknowledged that it is not always clear whether one is applying a rule or extending it, and that § 2254 does not require an identical fact pattern for a rule to be applied, rather than extended. Yet for relief to be available under the unreasonable application clause, a clearly established rule must so obviously apply to the given set of facts “that there could be no fairminded disagreement on the question.”

Finally, the Court noted in this case, as it has in several of the recent per curiam reversals, that habeas relief can never be justified by reference to a circuit court’s own precedents. Use of lower court cases as part of what law has been “clearly established” is, of course, expressly prohibited by the language of § 2254(d)(1) (“clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States”). Yet even if circuit courts may not extend the reach of Supreme Court precedents in the habeas context, are they precluded from looking to their own opinions, or the decisions of sister circuits, in determining what law the Supreme Court has clearly established? The Sixth Circuit in Woodall referred to a prior case in which the court had analyzed the Supreme Court’s cases involving an adverse inference from a defendant’s failure to testify, noting that although the high court had not “directly” addressed the specific circumstance at issue, the principles set forth in its opinions suggested that the instruction requested was constitutionally required. In fact, in the circuit court’s view, the question the Supreme Court had not “directly” addressed was application of the principle to non-capital cases; given Woodall’s death sentence, that concern was irrelevant. Nonetheless, the Supreme Court chastised the circuit for basing its conclusion on one of its own cases, broadly proclaiming that a lower court may not “consult” its own precedents in assessing a habeas claim governed by § 2254.

A number of the per curiam opinions that are the subject of this essay, in which the Court has reversed circuit courts’ grant of habeas relief summarily, without briefing or oral argument, assert that habeas was not warranted because the applicable law had not been “clearly established” – there simply was no explicit prior holding by the Supreme Court on the facts

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19 White v. Woodall, 134 S. Ct. at 1705-06.
21 In the prior case, Finney v. Rothgerber, 751 F.2d 858 (6th Cir. 1985), the court had analyzed the issue as follows: In Carter v. Kentucky, 450 U.S. 288, 67 L. Ed. 2d 241, 101 S. Ct. 1112 (1981), the Supreme Court held that a defendant in a state criminal trial has the right, upon request, to a jury instruction that his failure to testify may not be the basis of an inference of guilt and should not prejudice him in any way. The Court had earlier held that a federal statute required that a no adverse inference instruction be given upon request of a criminal defendant. Bruno v. United States, 308 U.S. 287, 84 L. Ed. 257, 60 S. Ct. 198 (1939). Following Carter, in Estelle v. Smith, 451 U.S. 454, 68 L. Ed. 2d 359, 101 S. Ct. 1866 (1981), the Court held a defendant is entitled to the Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination in the punishment phase of a bifurcated trial of a capital case, declaring, “We can discern no basis to distinguish between the guilt and penalty phase of respondent’s capital murder trial so far as the protection of the Fifth Amendment privilege is concerned.” Id. at 462-63 (footnoted omitted). The Supreme Court has not held directly that a no adverse inference instruction is required in the enhancement phase of a bifurcated persistent felony offender proceeding. It can be argued that Estelle v. Smith should be applied only to the punishment phase of capital cases, in view of the emphasis the Court placed on that feature of the case: “Given the gravity of the decision to be made at the penalty phase, the State is not relieved of the obligation to observe fundamental constitutional guarantees.” 451 U.S. at 463 (citations omitted). We do not believe this emphasis is significant. . . .

Finney, 751 F.2d at 863.
22 134 S. Ct. at 1702, n.2.
presented. Of course, as any law student knows after a few weeks in school, the “holding” of a case can be stated in rather general or very specific terms. In the extreme case, so many facts are incorporated in the holding that virtually any deviation from those particular facts prevents the case from being binding precedent. That appears to be the route taken by the Supreme Court in the habeas context when determining that the law based on which relief was granted was not in fact “clearly established.” Reliance on general principles of constitutional law drawn from Supreme Court precedents, or, even worse, on interpretation of those precedents by the circuits themselves, is condemned as departing from the highly deferential standard of review required by AEDPA.

In seven of the summary reversals in recent terms, three involving death sentences and two sentences of life imprisonment, the per curiam opinions focused primarily on the lack of clearly established law to support the grant of habeas relief. In its brief opinion reversing the grant of relief to a petitioner serving life imprisonment for rape, the Court reiterated three separate times that “no decision of this Court” clearly established the principle on which the Ninth Circuit had relied. At issue was the Nevada trial court’s refusal to allow the defense to introduce evidence that the victim, defendant’s former girlfriend, had made several previous reports claiming that defendant raped or assaulted her, claims the police were unable to corroborate, thereby depriving him of his federal constitutional right to present a complete defense. According to the Supreme Court, the circuit court had made the mistake of describing its precedents establishing the right to present a defense too generally: “By framing our precedents at such a high level of generality, a lower federal court could transform even the most imaginative extension of existing case law into ‘clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court.’ 28 U.S.C. §2254(d)(1).”

The Nevada courts had asserted that the defendant could not rely on a Nevada statute that explicitly granted defendants in sexual abuse cases the right to present extrinsic evidence of false allegations because he had not filed the written notice required by the statute. The Supreme Court declared: “No decision of this Court clearly establishes that this notice requirement is unconstitutional.” In response to the Ninth Circuit’s conclusion that such a notice requirement is subject to examination as to whether it serves legitimate state interests, the Court proclaimed: “Nor … do our cases clearly establish that the Constitution requires a case-by-case balancing of interests before such a rule can be enforced.” The Court concluded: “No decision of this Court clearly establishes that the exclusion of such evidence for such reasons in a particular case

23 Judges working within the common law tradition of stare decisis are well versed in how to characterize prior cases from which they want to deviate. A common formulation is to describe the pesky precedent as “best understood in the context of its facts.” See Ursula Bentele, “Chief Justice Rehnquist, the Eighth Amendment, and the Role of Precedent,” 28 American Criminal Law Review 267, 290 (1991) (Rehnquist was referring to Witherspoon v. Illinois, 391 U.S. 510 (1968), which had announced a strict rule about when jurors could be excluded from capital trials based on their death penalty views. Wainwright v. Witt, 469 U.S. 412 (1985)).
25 Id. at 1991.
26 Id. at 1994.
27 Id. at 1993.
28 Id. The Court described the decision on which the Ninth Circuit relied, Michigan v. Lucas, 500 U.S. 145 (1991), as “very far afield.” Id. Again, any intelligent second-semester law student could make a cogent argument to the contrary.
violates the Constitution.” Of course, if that kind of specificity regarding the holding of precedents is required, habeas petitioners will virtually never be entitled to relief.

Similarly confining habeas relief to cases in which the Supreme Court had faced essentially identical facts, the Court reversed the Sixth Circuit’s holding that the prosecutor’s closing argument in a capital case deprived the defendant of due process. Conceding that part of the summation did appear improperly to allege collusion between the defendant and counsel, the Court was not persuaded that his suggestion that the defendant tailored his testimony justified the grant of relief: “The Sixth Circuit cited no precedent of this Court in support of its conclusion that due process prohibits a prosecutor from emphasizing a criminal defendant’s motive to exaggerate exculpatory facts.” Again, habeas relief seems to be authorized only when the Supreme Court has decided a case on all fours with the petitioner’s.

In addition to granting relief without the requisite Supreme Court precedent, the Sixth Circuit also committed error in consulting its own precedents, rather than those of the Supreme Court. Rejecting the argument that the circuit court was simply considering those cases to shed light on what law had been clearly established by the Supreme Court, the Court noted that the general standard regarding prosecutorial misconduct set forth in its key precedent, Darden v. Wainwright, did not support the more specific tests suggested by the circuit court cases cited. Accordingly, the Court granted the warden’s petition for writ of certiorari and reversed the circuit court’s decision granting habeas relief.

A third summary reversal illustrates the same pattern. At the first trial of Irving Cross, the complaining witness had described a forcible assault, while the defendant claimed a consensual sexual encounter in exchange for money and drugs. The jury found the defendant not guilty of kidnapping, but when it was unable to reach a verdict on the sexual assault count, the court declared a mistrial. At the retrial, the complainant could not be located and, over defense objection, her prior testimony was read by a legal intern from the State’s attorney’s office upon a finding that the prosecution had made sufficient efforts to secure her presence. The jury acquitted Cross of aggravated sexual assault, but found him guilty of criminal sexual assault, and the Illinois appellate courts affirmed. The Seventh Circuit granted habeas relief (reversing the district court), on the basis that the Illinois courts were unreasonable in finding the State’s efforts to secure the complainant’s testimony to be sufficient. In finding that the efforts did not meet constitutional standards, given the importance of the witness’s testimony, the court relied in part on the fact that the trial judge had described the witness’s testimony at the first trial as halting.

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29 Id. at 1994.
31 Id. at 2154.
32 Id. at 2155.
34 Parker v. Matthews, 132 S. Ct. at 2155.
35 The case was remanded for further proceedings, but as of this writing, no additional decision has been forthcoming.
37 Id. at 492-93.
while the intern read the testimony without the pauses.\textsuperscript{38} Regarding her unavailability, in addition to suggesting various avenues the State might have pursued to find the witness, the court noted that the prosecution failed to serve her with a subpoena after she had expressed concern about testifying at the retrial. The Supreme Court responded to that assertion as follows: “We have never held that the prosecution must have issued a subpoena if it wishes to prove that a witness who goes into hiding is unavailable for Confrontation Clause purposes . . . .”\textsuperscript{39} If that kind of specificity is required in the prior holdings of Supreme Court cases, habeas relief will indeed be limited to cases that duplicate the facts in those precedents.

Two other summary reversals in which circuit courts had granted relief to death row inmates also relied on the absence of “clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court.” The Sixth Circuit had found a Fifth Amendment violation when the police persuaded the defendant to cut a deal before his accomplice did so. The Supreme Court responded: “Because no holding of this Court suggests, much less clearly establishes, that police may not urge a suspect to confess before another suspect does so, the Sixth Circuit had no authority to issue the writ on this ground.”\textsuperscript{40} Articulating a similarly narrow description of what previous high court precedents must hold, the Court reversed the Fifth Circuit’s grant of relief on a \textit{Batson} claim: “In holding that respondent is entitled to a new trial, the Court of Appeals cited two decisions of this Court, \textit{Batson} and \textit{Snyder}, but neither of these cases held that a demeanor-based explanation for a peremptory challenge must be rejected unless the judge personally observed and recalls the relevant aspect of the prospective juror’s demeanor.”\textsuperscript{41} Again, requiring such a fact-specific holding in a Supreme Court case before habeas relief is warranted limits state prisoners to swiss-cheese-like constitutional protections with major holes wherever the Court has not yet confronted the fact pattern presented by the petitioner.

Finally, the pattern continues in the current term. On the first day, the Court summarily reversed, in a per curiam opinion, the grant of habeas to a defendant convicted of murdering his wife when the prosecution asserted throughout the trial that he had committed the killing himself, but after all the evidence was in, requested an aiding and abetting charge.\textsuperscript{42} The jury, instructed on both theories, found the defendant guilty without specifying which theory it found to have been proven. The Court justified its reversal both on the ground that the California courts’ affirmance of the conviction did not contravene clearly established Supreme Court law and that the circuit court had committed error in relying on its own precedents.

On the issue of how “clearly” the law must be established, the Court defined the principle at issue in the narrowest possible terms:

“… the Ninth Circuit’s grant of habeas relief may be affirmed only if this Court’s cases clearly establish that a defendant, once adequately apprised of such a possibility, can nevertheless be deprived of adequate notice by a prosecutorial

\textsuperscript{38} See Cross v. Hardy, 632 F.3d 356, 362 (7th Cir. 2011) (“A.S.’s testimony at the first trial was pause-filled and evasive, which may have adversely affected the jury’s impression of her, as is perhaps demonstrated by the verdict of not guilty on the kidnapping count and the lack of a verdict on the sexual assault counts.”)
\textsuperscript{39} Hardy v. Cross, 132 S. Ct. at 494.
\textsuperscript{40} Bobby v. Dixon, 132 S. Ct. 26, 30 (2011).
\textsuperscript{42} Lopez v. Smith, 135 S. Ct. 1 (2014), reversing Smith v. Lopez, 731 F.3d 859 (9th Cir. 2013).
decision to focus on another theory of liability at trial. The Ninth Circuit pointed to no case of ours holding as much. Instead, the Court of Appeals cited three older cases that stand for nothing more than the general proposition that a defendant must have adequate notice of the charges against him. [citations omitted]. This proposition is far too abstract to establish clearly the specific rule respondent needs. We have before cautioned the lower courts – and the Ninth Circuit in particular – against “framing our precedents at such a high level of generality.” *Nevada v. Jackson*, 569 U. S. ___, __ (2013) (per curiam) (slip op., at 7). None of our decisions that the Ninth Circuit cited addresses, even remotely, the specific question presented by this case.”

As in the cases discussed above, the Court seems to require a precedent with a fact pattern virtually on all fours to warrant federal habeas relief.

Similarly, the Court found fault with the circuit’s citation to its own precedent, refusing to accept the lower court’s assertion that the previous case had simply applied principles that had been established by the Supreme Court:

“The Ninth Circuit did not purport to identify any case in which we have found notice constitutionally inadequate because, although the defendant was initially adequately apprised of the offense against him, the prosecutor focused at trial on one potential theory of liability at the expense of another. Rather, it found the instant case to be ‘indistinguishable from’ the Ninth Circuit’s own decision in *Sheppard v. Rees*, 909 F.2d 1234 (1989), which the court thought ‘faithfully applied the principles enunciated by the Supreme Court.’ 731 F.3d, at 868.”

Apparently disagreeing with the circuit court’s assessment that it was in fact applying clearly established Supreme Court law, the Court summarily reversed the decision granting habeas relief.

Another recent case, again from the Ninth Circuit, continued in the same vein. Habeas relief had been denied by the district court and a panel of the circuit, but the en banc court reversed in a decision that was, in turn, reversed summarily by the Supreme Court. 43 At trial, the defendant, charged with participating in robberies with two associates, had relied on a defense of duress. Before summation, his attorney asked to be able to argue both that the state had not proven that his client was an accomplice and, in the alternative, that he had acted under duress. The trial court ruled that, under state law, a defendant was prohibited from simultaneously contesting an element of the crime and raising an affirmative defense. The state appellate court agreed that the trial court’s decision was in error, but ruled the error harmless. On federal habeas, the en banc court deemed the mistake to constitute structural error, the kind of error that is not subject to harmless error analysis. The Supreme Court declared this ruling not to have been clearly established, noting that most constitutional errors call for reversal only if the government fails to show harmlessness, with only a rare type of error requiring automatic reversal: “None of our

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cases clearly requires placing improper restriction of closing argument in this narrow category.”

In addition to interpreting the relevant Supreme Court precedent too broadly, the circuit had also cited to precedents from its own circuit. Again declining to accept that the court referred to these decisions simply to shed light on what law had been clearly established by the Supreme Court, the Court reminded the circuit that, as “we have repeatedly emphasized,” circuit court precedent does not satisfy AEDPA’s clearly established law requirement.

These per curiam, summary decisions by the Supreme Court send a strong message to lower federal courts considering granting habeas relief to a state prisoner. That message is obviously most explicit when the Court directly orders habeas relief to be denied. In most cases, however, the Court remands to the circuit court for further proceedings consistent with the per curiam opinion. Such remands generally, but not always, result in denial of habeas relief. In addition, the Court with some frequency issues orders granting certiorari, vacating, and remanding (gvr) for reconsideration in light of decisions that have some bearing on the opinion below. In those cases, too, the lower courts most often “get the hint” and issue an opinion in keeping with the Court’s restrictive view of the availability of habeas relief under AEDPA. Finally, even without an order from the Court, some circuits, presumably gleaning an implicit threat of summary reversal, have sua sponte changed outcomes in cases previously granting relief, citing to recent Supreme Court opinions. The pronounced ripple effect of the Court’s admonition that circuit

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44 Id. at 430-31.
45 Id. at 431. The Court seemed to find determinative that the precedents did not arise under AEDPA; it did not explain why that fact should be conclusive on the issue of what law the Supreme Court had “clearly established.”
46 Id. at. 431-32.
47 To further complicate matters, the message may be strong, but not entirely clear. As one scholar has pointed out, use of the summary reversal has the potential of muddying up “clearly established law.” See William Baude, Is the Supreme Court Rethinking its Summary Reversal in Martinez v. Illinois, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/07/21/is-the-supreme-court-rethinking-its-summary-reversal-in-martinez-v-illinois/.
48 Indeed, in one recent case, the Court at first stated that habeas relief should be denied despite an open issue on which the circuit court had never ruled. Johnson v. Williams, 133 S. Ct. 1088, 1092 (2013). Then, alerted by two circuit judges pointing out the error, the Court issued a per curiam decision remanding for consideration of that claim under the proper standard. See Johnson v. Williams, 134 S. Ct. 2659 (2014), vacating Williams v. Johnson, 720 F.3d 1212 (9th Cir. 2013). Judges Reinhardt and Kozinski concurred in denial of the habeas petition but expressed concern about the Court’s previous opinion. Id. at 1212, 1214.
49 See, e.g., Parker v. Matthews, 132 S. Ct. at 2155 (“The petition for a writ of certiorari and respondent’s motion to proceed in forma pauperis are granted. The judgment of the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit is reversed, and the case is remanded for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.”)
50 See discussion below at nn. 62-78.
52 See, e.g., Moore v. Helling, 763 F.3d 1011 (9th Cir. 2014). The original opinion granting habeas was withdrawn (Warden had petitioned for rehearing) in light of intervening decision in White v. Woodall, which made clear that relief may not be based on a state court’s unreasonable refusal to extend a rule set forth by Supreme Court
courts are prohibited from playing any role in developing principles of constitutional law in the context of assessing state court decisions under AEDPA means that state prisoners throughout the country must be satisfied with Constitution lite.

No fairminded jurist

The Supreme Court’s insistence that, before any federal court, including the Court itself, is authorized to grant habeas relief to a state prisoner, the law governing the claim must have been clearly established by the high court in the factual context in which the petitioner presents it poses a significant constraint. That limitation has been magnified exponentially by the Court’s recent redefinition of the meaning of the term “unreasonable application.” In cases where the state court adjudicated the federal constitutional claim on the merits, comprising the vast majority of federal habeas petitions, the federal court is precluded from granting the writ unless the state court’s decision was “contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States…” § 2254(d)(1). Particularly given that even so-called postcard denials of relief, that is those in which the state court provides no reasons whatever, are deemed to be on the merits, it is not surprising that state decisions will rarely be challengeable as “contrary to” clearly established law. Most cases, therefore, will fall under the “unreasonable application” clause.

That clause was first interpreted in Williams v. Taylor, where, with Justice O’Connor writing the controlling opinion, the Court emphasized that the petitioner must show something more than that the state court’s decision was erroneous; rather, the decision must have been “objectively unreasonable.” The Court firmly rejected, however, the position taken by some circuits that, to be unreasonable, the challenged state court decision had to be one that no reasonable jurist could make. Yet eleven years later, in Harrington v. Richter, without so much as acknowledging its about-face, the Court adopted just that interpretation. State prisoners whose claims were precedent. The court explained that when petitioner’s conviction became final, fairminded jurists could conclude that the Supreme Court had not yet clearly established that an ameliorative change in state law must be applied retroactively to cases pending on appeal. See also Rivera v. Cuomo, 664 F.3d 20 (2d Cir. 2011) (panel decision granting habeas on ground of insufficiency of the evidence reversed on rehearing based on summary reversal in Cavazos v. Smith reasserting the “double deference” due to state court decisions raising such a claim.)

53 The most common scenario where a state court does not reach the merits involves reliance on the defendant’s failure to follow a state procedural rule, thereby defaulting the claim. Under such circumstances, the habeas petitioner is not entitled to federal review at all without demonstrating either “cause and prejudice” or actual innocence. Fortunate petitioners who can overcome that high bar may then be granted de novo review. See n. 5, supra.

56 Id. at 409.
57 Id.
59 Justice Kennedy’s opinion cites to Williams only generally as distinguishing between an unreasonable application and an incorrect application. Harrington v. Richter, 131 S. Ct. at 785. Without explanation, the opinion goes on to assert that federal habeas relief is precluded so long as “fairminded jurists could disagree” on the correctness of the state court’s decision, citing Yarborough v. Alvarado, 541 U.S. 652, 664 (2004). In that 5 to 4 decision, again without any reference to the discussion in Williams, the majority introduced the idea of the fairminded jurist as the appropriate standard for determining whether a state court decision was unreasonable. Scholarship supporting the Court’s restrictive interpretation of AEDPA similarly ignores the initial interpretation of the AEDPA language in
adjudicated on the merits by state courts are now barred from federal relief unless there is “no possibility fairminded jurists could disagree that the state court’s decision conflicts with this Court’s precedents.”60 A number of the summary per curiam opinions have explicitly relied on this standard in reversing the circuit courts’ grants of habeas relief, at times placing an additional gloss on the meaning of “unreasonable application.” Quoting the Richter standard in the first paragraph of its opinion reinstating a death sentence, for example, the Court asserted: “Because it is not clear that the Ohio Supreme Court erred at all, much less erred so transparently that no fairminded jurist could agree with that court’s decision, the Sixth Circuit’s judgment must be reversed.”61 The notion that an error must be “transparent” appears to be a new, and exacting, requirement.

Application of the “no fairminded jurist” standard has led to some puzzling results. In two cases in which the Supreme Court had summarily reversed the grant of habeas but sent the case back to the circuit for further consideration, habeas relief was again affirmed, each time over the dissent of a member of the panel. Despite what appeared to be the opinion of a presumptively fairminded judge, the Supreme Court this time denied certiorari review to the wardens. Examination of these opinions reveals the extent to which the writ has been both marginalized and made dependent on the subjective views of the particular judges who happen to sit on the panel reviewing the case. These results are particularly ironic given that the standard was originally touted as suggesting that relief would be based on “objective” unreasonableness.

In one of the cases in which the Supreme Court summarily reversed the grant of habeas to a death row inmate by the Third Circuit, the Court remanded for exploration of an issue on which the state court might have relied.62 According to the Court, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court may have concluded that a report that had been withheld was “ambiguous” in denying petitioner’s Brady claim. Having been chided for failing to acknowledge and address the state courts’ possible reliance on the ambiguous nature of the withheld report, the Third Circuit on remand explicitly addressed that purported conclusion.63 Even granting AEDPA deference, the majority found the state court’s characterization of the police report as ambiguous to be an unreasonable determination of the facts, as well as an unreasonable application of clearly established law.64 Accordingly, this Pennsylvania death row inmate’s life was spared.

Dissenting Judge Hardiman, on the other hand, conceding that finding ambiguity was not the most natural reading of the report, asserted that the state court’s decision had enough support to preclude federal habeas relief: “If we exercised de novo review of the state court decision, it would seem that the best reading of the activity sheet is that it relates to the . . . robbery [with


60 Harrington v. Richter, 131 S. Ct. at 786.


62 Wetzel v. Lambert, 132 S. Ct. 1195, 1198 (2012) (The “Third Circuit overlooked the determination of the state courts that the notations were . . . ‘entirely ambiguous.’”)


64 Id.
which petitioner was charged]. But under AEDPA’s highly deferential standard of review, ‘even a strong case for relief does not mean the state court’s contrary conclusion was unreasonable.’ Harrington, 131 S. Ct. at 786 (citation omitted). The dissenting judge further cited to the earlier Supreme Court case of Yarborough v. Alvarado for the proposition that habeas relief is precluded as long as the state court decision was “within the matrix” of the custody test for Miranda purposes as articulated by the Court. Finally, the judge stressed the reach of the standard set forth in Harrington v. Richter, supplying emphasis to the word “possibility”: “The Court has repeatedly reminded the lower federal courts that AEDPA precludes relief unless the state court’s ruling was error ‘beyond any possibility of fairminded disagreement,’ Harrington, 131 S. Ct. at 787 (emphasis added).” In a footnote to this interpretation of the standard, Judge Hardiman cited to a previous dissent in which he had collected all the cases in which the Supreme Court had reversed lower courts for failure to heed this admonition.

Another case illustrates the same point. Habeas relief that had been granted by the Sixth Circuit was vacated and remanded in light of Parker v. Matthews, one of the summary reversals being considered here. Unlike in most cases, when such a remand results in the court toeing the line articulated by the Supreme Court, the lower court again found relief warranted, with one judge dissenting. The circuit court acknowledged that its first decision had relied, improperly as the Supreme Court made clear in Parker v. Matthews, on its own precedent in evaluating the prejudice suffered by the defendant by his attorney’s deficient performance. On remand, the court reexamined the case using only the Strickland standard itself and concluded that the Michigan court both failed to apply the correct rule and, even if it stated the rule correctly, the result was an unreasonable application of federal law. By contrast, the dissenting judge did not find the Michigan court’s decision to be “objectively unreasonable; fairminded jurists could (and did) disagree on this point.”

The same pattern is reflected in another recent case, although it is too soon to know whether the Supreme Court will allow the Eleventh Circuit’s grant of habeas relief to vacate an Alabama death sentence to stand. Here, too, a dissenting judge, praised by one of the judges ruling in the petitioner’s favor as a “nationally known and admired judge,” criticizes his colleagues as

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65 Id. at 89.  
67 Id. at 665.  
68 Id. at 90.  
69 Id. at n. 2, citing Garrus v. Sec’y of Pa. Dep’t of Corrs., 694, 412-14 & nn. 1-3 (3d Cir. 2012). Judge Raggi of the Second Circuit provided a similar list in an opinion dissenting from a grant of habeas relief. Young v. Conway, 715 F.3d 79, 87 n.1 (2d Cir. 2013) (Raggi, J., dissenting).  
73 Walker v. McQuiggan, 656 F.3d at 321 (citing Sixth Circuit precedent for the proposition that “a defendant suffers prejudice when he is deprived of a ‘substantial defense’ by the deficient performance of his counsel.”).  
75 Id. at 418 (Cook, J., dissenting).  
76 See DeBruce v. Commissioner, Ala. Dept. of Corrections, 758 F.3d 1263 (11th Cir. 2014). The decision was rendered on July 15, 2014; petition for certiorari filed on January 8, 2015; response due February 11, 2015 (No. 14-807, Kim T. Thomas, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Corrections, Petitioner v. Derrick Anthony DeBruce).  
77 DeBruce v. Commissioner, Ala. Dept. of Corrections, 758 F.3d 1263, 1279 (11th Cir. 2014) (Martin, J., conc.).
failing to heed the requirement that the state court’s application of Strickland be “objectively unreasonable.” 78 It is difficult to square the disagreement of a jurist acknowledged to be fairminded with the grant of habeas relief applying the “fairminded jurist” standard.

The new fairminded jurist standard poses a particular analytical challenge in the context of claims that the evidence was insufficient to support a conviction. Such claims require a defendant to demonstrate that “no rational trier of fact” could have agreed with the jury’s finding of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. 79 To secure habeas relief on that basis, in addition to making that showing, a petitioner must now show that a state court’s decision rejecting the sufficiency of the evidence claim was such that “no fairminded jurist” could agree with it. As the Supreme Court noted in one of its per curiam summary reversals, over the objection of three dissenting justices, “[b]ecause rational people can sometimes disagree, the inevitable consequence of this settled law is that judges will sometimes encounter convictions that they believe to be mistaken, but that they must nonetheless uphold.” 80 Yet in this context, several presumably fairminded jurists (including three justices of the Supreme Court) found the evidence so lacking that no rational factfinder could arrive at a verdict of guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

The case that prompted the Court’s admonition that mistaken convictions must sometimes be upheld involved Shirley Rhee Smith, a grandmother convicted of killing her seven-week-old grandchild based on questionable evidence that he had died of “shaken baby syndrome.” 81 The case had a long and complicated history in the state and federal courts, including three trips to the United States Supreme Court. When the Ninth Circuit first granted habeas relief, 82 the Supreme Court vacated and remanded 83 in light of the recently decided Carey v. Musladin, which, as described above, had narrowed the meaning of “clearly established law” in § 2254(d)(1). The Court of Appeals reinstated its grant of relief on the grounds that, unlike the situation in Musladin, here, the federal law had been clearly established by the Supreme Court in Jackson v. Virginia. The court acknowledged that the high court had not confronted the same factual scenario presented by the petitioner, but refused to accept that AEDPA could be interpreted to limit habeas relief to cases in which the Court had decided an identical case. 84 When the Warden sought rehearing en banc in light of another Supreme Court case applying the

78 Id. at 1280 (Tjoflat, J., dissenting in part).
81 Id.
82 Smith v. Mitchell, 437 F.3d 884, 885 (9th Cir. 2006) (“We agree with Smith that no rational trier of fact could have found beyond a reasonable doubt that Smith caused the child’s death. We further conclude that the state court’s affirmance of Smith’s conviction constituted an unreasonable application of Jackson v. Virginia, 443 U.S. 307, 319, 99 S. Ct. 2781, 61 L. Ed. 2d 560 (1979), which established the standard for constitutional sufficiency of the evidence. See 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d)(1). We accordingly reverse and remand with instructions to grant the writ.”)
84 Smith v. Patrick, 508 F.3d 1256, 1259 (9th Cir.2007) (“It is true, of course, that the Supreme Court has never had a case where the issue was whether the evidence, expert and otherwise, was constitutionally sufficient to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that a defendant had shaken an infant to death. But there are an infinite number of potential factual scenarios in which the evidence may be insufficient to meet constitutional standards. Each scenario theoretically could be construed artfully to constitute a class of one. If there is to be any federal habeas review of constitutional sufficiency of the evidence as required by Jackson, however, section 2254(d)(1) cannot be interpreted to require a Supreme Court decision to be factually identical to the case in issue before habeas can be granted on the ground of unreasonable application of Supreme Court precedent.”).
Musladin principle, the Ninth Circuit denied the petition, again finding that the intervening opinion did not affect the grant of relief. The Supreme Court vacated and remanded, citing yet another intervening opinion, McDaniel v. Brown, in which it had granted certiorari to consider the insufficiency standard in the habeas context. And yet again, the Ninth Circuit reinstated its prior opinion. Finally, the Supreme Court summarily reversed the grant of habeas relief, per curiam, over the dissents of three justices.

The per curiam opinion begins by stressing that, under Jackson v. Virginia, it is the responsibility of the jury, not the court, to decide what conclusions should be drawn from evidence. A reviewing court may set aside the jury verdict only if no rational trier of fact could have agreed with the jury’s assessment that the evidence demonstrated the defendant’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Added to this significant hurdle, on habeas review, the federal court may not grant relief simply because it disagrees with the state court’s rejection of the sufficiency claim; rather, the state court decision must be “objectively unreasonable” such that “no fairminded jurist” would agree with it. It is almost impossible even to imagine that no fairminded jurist could agree with a conclusion of twelve jurors that the state court, by hypothesis, refused to reverse as one that “no rational factfinder” would have reached.

In another per curiam opinion, the Supreme Court also summarily reversed a habeas grant on the ground of insufficiency of the evidence, chiding the Third Circuit for failing to afford the respect that the jury and Pennsylvania state courts were due. The federal court had found insufficient evidence that the defendant was an accomplice of the shooter to a deliberate murder; according to the Supreme Court, under the doubly deferential standard, that conclusion could not stand. Accordingly, on remand habeas relief was denied.

Analysis of claims under these multiple layers of abstract standards, most involving some notion of what is “reasonable,” not only requires mind-numbing logical gymnastics, but fails to achieve results that can in any meaningful way be termed “objective.” First, the Jackson standard itself suggests that presumably reasonable jurors may arrive, unanimously, at a verdict that “no

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86 Smith v. Patrick, 519 F.3d 900, 901 (9th Cir.2008) (For the same reason that we determined that Musladin did not affect our decision in Smith, we conclude that Van Patten does not, either. Van Patten addresses an entire class of cases under the Supreme Court’s jurisprudence applying the standards set by Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668, 104 S. Ct. 2052, 80 L. Ed. 2d 674 (1984), for ineffective assistance of counsel. Whether appearance of counsel by telephone is structural error is an issue “for another day” that the Supreme Court may address to establish a rule for innumerable cases in the future. See 128 S. Ct. at 747.”)
89 Smith v. Mitchell, 624 F.3d 1235, 1237 (9th Cir.2010) (“We have now examined Brown along with supplemental briefs from the parties addressing its potential effect on Smith’s case. We conclude that nothing in Brown is inconsistent with our prior decision or our method of reaching it. We accordingly reinstate our former decision. . .”).
91 Although she did not secure relief through the courts, Shirley Rhee Smith was ultimately granted a commutation by Governor Jerry Brown. See http://www.propublica.org/article/california-governor-commutes-sentence-in-shaken-baby-case.
rational factfinder” could support. To further complicate matters, that conclusion necessarily incorporates the constitutionally mandated burden that guilt must be proven “beyond a reasonable doubt.”

Second, trial courts routinely deny defense counsel’s motion before the case is submitted to the jury asking for dismissal on the basis of insufficiency of the evidence. Overturning a jury’s verdict pursuant to the Jackson standard therefore inherently involves disagreement among fairminded jurists. Accordingly, applying the “fairminded jurist” standard would appear always to preclude the grant of federal habeas relief.

The fairminded jurist standard raises a further issue for courts of appeals considering whether to grant a certificate of appealability to a petitioner who has been denied habeas relief by a district court. Long before Harrington v. Richter, the Supreme Court had set the bar for issuance of such a certificate at a relatively low level. Courts were admonished that they should make only a threshold inquiry into the claim, assessing whether the petitioner has “made a substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right.” Such a showing is made when “jurists of reason could disagree with the district court’s resolution” or conclude the issues presented are worthy of further exploration. In establishing this standard for appellate review, the Court noted specifically that “a claim can be debatable even though every jurist of reason might agree, after the COA has been granted and the case has received full consideration, that petitioner will not prevail.” Once the fairminded jurist test is in place, however, if the issue is debatable among such jurists, no habeas relief will ever be warranted for claims adjudicated on the merits in state courts.

Summary treatment

The Supreme Court’s practice of issuing summary per curiam opinions resolving cases on petitions for certiorari review has long come under strong criticism both within the Court and from academics and practitioners. While the earlier practice of reversing summarily without providing reasons has largely been abandoned, questions have been raised about the lack of transparency and procedural regularity governing summary dispositions. In addition, skeptics wonder whether such reversals are being limited to cases of clear error, and whether there is a substantive bias in the selection of cases to subject to this treatment. Moreover, concern that

95 Indeed, in Cavazos v. Smith, described above, the Magistrate Judge noted that this was not the typical shaken baby case, raising many questions, but found that the evidence was sufficient to a support conviction; the district court adopted this recommendation, but granted a COA on ground that question was debatable. Cavazos v. Smith, 132 S. Ct. at 6, 8.
97 Id.
98 Id. at 338.
99 Failure to give any rationale for summary reversal prompted the initial protests against the practice. See, e.g., Ernest J. Brown, Foreword: Process of Law, 72 HARV. L. REV. 77, 82, 90 (1957).
100 See William Baude, “Foreword: The Supreme Court’s Shadow Docket,” 9 N.Y.U. J. of Law & Liberty 1 (2015). Professor Baude looked at all the Roberts Court’s summary reversals so far, and studied in depth those issued in the 2013-14 term. He describes the reversals as falling into two general categories: those designed to enforce the Supreme Court’s supremacy over recalcitrant circuit courts and those essentially serving an ad hoc function. Id. at 2.
101 See Jonathan Kirshbaum, “Accelerating Pace of Supreme Court’s Summary Reversals of Habeas Relief Suggests Impatience With Circuit Courts’ Failure to Defer to State Tribunals,” 2012 Crim. Law Reporter (6/27/12)
respondents may be unfairly prejudiced when the merits of claims are adjudicated on petitions for writ of certiorari continues to be voiced.

Several of the opinions being considered here illustrate the problems of such summary reversals. In her dissent from the summary reversal in *Cavazos v. Smith*, 102 joined by two other members of the Court, Justice Ginsburg specifically chastised the Court for its failure to allow for full briefing and argument. "The fact-intensive character of the case calls for attentive review of the record, including a trial transcript that runs over 1,500 pages. Careful inspection of the record would be aided by the adversarial presentation that full briefing and argument afford." 103 Justice Ginsburg cited to two highly respected treatises in support of her objection to the summary treatment of the case. The classic treatise on Supreme Court practice 104 characterizes per curiam opinions such as those discussed in this article, in which the Court grants certiorari and, at the same time, disposes of the merits, addressing both facts and issues in detail, as the "most controversial form of summary disposition..." 105 The authors note that the justices themselves characterized summary reversals as "rare and exceptional," appropriate "only when law is well settled, facts are undisputed, and decision below is clearly wrong." 106 According to Justice Brennan, summary dispositions should be limited to situations where the decision below flatly rejected the Court’s controlling authority. If even one justice disagreed, the case should be set for briefing and argument. 107 In addition, the authors describe the problems posed for counsel, particularly for respondents, by the use of summary reversals, in light of the fact that lawyers are told not to focus on briefing the merits of the issue when seeking or opposing certiorari review. 108

Summary reversal seems particularly questionable when, as in Shirley Rhee Smith’s case and the capital case involving James Lambert described above, 109 several justices of the Supreme Court dissent from the disposition. If indeed the practice is meant for cases in which the law and facts are undisputed and the decision below is clearly wrong, even one dissenting opinion, much less three, would suggest that, at the very least, full briefing and argument is in order. Moreover, the lack of any written dissent does not, in and of itself, demonstrate that summary treatment is proper. Several of the unanimous summary reversals presented both factual and legal issues that

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103 Id.
104 Gressman, Geller, Shapiro, Bishop, & Hartnett, Supreme Court Practice (now in its 10th edition) is "regarded as a sufficiently authoritative resource on all things related to the Court that it is cited not only by lawyers who argue there but also by the Justices themselves." Tom Goldstein and Amy Howe, Book review: New edition for a classic treatise, SCOTUSblog (Jan. 28, 2014, 7:00 PM), http://www.scotusblog.com/2014/01/book-review-new-edition-for-a-classic-treatise/.
105 Gressman, Geller, Shapiro, Bishop, & Hartnett, Supreme Court Practice (9th edition), Ch. 5(12)(c).
106 Id., quoting Justices Marshall and Stevens. The other treatise cited by Justice Ginsburg, Fallon, Manning, Meltzer, & Shapiro, Hart and Wechsler’s The Federal Courts and the Federal System (6th edition 2009), also cites to justices in its critique of summary reversals, adding that some justices complained that they were more likely to be granted in favor of the government than an individual claiming violation of constitutional rights. Id. at 1479.
108 Gressman, et al, Supreme Court Practice, supra note 104, at Ch. 6.12(c), n. 46.
109 See text supra at nn. 62-69.
seemed worthy of full consideration by the Court. In *Felkner v. Jackson*, for example, the Ninth Circuit had granted relief on a *Batson* claim, finding that the prosecutor’s proffered race-neutral bases were not sufficient to counter evidence of purposeful discrimination, given that two of three black jurors were stricken and the record reflected different treatment of comparably situated white jurors. Such claims are by their nature fact-sensitive, and adherence to the prohibition against use of peremptory challenges on the basis of race has by no means been universally accepted. Yet the Supreme Court summarily reversed the circuit court’s determination: “That decision is as inexplicable as it is unexplained. It is reversed.” Noting the deference due to trial judge’s assessment of a prosecutor’s credibility, to which AEDPA adds another level of deference, the Court announced: “The state appellate court’s decision was plainly not unreasonable. There was simply no basis for the Ninth Circuit to reach the opposite conclusion, particularly in such a dismissive manner.”

The panel of the Ninth Circuit that did reach this conclusion surely will consider the Supreme Court’s summary reversal of its decision to have been reached in a similarly “dismissive manner.” As will the Sixth Circuit, whose decision that a defendant facing a death sentence did not receive effective assistance at sentencing phase was summarily reversed, with the conclusory statement: “Because we think it clear that Van Hook’s attorneys met the constitutional minimum of competence under the correct standard, we grant the petition and reverse.” The circuit court was deemed particularly at fault for relying on the 2003 ABA guidelines for the defense of capital cases, a point that prompted Justice Alito to write a separate concurrence to make clear that the opinion in no way suggests that those guidelines have special relevance. Admonishing the circuit court for relying on the well-established guidelines for the representation of defendants in capital cases seems particularly unseemly without allowing full briefing or oral argument on the issue.

**Tone**

As the previous sections have shown, these per curiam summary reversals reveal a pattern of limiting the federal habeas petitioner’s opportunity to secure relief based on constitutional violations in state court. The petitioner must be able to point to “clearly established law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States,” which has been limited to narrowly defined holdings of the Court; no reference should be made to any circuit court rulings; then it must be demonstrated that “no fairminded jurist” would agree with the state court’s determination that his constitutional rights were not violated. Moreover, all this must be accomplished in the context of responding to a petition for certiorari by the Warden, without the opportunity for full briefing and argument. One additional characteristic of these opinions is noteworthy: their tone. The Court strikes an attitude of lecturing and dismissiveness, suggesting that the circuit courts need to be taught a lesson, that they should know better. Indeed, as one

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111 See, e.g., *Miller-El v. Cockrell*, 537 U.S. at 335.
112 131 S. Ct. at 1307.
113 Id.
115 Id. at 13-14 (Alito, J., concurring).
The commentator has noted, the Court’s summary reversals can be seen as a non-too-subtle threat to any federal court considering granting habeas relief. Even if not designed to send such warnings, the language used by the Court in describing opinions granting relief certainly conveys a message any objective reader would find insulting.

The Supreme Court’s attitude is well illustrated by the first paragraph of one of the summary reversals in a case in which the defendant had been sentenced to death:

In this habeas case, the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit set aside two 29-year-old murder convictions based on the flimsiest of rationales. The court’s decision is a textbook example of what the AEDPA proscribes: “using federal habeas corpus review as a vehicle to second-guess the reasonable decisions of state courts.” 

The Supreme Court’s derogatory assessment of the Sixth Circuit’s opinion is particularly striking in light of the Court’s own curious evaluation of the evidence regarding extreme emotional disturbance, the issue on which the circuit had found the Kentucky courts to have improperly shifted the burden to the defense. Noting that the defense expert admitted that many people suffer from adjustment disorders, the Court commented: “But of course very few people commit murders.” The Court thereby suggested that it is the murder for which there must be a reasonable explanation or excuse, while any competent first year criminal law student would understand that the requirement of a reasonable explanation applies to the emotional disturbance, not to the killing.

In the same opinion, the Court chastised the circuit court for relying on its own precedents, rather than limiting consideration to Supreme Court case law. Beginning with a phrase that appears regularly in these summary reversals: “To make matters worse, the Sixth Circuit decided [the prior case] under pre-AEDPA law …, so that case did not even purport to reflect clearly established law as set out in this Court’s holdings. It was plain and repetitive error for the Sixth Circuit to rely on its own precedents in granting Matthews habeas relief.” Why reliance on a pre-AEDPA case would “make matters worse” is by no means clear; surely a circuit court could render an opinion stating well-established principles of constitutional law rooted in Supreme Court precedents at any time.

The Court’s reversal of habeas relief granted to a death row inmate by the Sixth Circuit contained similarly querulous language: “Because it is not clear that the Ohio Supreme Court erred at all, much less erred so transparently that no fairminded jurist could agree with that court’s decision, the Sixth Circuit’s judgment must be reversed.”

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116 See Jonathan M. Kirshbaum, “Accelerating Pace of Supreme Court’s Summary Reversals of Habeas Relief Suggests Impatience With Circuit Courts’ Failure to Defer to State Tribunals,” supra n. 101.
118 Id. at 2153.
119 Id. at 2155-56.
120 See n. 45 supra, describing another case in which the Court made the same point in reversing the Ninth Circuit.
rationale for concluding that the state courts had failed to acknowledge a *Miranda* violation, the Court announced dismissively: “That is plainly wrong.”

The Court used the same phraseology in rejecting the Ninth Circuit’s evaluation of the evidence in Shirley Rhee Smith’s case as insufficient to demonstrate the cause of the child’s death beyond a reasonable doubt: “That conclusion was plainly wrong.” Reminding the circuit that a state appellate court can reverse for insufficiency only if no rational trier of fact could have found the essential elements of the crime; that the reviewing court must presume that jury resolved conflicts in favor of prosecution, and must defer to that resolution; and that AEDPA adds another layer of deference to state court decisions, the Court announced: “[T]here can be no doubt of the Ninth Circuit’s error below.” The Court continued with its tone of absolute certainty, despite the disagreement of three dissenting justices: “In light of the evidence presented at trial, the Ninth Circuit plainly erred in concluding that the jury’s verdict was irrational, let alone that it was unreasonable for the California Court of Appeal to think otherwise.” The final substantive paragraph of the Court’s opinion went beyond finding the circuit to have been mistaken and accused the court of essentially ignoring the Supreme Court’s directives:

“The decision below cannot be allowed to stand. This Court vacated and remanded this judgment twice before, calling the panel’s attention to this Court’s opinions high-lighting the necessity of deference to state courts in §2254(d) habeas cases. Each time the panel persisted in its course, reinstating its judgment without seriously confronting the significance of the cases called to its attention. [citations omitted]. Its refusal to do so necessitates this Court’s action today.”

Justice Ginsburg, dissenting with two other justices, viewed the case as intensely fact-bound and not worthy of certiorari review, and characterized the per curiam opinion as follows: “[T]he Court is bent on rebuking the Ninth Circuit for what it conceives to be defiance of our prior remands. [citation omitted] I would not ignore Smith’s plight and choose her case as a fit opportunity to teach the Ninth Circuit a lesson.”

Criticizing the Ninth Circuit in another case, the Supreme Court, as noted above, focused on the conclusory and dismissive manner in which the circuit treated the state court’s rejection of the petitioner’s *Batson* claim: “The state appellate court’s decision was plainly not unreasonable. There was simply no basis for the Ninth Circuit to reach the opposite conclusion, particularly in such a dismissive manner.” Yet some of the per curiam opinions in which the high court rejected the determinations of circuit court panels appear equally “dismissive,” or at least might be taken that way by the judges who had found violations of state prisoners’ constitutional rights.

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124 Id.
125 Id.
126 Id. at 7.
127 Id. at 12 (Ginsburg, J., dissenting).
128 See text at nn. 110-113.
In summarily reversing the Sixth Circuit’s grant of habeas to a death row inmate even in the absence of AEDPA deference, when the petitioner had filed for relief before that statute was enacted, the Court, without the benefit of full briefing and argument, was able to reject an ineffective assistance of counsel claim: “Because we think it clear that Van Hook’s attorneys met the constitutional minimum of competence under the correct standard, we grant the petition and reverse.”

After describing the gruesome crime in considerable detail, the Court noted that a panel of the circuit had been reversed by the en banc court twice, and then went on to criticize the most recent panel opinion for its reliance on the 2003 ABA guidelines for defense of capital cases, according to the Court, “without even pausing to consider whether they reflected the prevailing professional practice at the time of the trial...” The Court continued: “To make matters worse,” the circuit treated the guidelines as inexorable commands, rather than as guides for what is reasonable, as required by Strickland. To the petitioner’s assertion that his counsel was ineffective even under professional standards of the time, the Court responded curtly. “He is wrong.”

Justice Alito took the opportunity in his concurrence to stress that the Court’s opinion in no way suggests that ABA guidelines have special relevance. “It is the responsibility of the courts to determine the nature of the work that a defense attorney must do in a capital case in order to meet the obligations imposed by the Constitution, and I see no reason why the ABA Guidelines should be given a privileged position in making that determination.” Particularly when a defendant’s life is at stake, one might question whether it is appropriate for the Supreme Court to reach out to scold a court of appeals for relying on well-respected guidelines for the defense of capital cases without even permitting counsel to brief and argue their possible relevance.

The Court’s most recent summary reversal contains the same kind of sharp rebuke. Asserting that the “second rationale for the Court of Appeals’ decision is no more sound than the first,” the Court summarizes the key points in the circuit court’s opinion leading it to the determination that the trial court’s error was structural. The next paragraph begins with a single word: “No.” The Court then goes on to find fault with each aspect of the circuit’s analysis, stressing that “reasonable minds could disagree” with all of the lower court’s conclusions.

**Summary Reversals When Relief Was Denied**

The five per curiam summary reversals of decisions in which the circuit court had denied federal habeas corpus relief during this period convey strikingly different characteristics, both in terms of substance and tone. Four of these cases are essentially reversals based on procedural irregularities, in which the courts had in some way misinterpreted their task in assessing the petitioner’s right to relief. The fifth case, *Porter v. McCollum*, was unanimous in reversing a

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131 Id. at 8.
132 Id.
133 Id. at 14 (Alito, J., concurring).
134 Glebe v. Frost, 135 S. Ct. at 431.
135 Id.
136 See cases listed in Appendix B.
137 In the most recent such case, Johnson v. Williams, 134 S. Ct. 2659 (2014), the Court corrected an error in its previous opinion when it declared that the petitioner was not entitled to relief despite the fact that it had not ruled on
death sentence imposed on a Korean War veteran on the basis that his attorney had provided ineffective assistance at the penalty phase of trial by not informing the jury about the defendant’s post-traumatic stress disorder. As Linda Greenhouse pointed out at the time, the case formed a stark contrast with that of Bobby Van Hook, whose lawyer similarly failed to present extensive mitigating evidence on behalf of that veteran. Because the state court had not decided whether counsel’s performance was deficient, Porter’s claim could be reviewed de novo by the federal court, without the deference due under AEDPA. Bobby Van Hook was not so fortunate: habeas relief granted to that petitioner was summarily reversed.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from examination of these summary reversals is one of a Supreme Court arrogating to itself, through its tiny direct review docket, guardianship of the Constitution as it applies to defendants in state courts, leaving no role for the lower federal courts. From this vantage point, the Court interprets constitutional protections in the narrowest possible terms, using the mechanism of summary reversals to send unmistakable messages to the circuit courts that granting relief based on generous reading of Supreme Court precedents, much less on lower court characterizations of what those precedents might have held, will be set aside without so much as a call for briefing or oral argument. Moreover, to be deemed “generous,” an opinion in a petitioner’s favor simply needs to be one with which any fairminded jurist could disagree. And the Supreme Court’s per curiam opinions are written in a way that signals utter lack of respect for both the petitioners and the courts that found their constitutional claims to be valid. The Great Writ’s protections extend only to Constitution lite.

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139 Id. at 31, 40.
141 See text above at nn. 114-15, 130-133.
Appendix A

Summary reversals of grants of habeas corpus relief, October, 2009 to December, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Case Name</th>
<th>Circuit</th>
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<td>Bobby v. Van Hook, No. 09-144</td>
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<td>(death sentence)</td>
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<td>558 U.S. 4 (2009)</td>
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<td>Nov. 16, 2009</td>
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<td>559 U.S. 43 (2010)</td>
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<td>Mar. 21, 2011</td>
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<td>May 2, 2011</td>
<td>Bobby v. Mitts, No. 10-1000</td>
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<td>Wetzel v. Lambert, No. 11-38</td>
<td>3rd Cir.</td>
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<td>132 S. Ct. 1195 (2012)</td>
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<td>May 29, 2012</td>
<td>Coleman v. Johnson, No. 11-1053</td>
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<td>132 S. Ct. 2148 (2012)</td>
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* This case was briefed and scheduled for oral argument, but shortly before the argument date, it was removed from the calendar without explanation.
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## Appendix B

Summary reversals of denials of habeas corpus relief, October, 2009 to December, 2014

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<td>July 1, 2014</td>
<td>Johnson v. Williams, No. 13-9085</td>
<td>9th Cir.</td>
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