

1 IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

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3 NICHOLAS BRADY HEIEN, :  
4 Petitioner : No. 13-604

5 v. :  
6 NORTH CAROLINA. :  
7 - - - - - x

8 Washington, D.C.

9 Monday, October 6, 2014

10

11 The above-entitled matter came on for oral  
12 argument before the Supreme Court of the United States  
13 at 10:03 a.m.

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22 the Respondent.

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

2 (10:03 a.m.)

3 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Our first case this  
4 morning is Heien v. North Carolina.

5 Mr. Fisher.

6 ORAL ARGUMENT OF JEFFREY L. FISHER  
7 ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONER

8 MR. FISHER: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it  
9 please the Court.

10 In a country dedicated to the rule of law,  
11 governmental officers should be presumed to know the law  
12 at least as well as the citizens are. That being so,  
13 when questions about individualized suspicion arise  
14 under the Fourth Amendment, they should be addressed  
15 against the backdrop of the correct interpretation of  
16 the law, not simply any plausible reading an officer  
17 might have.

18 JUSTICE KENNEDY: So suppose that this  
19 State, North Carolina, did have a good-faith exception  
20 to the exclusionary rule. What would you be arguing  
21 today?

22 MR. FISHER: We would be -- still be  
23 arguing, if that were the case, that not only the Fourth  
24 Amendment was violated, but that the good-faith  
25 exception didn't apply. But you wouldn't have to reach

1       that question in this case, and I -- and I would concede  
2       to you, Justice Kennedy, that would be a debatable  
3       argument under this particular --

4                  JUSTICE KENNEDY:                   Well, why would it be any  
5       more debatable than the argument you're making here?  
6       I -- I -- I've more or less anticipated your -- your --  
7       your answer. I think that has to be -- I -- I think you  
8       have to tell us even if the good-faith exclusionary rule  
9       applies, a mistake of law just doesn't count.

10          MR. FISHER:                   Well, that's not exactly what  
11      this Court's jurisprudence holds, of course. In Krull  
12      and Davis, the Court has held that reasonableness of  
13      mistakes of law can be taken into account at the remedy  
14      stage, and I think that would be --

15          JUSTICE KENNEDY:                   Then -- and then -- but  
16      then that question is why isn't that a problem for you  
17      when you say there cannot be a reasonable mistake of  
18      law? We know there can be.

19          MR. FISHER:                   Well, there's a difference,  
20      Justice Kennedy, between rights and remedies in the  
21      Court's jurisprudence. When you ask the question about  
22      what is reasonable as to whether or not the Fourth  
23      Amendment was violated, both in its Fourth Amendment  
24      jurisprudence in criminal cases and in qualified  
25      immunity cases, you would do that assessment against the

1      correct interpretation of the law.

2            Now, in Leon --

3            JUSTICE KENNEDY:                Well, in connection --  
4      we're talking about whether as a -- as a categorical  
5      matter, as a jurisprudential matter, we can have this  
6      dichotomy known as a reasonable mistake of law, a  
7      difficult and interesting question. But it seems to me  
8      that you have to make the same argument here or in --  
9      in -- in the case where they have a good-faith  
10     exception, as you're making here, and that you have a  
11     problem with Davis and Krull. And if you don't have  
12     a -- if you have a problem with Davis and Krull, then  
13     that undermines your categorical argument.

14            MR. FISHER:                No, I really don't think so,  
15      Justice Kennedy. If -- I think the best exposition of  
16      this problem in the course of jurisprudence is actually  
17      in the Anderson against Creighton case, the qualified  
18      immunity case, where the Court wrestled with this notion  
19      that how can something be reasonable in one sense and  
20      unreasonable in another.

21            And the answer the Court gave is that when  
22      we ask whether the Fourth Amendment was violated, we do  
23      not take mistakes of law into account, but the  
24      reasonableness of a mistake of law can go to the remedy  
25      question. This is the premise from which Leon, Krull,

1 and Davis all derive, which is that there was a Fourth  
2 Amendment --

3 JUSTICE ALITO:                   Would you just submit that  
4 the --

5 JUSTICE GINSBURG:               Mr. Fisher, I have a  
6 preliminary question.

7           Even if you -- you're right about mistake of  
8 law, isn't it a moot question in this case because, as I  
9 understand it, the traffic stop ended with a warning  
10 citation. So the traffic stop was over. And at that  
11 point, the police officer asked if he can inspect the  
12 car, and the answer is yes. Why isn't the consent to  
13 the search the end of this case?

14          MR. FISHER:              Because it would be the fruit  
15 of the poisonous tree, Justice Ginsburg, if the stop was  
16 illegal. There would have never been an opportunity to  
17 ask for consent. And I think that's why the State and  
18 Solicitor General haven't made any argument  
19 that the consent wipes away the Fourth Amendment  
20 question here.

21          JUSTICE ALITO:           Well, suppose the officer  
22 had said, all right, I'm giving you a warning. You're  
23 free to leave now. But by the way, may we -- may I  
24 search your car?

25          MR. FISHER:              I -- I think that's more or

1 less what the officer did say here, Justice Alito.

2 JUSTICE ALITO: And you would say then, even  
3 in that situation, that that would be the fruit of the  
4 poisonous tree?

5 MR. FISHER: Yes. Because the stop wouldn't  
6 have taken place. The -- the Court's cases, Prouse and  
7 all the rest, say that a traffic stop is a seizure. And  
8 so upon pulling Mr. Heien over, the officer needed to  
9 have reasonable suspicion to do so. And the only  
10 argument for reasonable suspicion is the mistake of  
11 North Carolina law as to the brake light in this case.

12 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I understood you to  
13 say earlier that you don't take -- distinguishing the  
14 exclusionary rule in qualified immunity, you don't take  
15 reasonableness into account when it comes to a mistake  
16 of law?

17 MR. FISHER: What -- what I -- I'm sorry,  
18 Mr. Chief Justice. What I -- I think I said is that  
19 you -- you don't take the reasonableness of mistake of  
20 law into account when you ask whether the Fourth  
21 Amendment was violated.

22 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, but the Fourth  
23 Amendment --

24 MR. FISHER: You do sometimes --

25 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I'm sorry, go ahead.

1           MR. FISHER:               Forgive me.

2           You do sometimes when you ask about the  
3 remedy, and that's what he did.

4           CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:       But the -- but the  
5 Fourth Amendment itself protects only against  
6 unreasonable searches and seizures by its term. I don't  
7 understand. It would seem to me that there's a stronger  
8 argument for taking the reasonableness of the officer's  
9 actions into account when you're talking about a mistake  
10 of law, because that's what the Fourth Amendment says,  
11 as opposed to remedies and qualified immunity.

12          MR. FISHER:               Mr. Chief Justice, the Court  
13 rejected that precise argument in Anderson, that textual  
14 argument that the word "reasonableness" means that the  
15 Fourth Amendment incorporates mistakes of law, and  
16 because of a deep common law rule, which is that when we  
17 ask --

18          CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:       If I could just  
19 pause.

20          MR. FISHER:               Yeah.

21          CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:       I thought we said  
22 exactly that in Herring, though, where we said that even  
23 though we're going to look at it in terms of remedy,  
24 that was not to say that the reasonableness didn't go to  
25 whether there was a substantive violation of the Fourth

1       Amendment.

2                    MR. FISHER:                  My understanding of Herring  
3       would be that would be a mistake of fact case, whether  
4       or not there was a warrant outstanding for  
5       Mr. Herant's -- Mr. Herring's arrest would have been a  
6       factual question, not necessarily a legal question.

7                    In Anderson and Krull and Leon -- in Leon,  
8       Mr. Chief Justice, the Court said the officer in that  
9       case acted exactly as a reasonable officer could and  
10      should have acted. And time and again in the Court's  
11      exclusionary rule cases, they've said the officer acted  
12      reasonably because at the reasonableness stage, you can  
13      take into account whether the officer reasonably  
14      misunderstood the law.

15                  CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:            Well, if you put  
16      aside --

17                  MR. FISHER:                    But at the right stage --  
18      forgive me.

19                  CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:            I was just saying,  
20      putting aside our discussion of Prouse and -- and  
21      Herring, why does it make sense to say that you don't  
22      take reasonableness into account when the Fourth  
23      Amendment only protects against unreasonable searches  
24      and seizures?

25                  MR. FISHER:                    I think for three reasons,

1       Mr. Chief Justice. There's a practical reason, a  
2       theoretical reason, and a jurisprudential reason.

3           Now, I'll start with the theory because  
4       that's where I was just describing. The deep common law  
5       heritage in this country that we have always followed,  
6       and the best exposition of that is in the Court's Cheek  
7       case, is that the criminal law is presumed to be  
8       definite and knowable.

9           So in all kinds of settings, whether it be  
10      punishing somebody for violating the law or any other  
11      actions citizens or the government engages in, we always  
12      assume a correct understanding of the law, even if it's  
13      later construed by a court in a way that wasn't exactly  
14      predictable or foreseeable.

15           JUSTICE ALITO:           Isn't it strange that you're  
16      citing Cheek for that proposition? Didn't the Court  
17      hold in Cheek that under the -- in that -- in the  
18      circumstances there, ignorance of the law would be a  
19      defense?

20           MR. FISHER:           Because of a special statutory  
21      exception that Congress had written. The beginning of  
22      part two of Cheek is what I'm relying on, Justice Alito,  
23      where there is a paragraph or two that sets out with  
24      numerous citations this principle Justice Holmes  
25      described, and many others, that the criminal law is

1 presumed to be definite and knowable.

2                 And once you take that presumption and put  
3 it into the police officer's mind, in this case or any  
4 other governmental actor who acts on a mistake of law,  
5 then there is no reasonable suspicion because we  
6 presumed them to have known the law when they acted.

7                 JUSTICE KENNEDY:                  Suppose the officer  
8 stopped the driver here and said, you know, I've been  
9 going to night law school and we don't know about this  
10 one light/two light thing. There's an intermediate  
11 court of appeals that's hearing a case, it sounds like  
12 they're going so say only one light is necessary, but I  
13 don't know what the law is. You better get this fixed.

14                 MR. FISHER:                  Well, I think there's two  
15 questions in there.

16                 JUSTICE KENNEDY:                  And then -- and then he  
17 sees the contraband.

18                 MR. FISHER:                  Pardon me?

19                 JUSTICE ALITO:                  And -- and then he sees  
20 the -- in the course of this conversation, he sees the  
21 contraband.

22                 MR. FISHER:                  Well, I think there's two  
23 questions embedded in there. One is whether the officer  
24 can look to court decisions or other third party sources  
25 to help him do his job. Now, again, that is what the

1 Court has said in the Krull and Davis cases, that you  
2 take into account things like police manuals, court  
3 decisions, and the rest. The Court has embraced that in  
4 its remedy jurisprudence, but in Whren has said that is  
5 off limits as to the Fourth Amendment.

6 Now, I think there's also an element of your  
7 question asking about what if -- all that the officer  
8 was worried about was the safety on the roadway. That  
9 would be a very different case. Again, I'm going to  
10 turn the Court to Whren, where the Court said that if  
11 there's a stop done for reasons aside from probable  
12 cause, then the purpose of that stop, such as the  
13 community caretaking function, might kick in. But of  
14 course the State hasn't made any argument in that  
15 respect in this case because the record is quite clear  
16 the officer was performing a criminal investigation.

17 JUSTICE SCALIA: But Mr. Fisher, we -- we  
18 don't review opinions. We review judgments, we review  
19 results. What you're complaining about here is the  
20 admission of what was discovered in the search of the  
21 car, right?

22 Now, what difference does it make whether  
23 that was lawfully admitted because it was a  
24 constitutional search or it was lawfully admitted  
25 because the remedy of excluding it would not be applied

1 if there was a mistake of law, a reasonable mistake of  
2 law?

3 I mean, the constitutional problem is the  
4 admission of this evidence. And it seems to me whether  
5 it's properly admitted because the Fourth Amendment  
6 wasn't violated or whether it's properly admitted  
7 because the remedy for that violation is not -- is not  
8 exclusion of the evidence, you lose either way, don't  
9 you?

10 MR. FISHER: Well, Justice Scalia, nobody  
11 has addressed the question of remedy in this case  
12 because nobody needs to address the good-faith --

13 JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, we need to if we  
14 find, as you urge us to find, that it violates the  
15 Fourth Amendment to make the search. We would then have  
16 to -- in order to decide whether this judgment is  
17 lawful, we would have to decide whether the remedy of  
18 excluding that evidence has to be applied. And you know  
19 the answer to that --

20 MR. FISHER: Well, with -- forgive me. With  
21 respect, Justice Scalia, I'm not sure the Court needs to  
22 do that. Of course, I think the Court can vacate and  
23 remand the judgment just as it does innumerable other  
24 times where it finds a problem with the lower court  
25 decision and therefore sends it back. Even if this were

1      purely a Federal case, Justice Scalia, I think I'd be  
2      saying the same thing, which is nobody has briefed or  
3      argued the good-faith exception in this case. So you  
4      would need --

5                   JUSTICE SCALIA:                  Well, you have. I mean,  
6      you have and you acknowledge that it applies to  
7      remedies.

8                   MR. FISHER:                        No. No. No. Here's what I've  
9      acknowledged, Justice Scalia. And I guess this is  
10     important. We've acknowledged that the question of  
11     whether the mistake was reasonable would be relevant, if  
12     at all, at the remedy stage.

13                  So what you would do is you'd ask the  
14     question, if this were a Federal case where you had to  
15     reach the question, you'd ask whether the officer's  
16     mistake of law in this case renders suppression  
17     inappropriate.

18                  Now, I would -- I would add that holding  
19     that it did render suppression inappropriate would be an  
20     extension of the Court's current good-faith  
21     jurisprudence, which thus far has held that good-faith  
22     doctrine applies only when an officer relies on binding  
23     law from a third -- from a legislature or a court.

24                  JUSTICE SCALIA:                       So the most you can get  
25     from us is a remand?

1           MR. FISHER:           That's right. But I do think  
2       it's just like any other --

3           JUSTICE SCALIA:       Just let the North Carolina  
4       law -- court decide whether -- whether the remedy of  
5       exclusion should have been --

6           MR. FISHER:           That's right. For example,  
7       Justice Scalia, I'm not sure it's any different if I  
8       said it was a constitutional violation that I may or may  
9       not be entitled to a remedy for under Chapman because  
10      the error was harmless or not. Those are the kinds of  
11      situations where the Court would always resolve the  
12      constitutional question that the lower court addressed  
13      and then send it back down for the question of remedy.  
14      And that's all I --

15          JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:     I don't know why,  
16      following up on what Justice Scalia is saying, he's  
17      saying we don't give you a remedy unless we believe that  
18      one is warranted under the Fourth Amendment. And since  
19      we apply -- it doesn't matter what North Carolina  
20      applies, good faith or not -- what we apply in terms of  
21      determining whether a Federal violation or a  
22      constitutional violation is subject to any type of  
23      remedy for you is the good-faith exception. So why do  
24      we have to remand? I think that's Justice Scalia's  
25      question and I'm not quite sure you've answered it.

1           MR. FISHER:           The reason to remand is because  
2       the lower court hasn't addressed any question of remedy.  
3       And so in the first instance, you should send it back to  
4       the lower court for a full adversarial briefing subject  
5       to waiver and --

6           JUSTICE GINSBURG:       But North Carolina has a  
7       rule, I thought, that if you violate the Fourth  
8       Amendment, that's it. We don't -- we don't have a  
9       good-faith exception.

10          MR. FISHER:           That will be our position on  
11       remand, Justice Ginsburg. But The State may try to  
12       persuade the Court of something else.

13          JUSTICE GINSBURG:       But isn't that -- isn't  
14       that -- isn't that what the North Carolina law is now?  
15       So it would be futile to send it back for them to answer  
16       the good-faith exception since they have none.

17          MR. FISHER:           It wouldn't be futile, Justice  
18       Ginsburg. I think -- I think the analogy that I gave  
19       earlier about Chapman is more or less on point. The  
20       Court has held that if the Constitution is violated,  
21       that the defendant in a criminal case doesn't get a  
22       remedy unless he satisfies that test.

23           Now, all of the time in criminal cases you  
24       would just decide the constitutional issue and then send  
25       it back for remedy analysis if the lower court hadn't

1 addressed it.

2 JUSTICE SCALIA: That's because -- that's  
3 because they would be applying Federal law. They would  
4 be answering the question that you want us to leave  
5 unanswered; namely, whether the Constitution requires  
6 that this evidence be -- be stricken from the case.

7 MR. FISHER: Well, let me say --

8 JUSTICE SCALIA: But if indeed they're not  
9 going to ask that question when we send it back, it  
10 seems to me we have to answer that question here before  
11 we are able to reverse or affirm the North Carolina  
12 court. It's a Federal question.

13 They are not going to -- they are not going  
14 to get to that, but you're asking us to invalidate this  
15 conviction on the basis of Federal law. And it seems to  
16 me we cannot do that unless there has -- even if there  
17 has been a violation of the Fourth Amendment, the remedy  
18 must be exclusion of -- of the evidence. That's a  
19 Federal question. I think we're going to have to decide  
20 it. If we send it back to North Carolina, they're not  
21 going to decide it. Are they?

22 MR. FISHER: No, I don't believe they would  
23 or should. But I -- but just if a State had adopted a  
24 rule saying we're going to have a more favorable  
25 jurisprudence of constitutional error and give automatic

1 new trials, the Court wouldn't be prohibited from  
2 deciding a constitutional issue and sending it back down  
3 to the State.

4 In the retroactivity sphere, *Danforth v. Minnesota* is another case where the Court has said that  
5 States can choose for themselves to have more favorable  
6 remedies and the Court simply deals with the Federal  
7 question.

8 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, there's no question  
9 that if -- if North Carolina applied a State  
10 constitutional analog to the Fourth Amendment, they  
11 could have a more extensive remedy than is recognized  
12 under our Fourth Amendment cases. But your argument is  
13 they can adopt a State law rule for Fourth Amendment  
14 violations that is more protective of defendants than --  
15 than Federal case law provides. That would be your  
16 argument, right?

17 MR. FISHER: I don't need to make that  
18 argument. I think that would be an interesting question  
19 and I think the State may be able to do that. But what  
20 the Carter decision in North Carolina says is that  
21 violations of the State Constitution cannot be  
22 overlooked on good-faith doctrine.

23 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, was this decision  
24 based on the State constitution?

1           MR. FISHER:                 No. It was based on the  
2     Federal Constitution, so we would send it back down.  
3     And we have preserved an argument that under State law,  
4     the violation of the Fourth Amendment also violates the  
5     North Carolina Constitution.

6           JUSTICE SCALIA:             But you're asking us to  
7     reverse it on the basis of Federal law and you're asking  
8     us to send it back to a State court which is not going  
9     to -- to inquire any further into Federal law, even  
10    though Federal law, arguably, you will concede says that  
11    even if there is a Fourth Amendment violation, if  
12    there's a good-faith reasonable belief that the law was  
13    violated, the remedy of exclusion will not be imposed.

14          That's what the Constitution requires.             And  
15    you're asking us to say, oh, no, there's -- there's been  
16    a violation of the Constitution and we're going to  
17    reverse this judgment, even though we haven't inquired  
18    into whether the remedy that -- that you want is  
19    required. And it seems to me -- I don't see how we can  
20    do that.

21          MR. FISHER:                 Well, I don't want to keep  
22    saying the same thing. I'll try and say it one more  
23    time. I think it's fully customary for this Court to  
24    have a case from State courts where a State court issues  
25    a ruling on Federal law. There may be many other issues

1       in the case, Federal, State, whatever, but if the  
2       question of Federal law the State court decided is  
3       incorrect, this Court can reverse that judgment, say you  
4       got Federal law wrong, we're going to send it back down.

5                  JUSTICE KENNEDY:                   But it -- but it chooses  
6       to decide based on only half of the Federal law or  
7       three-quarters of the Federal law.  Can North Carolina  
8       more or less set us up this way?

9                  MR. FISHER:                       There is -- there is a  
10      Federalism element --

11                 JUSTICE KENNEDY:                   This is consistent with  
12      Justice Scalia's concern --

13                 MR. FISHER:                       Forgive me.

14                 JUSTICE KENNEDY:                   -- which is a follow-on to  
15      Justice Scalia's question.

16                 JUSTICE SCALIA: Yeah, they didn't get Federal  
17      law wrong.  Their opinion got Federal law wrong, but their  
18      judgment did not get Federal law wrong if indeed a good  
19      faith mistake of law does not require the exclusion of  
20      the evidence from the trial.  The judgment did not get  
21      Federal law wrong if that's the case.

22                 MR. FISHER:                       Well, I think that their  
23      analysis got Federal law wrong for the reasons we've  
24      described.

25                 JUSTICE SCALIA:                   We don't review analyses.

1    We review judgments. You're -- you're urging that this  
2    conviction has to be set aside. That's what we're  
3    reviewing, the conviction, not the opinion.

4                    MR. FISHER:                Well, Justice Scalia, if you  
5    want to decide the good-faith question that has not been  
6    briefed by any party, I -- I suggest you might want to  
7    tread carefully.

8                    Now, we've given you -- maybe what I need to  
9    do at this point before I sit down and reserve my time  
10   for rebuttal, is explain to you why, even if you did  
11   feel like you needed to get to that question, which I  
12   don't think you need to, but if you did need to get to  
13   that question, why you should say that the good-faith  
14   doctrine doesn't apply.

15                  JUSTICE ALITO:                Well, I don't want to take  
16   up your rebuttal time, but your argument this morning  
17   has confused me on something I thought I understood. I  
18   thought that your -- I thought the reason why you've  
19   argued this case the way you have, trying to convince us  
20   to draw a very sharp distinction between right and  
21   remedy is because you believe that North Carolina has  
22   the right under State law to devise its own version of  
23   the exclusionary rule. If you're not -- if that's not  
24   your argument, then I'm really puzzled by what you're  
25   doing.

1                   MR. FISHER:           Functionally, that's the way  
2 things work in North Carolina, Justice Alito. I think  
3 the only thing that -- that maybe I need to make more  
4 clear is that the reason why it works that way in North  
5 Carolina is because the State has held that violations  
6 of our State constitution cannot be subject to a good  
7 faith exception. The States have also held --

8                   JUSTICE ALITO:       The State constitution is  
9 irrelevant because you're arguing about whether there is  
10 -- whether there can be mistake of law in determining  
11 whether a search is reasonable under the Fourth  
12 Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.  
13 Whatever we hold on that, North Carolina can do whatever  
14 it wants on the same question with respect to the State  
15 constitution.

16                  MR. FISHER:         That's the next thing I was  
17 going to say, is in theory you're right, Justice Alito,  
18 but what North Carolina has said is that we construe  
19 article 1, section 20, which is the State counterpart,  
20 to be coterminous with the Fourth Amendment. So that's  
21 not the way the Court goes about its business. So  
22 functionally in the State of North Carolina where you  
23 are is that Fourth Amendment questions run exactly  
24 parallel to State substantive constitutional law  
25 questions, and if there's a violation, you -- you

1 suppress.

2 JUSTICE KAGAN: Mr. -- Mr. Fisher, suppose  
3 this were a Federal case and we had available to us, it  
4 had all been briefed, two alternative holdings in order  
5 to support the conviction. And one holding was this is  
6 not a violation of Fourth Amendment law in the first  
7 instance, and the other holding was this is a violation  
8 of Fourth Amendment law, but the exclusionary rule  
9 operates and so the -- the good-faith exception to the  
10 exclusionary rule operates and so the evidence comes in.  
11 Is there any difference between those two holdings?

12 MR. FISHER: I think the difference between  
13 those two holdings, if the Court remanded, may well play  
14 out differently in North Carolina.

15 JUSTICE KAGAN: No, no, no. But I mean, if  
16 it were a Federal case --

17 MR. FISHER: Oh, if it were. I'm sorry, I  
18 missed that.

19 JUSTICE KAGAN: Is there any difference?

20 MR. FISHER: If it were a Federal case, it  
21 would be functionally the same holding as to the outcome  
22 of that case. But I think -- if I could.

23 JUSTICE KAGAN: Yes, please.

24 MR. FISHER: But there would be important  
25 reasons nonetheless, even though that would be a

1 functionally identical holding for the parties in the  
2 case, there'd be very important reasons nonetheless to  
3 make sure that you render that holding as to remedy  
4 jurisprudence, not as to the Fourth Amendment itself.

5 And one reason is what I opened with and  
6 I've tried to say a couple times, that the government  
7 should be presumed to know the laws. It would undercut  
8 public confidence in law enforcement and the common law  
9 rule upon which the criminal law is built to say the  
10 government doesn't have to be presumed to know the law  
11 when it acted.

12 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, you say that, but some  
13 people say that the existence of a rule-remedy gap  
14 undermines public confidence in the law. So why should  
15 we take that argument any more seriously than the --  
16 than the rule-remedy gap problem in law?

17 MR. FISHER: Because that argument comes  
18 from academic literature and my argument comes from the  
19 Court's jurisprudence, where people have argued that you  
20 shouldn't suspend remedy and the Court has rejected and  
21 said, no, as Judge Wilkinson wrote in the law review  
22 piece that I cited in the brief, there's an important  
23 reason to announce the right even if you're not going to  
24 give a remedy.

25 Now, there are practical reasons for this as

1 well. Even in the Court's good-faith jurisprudence, the  
2 Court has given leeway to officers only to the extent  
3 the officers are relying on a clear directive from a  
4 third party, like a legislature or a court. This is  
5 very different. This is like the Johnson case from  
6 1982, where the Court held that if the officer acts on  
7 his own view of a, quote, "unsettled" rule of law, that  
8 we not only find a Fourth Amendment violation, we  
9 suppress. Even if I have to argue this case --

10 JUSTICE ALITO: Do you dispute that this was  
11 a reasonable interpretation of State law?

12 MR. FISHER: I -- I would dispute if you  
13 were asking in sort of a Chevron sense, that -- that the  
14 statute was sufficiently ambiguous that it could have  
15 been read this way. But I don't think it should be  
16 viewed as a reasonable mistake under the good-faith  
17 doctrine, because the good-faith doctrine deals with  
18 directives from third parties and officers relying on  
19 third parties. Johnson that I was just citing to you  
20 says that unsettled questions of law --

21 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, I don't mean to -- I  
22 don't mean to ask this in the context of any other body  
23 of the Court's case law, just in the common sense  
24 understanding of the term. Was it reasonable if a --  
25 even an attorney sat down and read the -- the relevant

1 North Carolina statutes, do you think it would be  
2 reasonable for that attorney to conclude that you have  
3 to have two functioning brake lights and not just one?

4 MR. FISHER: I think in the common sense  
5 way, I could concede that that would be reasonable. But  
6 there's a legal way of asking what is reasonable and  
7 what is not, Justice Alito. Let me say two things about  
8 that. One is to just remind you that the Court has  
9 never taken into account ambiguity or -- or the  
10 possibility for error in asking whether a governmental  
11 officer gets the law right.

12 And secondly, you have to define the concept  
13 of reasonable. So even if you look at the facts of this  
14 case and you think, well, this mistake was reasonable,  
15 the other side hasn't given a definition of what it  
16 would say would be a reasonable mistake of law. There's  
17 a reference to qualified immunity jurisprudence in the  
18 State's brief, and the Solicitor General describes --  
19 uses language to say a foothold in the statutory text.

20 I'm not sure what definition actually would  
21 apply here, but one thing I do know from the Court's  
22 good -- qualified immunity and EDPA jurisprudence, you'd  
23 have to define that concept, and the definitions that  
24 exist in the law right now are very, very broad. And I  
25 think that goes to the practical reason that I was going

1 to describe to the Court why you shouldn't hold that the  
2 Fourth Amendment was satisfied here. Because if you say  
3 that anything that's reasonable, as the Court has  
4 defined it in other cases, susceptible to debate, you  
5 vastly expand police officer discretion to conduct  
6 traffic stops.

7 As the Court has noted already, officers  
8 have enormous discretion both by the nature of the  
9 traffic laws and under the Whren decision. If --

10 JUSTICE SCALIA: Mr. Fisher, let me -- let  
11 me try my problem just one last time before your time.  
12 You -- you assert that -- that we -- we should not  
13 decide the remedy question because it hasn't been  
14 argued. But wasn't it your responsibility to argue it?  
15 You're asking us to set aside a judgment of the North --  
16 North Carolina court. That judgment can be set aside  
17 only if, number one, the Fourth Amendment was not  
18 violated or, number two, it was violated, but the remedy  
19 does not have to be exclusion of the evidence.

20 It's -- it seems to me it's your burden to  
21 establish not just that the Fourth Amendment was  
22 violated, but also that -- that exclusion was necessary  
23 under the Constitution. And it is no answer to say,  
24 well, that hasn't been argued. You haven't argued it.  
25 That's the problem.

1                   MR. FISHER:           Well, if I need to argue it, I  
2 would refer you to the part three arguments in our  
3 opening brief, which explain why even if you move good  
4 faith into the right -- those -- those would be my  
5 arguments, Justice Scalia.

6                   The only other case that comes to mind is  
7 the Court's Ayolata case several years ago, where there  
8 was a takings question brought to the Court, and the  
9 Court divided that Federal law question into two pieces.  
10 And when the lower court had only addressed the first  
11 piece of the case, the Court reversed on that first  
12 piece of the case and sent it back down. So I think  
13 what I'm asking for isn't terribly different.

14                  JUSTICE SCALIA:       Sent it back down for that  
15 court to decide the other piece. But this Court will  
16 not decide the other piece, as you acknowledge.

17                  MR. FISHER:           If a State makes that choice  
18 that it's going to give a more favorable remedy, then  
19 federalism should respect that choice, Justice Scalia.

20                  And so I'd like to reserve the rest of my  
21 time.

22                  CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:     Thank you, Mr.  
23 Fisher.

24                  Mr. Montgomery.

25                  ORAL ARGUMENT OF ROBERT C. MONTGOMERY.

1                   ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENT

2                   MR. MONTGOMERY: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it please  
3                   the Court:

4                   The Fourth Amendment prohibits unreasonable searches and  
5                   seizures, but it does not require that police officers  
6                   be perfect. Because the touchstone of the Fourth  
7                   Amendment is reasonableness, all that is required is  
8                   that a police officer have a reasonable view of the  
9                   facts and apply those facts to a reasonable  
10                  understanding of the law.

11                  JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: When will we ever get an  
12                  understanding, the right understanding of the law?  
13                  Meaning as I read the North Carolina Supreme Court  
14                  decision, it still hasn't told me whether it's one or  
15                  two brake lights, and the next police officer who wants  
16                  to stop someone won't know that either.

17                  MR. MONTGOMERY: In North Carolina -- excuse  
18                  me.

19                  JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Now, he may be bound by  
20                  the appellate court decision, but that won't help  
21                  clarify the state of the law.

22                  Isn't what you're doing going to leave the  
23                  criminal law unclear? It's one thing to say that you  
24                  want to not subject officers to civil liability. It's  
25                  another to say you want to leave the law unclear in a

1        criminal prosecution.

2                    MR. MONTGOMERY:                    Well, Your Honor in North  
3        Carolina, controlling precedent does come from the  
4        intermediate court of appeals. That's not to say that  
5        our supreme court might not reach a different decision  
6        some day. But for now, police officers would be bound  
7        by what the North Carolina court of appeals decided.

8                    So the law has been decided.                  An officer who  
9        goes out and makes a stop tomorrow because one brake  
10      light is out would be acting unreasonably under that  
11      decision, so it doesn't leave criminal law uncertain.

12      It --

13                   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                    Well, it will for the  
14      appellate decision if it's now taking your view that it  
15      can just find out whether the reading, the officer's  
16      reading of the law is reasonable. It basically means  
17      that any open question, police officers will rule in  
18      favor of their right to search.

19                   MR. MONTGOMERY:                    It depends on whether the  
20      question is an open question and whether that  
21      interpretation by the officer is reasonable. It  
22      certainly may be an unreasonable interpretation. It  
23      would have --

24                   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                    Define what would make  
25      it unreasonable?

1                   MR. MONTGOMERY:           Well, it would be  
2     unreasonable if there was plain language of the statute  
3     that no one could reach a different interpretation about  
4     at all if it was plain, or if there was a definite  
5     decision by an appellate court it would be unreasonable  
6     for officer to interpret it in his own way.

7                   And the whole standard would be a reasonable  
8     person standard. Would a reasonable person be able to  
9     take this view of the statute?

10                  CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:       That's a very broad  
11     definition of reasonable. I understand the idea that  
12     when, you know, 99 people out of a hundred think you  
13     have to have two brake lights, like you do everywhere  
14     else in the country, that it's reasonable for the police  
15     officer to think that.

16                  But it sounds to me like you're adopting the  
17     same standard that we apply in qualified immunity, which  
18     gives the officers quite -- quite broad scope, and  
19     that -- that's troubling.

20                  MR. MONTGOMERY:           It's not -- it's not the  
21     same as qualified immunity in that qualified immunity  
22     looks also -- it looks -- it protects the plainly  
23     incompetent. We're not saying that is the standard  
24     here, that --

25                  JUSTICE KAGAN:           No, I think it doesn't

1 protect the --

2 MR. MONTGOMERY: I'm sorry. It doesn't  
3 protect the plainly incompetent.

4 JUSTICE KAGAN: Yes. So I think what the  
5 Chief Justice is asking you is to describe a case for us  
6 where the officer would receive qualified immunity but  
7 it would not count as reasonable for these purposes.

8 MR. MONTGOMERY: One of the things that this  
9 Court has said in Wilson v. Layne is that this Court and  
10 courts can look beyond just the officer's interpretation  
11 like this. It can look to other matters. There could  
12 be an officer who -- who had an unreasonable  
13 interpretation of the statute, and yet he may still have  
14 qualified immunity, for instance, because he was told by  
15 a judge or by the attorney general or by someone that  
16 this was correct, and that was a complete  
17 misunderstanding of the statute.

18 It may be that that officer would still be  
19 protected by qualified immunity, but for the -- for  
20 Fourth Amendment purposes, that would not be a  
21 reasonable interpretation of the statute.

22 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: You would not give a  
23 pass -- I mean, let's say the case is flipped here and  
24 the most reasonable reading of the statute is that you  
25 only need one brake light.

1           And so someone's driving around with one  
2       brake light. You pull him over. He's going to say: I  
3       reasonably thought that, you know, I -- I only -- I only  
4       needed one. And the Court comes out and says, I needed  
5       two.

6           In that case, ignorance of the law would not  
7       save him, would it?

8           MR. MONTGOMERY:                   No, it would not. But the  
9       flip side of that is that an officer's belief that you  
10      needed all of your brake lights, and that is not  
11      actually the law, does not mean that that person is  
12      guilty.

13           In other words, in this instance, this --  
14      this driver -- excuse me, the defendant here or driver,  
15      actually, could not be held liable for the brake light  
16      violation. So it's not that the fact that an officer  
17      thinks reasonably that the law is something. That  
18      doesn't make it the law, just like if a citizen does not  
19      think that's the law, that does not mean that he can  
20      escape liability.

21           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:               There is a problem,  
22      however -- I'm sorry. The police officer wasn't  
23      stopping him because of the brake light. The police  
24      officer was involved in criminal interdictions and  
25      admitted that this was a pretext, a lawful pretext, he

1       thought.

2           So he wasn't there just to tell him -- if he  
3       had just stopped him and said, you know, fix your brake  
4       light, and drove away, there would never be a lawsuit,  
5       correct?

6           MR. MONTGOMERY:                   That's correct.

7           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                So how many citizens  
8       have been stopped for one brake light who are asked to  
9       have their car searched? And is that something that we  
10      as a society should be encouraging?

11          MR. MONTGOMERY:                   Well, there -- wholly  
12       innocent people are stopped quite often because of  
13       mistakes of fact, for instance. That's part of the  
14       whole Terry -- how Terry works and those types of brief  
15       stops. There turns out times that citizens have not  
16       committed any kind of offense, and yet they are stopped.

17          This is just another example of that, in  
18       which an officer acted reasonably, just as with a  
19       reasonable mistake of fact, and it turned out that this  
20       was not actually a violation.

21          CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:             I'd like to focus  
22       again on your definition of reasonableness. Let's say  
23       you have two court of appeals decisions. One says you  
24       need two brake lights; the other says you need one.

25          Is it reasonable for the officer to pull

1       somebody over when one of their two brake lights is  
2       burned out?

3                    MR. MONTGOMERY:           If you have conflicting  
4       rulings from the court of appeals, it would be  
5       reasonable then for the officer to decide which he  
6       thought was the better rule, if there were two different  
7       decisions from the court of appeals, which is not  
8       supposed to happen in our system.

9                    But if that did happen, then it would be  
10      reasonable for the officer to rely on either one of  
11      those.

12                  JUSTICE KAGAN:           Mr. Montgomery, I take it  
13      that one of Mr. Fisher's arguments, maybe his primary  
14      argument, is that this just looks like a remedies  
15      question, it does not look like a rights question, it  
16      focuses on the culpability of the officer in the way we  
17      do when we think about immunity or when we think about  
18      the exclusionary rule.

19                  So why isn't that exactly right, that to the  
20      extent that this conviction ought to be upheld, it ought  
21      to be upheld on remedies reasons rather than rights  
22      reasons to fit in with our basic understanding of what  
23      remedies and rights do and do differently in our law?

24                  MR. MONTGOMERY:           Well, certainly this court  
25      looks at different things when it looks at the right

1 versus the remedy. Reasonableness is important in the  
2 rights stage. In the remedies stage, that may be  
3 considered, but also the culpability of -- of the  
4 officer, whether he was deliberately disregarding the  
5 law, those types of things.

6 This Court has addressed mistakes of law  
7 both in the rights and the remedy stage. And so it  
8 would be important to address it in the rights stage  
9 here in this particular case because then we don't get  
10 into the sorts of things that wouldn't be necessary in  
11 the remedy stage, if that answers your question.

12 JUSTICE GINSBURG: What about -- what about  
13 the dissenter in the North Carolina court of appeals who  
14 said North Carolina has no good-faith exception, and so  
15 all that this decision does is it allows the police to  
16 get around the absence of a good-faith exception?

17 Wasn't that the position of the dissenter,  
18 that allowing for a reasonable mistake of law to support  
19 a warrantless stop is the functional equivalent of a  
20 good-faith exception?

21 MR. MONTGOMERY: That was the position of  
22 the dissenting justices at the North Carolina Supreme  
23 Court, one of the things that they said.

24 But again, this again gets back to  
25 reasonableness as the standard for the Fourth Amendment.

1 And that is what this Court has said is important at  
2 that stage, is whether an officer is acting reasonably.

3 There are other considerations that take  
4 place at the remedy stage. So the State was asking for  
5 nothing more than simply whether this violated the  
6 Fourth Amendment, and not about remedy. And --

7 JUSTICE SCALIA: Counsel, maybe you have the  
8 answer to all the questions I was asking of -- of  
9 Mr. Fisher. And -- and I guess the answer is you  
10 haven't argued that point, right?

11 MR. MONTGOMERY: The remedy?

12 JUSTICE SCALIA: You did not -- you did not  
13 assert in your -- in your brief or you haven't asserted  
14 it in oral argument, thus far, anyway, that even if it  
15 did constitute a violation of the Fourth Amendment, the  
16 remedy did not have to be exclusion of the evidence, and  
17 that remedy is indeed subject to reasonable mistake of  
18 law, and therefore, the decision has to be affirmed.

19 But you didn't make that argument. You want  
20 to put all your eggs in the basket of whether it's a  
21 violation of Fourth Amendment. Am I right about this?

22 MR. MONTGOMERY: That's correct, Your Honor.

23 JUSTICE SCALIA: Okay. I'm sorry to waste  
24 so much of our time.

25 MR. MONTGOMERY: Well, we did not make that

1 argument below in the North Carolina Supreme Court. And  
2 Mr. Fisher is correct in that it is our State  
3 constitution that says that there's no good-faith  
4 exception.

5 If a defendant had only raised a Fourth  
6 Amendment question in our courts, the good-faith  
7 exception would still be available if that defendant did  
8 not make a claim under the State constitution.

9 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, I'm not so sure it  
10 makes good prudential sense to allow the North Carolina  
11 Supreme Court to put to us what is basically an abstract  
12 question.

13 MR. MONTGOMERY: The question of --

14 JUSTICE KENNEDY: To -- to give an answer  
15 without reference to the fact that, as Justice Scalia  
16 indicates, part of the Fourth Amendment is the  
17 good-faith exception. It bears on reasonableness.

18 MR. MONTGOMERY: That's correct. And -- and  
19 this -- this Court has, in cases like Rodriguez dealt  
20 with mistake of law just in the rights stage rather than  
21 the remedies stage, and that's all that it -- has been  
22 briefed in this instance. That's correct.

23 And one of the things that is different  
24 about this from Krull and Davis is that we're not  
25 talking about --

1                   JUSTICE SCALIA:                   Excuse me. I mean, that  
2 just doesn't wash. Yes, in other cases we just decide  
3 the -- the right and -- and don't have to decide the  
4 remedy, but this is a case in which, unless -- unless  
5 the remedy is exclusion, there's no basis for us to set  
6 aside the judgment of the North Carolina Supreme Court.  
7 Unless -- unless the remedy is exclusion. It seems to  
8 me that's part of the case to reverse. If -- if we  
9 can't say that, we have no business reversing. But if  
10 it hasn't been argued, I guess we can do that. I guess.

11                  MR. MONTGOMERY:                  That -- that has not been  
12 argued here or below, that's correct. A difference  
13 between this case and Krull and Davis is that this case  
14 does not -- this involves a mistake of law as to a  
15 substantive statute rather than a mistake of law as to  
16 the Fourth Amendment itself. And the difference in that  
17 is that a reasonable violation of the Fourth Amendment  
18 is still a violation of the Fourth Amendment.

19                  There -- if there's a statute that gives an  
20 officer the opportunity to make a seizure on less than  
21 what is required by the Constitution, less than probable  
22 cause or less than reasonable suspicion, even if the  
23 officer is reasonable, that is still a Fourth Amendment  
24 violation, which is why this Court would have to go to  
25 the remedy portion to decide whether the exclusionary

1 rule applied.

2 In this instance, this case, it was a  
3 mistake as to a substantive statute that was used by the  
4 officer to -- as part of the facts and circumstances of  
5 this case. As part of the totality of the circumstances  
6 of this case, the officer considered what he thought was  
7 the correct law.

8 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Why does it -- why should  
9 you draw the line between if he gets the Fourth  
10 Amendment wrong, the Fourth Amendment is violated, but  
11 if he gets the statute wrong, then the Fourth Amendment  
12 is not violated?

13 MR. MONTGOMERY: Because the officer only  
14 needs to act reasonably and the fact that he gets the  
15 statute wrong does not mean that he acted necessarily  
16 unreasonably.

17 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Well, the fact that he  
18 made a mistake about what the Fourth Amendment requires  
19 could also be reasonable.

20 MR. MONTGOMERY: It could be, and that would  
21 be proper to consider, as this Court has, in the  
22 remedies stage rather than in the rights stage. In the  
23 DeFillippo case that this Court decided, there was a  
24 situation in which a statute, a substantive statute was  
25 found unconstitutional and void for vagueness, and yet

1       this Court found that there was probable cause in that  
2       case for the officer to make an arrest based upon that  
3       statute.

4                   So that was one case in which this Court  
5       looked at it at the rights stage as a mistake of law  
6       rather than at the remedy stage.

7                  JUSTICE KAGAN:                   Well, do you think if  
8       DeFillippo came up again today, with all the cases that  
9       have been decided since then, that we would decide it  
10      the same way or do you think we would conceptualize it  
11      now as a remedies question?

12                 MR. MONTGOMERY:                  I think the Court would  
13      decide it the same way. And this Court in Arizona v.  
14      Evans said that if the case is even decided before the  
15      good-faith exception are still viable in terms of the  
16      Fourth Amendment analysis.

17                 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 What kind of mistake of  
18      law did the police officer make in DeFillippo? The law  
19      said exactly what he thought it said.

20                 MR. MONTGOMERY:                  That's correct, Your Honor.

21                 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 Why do you classify this  
22      as a mistake of law question?

23                 MR. MONTGOMERY:                  I believe the --

24                 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 We said it was  
25      presumptively valid and he acted according to a statute.

1           MR. MONTGOMERY:           That's correct.

2           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:        You don't ask police  
3 officers to ignore the law.

4           MR. MONTGOMERY:        That is correct that it's  
5 different from this case, but there was still --

6           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:       No, no, no. This is a  
7 mistake of law; he wasn't following the law, presumably,  
8 according to the appellate decision.

9           MR. MONTGOMERY:        That's right. The  
10 DeFillippo case is important because you had someone who  
11 was acting wholly innocently; he was not committing an  
12 offense at all, as -- as in this case you had someone  
13 who was acting wholly innocently and was not committing  
14 a violation of the law. So in DeFillippo, this Court  
15 said that even though the conduct was wholly innocent,  
16 there still was probable cause despite the mistake of  
17 law, and that's all that we're saying in this case.

18          JUSTICE KAGAN:         Isn't there another  
19 difference between DeFillippo and this case? The court  
20 in DeFillippo talks a lot about how there's a  
21 presumption of constitutionality for any statute and we  
22 don't want officers to go around questioning the  
23 constitutionality of statutes. But here, that's not the  
24 case. Here, there's a statute and an officer is not  
25 supposed to read it as broadly as possible. An officer

1       is supposed to read it fairly.

2                   So there's no presumption that goes into  
3 effect and there's no -- there's no way in which we  
4 could say the same thing about DeFillippo, is that we  
5 don't want officers to question -- to inquire into this  
6 area.

7                   MR. MONTGOMERY:           It is different, but we do  
8 want officers to enforce the law. We don't want them to  
9 just sit back and not enforce --

10                  JUSTICE KAGAN:           We want them to enforce the  
11 law fairly and as written and -- and not to push every  
12 statute to its -- you know, to the furthest, furthest,  
13 furthest it could go without being found, you know,  
14 utterly unreasonable.

15                  MR. MONTGOMERY:           That's correct, Your Honor.  
16 But we do want them to act reasonably and still enforce  
17 the law, not to turn a blind eye to what may be a  
18 violation.

19                  JUSTICE SCALIA:           How -- how does the statute  
20 read here? What are the exact words from the statute.

21                  MR. MONTGOMERY:           The statute has two parts.  
22 It has a subsection (d).

23                  JUSTICE KENNEDY:           Where -- where do we find  
24 it?

25                  MR. MONTGOMERY:           This would be in the

1 appendix to the Respondent's brief, appendix pages 1 --  
2 appendix pages 1 through -- actually through 5, has all  
3 of the relevant portions of the statute.

4 Subsection (d) involves rear lamps and says  
5 that, "every motor vehicle shall have all originally  
6 equipped rear lamps or the equivalent in good working  
7 order." That's the relevant portion of subsection (d).  
8 Subsection (g), which is on page 3 of the appendix says,  
9 "No person shall sell or operate on the highways of the  
10 State any motor vehicle manufactured after December  
11 31st, 1955 unless it shall be equipped with a stop lamp  
12 on the rear of the vehicle." That is the language that  
13 the North Carolina Court of Appeals said when it said "a  
14 stop lamp," that meant that only one was required.

15 JUSTICE SCALIA: That -- that seems to be  
16 what it says.

17 MR. MONTGOMERY: The confusion comes in --  
18 the confusion comes in, Justice Scalia, in the last  
19 sentence of subsection (g) on appendix page 3, which  
20 says, "The stop lamp may be incorporated into a unit  
21 with one or more other rear lamps." Where the confusion  
22 comes in is that sentence would seem to imply that the  
23 stop lamp is a rear lamp, that it can be incorporated  
24 into a unit with one or more other rear lamps.

25 And if you go back to subsection (d), that's

1 the section that says that "all originally equipped rear  
2 lamps must be in good working order." So there --  
3 there's some conflicts in --

4 JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, I mean, that applies  
5 to all rear lamps, the stop lamp and all the other  
6 lamps.

7 MR. MONTGOMERY: That's correct. All the  
8 other lamps we know --

9 JUSTICE SCALIA: So -- so it has to be  
10 plural. If it's going to apply to the stop lamp and all  
11 the other lamps, of course, it would say lamps.

12 MR. MONTGOMERY: Thank you.

13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.  
14 Ms. Kovner.

15 ORAL ARGUMENT OF RACHEL P. KOVNER  
16 ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED STATES  
17 AS AMICUS CURIAE, SUPPORTING RESPONDENT

18 MS. KOVNER: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it  
19 please the Court:

20 Since the founding, the probable cause  
21 standard had allowed -- has allowed police officers to  
22 make stops when there are reasonable grounds to believe  
23 that a person committed a crime even if the officer  
24 later turns out to have been mistaken about either the  
25 facts or the law. And as Justice Kennedy observed at

1 the start of this argument, given that this Court's  
2 cases recognize that there can be a reasonable mistake  
3 of law, an officer who makes a reasonable mistake of law  
4 may have a reasonable grounds to believe that a person  
5 committed a crime.

6           If I can go to a question that Justice Kagan  
7 asked about why this question is more appropriately  
8 addressed at the rights stage than the remedies stage,  
9 we think there are three main reasons. The first has to  
10 do with history. Since the founding, this Court has  
11 treated the probable cause standard as allowing for  
12 reasonable mistakes of law.

13           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 Are all the cases that  
14 you cite, including Riddle, all in the context of a  
15 customs statute that didn't permit customs officers to  
16 suffer damages --

17           MS. KOVNER:                         Yes, Your Honor.

18           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 -- for purposes of an  
19 error of law, correct?

20           MS. KOVNER:                         That's correct. The reason --

21           JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 None of those cases  
22 involved a violation of the Fourth Amendment.

23           MS. KOVNER:                         That's correct. The reason  
24 those cases are relevant here is because those cases are  
25 interpretations of the probable cause standard.

1                   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 But how is that  
2                   different in terms of its analysis, those cases, from  
3                   what we've ultimately applied as a qualified immunity  
4                   standard with respect to civil damages today?

5                   MS. KOVNER:                         So --

6                   JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 Doesn't it follow --  
7                   don't they follow exactly the same reason?

8                   MS. KOVNER:                         I don't think so, Your Honor.  
9                   Those cases, the probable cause reasoning that the Court  
10                  has followed in those cases is what the Court has done  
11                  at the merits stage of the Fourth Amendment analysis.  
12                  So this Court has routinely cited cases under those  
13                  customs statutes as illuminating the meaning of the  
14                  probable cause standard, and is therefore illuminating --

15                  JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 So you disagree with  
16                  Justice Story when he looked at those cases and made the  
17                  point I just made.

18                  MS. KOVNER:                         No --

19                  JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR:                 Do you think he was  
20                  wrong?

21                  MS. KOVNER:                         There's no doubt that in those  
22                  cases the question, the question the court was  
23                  ultimately answering is, are those customs officers  
24                  liable. But the way that it was answering that question  
25                  was by determining whether those officers had probable

1 cause. And probable cause is the constitutional  
2 standard. And that's why this Court has subsequently  
3 relied on those cases in illuminating the --

4 JUSTICE BREYER: Can I ask you a question?  
5 I'd just like you to address for a minute -- assume for  
6 the sake of argument that I agree with you that a  
7 reasonable mistake of law that I -- is an excuse. But  
8 what is a reasonable mistake?

9 Now, that's what I'd like you to address.  
10 And in particular, would you have objection to: It has  
11 to be, one, exceedingly rare; two, objective; three, it  
12 is -- has to be that a reasonable lawyer would think  
13 that the policeman was right on the law, and only if  
14 after, to quote you brief, a careful scrutiny and  
15 serious difficulty in construing the law, does it turn  
16 out that he is wrong.

17 Now, what do you think about that or some  
18 other standard?

19 MS. KOVNER: I think we agree with each of  
20 those descriptions of a reasonable --

21 JUSTICE BREYER: All right. If you agree  
22 with those then what about this case? Because after  
23 all, it does say a stamp light -- a stop light. What's  
24 the difficulty of construing that to mean a stop light?

25 MS. KOVNER: So we think that the North

1 Carolina Supreme Court and the court of appeals were  
2 right that an officer could reasonably interpret the  
3 statute to require --

4 JUSTICE BREYER: Only after a careful  
5 scrutiny and serious difficulty in construing the law  
6 does it turn out that the officer was wrong. What's the  
7 difficulty?

8 MS. KOVNER: Here --

9 JUSTICE BREYER: It stays a stamp -- a stop  
10 light.

11 MS. KOVNER: Here, the difficulty is in the  
12 other provision, which requires all originally equipped  
13 rear lamps to be working. And --

14 JUSTICE SCALIA: But that includes the stop  
15 light and any other lights. Okay. A stop light, the  
16 turn lights, the back-up lights.

17 So you had to use the plural for those other  
18 provisions.

19 MS. KOVNER: Agreed. It's not the plural.  
20 It's the fact that all originally equipped rear lamps  
21 need to be working, which means that if a car was  
22 originally equipped with multiple stop lamps, as cars  
23 now are, then when one of them is broken, one of the  
24 originally equipped rear lamps is not working.

25 So that's the difficulty. And that's why

1 none of the courts that considered this question thought  
2 this was anything other than a very hard question of  
3 statutory interpretation.

4 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So where do you come  
5 out in my hypothetical of the two court of appeals  
6 decisions? Is that reasonable for the officer to say,  
7 "Well, I'm going to pick this one and follow that?"

8 MS. KOVNER: So if the officer is in a  
9 jurisdiction whose court of appeals has decided the  
10 question, we think the officer is bound by that  
11 interpretation, even if other courts of appeals come out  
12 differently. But if the officer is in a jurisdiction  
13 where the question is undecided and different courts  
14 have come out differently in other jurisdictions, then  
15 we don't think the fact that one court has decided it in  
16 one way is dispositive. We think then the court looks  
17 to this question of is it a really difficult --

18 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, now I forgot one  
19 thing, which may be obvious to me. We're not talking  
20 about a difficulty in construing the Fourth Amendment  
21 itself? We're talking only about a difficulty in  
22 construing a criminal statute, where, in fact, the  
23 reason for the stop or seizure is based on a violation  
24 of criminal law.

25 MS. KOVNER: That's right. I think the

1 probable cause standard allows for an officer to act  
2 when he has reasonable grounds to --

3 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: How is your standard  
4 differed from qualified immunity standard of  
5 reasonableness?

6 MS. KOVNER: Sure. We think that an  
7 officer, in order to have reasonable grounds for a stop,  
8 needs to be able to point to something in the statute  
9 that affirmatively supports his view, whereas the  
10 qualified immunity standard seems to require essentially  
11 the opposite. It seems to require that there's a  
12 precedent that forecloses what the officer does in order  
13 to protect only those who were acting -- to protect  
14 everybody except for those who are clearly incompetent.

15 JUSTICE GINSBURG: The one argument that is  
16 in your brief that I didn't follow is that the  
17 importance of holding the way you recommend is so that  
18 when you get this question solved, you tee up the  
19 question, what is the rule, one light or two lights.

20 But yet in this case, it was consent. The  
21 evidence that came in had nothing at all to do with the  
22 traffic violation, so we wouldn't need to -- the Court  
23 wouldn't need to decide the traffic violation, say -- it  
24 was consent. I think the North Carolina Immediate  
25 Appellate Court said it was a legitimate consent. It

1 was consent, and this evidence comes in, and we never  
2 had to deal with what the traffic regulation was.

3 MS. KOVNER: That's correct, Your Honor.

4 And this question comes up in two contexts. Sometimes  
5 it would be litigated in the suppression context, and  
6 sometimes it would be litigated because the officer  
7 actually issues a citation. And our concern expressed  
8 in that portion of the brief is that if the Court takes  
9 the position that whenever an officer is wrong about the  
10 law, he has violated the Fourth Amendment, it's going to  
11 deter officers from making stops where there are  
12 arguments on both sides.

13 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Do you -- do you agree  
14 that if there is an illegal stop, that this consent is  
15 the fruit of the poison tree?

16 MS. KOVNER: We think that would be a  
17 difficult question. We don't necessarily agree with  
18 that. This Court has said it's not simply a but-for  
19 test. So even if the stop was a but-for cause, that  
20 doesn't necessarily mean that the evidence was fruit of  
21 the poisonous tree. But the question wasn't argued  
22 below by the State and it hasn't been briefed here. So  
23 we've addressed simply the question of --

24 JUSTICE KAGAN: Ms. Kovner, you started your  
25 argument by saying you were going to give us three

1    reasons why this should be a rights question rather than  
2    a remedies question. You said history, which frankly,  
3    you know, I think your history probably doesn't say as  
4    much as you think it says. So I want to know what is  
5    number two and number three are.

6                 MS. KOVNER:                 Sure. The second is an  
7    administrability reason. We think that this is the  
8    simplest standard. You simply ask officers to decide  
9    whether -- you simply ask courts to decide whether an  
10   officer could reasonably think that a person had  
11   committed a crime, and you don't separate was this a  
12   question of law or a question of fact and treat one in  
13   the rights section and one in the remedies section.

14                And the third is that we don't think there's  
15   a normative reason to treat mistakes of law and mistakes  
16   of fact differently. When an officer makes a stop in  
17   this situation, he can just as reasonably be confused as  
18   to what the -- the law is under these statutes, as  
19   confused as to what the facts are. And if we're going  
20   to treat mistakes of fact as part of the rights  
21   analysis, it makes sense to treat reasonable mistakes of  
22   law in the same way.

23                If the Court has no further questions, thank  
24   you.

25                CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:                 Thank you, counsel.

1           Mr. Fisher, you have three minutes left.

2           REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF JEFFREY L. FISHER

3           ON BEHALF OF PETITIONER

4           MR. FISHER:           Thank you. I'd like to make  
5          four points if I could. To start with the  
6          administrability question of what would reasonableness  
7          mean, Mr. Chief Justice, I think your hypothetical of  
8          two differing court of appeals opinions in a State,  
9          I think under the analysis that I just described, would  
10         mean that it would violate the Fourth Amendment and half  
11         the State to conduct the stop and not in the other half  
12         of the State, because each would be binding in its own  
13         component of the State.

14         And that shows why in Whren, and many other cases, this  
15         Court has rejected that kind of analysis at the rights  
16         stage and cabined it only to the remedies stage. If you  
17         want to ask --

18           JUSTICE ALITO:       Well, in this -- in this  
19         case, didn't the dissenters in the North Carolina  
20         Supreme Court say that the interpretation adopted by the  
21         court of appeals was surprising? So all we would have  
22         to say on reasonableness is that if it's not -- if it's  
23         surprising, if the correct interpretation is surprising,  
24         then the contrary interpretation is reasonable. Would  
25         we have to go further than that?

1           MR. FISHER:           I think you do because you have  
2        to just give a little more teeth to it. What the  
3        Solicitor General said is that it would have to have  
4        foothold in the statute. And I think that's more or  
5        less what was recited today, there was a recent D.C. Court  
6        of Appeals opinion that holds that a police officer  
7        could -- could argue from a foothold in the statute that  
8        all license plate frames are illegal.

9           Now, they rejected that under their code,  
10       but it's just one of innumerable arguments that a law  
11       enforcement officer might make and that this  
12       reasonableness test would give grave --

13       JUSTICE BREYER:           No, no. I mean, it would  
14       be one way, one way. One court one way, one way the  
15       other way. The officer loses because, you know, it ties  
16       -- it has to be unusual. It has to be -- you heard  
17       what --

18       MR. FISHER:              Well, I think, Justice Breyer,  
19       the problem with that is that it's the core presumption  
20       that the officer needs to understand the law as it  
21       existed, as it was later construed.

22       And Mr. Chief Justice, you asked, I think,  
23       about the ignorance canon. The State's response was,  
24       well, if somebody is reasonably mistaken about the law,  
25       we would convict him.

1           And the reason why is because we would  
2   assume he knew the law. We would assume that somebody  
3   at the court of appeals split and this Court divided  
4   5-4, the person is still convicted because we assume  
5   they knew the law when they acted.

6           And all we are asking for today is for the  
7   exact same assumption to apply to police officers. And  
8   with due respect to the Solicitor General, the founding  
9   -- the cases they describe don't help them. They're  
10   only remedy cases, and they reinforce our point. And  
11   even when the Court has cited these cases, they're all  
12   in the pre-Leon context where this Court didn't  
13   distinguish rights from remedies.

14          If you want to look at the founding, the  
15   controlling rule would be the common law rule. And as  
16   we said in our brief, with no -- with no disagreement  
17   from the other side, the common law rule dating back  
18   centuries was that ignorance of the law on the police  
19   officer's part, even if it was perfectly reasonable,  
20   didn't justify the stop.

21          And if I could say one last thing to Justice  
22   Scalia about the colloquies we were having before, with  
23   all due respect, I really do think there is nothing  
24   unusual about a party litigating a case up through the  
25   courts. It may arise in Federal court or it may arise

1      in State court, but they can choose the arguments they  
2      choose to raise.

3            And when we got a judgment in our favor from  
4      the North Carolina court of appeals, it was up to the  
5      State at that point to choose what arguments it wanted  
6      to pursue further in this case. So just like a State  
7      may -- a party may ride the First Amendment instead of  
8      the Second or a rights question instead of remedy, we  
9      think that's all that's happened here.

10           CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS:                  Thank you, Counsel.

11           The case is submitted.

12           Whereupon, at 11:02 a.m., the case in the  
13      above-entitled matter was submitted.)

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