No. 09-

In The
Supreme Court of the United States

HENRIETTA BROWNING,

Petitioner,

v.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, *et al.*,

Respondents.

On Petition For A Writ Of Certiorari To The United States Court Of Appeals For The Ninth Circuit

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

ERIC SCHNAPPER*
University of Washington
School of Law
P.O. Box 353020
Seattle, WA 98195
(206) 616-3167

BETH CREIGHTON
ZAN TEWKSBURY
STEENSON, SCHUMANN, TEWKSBURY, CREIGHTON & ROSE, P.C.
500 Yamhill Plaza Building
815 Second Avenue
Portland, OR 97204
(503) 221-1792

Attorneys for Petitioner

**Counsel of Record*

COCKLE LAW BRIEF PRINTING CO. (800) 225-6964
OR CALL COLLECT (402) 342-2831

Blank Page

QUESTION PRESENTED

In *Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Products, Inc.*, 530 U.S. 133 (2000), this Court held that a trier of fact may infer the existence of a discriminatory motive from falsity of a defendant's explanation of its action. The question presented is:

> In a discrimination case tried to a jury, should the trial judge if requested to do so instruct the jury that it may draw the inference permitted by *Reeves*?

PARTIES

The petitioner is Henrietta Browning. The respondents are the United States of America, the United States Department of Treasury, the United States Internal Revenue Service, and Henry Geithner, Secretary of the Department of the Treasury. Secretary Geithner is sued in his official capacity, and is substituted for his predecessor pursuant to Fed. R. App. P. 43(c)(2).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Question Presented	i
Parties	ii
Opinions Below	1
Jurisdiction	1
Statutory Provision Involved	2
Statement	2
Reasons for Granting The Writ	5
I. There Is A Well Established Inter-Circuit Conflict Regarding Whether A Trial Judge Must, If Requested, Give A *Reeves* Inference Instruction	5
A. The Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth and Tenth Circuits Require That A Trial Judge Give A *Reeves* Inference Instruction If Requested	9
B. The Seventh, Ninth and Eleventh Circuits Hold That A *Reeves* Inference Instruction Is Never Mandatory	12
C. This Inter-Circuit Conflict Is Widely Recognized	14
II. The Question Presented Is of Manifest and Considerable Importance	18
III. The Decision of The Court of Appeals Is Clearly Incorrect	21

TABLE OF CONTENTS – Continued

Page

IV. This Case Presents An Excellent Vehicle for Resolving The Question Presented 30

Conclusion 32

Appendix

Opinion of The Court of Appeals for The Ninth Circuit, May 22, 2009 ..... 1a

Judgment of The United States District Court for the District of Oregon, May 2, 2009 ..... 11a

Opinion of The Court of Appeals for The Ninth Circuit, June 16, 2009 ..... 12a

Transcript of District Court Hearing, April 27, 2007 ..... 14a

Order of The Court of Appeals for The Ninth Circuit Denying Rehearing and Rehearing En Banc, August 12, 2009 ..... 16a

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Page

CASES:

Cabrera v. Jakabovitz, 24 F.3d 372 (2d Cir. 1994) 8, 9, 10, 11, 16

Cassino v. Reichold Chemicals, Inc., 817 F.2d 1338 (9th Cir. 1987) 4

Conroy v. Abraham Chevrolet-Tampa, Inc., 2003 WL 25738230 (M.D. Fla.) 17

Conroy v. Abraham Chevrolet-Tampa, Inc., 375 F.3d 1228 (11th Cir. 2004) 8, 14, 15, 18

Fite v. Digital Equipment Corp., 232 F.3d 3 (1st Cir. 2000) 8, 14, 16, 18

Gehring v. Case Corp., 43 F.3d 340 (7th Cir. 1994) 8, 13

Kanida v. Gulf Coast Medical Personnel, LP, 363 F.3d 568 (5th Cir. 2004) 16

Kozlowski v. Hampton School Bd., 77 Fed.Appx. 133 (4th Cir. 2003) 12, 23

Moore v. Robertson Fire Protection District, 249 F.3d 786 (8th Cir. 2001) 8, 14, 16

Ratliff v. City of Gainesville, Texas, 256 F.3d 355 (5th Cir. 2001) ..... *passim*

Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Products, Inc., 530 U.S. 133 (2000) ..... *passim*

Smith v. Borough of Wilkinsburg, 147 F.3d 272 (3d Cir. 1998) ..... *passim*

St. Mary's Honor Center v. Hicks, 509 U.S. 502 (1993) 7, 10, 19

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES – Continued

Page

Townsend v. Lumbermens Mutual Cas. Co., 294 F.3d 1232 (10th Cir. 2002) ..... *passim*

Valle v. National Basketball Association, 42 F.Supp. 334 (S.D.N.Y. 1999) 10

Watson v. Southeastern Pennsylvania Transp. Authority, 207 F.3d 207 (3d Cir. 2000) 10, 11, 18

Wright v. West, 505 U.S. 277 (1992) 7

STATUTES AND REGULATIONS:

28 U.S.C. § 1254(1) 2

Section 703(a)(1), Title VII, Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(a)(1) 2, 8, 18, 26

F.R.C.P. 51 30

Age Discrimination in Employment Act 18

Americans with Disabilities Act 18, 19

Fair Housing Act 19

Fair Labor Standards Act 19

Section 1981 19

Section 1982 19

BRIEFS:

Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Ratliff v. City of Gainesville*, No. 99-41472 (5th Cir.).... 11, 20, 27, 28

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES – Continued

Page

Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Townsend v. Lumbermens Mutual Casualty Co.*, No. 00-3055 (10th Cir.) 12, 20, 27

Brief of The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *DiJoseph v. Invivo Research, Inc.*, No. 03-13754-HH (11th Cir.) 17, 20, 26, 27, 28

Brief of The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Conroy v. Abraham Chevrolet-Tampa, Inc.*, No. 03-11405-GG (11th Cir.), 2003 WL 23744565 ..... 26, 29

OTHER AUTHORITIES:

C. Belmont, "The Imperative of Instructing on Pretext: A Comment on William J. Vollmer's Pretext in Employment Discrimination Litigation: Mandatory Instructions for Permissible Inferences?", 61 Wash. & Lee L.Rev. 445 (2004) 17

C. Wheeler, "Comments on Pretext in Employment Discrimination Litigation: Mandatory Instructions for Permissible Inferences?", 61 Wash. & Lee L.Rev. 459 (2004) 17

Comment, "Pretext Instructions in Employment Discrimination Cases: Inferring A New Disadvantage for Plaintiffs," 57 Fla.L.Rev. 411 (2005) 17

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES – Continued

Page

E. Jones, J. Dugas, and J. Youpa, "Employment and Labor Law," 58 S.M.U.L.Rev. 785 (2005) 17

K. Smith, "How Do We Work This? Making Sense of the Liability Standard in 'Disparate Treatment' Employment Discrimination Cases," 14 Me.B.J. 34 (1999) 18

S. Kaminshine, "Disparate Treatment As A Theory of Discrimination: The Need for A Restatement, Not A Revolution," 2 Stan. J.Civ.Rts. & Civ.Liberties 1 (2005) 17

T. Devine, Jr., "The Critical Effect of a Pretext Jury Instruction," 80 Den.U.L.Rev. 549 (2003) 18

W. Corbett, "Of Babies, Bath Water, and Throwing Out Proof Structures: It Is Not Time to Jettison *McDonnell Douglas*," 2 Employee Rts. & Emp. Pol'y J. 361 (1998) 18

W. Vollmer, "Pretext in Employment Discrimination Litigation: Mandatory Instructions for Permissible Inferences?", 61 Wash. & Lee L.Rev. 407 (2004).....17

Petitioner Henrietta Browning respectfully prays that this Court grant a writ of certiorari to review the judgment and opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit entered on May 22, 2009.

OPINIONS BELOW

The May 22, 2009 opinion of the court of appeals, which is reported at 567 F.3d 1038, is set out at pp. 1a-10a of the Appendix. The June 16, 2009 opinion of the court of appeals, which is unofficially reported at 2009 WL 1974589 (9th Cir. 2009), is set out at pp. 12a-13a of the Appendix.[1] The pertinent portions of the District Court hearing of April 27, 2007, regarding jury instructions, is set out at pp. 14a-15a of the Appendix. The August 12, 2009 order of the court of appeals, denying rehearing and rehearing en banc, which is not officially reported, is set out at pp. 16a-17a of the Appendix.

JURISDICTION

The decision of the court of appeals was entered on May 22, 2009. A timely petition for rehearing and rehearing en banc was denied on August 12, 2009.

[1] The June 16, 2009 opinion superseded an unpublished opinion on the same subject issued on May 22, 2009. See 2009 WL 1426796 (9th Cir.).

The Court has jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1).

STATUTORY PROVISION INVOLVED

Section 703(a)(1) of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2(a)(1) provides:

> It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer –
>
> > (1) to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin....

STATEMENT

Plaintiff-appellant is an employee of the Internal Revenue Service call center in Portland, Oregon. In 2003 she filed suit under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, alleging that she had been demoted because of her race and in retaliation for having complained about racial discrimination. At trial plaintiff relied heavily on evidence that the explanations that the defendants had given for that demotion were untrue.

At the close of trial, plaintiff requested that the following jury instruction be given to the jury:

> Consistent with the general principle of law that a party's dishonesty about a material fact may be considered as affirmative evidence of guilt, if you find that the defendants' explanation about why they took adverse action against a plaintiff is not worthy of belief, you may infer a discriminatory or retaliatory motive from that fact.

(App. 4a). That instruction was based on, and closely resembled, the holding in *Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Products, Inc.*, 530 U.S. 133 (2000):

> In appropriate circumstances, the trier of fact can reasonably infer from the falsity of the explanation that the employer is dissembling to cover up a discriminatory purpose. Such an inference is consistent with the general principle of evidence law that the factfinder is entitled to consider a party's dishonesty about a material fact as "affirmative evidence of guilt."

530 U.S. at 147. The district court refused to give the requested instruction. The district judge, in rejecting this instruction, relied on its understanding that all instructions regarding permissive inferences were disapproved by the Ninth Circuit.[2] The jury returned

---

[2] App. 15a:

> I'm mindful of Ninth Circuit authority that cautions trial judges against giving any kind of inference

(Continued on following page)

a verdict for the defendants. The plaintiff appealed, arguing that the denial of the requested instruction was improper.

The court of appeals upheld the refusal of the trial judge to give the requested instruction. The Ninth Circuit did not dispute that the requested inference instruction was a correct statement of the law. It recognized that there is a circuit split on this issue, and that other circuits have held that such an instruction is mandatory. (App. 7a). The panel nonetheless held that a trial judge is not required to grant a request to give any instruction other than an explanation of the essential elements of the plaintiff's claim.

> [I]f the jury instructions set forth the essential elements the plaintiff needs to prove, the district court's refusal to give an instruction explicitly addressing pretext is not reversible error.

(App. 7a). The court of appeals reasoned that its 1987 decision in *Cassino v. Reichold Chemicals, Inc.*, 817 F.2d 1338 (9th Cir. 1987), decided thirteen years before *Reeves*, precludes requiring the instruction at issue. (App. 5a-7a). The panel ruled that in the Ninth Circuit it is not the responsibility of the trial judge to explain (or reveal) to the jury the rule in *Reeves*;

> instruction, and I'm mindful of the risk that an inference instruction can be seen as potentially a comment on the evidence....

rather, the judge need only leave plaintiff's trial counsel in closing argument "free to explain ... that finding the IRS's proffered reasons for Browning's demotion pretextual could justify the jury finding the IRS had discriminated against Browning." (App. 9a).[3]

Plaintiff filed a timely petition for rehearing en banc. The petition noted that the argument advanced in this case by the Department of Justice, that a *Reeves* inference instruction is not mandatory if requested, is squarely contrary to the longstanding position of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.[4] The petition was denied on August 12, 2009. (App. 16a-17a).

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE WRIT

I. THERE IS A WELL ESTABLISHED INTER-CIRCUIT CONFLICT REGARDING WHETHER A TRIAL JUDGE MUST, IF REQUESTED, GIVE A *REEVES* INFERENCE INSTRUCTION

This case presents a sharp conflict among the courts of appeals regarding whether a jury should be instructed (if a party so requests) that it may infer

[3] In a separate unpublished opinion the panel held that the action of the trial judge in excluding certain evidence proffered by Browning was not error. (App. 12a-13a). That decision is not at issue in this petition.

[4] Petition for Rehearing En Banc, at 12-13.

the existence of an unlawful discriminatory purpose if it concludes that a defendant's explanation for the disputed action is untrue. Five circuits have held that such an instruction is mandatory. In the instant case the Ninth Circuit has joined the Seventh and Eleventh Circuits in holding, to the contrary, that such an instruction need not be given.

For a quarter of a century the federal courts have struggled with the issue of whether the existence of an unlawful discriminatory[5] purpose can be inferred from the falsity of a defendant's explanation of its actions. That question is of overarching importance to the large number of discrimination cases in federal court, because plaintiffs generally rely heavily on evidence of such falsity to demonstrate the existence of a discriminatory motive. Prior to 2000, decisions in a number of circuits had held that such an inference is impermissible.[6] Because of the importance of this

---

[5] The same question arises regarding what evidence would support an inference of an unlawful retaliatory motive. Although the instant case involves claims of both discrimination and retaliation, for simplicity we refer in the body of the petition simply to an inference of discrimination.

[6] This Court in *Reeves* noted that the Fifth Circuit in that case had

> proceeded from the assumption that a prima facie case of discrimination, combined with sufficient evidence for the trier of fact to disbelieve the defendant's legitimate, nondiscriminatory reason for its decision, is insufficient as a matter of law to sustain a jury's finding of intentional discrimination.

530 U.S. at 146.

question, the Supreme Court twice granted certiorari to address it, first in *St. Mary's Honor Center v. Hicks*, 509 U.S. 502 (1993), and then in *Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Products, Inc.*, 530 U.S. 133 (2000).

Reeves held as a matter of law that an inference of discrimination may indeed be drawn from a showing that an employer's proffered explanation was not its true reason. 530 U.S. at 146-49.[7] If a federal judge after a bench trial were to rule for the defendant on the ground that it is impermissible – not in that particular case but in general – to draw an inference of discrimination from the falsity of an employer's explanation, that would be reversible error under *Reeves*. In the wake of the decision in *Reeves*, every federal judge who tries a discrimination case fully understands that such an inference is permissible as a matter of

---

[7] See 530 U.S. at 147:

> [I]t is *permissible* for the trier of fact to infer the ultimate fact of discrimination from the falsity of the employer's explanation.... In appropriate circumstances, the trier of fact can reasonably infer from the falsity of the explanation that the employer is dissembling to cover up a discriminatory purpose. Such an inference is consistent with the general principle of evidence law that the factfinder is entitled to consider a party's dishonesty about a material fact as "affirmative evidence of guilt." *Wright v. West*, 505 U.S. 277, 296 (1992).... Moreover, once the employer's justification has been eliminated, discrimination may well be the most likely alternative explanation, especially since the employer is in the best position to put forth the actual reason for its decision.

(Emphasis in original).

law. But most discrimination cases today are decided by juries, whose members of course have never read this Court's opinion in *Reeves*. The question that led to and was resolved by *Reeves* – whether an inference of discrimination can be drawn from the falsity of a defendant's explanation – has thus been replaced by a dispute of equal importance: whether (if such an instruction is requested) a jury must be informed of the permissibility of that inference under *Reeves*.

The panel in the instant case held that such a *Reeves* inference instruction is never required. The court below frankly recognized that its conclusion conflicted with decisions in several circuits which hold that a plaintiff is entitled to the pretext inference requested in this case. "In the years since [1987], a circuit split has emerged on the question of permissive pretext instructions." (App. 7a). The panel opinion cited decisions in seven circuits as illustrating this inter-circuit conflict.[8] Of the circuit court

---

[8] App. 7a n.2:

Compare Townsend v. Lumbermens Mut. Cas. Co., 294 F.3d 1232 (10th Cir. 2002), *and Ratliff v. City of Gainesville*, 256 F.3d 355 (5th Cir. 2001), *and Smith v. Borough of Wilkinsburg*, 147 F.3d 272 (3d Cir. 1998), *and Cabrera v. Jakabovitz*, 24 F.3d 372 (2d Cir. 1994), *with Conroy v. Abraham Chevrolet-Tampa, Inc.*, 375 F.3d 1228 (11th Cir. 2004) (holding permissive pretext instruction is not required), *and Moore v. Robertson Fire Prot. Distr.*, 249 F.3d 786 (8th Cir. 2001), *and Fite v. Digital Equip. Corp.*, 232 F.3d 3 (1st Cir. 2000), *and Gehring v. Case Corp.*, 43 F.3d 340 (7th Cir. 1994).

opinions cited by the panel, four had held that such a pretext instruction is mandatory.[9] The defendant itself recognized that the courts of appeals are divided about this issue, and that several circuits hold that a *Reeves* inference instruction must be given if requested.[10]

A. The Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Tenth Circuits Require That A Trial Judge Give A *Reeves* Inference Instruction If Requested

Five circuits hold that a trial judge must give a *Reeves* inference instruction if requested to do so.

The Second Circuit has since 1994 required the type of pretext instruction which the district court in this case refused to give. *Cabrera v. Jakabovitz*, 24

---

[9] The cited decisions requiring a *Reeves* inference instruction were *Townsend*, *Ratliff*, *Smith*, and *Cabrera*.

[10] Appellees' Answering Brief, pp. 32-37:

> A slight majority of the circuit courts that have confronted the issue of whether a permissive inference instruction for pretext should be given have held that, while such an instruction is not error, it is neither required nor an abuse of discrimination to refuse it.... A *per se* requirement that a district court give a permissive inference pretext instruction ... finds no support in the majority of the case authority from other circuits.

The government acknowledged that decisions in the Second, Third and Tenth Circuits required the trial judge to give such an instruction if requested. *Id.* at 36.

F.3d 372 (2d Cir. 1994). Relying on *St. Mary's Honor Center v. Hicks*, the Second Circuit held in *Cabrera* that

> the jury needs to be told ... the jury is entitled to infer, but need not infer, that this burden [of proof] has been met if they find [the facts constituting a prima facie case] and they disbelieve the defendant's explanation.

24 F.3d at 362. The necessity of this instruction is well established in the Second Circuit, where it is referred to as a "*Cabrera* charge." *Valle v. National Basketball Association*, 42 F.Supp. 334, 339 (S.D.N.Y. 1999).

The Third Circuit has twice held that a plaintiff is entitled to an instruction that a jury may infer discrimination from the falsity of a defendant's explanation, reiterating that rule most recently in a decision by then Judge Alito. *Watson v. Southeastern Pennsylvania Transp. Authority*, 207 F.3d 207, 222-23 (3d Cir. 2000) (opinion by Alito, J.); *Smith v. Borough of Wilkinsburg*, 147 F.3d 272, 280 (3d Cir. 1998).

> In *Smith*, the Court held it to be reversible error to fail to instruct the jurors that "they are entitled to infer, but need not, that the plaintiff's ultimate burden of demonstrating intentional discrimination by a preponderance of the evidence can be met if they find that the facts needed to make up the prima facie case have been established and they

> disbelieve the employer's explanation for its decision." 147 F.3d at 280.

Watson, 207 F.3d at 222.

At the urging of the EEOC,[11] the Fifth Circuit has adopted the rule in *Cabrera* and *Smith* that a plaintiff is entitled to a *Reeves* pretext inference instruction. *Ratliff v. City of Gainesville, Texas*, 256 F.3d 355, 360-61 (5th Cir. 2001). *Ratliff* held that it was reversible error for the trial court to refuse to give a *Reeves* inference instruction.[12] In the absence of that requested instruction "the jury instructions failed to conform to *Reeves* or to our precedent post-*Reeves*." 256 F.3d at 362. "[T]he district court erred in failing to give an inference instruction." 256 F.3d at 364.

The Tenth Circuit held in *Townsend v. Lumbermens Mutual Cas. Co.*, 294 F.3d 1232, 1241-42 (10th Cir. 2002), that a *Reeves* inference instruction is mandatory, explaining that it was "persuaded by the

---

[11] Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Ratliff v. City of Gainesville*, No. 99-41472 (5th Cir.).

[12] The requested instruction was:

> If the Plaintiff disproves the reasons offered by Defendants by a preponderance of the evidence, you may presume that the employer was motivated by age discrimination.

256 F.3d at 359.

position of the EEOC." 294 F.3d at 1241.[13] "[W]e hold that in cases such as this, a trial court must instruct jurors that if they disbelieve an employer's proffered explanation they may – but need not – infer that the employer's true motive was discriminatory." 294 F.3d at 1241.

Most recently the Fourth Circuit has

> h[e]ld that when the evidence presented at trial creates some likelihood that the jury might disbelieve the legitimate, non-discriminatory reasons given by the employer to justify its actions, then the jury should be instructed on this permissible inference.

Kozlowski v. Hampton School Bd., 77 Fed.Appx. 133, 144 (4th Cir. 2003); see *id.* (in such cases the court should "instruct jurors that they may, but need not, infer discrimination from their disbelief of an employer's stated reasons.").

B. The Seventh, Ninth and Eleventh Circuits Hold That A *Reeves* Inference Instruction Is Never Mandatory

The decision of the Ninth Circuit in the instant case adopts the rule in the Seventh and Eleventh

---

[13] See Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Townsend v. Lumbermens Mutual Casualty Co.*, No. 00-3055 (10th Cir.).

Circuits that a *Reeves* inference instruction is not mandatory.

In *Gehring v. Case Corp.*, 43 F.3d 340 (7th Cir. 1994), the Seventh Circuit held that counsel for the plaintiff, not the trial judge, is responsible for explaining to the jury that it may infer the existence of discrimination from the falsity of a defendant's explanation.

> Gehring ... wanted the judge to instruct the jury about one permissible inference: that if it did not believe the employer's explanation for its decisions, it may infer that the employer is trying to cover up age discrimination. This is a correct statement of the law, ... but a judge need not deliver instructions describing all valid legal principles.... Many an inference is permissible. Rather than describing each, the judge may and usually should leave the subject to the argument of counsel.

43 F.3d at 343.

The Eleventh Circuit also insists that a trial judge need not give a *Reeves* inference instruction.

> We agree with [the plaintiff] that his proposed instruction on pretext accurately states the law – the jury's disbelief of an employer's stated reason for termination may be enough to infer intentional discrimination.... We reject [the plaintiff's] contention that *Reeves* requires a pretext instruction to

> be given to the jury in an employment discrimination case.

Conroy v. Abraham Chevrolet-Tampa, Inc., 375 F.3d 1228, 1233 (11th Cir. 2004).

The First and Eighth Circuits have indicated a disinclination to require a *Reeves* inference instruction, but have not squarely decided the issue.[14]

C. This Inter-Circuit Conflict Is Widely Recognized

Both the Ninth Circuit and the Department of Justice in its brief in the court below expressly recognized the existence of the inter-circuit conflict on this issue. See pp. 8-9, *supra*.

In *Kozlowski v. Hampton School Board* the Fourth Circuit summarized the division among the courts of appeals.

---

[14] In *Fite v. Digital Equipment Corp.*, 232 F.3d 3 (1st Cir. 2000), the First Circuit commented that "we doubt that such an explanation is compulsory, even if properly requested." 232 F.3d at 7. That court of appeals did not resolve the issue, however, because there had been no timely request for such an instruction. *Id.*

In a footnote in *Moore v. Robertson Fire Protection District*, 249 F.3d 786 (8th Cir. 2001), the Eighth Circuit remarked, "We do not express any view as to whether it ever would be reversible error for a trial court to fail to give a pretext instruction, though we tend to doubt it." 249 F.3d at 790 n.9.

> Different courts have taken varied approaches ... on the question of whether a court is required to instruct a jury on the inference of discrimination that may be drawn from disbelief of the employer's stated reasons for its actions. At least three circuits have held ... that an instruction on this permissible inference is required, at least in cases where it appears from the evidence that the jury may doubt the employer's stated reasons for its actions, and that the failure to provide the instruction in such circumstances may constitute reversible error.... In contrast, the Seventh Circuit has held that while the instruction may be given, it is not required....

77 Fed.Appx. at 142-43.

In *Conroy* the Eleventh Circuit also acknowledged the split on this issue.

> We do realize that some circuits in the wake of *Reeves*, now require the district courts to include a pretext instruction in their jury charge.... [O]ther circuits have not interpreted *Reeves* to require a pretext instruction.... We agree with those circuits that have not held *Reeves* to govern the question of whether a pretext instruction is necessary....

Conroy, 375 F.3d at 1233-34 (contrasting decisions in the Second, Third, Fifth and Tenth Circuits with decisions in the First, Seventh and Eighth Circuits).

In adopting the requirement of a *Reeves* inference instruction, the Third Circuit noted that while "the Seventh Circuit has signified its approval" of the absence of such an instruction, "the Second Circuit has expressly required more." *Smith v. Borough of Wilkinsburg*, 147 F.3d at 279 (quoting *Cabrera*). The Tenth Circuit decision in *Townsend*, which adopted that same requirement, relied on the Second Circuit decision in *Cabrera* and the Third Circuit decision in *Smith*. 294 F.3d at 1237-38. It candidly acknowledged, however, "that other circuits' opinions differ from the *Smith* and *Cabrera* requirements." 294 F.3d at 1238. The First Circuit, while expressing doubts as to the necessity of a *Reeves* instruction, acknowledged that such an instruction was indeed required by the Third Circuit under *Smith*. *Fite*, 232 F.3d at 7.

The Eighth Circuit has similarly recognized that "circuits that have addressed the requirement of pretext instructions are split." *Moore v. Robertson Fire Protection District*, 249 F.3d at 790 n.9 (contrasting decisions in the Second and Third Circuits with decisions in the First, Seventh and Eleventh Circuits). The Fifth Circuit has noted that while several "circuits agree with our decision in *Ratliff*," requiring the giving of a *Reeves* inference instruction, "[m]any of our sister circuits do not understand *Reeves* to *require* that instruction." *Kanida v. Gulf Coast Medical Personnel, LP*, 363 F.3d 568, 574 (5th Cir. 2004) (emphasis in original) (contrasting decisions in the Second, Third, Fifth and Tenth Circuits with decisions in the Eighth and Eleventh Circuits).

The existence of this inter-circuit conflict has also been recognized by other lower courts,[15] the EEOC,[16] and numerous commentators.[17]

---

[15] E.g., *Conroy v. Abraham Chevrolet-Tampa, Inc.*, 2003 WL 25738230 at *5 (M.D. Fla.).

[16] Brief of The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *DiJoseph v. Invivo Research, Inc.*, No. 03-13754-HH (11th Cir.), at 23.

[17] Comment, "Pretext Instructions in Employment Discrimination Cases: Inferring A New Disadvantage for Plaintiffs," 57 Fla.L.Rev. 411, 413 n.22 (2005) (noting that "[t]here are two prevailing schools of thought on [the issue]," contrasting the decisions in the Second, Third and Fifth Circuits with the decisions in the Seventh and Eighth Circuits); E. Jones, J. Dugas, and J. Youpa, "Employment and Labor Law," 58 S.M.U.L.Rev. 785, 806 (2005) (contrasting decisions in the Second, Third and Tenth Circuits with decisions in the First, Eighth and Eleventh Circuits); S. Kaminshine, "Disparate Treatment As A Theory of Discrimination: The Need for A Restatement, Not A Revolution," 2 Stan.J.Civ.Rts. & Civ.Liberties 1, 15 n.76 (2005) ("[c]ourts are divided over whether juries must be given a pretext instruction"; contrasting decisions in the Second, Third and Tenth Circuits with decisions in the First, Seventh and Eighth Circuits); C. Belmont, "The Imperative of Instructing on Pretext: A Comment on William J. Vollmer's Pretext in Employment Discrimination Litigation: Mandatory Instructions for Permissible Inferences?", 61 Wash. & Lee L.Rev. 445, 447 (2004) (noting "split that has developed in the Courts of Appeals"); C. Wheeler, "Comments on Pretext in Employment Discrimination Litigation: Mandatory Instructions for Permissible Inferences?", 61 Wash. & Lee L.Rev. 459, 463 (2004) (noting "emerging split in the courts of appeals"); W. Vollmer, "Pretext in Employment Discrimination Litigation: Mandatory Instructions for Permissible Inferences?", 61 Wash. & Lee L.Rev. 407, 408 (2004) ("a circuit split currently exists regarding whether a trial court must instruct the jury that it may, but need not, infer intentional discrimination on the part of the employer if the jury disbelieves the employer's

(Continued on following page)

II. THE QUESTION PRESENTED IS OF MANIFEST AND CONSIDERABLE IMPORTANCE

The question presented in this case could arise in virtually every federal discrimination and retaliation case tried to a jury. In the vast majority of these cases the plaintiff relies, often heavily, on proof that the defendant's stated reasons for its actions were false. The availability of a *Reeves* inference instruction could affect the trial and the jury instructions in trial of almost all of these cases. In the instant case, as in others, the defendants' insistent opposition to such an instruction is telling evidence of its potential impact on the jury verdict. This issue has been litigated not only (as here) in Title VII cases,[18] but also in cases arising under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act,[19] the Americans with Disabilities

---

explanation"); T. Devine, Jr., "The Critical Effect of a Pretext Jury Instruction," 80 Den.U.L.Rev. 549, 549 (2003) (noting the "dispute" among the circuits); K. Smith, "How Do We Work This? Making Sense of the Liability Standard in 'Disparate Treatment' Employment Discrimination Cases," 14 Me.B.J. 34, 40 (1999) (noting circuit split); W. Corbett, "Of Babies, Bath Water, and Throwing Out Proof Structures: It Is Not Time to Jettison *McDonnell Douglas*," 2 Employee Rts. & Emp. Pol'y J. 361, 387 (1998) (noting division among the circuits).

[18] *Townsend v. Lumbermens Mutual Casualty Co.*, 294 F.3d at 1234; *Watson v. Southeastern Pennsylvania Transp. Authority*, 207 F.3d at 212.

[19] *Conroy v. Abraham Chevrolet-Tampa, Inc.*, 375 F.3d at 1230; *Kozlowski v. Hampton School Bd.*, 77 Fed.Appx. at 137; *Ratliff v. City of Gainesville, Texas*, 256 F.3d at 359; *Fite v. Digital Equipment Corp.*, 232 F.3d at 5; *Smith v. Borough of*

(Continued on following page)

Act,[20] the Fair Housing Act,[21] the Fair Labor Standards Act,[22] section 1981,[23] and section 1982.[24]

This Court twice granted certiorari, in *Reeves* itself and earlier in *Hicks*, to decide whether it is permissible for a trier of fact to infer the existence of an unlawful motive from the falsity of a defendant's proffered explanation. The question presented in the instant case is fully as important as the issue which warranted review in *Reeves* and *Hicks*. Whether a jury is to be told about the inference permitted by *Reeves* is assuredly as significant as the decision in *Reeves* itself permitting a jury to actually draw that inference.

The repeated EEOC amicus briefs in support of requiring a *Reeves* inference instruction have correctly stressed the significance of this question,

---

Wilkinsburg, 147 F.3d at 275; *Gehring v. Case Corp.*, 43 F.3d at 342.

[20] *Fite v. Digital Equipment Corp.*, 232 F.3d at 5; *Watson*, 207 F.3d at 212.

[21] *Cabrera v. Jakabovitz*, 24 F.3d at 379.

[22] *Kanida v. Gulf Coast Medical Personnel LP*, 363 F.3d at 573.

[23] *Townsend*, 294 F.3d at 1234; *Cabrera*, 24 F.3d at 379.

[24] *Cabrera*, 24 F.3d at 379.

noting "the importance of this issue to ... effective enforcement efforts."[25]

> We are concerned that, unless courts instruct juries ... that they may find that the defendant discriminated against the plaintiff if they find that defendant's stated reasons for the challenged decisions are not the true reasons, ... plaintiffs will be unfairly deprived of the benefit of an important method of proof.[26]

"[T]he instruction accurately states an important principal of proof in disparate treatment cases."[27]

Because of the current conflict on this issue, juries hearing identical discrimination claims on identical records will receive different instructions, depending on the location of the courthouse in which the trial is held. In five circuits the jury will be told that it may infer the existence of a discriminatory motive from the falsity of the defendant's explanation. In three circuits the jury will receive no such

---

[25] Brief of The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *DiJoseph v. Invivo Research, Inc.*, No. 03-13754-HH (11th Cir.), at 1.

[26] Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Ratliff v. City of Gainesville*, No. 99-41472 (5th Cir.), at 2; see Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Townsend v. Lumbermens Mutual Casualty Co.*, No. 00-3055 (10th Cir.), at 1-2 (same).

[27] Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Townsend v. Lumbermens Mutual Casualty Co.*, No. 00-3055 (10th Cir.), at 18.

explanation, and will be at liberty to conclude (as the Fifth Circuit mistakenly did in *Reeves*) that a plaintiff claiming discrimination must produce some other type of evidence. Because of this pivotal difference in instructions, the outcome of a trial will inevitably depend at times on the circuit in which the case is heard.

III. THE DECISION OF THE COURT OF APPEALS IS CLEARLY INCORRECT

The courts of appeals which require the giving of a *Reeves* inference instruction have correctly focused on an intensely practical problem: in the absence of that instruction juries are likely to make the same error committed by federal lower court judges prior to *Reeves* itself, mistakenly assuming that something more than proof of the falsity of an employer's explanation is required to support an inference of discrimination.

In *Smith* the Third Circuit explained that the caselaw which permits a trier of fact to infer discrimination from the falsity of a defendant's explanation is based on an extensive body of judicial experience evaluating discrimination cases, experience which juries themselves simply would not have. Although that caselaw is grounded in the notion

> that any party's false testimony may be taken as evidence of its having fabricated its case, ... this does not mean that the jury will know without being told that its disbelief in

> the employer's proffered reason may be evidence that, coupled with evidence establishing plaintiff's prima facie case, will support a finding of intentional discrimination. While it may appear to us, looking from the perspective of our knowledge of the reported opinions that the evidentiary framework is nothing more than common sense, the jury comes to its task without that background or experience.

147 F.3d at 280. The Third Circuit correctly observed that it was unlikely that a civil jury would in a few hours of deliberations arrive at the understanding which the federal judiciary had required many years to grasp regarding the significance of the falsity of a defendant's explanation.

> In light of the decades it has taken for the courts to shape and refine the *McDonnell Douglas* standard into its present form and the inordinate amount of ink that has been spilled over the question of how a jury may use its finding of pretext, it would be disingenuous to argue that it is nothing more than a matter of common sense. Indeed, the answer to the question of whether a jury is allowed to infer discrimination from pretext eluded many of the federal courts of this country for a substantial period of time.

147 F.3d at 280-81.

The Third Circuit also explained that the traditional jury instruction about witness credibility provides a jury with insufficient guidance.

> The ... charge ... instructed the jury that it could discredit a witness's testimony if it found inconsistencies or discrepancies therein. This, however, merely instructed the jurors as to when they may disbelieve a witness. It said nothing about what the jury may do or infer once the jurors had decided to disbelieve the employer's proffered reason.

147 F.3d at 280.

The Fourth Circuit in *Kozlowski* pointed out the need for a *Reeves* inference instruction to prevent jurors from making the same mistake as had some federal judges regarding whether the falsity of a defendant's explanation would support an inference of discrimination.

> We agree with the general principle that a judge need not instruct a jury on all valid legal principles in a given case. Nonetheless, the particular inference at issue here – that if the jury disbelieves the reasons given by the employer to justify its actions, then the jury may infer discrimination – has in the past sparked considerable disagreement among the courts.... Given the amount of disagreement among judges of the federal courts of appeals over whether a jury may infer discrimination simply from their disbelief of the employer's stated justifications, it seems unlikely that jurors will uniformly intuit that such an inference is permissible.

77 Fed.Appx. at 143.

The Fifth Circuit in *Ratliff* recognized that this problem cannot be avoided merely by instructing the jury that it can rely on circumstantial evidence to find discrimination. The Fifth Circuit noted that even federal district judges in that circuit – all of whom certainly knew that circumstantial evidence is probative – had repeatedly and mistakenly concluded that the falsity of a defendant's explanation could not support an inference of discrimination. 256 F.3d at 360. The Fifth Circuit reasoned that it would be unrealistic to assume that juries, unaided by any pretext instruction, would arrive on their own at the rule in *Reeves*.

> Without a charge on pretext, the course of the jury's deliberations will depend on whether the jurors are smart enough or intuitive enough to realize that inferences of discrimination may be drawn from evidence establishing plaintiff's prima face case and the pretextual nature of the employer's proffered reasons for its actions. It does not denigrate the intelligence of our jurors to suggest that they need some instruction in the permissibility of drawing that inference.

256 F.3d at 361 n.7 (quoting *Smith*).

The Tenth Circuit as well recognizes that a *Reeves* inference instruction is necessary because of the risk that juries would make the same error that had been made by the court of appeals in *Reeves* itself, and would incorrectly assume that proof of the

falsity of an employer's explanation could not support an inference of discrimination.

> [P]erhaps most significantly, we note that the Supreme Court in *Hicks* and *Reeves* cleared away a circuit split over the so-called "pretext-plus" theory which said that a jury's rejection of an employer's proffered explanation could not, by itself, suffice to show discriminatory motive.... Even after *Hicks*, federal courts had not yet fully abandoned the "pretext-plus" theory. See *Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Products, Inc.*, 197 F.3d 688, 693 (5th Cir. 1999).... This is a difficult matter for courts, and would certainly be difficult for a jury. We consider the danger too great that a jury might make the same assumption that the Fifth Circuit did in *Reeves*.

294 F.3d at 1240-41. The Tenth Circuit recognized that this problem can be avoided only by an instruction from the court, not by mere argument of counsel.

> [T]he permissibility of an inference of discrimination from pretext alone is a matter of law that the Supreme Court recently clarified in *Reeves*....
>
> While counsel may be relied on to point out facts and suggest reasoning, the judge's duty to give an instruction on an applicable matter of law is clear. That is particularly true where, as here, the law goes to the heart of the matter....

> It is unreasonable, we think, to expect that jurors, aided only by the arguments of counsel, will intuitively grasp a point of law that until recently eluded federal judges who had the benefits of such arguments.

294 F.3d at 1241 n.5.

The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the federal agency with primary responsibility for enforcing Title VII, has repeatedly recognized that a plaintiff is entitled to a *Reeves* inference instruction. In four briefs filed in three different courts of appeals, the EEOC has consistently maintained that it is improper for a district court to deny the type of jury instruction requested in this case.[28]

---

[28] Brief of The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *DiJoseph v. Invivo Research, Inc.*, No. 03-13754-HH (11th Cir.) at 11-12:

> The district court committed reversible error in declining to instruct the jury that it was permitted to infer a discriminatory motive if it disbelieved Defendant's explanation.... Trial courts should instruct jurors that a plaintiff may prove discriminatory motive by means of a negative inference from the falsity of the employer's explanation.

(Capitalization omitted). Brief of The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Conroy v. Abraham Chevrolet-Tampa, Inc.*, No. 03-11405-GG (11th Cir.), 2003 WL 23744565 at *13:

> The district court ... committed reversible error in declining to instruct the jury that it was permitted to infer a discriminatory motive if it disbelieved [the

(Continued on following page)

Such an instruction, the EEOC maintains, "goes to the heart of Plaintiffs' method of proving discrimination."[29]

> By failing to explain to the jury that it was permitted to infer that the [defendant] acted on the basis of age if it found that the [defendant's] stated reasons ... were false, the court created a real risk that the jury would reject [the plaintiff's] claim because it erroneously believed that he was required to ... establish a discriminatory motive by affirmative evidence *in addition to* the evidence that the proffered reasons were not the real reasons....
>
> The legal point explained in plaintiff's proposed instruction ... is a simple one.

> defendant's] explanation.... [W]ithout an appropriate instruction on "pretext," a reasonable jury could not be expected to understand that it is permitted to infer ... age discrimination based on a finding that the defendant's asserted reason was not the true reason.

Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Townsend v. Lumbermens Mutual Casualty Co.*, No. 00-3055 (10th Cir.) at 9:

> Trial courts should instruct jurors that a plaintiff may prove discriminatory motive by means of a negative inference from the falsity of the employer's explanation.

(Capitalization omitted). Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Ratliff v. City of Gainesville*, No. 99-41472 (5th Cir.) at 8 (same).

[29] Brief of The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *DiJoseph v. Invivo Research, Inc.*, at 12.

> However, it is not intuitively obvious.... The possibility of [jury] error is demonstrated by the fact that several courts have made it. After ... *Hicks* ... a number of appellate courts interpreted [that decision] to mean that the plaintiff must produce some affirmative evidence of discriminatory motive in addition to the prima facie case and proof that the stated reasons are false.... The confusion over this point led the Supreme Court to grant certiorari in *Reeves* to clarify the precise point that [the plaintiff] asked the district court to explain to the jury.[30]

(Emphasis in original). "[W]ithout an appropriate instruction on pretext, a reasonable jury could not be expected to understand that it is permitted to infer ... discrimination based on a finding that the defendant's asserted reason was not the true reason."[31]

> In the absence of the proper instruction on "pretext/inference," there is no way to determine, from the verdict, whether the jury decided the defendant's proffered reason was credible, or whether the jury disbelieved the defendant's explanation but concluded, incorrectly, that such a disbelief was not enough to sustain [the plaintiff's] burden of proving ... discrimination.... Counsel's arguments are

---

[30] Brief of The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Ratliff v. City of Gainesville*, at 11-13.

[31] Brief of The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *DiJoseph v. Invivo Research, Inc.* at 11-12.

> not an adequate substitute for a complete and accurate statement of the law by the judge....[32]

The position advanced by the defendant in the courts below has been rejected by all the courts of appeals. In the district court the government emphatically objected that a requested *Reeves* pretext inference instruction would actually be improper, asserting that such an instruction would be "argumentative" and would "improperly suggest[ ] that the defendant's explanation for any adverse action must be scrutinized more closely than the plaintiff's own testimony." (Record Excerpts, at 41). In the Ninth Circuit, the Department of Justice suggested that a *Reeves* inference instruction ought not be given because counsel for the plaintiff, not the trial judge, should be responsible for explaining to the jury what inferences can (under *Reeves*) permissibly be drawn from the falsity of a defendant's explanation. Emphasizing the Ninth Circuit's "general disinclination toward permissible inference instructions," the defendant argued that "[p]ermissive inferences should be left to counsel to argue and should not become the responsibility of the trial court." (Appellees' Answering Brief at 37). Even the circuits that do not

---

[32] Brief of The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as *Amicus Curiae*, *Conroy v. Abraham Chevrolet-Tampa, Inc.*, No. 03-11405-GG (11th Cir.), 2003 WL 23744565 at *24-*25.

require the giving of a *Reeves* inference instruction agree that such an instruction is permissible.

IV. THIS CASE PRESENTS AN EXCELLENT VEHICLE FOR RESOLVING THE QUESTION PRESENTED

This case presents an ideal vehicle for resolving the question presented. In the district court, plaintiff made a timely and quite specific request under F.R.C.P. 51 for a *Reeves* inference instruction. The terms of the requested instruction are those required in the Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth and Tenth Circuits.

Plaintiff emphatically litigated this precise issue in the court of appeals. In a published opinion, the Ninth Circuit squarely decided the question presented, and did so in a manner which the court of appeals itself recognized was contrary to the holding of several other circuits.

In the context of this appeal, the question presented is a straightforward legal issue, unencumbered by any fact-bound case-specific considerations. In opposing the requested instruction, the defendants did not argue that there was any circumstance particular to this case which rendered that instruction inappropriate or unnecessary; rather, the government contended that a *Reeves* inference instruction would always be inappropriate. Similarly, in rejecting that proposed instruction the district judge did not rely on any facet peculiar to the instant case, but indicated

she thought such instructions were always frowned upon under Ninth Circuit precedent. Finally, the court of appeals, in affirming the rejection of the requested instruction, clearly held that a trial judge is never required to grant a request for a *Reeves* inference instruction; nothing in the Ninth Circuit opinion turned in any way on the particular facts of this case.

This is a well established, mature conflict which is ripe for resolution by this Court. Seven circuits, encompassing a large majority of all the judicial districts in the United States, have now addressed the question presented. The underlying legal and practical issues have been fully aired by the lower courts, whose decisions reflect a body of experience which can inform this Court's decision.

CONCLUSION

For the above reasons, this Court should issue a writ of certiorari to review the judgment and opinion of the court of appeals.

Respectfully submitted,

ERIC SCHNAPPER*
University of Washington
School of Law
P.O. Box 353020
Seattle, WA 98195
(206) 616-3167

BETH CREIGHTON
ZAN TEWKSBURY
STEENSON, SCHUMANN, TEWKSBURY, CREIGHTON & ROSE, P.C.
500 Yamhill Plaza Building
815 Second Avenue
Portland, OR 97204
(503) 221-1792

Attorneys for Petitioner

**Counsel of Record*