The Case of the Speluncean Explorers: Revisited

Frank H. Easterbrook
THE CASE OF THE SPELUNCEAN EXPLORERS: A FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY SYMPOSIUM

FOREWORD: A CAVE DRAWING FOR THE AGES

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I. INTRODUCTION

When I was a student in law school, my two favorite law review articles were Henry Hart's famous dialogue and Lon Fuller's presentation of the case of the speluncean explorers. They still are.

Why is that so? Perhaps one never quite gets over the joy of discovering a fine work of art or literature when one is young. (I still revere War and Peace, which captivated me as a college sophomore, even though I can't get past the first hundred pages any more.) But I think more is involved here. The wonderful essays by Hart and Fuller each combine a timely consideration of contemporaneous debates with a timeless quality that continues to entice students and scholars to think and write about them some half a century later — and will doubtless engage our successors well into the next millennium. Moreover, each of the essays takes a form that I have always admired and that seems especially suited to the exploration of such basic questions as the nature of our federal union and the nature of law itself: an exchange of views in which competing positions are stated as forcefully as the author knows how. Indeed, an author's ability to make compelling statements of contrasting views is, for me, a powerful signal of the author's worth as a scholar.

Small wonder then that when I was invited to contribute a foreword to this revisiting of Fuller's great work, I felt both flattered and

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1 Unlike several of the writers of the opinions that follow, I cannot resist the temptation to use footnotes (in moderation, of course). The purpose of this footnote is to suggest to the reader that you may well prefer, as I do, to read a foreword, if at all, only after you have read all that follows. This practice not only tends to make the foreword more readable, but also eliminates any chance that the views expressed in the foreword will affect your reactions to what follows. Thus, you are in a better position to assess the merits and defects of the foreword itself. But if you must, read on.


3 Lon L. Fuller, The Case of the Speluncean Explorers, 62 Harv. L. Rev. 616 (1949). The article is reproduced below, see infra, at 1851-75, and for ease of reference, citations will be to the article as it appears in this issue.
intimidated. If good wine needs no bush,\(^4\) and the lily is not made more beautiful by being gilded, then what could I hope to add to such an extraordinary achievement? No more, perhaps, than some thoughts on just why Fuller's piece has proved so durable and so provocative, and some effort to connect its insights with those of our contributors to this celebration.

II. FULLER'S ACHIEVEMENT

To be sure, Fuller, like Hart and just about everyone else, was only mortal, and he could not wholly escape the context of the times in which he wrote. Hart was necessarily dealing with the state of constitutional doctrine as it then stood,\(^5\) and casually followed the custom of the times by using the term "wetback" when referring to a Mexican who had illegally entered the country across the Rio Grande.\(^6\) As for Fuller, his hypothetical case was staffed, by justices who were all male, and though we have little to go on, may also have been all white and all from relatively affluent backgrounds.\(^7\) After all, judges predomi-
nantly had those qualities when Fuller wrote. And when one of his justices wanted to argue that it can be easy to tell that a speaker's precise language contains a slip of the tongue or an overgeneralized command, the justice pointed to the ability of the "stupidest housemaid" to interpret her employer's words in light of their purpose — thus perhaps revealing some assumptions about the nature of the employer-employee relationship, especially when the employee is a domestic. Other examples doubtless abound, as they do in the work of every writer.

But Fuller was still able to write a piece that will endure — one that posed eternal dilemmas in a remarkably lucid and accessible fashion. Let me count the ways.

First, while the hypothetical — about the dilemma facing those who must kill one of their number or all die of starvation — drew loosely on two famous cases, Fuller made his own case more difficult and challenging through a variety of devices. He moved the setting to Newgarth, a jurisdiction of which we know little except for a few matters that leak out of the opinions — for example, that it has precedents, statutes, judges (all male in this case), a chief executive with the power to pardon, and housemaids who may sometimes be stupid. And to confirm the limits of our knowledge, the time of the relevant events is in the fifth millennium.

With respect to the facts themselves, Fuller enriched the knowledge of the defendants and increased the dilemmas of the case in wondrous

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8 Fuller, infra, at 1859 (Foster, J.). To quote Professor Eskridge again, "The only appearances of nonwealthy people in the case are demeaning. . . . Most revealing is the snide reference by Justice Foster — the 'nice' Justice — to the 'stupidest housemaid.'" Eskridge, supra note 7, at 1751 n.112. This point is made the capstone of Professor Paul Butler's opinion on this issue. See infra, at 1917 (Stupidest Housemaid, J.).

9 See Regina v. Dudley & Stephens, 14 Q.B.D. 273 (1884) (involving defendants, who, after twenty days on a lifeboat, killed and then ate the youngest person on the boat — evidently without any agreed-upon procedure for determining the one to be sacrificed — and who were ultimately convicted of murder but had their death sentences commuted); United States v. Holmes, 26 F. Cas. 360 (C.C.E.D. Pa. 1842) (No. 15,383) (involving a defendant who was a member of the crew of a ship that sank and who was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to six months imprisonment for throwing several passengers out of a long-boat so that he and the others in the boat might survive).

10 Some think that to deal with a case fairly and fully, we must be able to explore in depth every aspect of the context in which it arises. Cf., e.g., JOHN T. NOONAN, JR., PERSONS AND MASKS OF THE LAW 111-51 (1976) (discussing the context of Palsgraf v. Long Island Railroad, 162 N.E. 99 (N.Y. 1928)). Of course, no hypothetical can meet such a demanding standard, though Fuller has clearly gone beyond the standard A, B, and C of the law school classroom, and made a concerted effort to provide enough information for full debate of the issues he wanted to raise.
ways. For example, his trapped explorers find out that they cannot be rescued in less than ten days and are assured by experts that their chances of survival for ten days are slim to none unless they eat one of their members. Then, most intriguing of all, they all agree to draw lots (actually, to throw dice), to determine who shall be sacrificed, but before the lottery, Whetmore tries unsuccessfully to pull out of the agreement. Predictably (Fuller was never a candidate for a Booker Prize), Whetmore turns out to be the loser when the dice are cast for him by another, and he is killed and eaten. The others survive and are prosecuted for murder under a statute providing, in its entirety, "Whoever shall willfully take the life of another shall be punished by death."\(^{11}\)

We learn of other important matters as well — that ten members of the rescue party died in the course of their efforts, that Newgarth’s Chief Executive was well known for his hard-nosed attitude toward clemency, and that there were significant precedents on the books, addressing such issues as the availability of self-defense as a justification for killing (despite the failure of the legislature to mention it), the willingness of Newgarth’s courts to construe statutes to avoid absurd results, and the application of the anti-theft law to one who stole bread (Valjean) because he was starving and could not afford to buy it. In sum, as one who has often faltered in the effort to construct a flawless hypothetical, I think that Fuller’s comes about as close to perfection as one can get.

Second, Fuller’s opinions for his five justices managed to express an extraordinary range of views, and to do so with vigor and power. Truepenny, the Chief Justice, plays the role of narrator (a bit like the butler who comes on stage in Act I of a drawing-room comedy to dust the furniture and tell the audience what happened before the curtain went up). But he goes on, briefly but eloquently, to express two important viewpoints: first, that statutory language governs when it is free from ambiguity (as he claims it is in this case); and second, that institutionally, the role of mercy-giver in the criminal context belongs not to the judiciary but to the executive in the exercise of the pardon power.\(^{12}\)

Chief Justice Truepenny is followed by Justice Foster, who strongly disagrees that the conviction must be affirmed, and in doing so puts forward two separate (but perhaps related)\(^{13}\) arguments: the defendants, when they acted, were “in a ‘state of nature,’” as much outside the laws of Newgarth as if they were on the moon, and under the principles applicable in such a state (in other words, the principles of “natural law”), they were guiltless;\(^{14}\) and, in any event, and in a more

\(^{11}\) Fuller, infra, at 1853 (Truepenny, C.J.).
\(^{12}\) See id. at 1853-54.
\(^{13}\) Eskridge suggests that they are, and I agree. See Eskridge, supra note 7, at 1742.
\(^{14}\) Fuller, infra, at 1855 (Foster, J.).
traditional vein, the murder statute must be interpreted in accordance with its purpose — namely, deterrence.\textsuperscript{15} That purpose, he concludes, would no more be served by upholding a conviction on the facts at bar than in the case of the recognized justification of self-defense.\textsuperscript{16}

Justice Foster is then powerfully attacked in the two opinions that follow. Justice Tatting derides Justice Foster’s first argument — questioning when one can decide that an actor has crossed over into a state of nature and how the court acquires its authority to apply natural law — and then heaps similar scorn on Justice Foster’s “purposive” analysis, in part by insisting that purposes are both difficult to ascertain and, usually, multiple.\textsuperscript{17} The justification of self-defense is readily distinguished, the \textit{Valjean} precedent is invoked, and then Justice Tatting, baffled by the difficulty of the case and resentful of the decision to prosecute these hapless defendants under a statute providing a mandatory death penalty, decides to withdraw.\textsuperscript{18}

Justice Keen, a man of similar views but made of sterner stuff, votes to affirm. He insists that his own view of the morality or immorality of the acts charged is irrelevant, and that the court must recognize the supremacy of the legislature by applying the statute as written — not by rewriting it as the justices would like it to read through the dodge of ascertaining some fancied “purpose” or filling some non-existent “gap.”\textsuperscript{19} He even suggests that the courts may have erred years earlier in recognizing the justification of self-defense instead of leaving it to the legislature, if it wished, to spell out the precise contours of such a defense.\textsuperscript{20}

Finally, Justice Handy, the realist-pragmatist, scoffing at the learned debates among the other justices, insists that the justices must follow their own common sense and the popular will — in this case, evidenced by a poll showing that ninety percent of the people want to let the defendants off with little or no punishment — and reverse the convictions.\textsuperscript{21} He suggests achieving this result by using whatever legalistic device seems most adaptable (“handy”?) to the occasion — in this instance, Justice Foster’s second rationale.\textsuperscript{22}

Given a chance to reconsider his withdrawal, Justice Tatting sticks to his guns (if that is an apt metaphor for a coward), and partly as a

\textsuperscript{15} See \textit{id.} at 1858.
\textsuperscript{16} See \textit{id.}
\textsuperscript{17} See Fuller, \textit{infra}, at 1859–61 (Tatting, J.).
\textsuperscript{18} See \textit{id.} at 1863.
\textsuperscript{19} See Fuller, \textit{infra}, at 1864 (Keen, J.).
\textsuperscript{20} See \textit{id.} at 1868.
\textsuperscript{21} See Fuller, \textit{infra}, at 1868, 1870 (Handy, J.). In a delightful passage in which Fuller perhaps gets carried away, Justice Handy dismisses the likelihood of executive clemency on the basis of his knowledge of the Chief Executive’s character — knowledge acquired because, as it happens, “my wife’s niece is an intimate friend of his secretary.” \textit{id.} at 1872.
\textsuperscript{22} See \textit{id.} at 1870.
result of his refusal to face up to his responsibility as a judge, the convictions are affirmed by an equally divided vote.

Thus, Fuller managed in these five opinions to introduce just about every dispute about the nature of law and the role of judges. As Justice Handy notes before launching into his realist critique, the prior opinions have explored the clash between natural law and positivism, have examined a range of approaches to statutory interpretation, and have raised fundamental questions about the roles and limits of our legal institutions.

A third virtue of Fuller's essay is that if one were unfamiliar with his other works, one would be hard-pressed to identify his own preferred approach, although he is perhaps too cynical about the techniques of the realists (as embodied in Justice Handy's opinion) to be readily identified with that school of thought. In fact, Fuller's other works reveal an affinity for both aspects of Justice Foster's approach. Indeed, Fuller's view of the significance of purposive analysis in interpreting statutes gave rise in later years to the "legal process" theories of Professors Hart and Sacks, and yet his criticisms of that approach in the opinions of Justices Tatting and Keen are so trenchant that future scholars have been able to add little to their arguments. As noted earlier, this ability — to recognize and articulate the weaknesses in one's own theories — constitutes, in my view, a hallmark of true scholarship.

Fourth, Fuller not only used his "quintalogue" to explore some of the burning issues of his own day, especially the effort to resolve the challenges that natural law and positivism posed for each other; he also hit upon a technique for articulating these problems that has succeeded in engaging students and teachers ever since — witness this second symposium on the case in the last six years. Moreover, as I try to show, the scholars that have followed him may have cast some further light, but the real illumination still comes from Fuller himself.

Finally, Fuller did all this in a remarkably compact form. Although it is not unusual for a present-day article on an obscure problem of, say, bankruptcy law to stretch out for a hundred dreary pages, Fuller's five opinions consumed only thirty. And the style was not only lucid and accessible; it was also lively and witty throughout. Erwin Griswold, a man of simple tastes and direct speech, caught the essence of Fuller's gift for avoiding pretense and obscurity when he once introduced Fuller as "the only jurisprude I can understand."

23 See Eskridge, supra note 7, at 1737 n.38 (citing Lon L. Fuller, The Law in Quest of Itself (1940); Lon L. Fuller, American Legal Philosophy at Mid-Century, 6 J. Legal Educ. 457 (1954); and Lon L. Fuller, Reason and Fiat in Case Law, 59 Harv. L. Rev. 376 (1946).

III. LATER ANALYSES AND ONSLAUGHTS

A

The first extensive return to Fuller's cave appeared as two articles in the *George Washington Law Review* in 1993. The articles were entitled *The Case of the Speluncean Explorers: Twentieth-Century Statutory Interpretation in a Nutshell* and *The Case of the Speluncean Explorers: Contemporary Proceedings*. Professor William Eskridge, the architect of the project, contributed an introductory analysis of Fuller's work, and his essay was followed by seven new opinions in the case authored by a range of academics. Most of Eskridge's introductory analysis consisted of a scholarly exegesis of Fuller's piece, which Eskridge described as representing "a moment in the Anglo-American debate over the role of equity and natural law in statutory interpretation," and also as a harbinger of the "Legal Process" approach more fully developed in later years by Professors Hart and Sacks. Eskridge also noted the skill with which Justices Tatting and Keen question both the legitimacy and appropriateness of Justice Foster's use of natural law in his first argument and of "purposivism" in his second. Then, as part of his introduction of the opinions that follow, Eskridge notes that the world of the case "and of its Justices — and Lon Fuller's world — [is one] in which the only actors who matter are male, white, affluent, and heterosexual."

Eskridge's introduction is knowledgeable, informative, and generally respectful of Fuller's insights. My view, which is already apparent and which may not quite jibe with his, is that Fuller's essay is much more than a document of historical importance — that it transcends a moment in legal history, or even several moments, and that (granting that it cannot wholly escape the tacit assumptions and understandings of its day) will continue to fascinate and provoke its readers as long as it remains available.

In the seven opinions that followed Eskridge's introduction, perhaps the most notable feature is that not one new justice voted simply to affirm the conviction and sentence; rather, three voted to reverse the conviction; two voted to remand for further factual inquiry relating to — or for jury determination of — guilt or innocence; one voted to re-

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27 Eskridge, *supra* note 7, at 1732.
28 *Id.* at 1743.
29 *Id.* at 1750–51.
mand solely on the question of the appropriate sentence; and one voted to reverse the sentence of execution.\textsuperscript{30}

That no one voted to affirm both the conviction and sentence is, in part, a result of Professor Eskridge’s selection of judges. As he acknowledges, three were selected as representatives of feminist theory and two as representatives of critical race theory.\textsuperscript{31} Of the remaining two, one advocated a “purposive” analysis reminiscent of that espoused by Justice Foster,\textsuperscript{32} while the other appeared to speak for the neorealistic, “critical legal studies” approach presaged by Justice Handy.\textsuperscript{33}

The three advocates of feminist theory were Naomi Cahn, Mary Coombs, and Laura Stein. Professor Cahn voted to remand for further development of the facts in order effectively to “integrate” the ethics of “care and justice.”\textsuperscript{34} Professor Coombs noted that it was too easy for judges to identify themselves with the “privileged” male defendants who found themselves facing death; she then concluded (perhaps in part because of her fear of judicial bias) that, since the record did not establish an effective waiver of trial by jury by the defendants themselves, the case should be retried in order to obtain a jury verdict on the ultimate question of guilt.\textsuperscript{35} Professor Stein, after speculating on the possible impact of the decision on the disempowered (specifically including battered women), concluded that much would be lost by executing these defendants and that as one who “willfully would not give [the defendants] guidance beforehand,” she was “estopped from judging with hindsight.”\textsuperscript{36}

As for the two representatives of critical race theory, Professor John Calmore concluded in light of his own narrative of the history of racial

\textsuperscript{30} This is my reading of the conclusions reached, but in some instances, the authors might disagree with that reading.

\textsuperscript{31} See Eskridge, supra note 7, at 1751–52.

\textsuperscript{32} See Contemporary Proceedings, supra note 26, at 1800 (“We have both the right and the responsibility to interpret statutes in such a way as to serve the apparent legislative purpose — indistinct as that may be . . . .”) (opinion of Professor Geoffrey C. Miller).

\textsuperscript{33} See id. at 1801–07 (opinion of Professor Jeremy Paul). Paul rejects Justice Handy’s reliance on the views of “the common man.” Id. at 1806. But in reaching his conclusion that it would be “monstrous . . . to put these defendants to death for actions we can’t even agree constitute a crime,” id. at 1807, Paul confesses his “inability to announce an overarching principle that compels reversal,” along with his lack of concern that this is so, id. at 1805.

\textsuperscript{34} Id. at 1763 (opinion of Professor Naomi R. Cahn).

\textsuperscript{35} See id. at 1785, 1787, 1789 (opinion of Professor Mary I. Coombs). In Fuller’s hypothetical, the jury foreman asked that the question of guilt be determined by the court on the facts as found, and we are told that “counsel for the defendants” accepted the procedure. Fuller, infra, at 1853 (Truepenny, C.J.).

\textsuperscript{36} Contemporary Proceedings, supra note 26, at 1811 (opinion of Professor Laura W. Stein). Chief Justice Truepenny’s summary of the facts states only that Whetmore (speaking from inside the cave and just before communications were cut off) “asked if there were among the party [outside the cave] a judge or other official” who would tell them whether it “would be advisable” to cast lots to determine who should be eaten, but “[n]one of those attached to the rescue camp was willing to assume the role of advisor in this matter.” Fuller, infra, at 1852 (Truepenny, C.J.). Thus, we are not told whether any judges or other authorities on the law were present at all.
and religious persecution on the planet Newgarth that the entire Newgarthian criminal justice system was suspect "because we on Newgarth live under circumstances of racial oppression,"37 and Professor Dwight Greene, viewing the criminal law as a "legal trap[] ... for the less privileged," decided to affirm the conviction because he knew that the "affluent, all-Caucasoid, male panel" would not overturn the *Valjean* case, and one could not (under a theory of neutral principles?) find murder justifiable in order to survive when theft was punished under similar circumstances.38

This is not the place to analyze each of these approaches in detail. Suffice it to say that while I think there is much to be learned from the neo-realists, the feminists, and the critical race theorists, I do not count myself among any of these schools, and I am troubled by each of their conclusions in the context of Fuller's case. Some have simply refused to accept the case as stated and have used the opportunity to make up a story of their own and then act on the basis of that story. (Fuller might well respond, as I often do in class, that "It's my hypothetical.") Others seem to me to have copped out — Tatting-like — by imagining that more facts might help or by insisting on a trial by jury of the ultimate issues.39 In sum, the opinions rendered in the 1993 Symposium may represent much more of a relatively brief moment in legal history, and much less of a timeless consideration of a fundamental dilemma than Fuller's original. In any event, Fuller's work emerges, in my view, neither bloodied nor bowed.

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We come then to the present symposium. This time, the editors have sought to obtain a broader range of views. Their success in this effort is indicated by the closely divided vote. As I count, the vote to affirm the conviction is 3-3,40 with one of the three who voted for affirmance voting at the same time to invalidate the mandatory death penalty and to remand for further hearing on the issue of the appropriate sentence. Since, unlike Justice Tatting, I have not been assigned a judicial role, I could not break the tie if I wanted to — and I don't. Thus the defendants will have to serve time, but they may not have to

37 Contemporary Proceedings, supra note 26, at 1766 (opinion of Professor John O. Calmore).
38 Id. at 1790–91 (opinion of Professor Dwight L. Greene).
39 Fuller does not tell us whether Newgarth has a constitutional guarantee of jury trial like ours or whether it has a constitution at all. Indeed, I am sure he wanted his readers to think about these issues free from whatever constraints a constitution might impose. Moreover, Professor Coombs seemed determined to jam a jury trial down the defendants' throats whether they wanted one or not — an idea squarely at odds with our own constitutional precedent, see *Patton* v. United States, 281 U.S. 276 (1930).
40 My count assumes that Professor Butler would reverse the conviction in its entirety. If he would reverse only on the issue of the appropriate sentence, then the vote to affirm would be 4-2.
face the tribulations of death row, and worse. (I assume that there is no higher tribunal to which a further appeal would lie.)

A look at the six opinions reveals some surprises and many insights. But once again, I find myself concluding that the foundation for all that has followed was laid by Fuller in his thirty pages, and that while much of the subsequent filigree is entrancing, and sometimes brilliant, both the groundwork and the structure above it can be found in Fuller's pages.

To begin with the justices who voted to affirm, Alex Kozinski (a federal court of appeals judge in real life) takes the "textualist" route blazed by Chief Justice Truepenny and Justice Keen, and also embraces the institutional view espoused by Chief Justice Truepenny in his reference to the possibility of relief in the "political arena." Adding to Fuller's arguments, Kozinski points out that we cannot be sure that the defendants took the wisest course — perhaps they should have waited for one of their number to expire before diving into their questionable repast — and that judges should not engage in lawmaking by disregarding the plain language of a statute. For example, he asks, should the courts permit an indictment and conviction for killing a dog ("canicide") on the theory that the drafters of the statute have left a gap that needs to be filled?

This opinion is an eloquent statement of the textualist view, but it raises some concerns. Should the courts regard themselves only as messengers when applying the broad language of a statute to a particular problem as long as the words used are "plain"? Should it matter that the legislature, in the light of centuries of experience, may have come to expect the process of interpretation to comprise elements of both agency (the court as applier of the legislature's mandates) and partnership (the court as fine tuner of the legislature's general, and sometimes overly general, proscriptions and commands)? To take the case at hand, Kozinski manages to sidestep the problem posed for him by the earlier precedent (in Fuller's hypothetical), recognizing a "common law" justification of self-defense. He does so by invoking other statutory provisions, apparently not on the books when Fuller wrote, that "define justifiable homicide" and then by chiding the defendants for not invoking these previously unknown statutes, "doubtless be-
cause they do not apply.\textsuperscript{43} And his "canicide" example\textsuperscript{44} is especially ironic in view of the statutory language proscribing the killing of "another." Another what?\textsuperscript{45} Living thing? Homo sapiens? The question may not be answerable without an analysis of legislative purpose — with whatever materials are at hand.

The next vote to affirm, cast by Cass Sunstein, may come as a bit of a surprise to some, but the opinion is in fact a masterful application of Sunstein's view, developed elsewhere in his writings, that it is possible to reach a result on the basis of what he has described as an incomplete theory — one that reasons by analogy and does not resolve the most fundamental issues of the nature of law.\textsuperscript{46} While recognizing the virtues of a plain meaning approach (and indeed placing a good deal of reliance on that aspect of the case), as well as of a purposive analysis, Sunstein at the same time points out their weaknesses and limitations.\textsuperscript{47} For him, the problem is best approached by a comparison of the facts to the prototypical case at which the statute is aimed (the killing of an innocent for selfish purposes) and to its polar opposite (a killing to prevent the destruction of life by a wrongdoer). Following this analogy, Sunstein concludes that this killing should not be held justifiable, especially because Whetmore made a timely effort to pull out of the agreement.

This analysis, in my view, is both stunning in its own right and an illuminating example of Sunstein's broader approach to the resolution of legal problems. But I can't resist noting that its elements were, at least to some degree, present in the opinions of Fuller's justices, including the critiques of textualism and purposivism,\textsuperscript{48} the distinction of the justifications that had been recognized in the past,\textsuperscript{49} and the relevance of Whetmore's effort to get out of the lottery before the dice were thrown.\textsuperscript{50}

Robin West casts the third vote for affirmance of the conviction. After rehearsing (with some new insights) the arguments of Justices

\textsuperscript{43} Id. at 1879.

\textsuperscript{44} In this example, Kozinski asks whether it would be appropriate for a court to remedy a "legislative oversight" or fill in what may or may not have been an inadvertent gap in the statute, by applying the law to the killing of a dog. Id. at 1878.

\textsuperscript{45} See Eskridge, supra note 7, at 1798 (opinion of Professor Geoffrey C. Miller) ("There are many contexts in which 'another' can mean an animal. True, we naturally read the qualification 'human being' after the word 'another,' but that is only because execution for killing an animal seems excessive.").


\textsuperscript{47} See infra, at 1884–85 (Sunstein, J.).

\textsuperscript{48} See Fuller, infra, at 1860–62 (Tatting, J.), 1864–67 (Keen, J.).

\textsuperscript{49} See Fuller, infra, at 1861 (Tatting, J.) (noting the impulsive character of resisting an aggressive threat to one's life).

\textsuperscript{50} See id. at 1862 (questioning whether it would have mattered if Whetmore had refused from the beginning to participate in the plan).
Tatting and Keen that a statute of this kind has multiple, sometimes conflicting and sometimes unknowable, purposes, Professor West focuses on the distinction between the case at bar and the classic justification of self-defense. She joins with Sunstein in noting that it is one thing to resist aggression and quite another deliberately to take an innocent life in order to save the lives of others. (In the course of this discussion, she analogizes Whetmore’s plight to that of a woman who cannot be required to sacrifice her own life to save that of the fetus within her.) Finally, she concludes that the mandatory death penalty cannot withstand constitutional assault because it fails to permit consideration of mitigating circumstances. At least when it comes to punishment, she insists, we need not “bifurcate” justice and mercy.

Once again, the seeds of these powerful arguments were planted by Fuller in his critique of purposive analysis, in his distinction of the case of self-defense against an aggressor, and in his suggestion (in Justice Handy’s opinion) that a formalistic separation of institutional roles — leaving questions of “mercy” to the executive branch — was a dubious exercise. Of course, Fuller did not have the benefit (if that’s what it is) of our Supreme Court’s later pronouncements on the validity of the death penalty, or of its decisions dealing with the constitutionality of limitations or prohibitions on abortion. Indeed, it is far from clear that Newgarth has a constitution that bears any resemblance to ours or that our Supreme Court’s highly controversial and somewhat meandering interpretations of the Constitution on these issues should serve as a model. And in any event, West’s use of the abortion analogy is a puzzling one since it could, in my view, be turned completely around. Perhaps instead of analogizing Whetmore to the woman who may not be sacrificed to save the life of the fetus within her, we might more appropriately draw the analogy between the mother and the defendants. After all, just as the greater good may consist in allowing the sentient mother to preserve her health or life by sacrificing an unborn child, so the greater good may be achieved by

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51 See infra, at 1895–97 (West, J.).
52 See id. at 1896–97.
53 See id. at 1899.
54 See id. at 1898.
55 See Fuller, infra, at 1870–73 (Handy, J.).
56 The history of the Supreme Court’s struggle with the constitutional problems presented by capital punishment is remarkable, with respect to both the changes in the Court’s approach over time and the deep divisions within the Court at any particular time. For several decades, the Court has grappled with a steady series of cases involving the permissible circumstances in which capital punishment may be imposed, as well as the considerations that may, may not, or must be taken into account. See Carol S. Steiker & Jordan M. Steiker, Sober Second Thoughts: Reflections on Two Decades of Constitutional Regulation of Capital Punishment, 109 HARV. L. REV. 355 (1995) (describing and critiquing the Supreme Court’s treatment of these issues since 1972 and concluding that “the death penalty is, perversely, both over- and under-regulated”).
57 See supra note 39.
sacrificing one innocent to preserve the lives of many (at least if fair procedures are followed).

When we turn to those who would reverse the convictions, Frank Easterbrook's vote and rationale may come as something of a surprise to those who associate him with the "textualist" approach. In concluding that this case does not fall within the broad language of the statute, Easterbrook (a once and continuing academic and a federal appellate judge in real life) emphasizes such matters as historical context, the common law function of the courts in developing defenses to criminal charges, and the role of the courts not just as agents but as partners of the legislature in fitting new statutes into the "normal operation" of the legal system.58 His thoughtful distinction between the Valjean case and the case of the starving mountaineer is presented as part of a "utilitarian" analysis of the justification of necessity.59 Following this analysis, he concludes that acting behind a veil of ignorance, five explorers willing to take the risks associated with a dangerous expedition would rationally agree in advance to a cannibalistic arrangement that reduced the risk of death by starvation by eighty percent. (He analogizes such an agreement to the use of a connecting rope by mountain climbers.)60

Easterbrook's departure from the textualist orthodoxy in this case is not that surprising, given the sophistication of his approach to statutory construction and the particular nature of this statute. While much legislation represents a carefully-wrought compromise between conflicting forces — a compromise that might be perverted or even wrecked by a refusal to adhere to the text — this criminal statute is surely more sensibly viewed as an over-general prohibition enacted by a legislature that, at least implicitly, contemplated the necessity of judicial fine-tuning.61

Nor should Easterbrook's view of the utilitarian nature of the "necessity" defense, which is, I believe, a major contribution to our thinking about the problem of the case, come as a surprise to those familiar with his academic work. Once again, though, the approach was heralded in Fuller's piece when Justice Foster (in the "natural law" part of his argument) said:

If it was proper that these ten lives [of members of the rescue party] should be sacrificed to save the lives of five imprisoned explorers, why

59 See infra, at 1915 (Easterbrook, J.).
60 See id. at 1915-16.
61 In a previous article, Easterbrook more fully discusses this distinction, emphasizing, inter alia, the difference between a statute that enacts a code of rules, on the one hand, and a statute that delegates a kind of common law interpretive function to the courts on the other. See Frank H. Easterbrook, Statutes' Domains, 50 U. Chi. L. Rev. 533 (1983).
then are we told it was wrong for these explorers to carry out an arrange-
ment which would save four lives at the cost of one?\textsuperscript{62}

That Fuller regarded this analysis as most relevant to a "natural
law" thesis, while Easterbrook sees it as an appropriate tool of statu-
tory interpretation, is revealing. West insists that the prohibition of
murder is about "rights," in particular the right of the innocent not to
be assaulted or killed,\textsuperscript{63} while Easterbrook views the issue of justifica-
tion in terms of the net cost or benefit to those affected.\textsuperscript{64} If Easter-
brook is right, don't we have to worry about how far the many can go
at the expense of the few? And why is it irrelevant that on the "ac-
tual" facts (of the hypothetical), Whetmore tried to pull out before the
drawing — a point not mentioned by Easterbrook? In view of Whet-
more's decision, wouldn't it have been both fairer and at least as
sound from a cost-benefit standpoint to exclude him from the drawing
and from the meal that followed?

Another vote to reverse is cast by Alan Dershowitz, writing under
the pseudonym of Justice De Bunker.\textsuperscript{65} Professor Dershowitz, embel-
lishing Fuller's hypothetical, posits a religious war in the third millen-
nium that culminated, at least for the vast majority of survivors, in the
abandonment of both religious precepts and any notions of natural
law.\textsuperscript{66} Having eliminated one horn of Fuller's dilemma, Dershowitz
proceeds — in the first part of his analysis — to decide for the defen-
dants on the basis of his own preference (which he hopes will appeal to
others) for allowing all conduct that is not explicitly prohibited by law.
Since the murder statute, in his view, does not address the situation at
bar, his preference, derived from his libertarian principles, furnishes a
basis for his vote to reverse.\textsuperscript{67}

While Dershowitz is surely entitled to choose the positivist road, it
is a bit unfair to Fuller's hypothetical to eliminate the clash with natu-
ral law principles by assuming that society rejected the concept of
natural law a thousand years earlier. And as to allowing whatever is
not prohibited, it is hard to quarrel with that view as a general ap-
proach to interpretation — in truth, I find it very attractive — but I'm
not sure that it is helpful in this case. To be sure, there were two
widely noted cases several thousand years earlier (in other jurisdic-
tions), but both resulted in convictions under a general statute like this
one.\textsuperscript{68} To the extent those decisions have any relevance, why isn't the
conviction of the defendants in those cases an indication that if the

\textsuperscript{62} Fuller, infra at 1856-57 (Foster, J).
\textsuperscript{63} See infra, at 1893 (West, J).
\textsuperscript{64} See infra, at 1914 (Easterbrook, J).
\textsuperscript{65} Who turns out to be a "gay woman of color." Infra, at 1901 n.3 (De Bunker, J).
\textsuperscript{66} See id. at 1899-1900.
\textsuperscript{67} See id. at 1904-05.
\textsuperscript{68} See United States v. Holmes, 26 F. Cas. 360, 369 (C.C.E.D. Pa. 1842) (No. 15,383); Regina v.
Dudley & Stephens, 14 Q.B.D. 273, 288 (1884).
Newgarth legislature was aware of the problem, it was quite content with the way it had been treated in the past.\(^6\) Indeed, if Dershowitz’s reading of the statute is correct, can it be taken to prohibit a murder of a kidnap victim when the ransom is not paid, or for that matter, any killing under facts not specified in the statute itself?\(^7\)

Perhaps aware of the difficulties of his “interpretation” of the Newgarth murder statute, Dershowitz goes on in what looks like an alternative rationale to make an argument based on “necessity.”\(^7\) This argument bears a strong resemblance to Easterbrook’s utilitarian calculus, and as I have tried to suggest and others have forcefully argued, such an argument has both virtues and shortcomings. The most important of the shortcomings, in my view, is that it poses agonizing problems for a system of law that seeks in general to protect the innocent from being sacrificed by others for the greater good. In any event, I remain unpersuaded by Dershowitz’s concluding effort to tie together the two strands of his argument by noting that “our legislature has not explicitly spoken to this specific problem [of the nature and scope of a “necessity” defense].”\(^7\)

All of which brings us to Paul Butler’s opinion. Already known for his article in the *Yale Law Journal*, advocating that black jurors practice nullification when black defendants are charged with non-violent crimes,\(^7\) Professor Butler has decided to do himself at least one better. Seizing on Justice Foster’s use of a “stupid[] housemaid”\(^7\) to make a point about purposive construction, Butler writes an opinion from the perspective of that housemaid — and writes it in a style that is a curi-

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\(^6\) Citing what is surely the more famous of these cases — *Regina v. Dudley and Stephens*, 14 Q.B.D. 273 (1884) — in support of his argument, Dershowitz notes that the Dudley court was divided, that the result was followed by executive clemency, and that in any event, “[t]he vast majority of comparable cases — both before and after that decision — resulted in acquittal or decisions not to prosecute . . . .” *Infra*, at 1904 (De Bunker, J.). The first two of these points strike me as furnishing little support for Dershowitz’s argument. Few controversial decisions are unanimous; what is critical is that neither the British nor the Newgarth legislature opted to reject the result. And as for the subsequent commutation, it resembles what Chief Justice Truepenny urged in voting to affirm; such extraordinary cases, he contended, are not appropriate for rules promulgated by courts without any legislative authorization, but rather, they call for the case-by-case exercise of executive discretion focused on the particular circumstances. See *infra*, at 1853–54 (Truepenny, C.J.).

Finally, I am puzzled by the reference to “[t]he vast majority of comparable cases.” There is no citation of supporting authority, and I did not know that the practice of cannibalism in these circumstances is so common that it is possible to speak of the cases in terms of a vast majority. (Perhaps my notion of what cases are comparable is a less expansive one.) There may be a large iceberg under the few appellate cases on the subject, but I am unaware of any empirical studies to support its existence.

\(^7\) Kozinski’s examples in support of this point, *see infra*, at 1880 (Kozinski, J.), are a delight.

\(^7\) *See infra*, at 1905–09 (De Bunker, J).

\(^7\) *Id.* at 1909.


\(^7\) Fuller, *infra*, at 1859 (Foster, J.).
ous mixture of Butler’s version of ebonics, four-letter words, thoroughly Bluebooked legal citations, and rather elegant phrases like “Having determined no moral culpability in the defendants’ actions,” and “[I]n the last part of the twentieth century, ... Negroes ... were difficult and expensive to rehabilitate and it was pleasurable to punish them.” The thrusts of his opinion are that no crime deserving of moral condemnation has been committed, that there is no sense in killing someone to prove that killing is wrong, and that in any event, there is no true rule of law because “the Supreme Court of Newgarth ain’t never gone choose law to favor the poor and colored folks ... at least not to the point that the rich white folks’ richness and whiteness is threatened.” And in the peroration, the housemaid is beguiled by the irony that after “sacrificing the lives of people of color for centuries,” Newgarth has come to the point where “white folks sacrifice white lives for the greater good.”

Granted (as Fuller recognizes in invoking the image of Jean Valjean), the law may appear even-handed when in fact — as Anatole France so brilliantly put it — it frequently treats the poor more harshly than the rich, and the poor in this country have often been people of color, especially blacks. Granted too, Butler’s prose has an attention-grabbing, if disconcerting, shock value. The question still remains whether — by operating on the assumption that Newgarth in the fifth millennium is like twentieth-century society at its worst, and on the more patronizing assumption that a hypothetical “stupid housemaid” is black — Butler has treated Fuller’s case with respect, or has simply used it as a platform to sound a brassier version of a note he has played before. Butler’s challenge to the whole concept of “legal reasoning” echoes the criticism of the legal realists in the early decades of this century and of their intellectual successors in the critical legal studies movement of more recent times. Fuller himself, who valued the rule of law, may have gone overboard in suggesting, through Justice Handy, that the alternative is to take the popular pulse and act ac-

75 Infra, at 1918 (Stupidest Housemaid, J.).
76 Id. at 1919.
77 See id. at 1918.
78 See id.
79 Id. at 1920.
80 Id. at 1923.
81 See Fuller, infra, at 1862 (Tatting, J.).
82 “[T]he majestic equality of the law ... forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.” ANATOLE FRANCE, LE LYS ROUGE 111–23 (1894), quoted in THE OXFORD DICTIONARY OF QUOTATIONS 292 (Angela Partington ed., 4th ed. 1992).
83 I must admit that in spite of myself, I couldn’t help smiling at Butler’s Handy-like trashing of the opinions of the other new justices, as well as of his own, and at the allusion (advertent, I’m sure) to Henny Youngman’s most famous one-liner.
But I am left wondering whether Butler's critique carries us beyond these earlier contributions. As Kozinski states forcefully in his opinion, Butler's approach contains its own puzzling inconsistencies and leaves us in the dark about how a better world might apply the rule of law in a case like this. The difficulty may well lie in Butler's insistence on viewing the explorers' case as a parable about race and class.

A Jewish colleague of mine — one of the participants in this project who shall remain nameless — told me years ago that when he was young, he would come home from a baseball game and announce proudly to his grandmother that "The Dodgers won!," to which his grandmother would reply, "So, is it good for the Jews?" Probably not, but it wasn't bad for them either.

* * *

In raising some questions about the new opinions assembled for this project, I do not mean either to deny the many insights in these opinions or even remotely to suggest that I could have done better. I am quite sure that I could not. But — as the reader must be tired of reading by now — I am convinced that one proposition is established by the continuing debate: Lon Fuller has posed a problem as challenging for those who worry about the law and legal institutions as is the origin and ultimate fate of the universe for astronomers.

84 See Fuller, infra, at 1870 (Handy, J.).
an open mind, untrammeled by the "natural" and "supernatural" myths of the past.

EASTERBROOK, J.* “Whoever shall willfully take the life of another shall be punished by death.” N. C. S. A. (N. S.) § 12-A. Defendants killed and ate Roger Whetmore; they did this willfully (and with premeditation, too). Were the language of the statute the end of matters, the right judgment would be straightforward, as Justices Keen and Kozinski conclude. See supra, at 1864 (Keen, J.); supra, at 1876 (Kozinski, J.). Then when the hangman had finished implementing the judgment, he too would be doomed, for the executioner takes life willfully; likewise we would condemn to death the police officer who shot and killed a terrorist just about to hurl a bomb into a crowd. Yet throughout the history of Newgarth such officers have been treated as heroes, not as murderers — and not just because the Executive declines to prosecute.

Language takes meaning from its linguistic context, but historical and governmental contexts also matter. Recall the text: “Whoever shall willfully take the life of another shall be punished by death.” “[W]illfully take the life of another,” not “be convicted of willfully taking the life of another.” Yet the latter reading is one that all would adopt: in our political system guilt is determined in court, not by the arresting officer or the mob. The statute is addressed in part to would-be killers and in part to judges, who in adjudicating a charge apply the complex rules of evidence that may make it impossible to prove beyond a reasonable doubt the guilt of someone who actually committed a murder. No one believes that N. C. S. A. (N. S.) § 12-A overrules the rules of evidence, the elevated burden of persuasion, the jury, and other elements of the legal system that influence whether a person who committed a killing will be adjudicated a murderer. Like other criminal statutes, N. C. S. A. (N. S.) § 12-A calls for decision according to the legal system’s accepted procedures, evidentiary rules, burdens of persuasion — and defenses.

For thousands of years, and in many jurisdictions, criminal statutes have been understood to operate only when the acts were unjustified. The agent who kills a would-be assassin of the Chief Executive is justified, though the killing be willful; so too with the person who kills to save his own life. Only the latter is self-defense; the case of the agent shows that self-defense is just one member of a larger set of justifications. All three branches of government historically have been entitled to assess claims of justification — the legislature by specifying the

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prohibition and allowing exceptions, the executive by declining to prosecute (or by pardon after conviction), and the judiciary by developing defenses. As a result, criminal punishment is meted out only when all three branches (plus a jury representing private citizens) concur that public force may be used against the individual. The legislature might curtail the role of the judiciary by enacting a closed list of defenses to criminal charges, but it has not done so. New statutes fit into the normal operation of the legal system unless the political branches provide otherwise. N. C. S. A. (N. S.) § 12-A does not provide otherwise. Our legislature could write a law as simple as N. C. S. A. (N. S.) § 12-A precisely because it knew that courts entertain claims of justification. The process is cooperative: norms of interpretation and defense, like agreement on grammar and diction, make it easier to legislate at the same time as they promote the statutory aim of saving life. The terrorist example proves the point.

"Necessity" is the justification offered by our four defendants. After the first landslide, all five explorers were in great peril, and the rescuers outside the cave confirmed that all were likely to starve by the time help came. The choice was stark: kill one deliberately to save four, or allow all five to die. The death of one was a lesser evil than the death of five, and it was therefore the path that the law of justification encouraged. Military commanders throughout time have understood this equation and have sent squads and platoons on missions from which they were not expected to return, so that a greater number might be saved.

Like all of the lesser-evil justifications, necessity is openly utilitarian. Self-defense may reflect uncertainty about the ability of the law to affect conduct by those in imminent fear of death, as Justice Tatting supposes, see supra, at 1862 (Tatting, J.) — though if this is so one wonders why the force used must be the least necessary to defeat the aggression, a restriction that makes sense only if the object of aggression is capable of rational thought and susceptible to influence of legal subtleties. But other lines of justification assume that the actor (our police officer, for example) is calculating and alert. The question is: what shall the law lead him to include or exclude from the calculation?

Allowing a defense of necessity creates a risk that people may act precipitately, before the necessity is genuine. Thus if the law allows a starving mountaineer to break into a remote cabin as a last resort to obtain food — if, in other words, necessity is a defense to a charge of theft — it creates a risk that wanderers will break doors whenever they become hungry, even though starvation is far in the future. The parallel risk is that a hungry and poor person surrounded by food may decide to bypass the market and help himself to sustenance. These risks are addressed by the rule that the evil must be imminent and the means, well, necessary; the departure from the legal norm must be (as
with self-defense) the very least that will avert the evil. *United States v. Bailey*, 444 U.S. 394 (1980), employs this understanding to conclude that a prisoner under threat of (unlawful) torture by the guards may defend against a charge of escape by asserting that the escape was necessary to avert a greater evil, but the prisoner loses that defense if he does not immediately surrender to a peace officer who will keep him in safe custody.

Allowing a defense of necessity creates a second hazard: the very existence of the defense invites extensions by analogy to situations in which criminal liability should not be defeated. That risk is met by the rule that all lawful or less hazardous options must first be exhausted. A prisoner must report his fears to the warden before escaping; and if the warden does nothing, the prisoner must escape rather than harm the guard. *United States v. Haynes*, 143 F.3d 1089 (7th Cir. 1998), which held that a prisoner who poured boiling oil over his tormentor rather than trying to flee could not assert a defense of necessity, illustrates this approach. The difference between the mountaineer case, in which breaking into a cabin is permitted, and *Commonwealth v. Valjean*, which held that a poor person may not steal a loaf of bread from a grocer, is that the poor person could negotiate with the grocer, or get a job, or seek public or private charity. A mountaineer who lacks other options to find food, and cannot negotiate with the cabin’s (missing) owner, may break into the cabin because that is the last resource; theft is a lesser evil than death, though not a lesser evil than working.

Negotiation, actual or potential, offers a good framework with which to assess defenses based on utility. If a defense actually promotes public welfare, then people who are not yet exposed to the peril would agree that the defense should be entertained. Suppose the five speluncean explorers had stopped on the way into the cave to discuss what to do in the event they became trapped. Doubtless they would have undertaken to wait as long as possible for rescue; and it does not stretch the imagination to think that they would have further agreed that if starvation appeared before rescuers did, they would sacrifice one of their number to save the rest. Each would prefer a one-fifth chance of death, if calamity happened, to a certainty of death. Although they might find the prospect so revolting that they would abandon their journey rather than reach such an agreement, the alternative — entering the cave under a set of rules that required all five to starve if any did — would be even worse in prospect. We know that they *did* enter the cave, and did so under a legal regimen that some members of this Court believe condemned all to starve; it follows that they would have preferred an agreement in which each reduced that risk by eighty percent.

Hypothetical contracts are easy to devise; perhaps this accounts for endless philosophical debate about how people negotiate behind a veil.
of ignorance. Judges should subject these speculations to a reality check. What do actual contracts for risk-bearing provide? I refer not to agreements reached after a disaster (such as the explorers’ initial plan to cast dice on the twenty-third day, a plan that Whetmore later abjured in favor of waiting some more), but to agreements made before the fateful venture begins — agreements that encompass all of the relevant options, including the option of avoiding the risk altogether.

Before going underground, spelunkers, like their above-ground comrades the rock climbers, agree to rope themselves together when scaling or descending walls and chimneys. If one loses his grip, the rope may save a life by stopping the fall — but the rope also creates a risk, for the falling climber may take the others down with him. By agreeing to rope up, each member of the group exposes himself to a chance of death because of someone else’s error or misfortune. In exchange he receives protection against his own errors or misfortunes. Each accepts a risk of death to reduce the total risk the team faces, and thus his portion of the aggregate risk. Each agrees, if only implicitly, that if one person’s fall threatens to bring all down, the rope may be cut and the others saved. What happened in the cave after the landslide was functionally the same: one was sacrificed that the others could live. That Whetmore turned out to be that one is irrelevant; the case for criminal culpability would have been equally strong (or weak) had any of the others been chosen. The explorers’ ex ante agreement did not cover the precise form that the risk would take, or the precise way in which total loss would be curtailed, but it established the principle of mutual protection by individual sacrifice. Securing the reciprocity of advantage ex ante justifies the fatal outcome ex post for an individual team member. Society should recognize this agreement, and the way in which it promotes social welfare, through the vehicle of the necessity defense. To reject the defense is to reject the agreement itself, and to increase future loss.

To accept the necessity defense (that is, the risk-sharing agreement) in principle is not necessarily to accept that a given death is within its scope. Rock climbers who cut a dangling comrade’s rope prematurely, without exhausting the options to save all, commit murder. Cicero opined that if two sailors were cast adrift on a plank adequate to support only one until rescue came, each could try to be the survivor without criminal liability. But what if they were mistaken, and the plank would support two for long enough? What if all five explorers could have survived until rescue (on day thirty-two), or could have found another exit by further exploration rather than encamping near the cave mouth? Ancient mariners consented to the practice of survival cannibalism in principle, but a broad defense of necessity would have led them to kill a comrade too quickly. Reports were remarkably consistent in relating that the youngest or most corpulent survivor drew the short straw. See A.W. Brian Simpson, Cannibalism and the
Common Law 124, 131 (1984). To prevent a lesser-evil defense from becoming a license to perpetrate evil, the necessity must be powerful and imminent — again following the self-defense model. But the prosecutor did not argue that the speluncean explorers should have looked for another exit from the caverns, and the jury found that a committee of medical experts had informed the men trapped in the cave that if they did not eat, then there was “little possibility” of their survival until day thirty. The danger that a necessity defense would lead people to magnify (in their own minds) the risk they are facing, and to overreact, did not come to pass. On the facts the jury found, all five very likely would have died had they passively awaited rescue. They acted; four lived. Putting these four survivors to death would be a gratuitous cruelty and mock Whetmore’s sacrifice. The judgment of conviction must be reversed.

Stupidest Housemaid, J.*

No superior wants a servant who lacks the capacity to read between the lines. The stupidest housemaid knows that when she is told “to peel the soup and skim the potatoes” her mistress does not mean what she says.

Supra, at 1858–59 (Foster, J.)

I. THE TRUTH

“O’yeah, O’yeah, O’yeah.” Now comes the “stupidest housemaid” to clean up the mess the white folks have made. Of course the convictions should be reversed. The stupidest housemaid don’t know nothin’ ’bout the rule of law. Of all the pretty things she’s seen in the Big House she ain’t never run cross that. But she knows what she thinks is right. That is the basis of her judgment. As it is the basis of all the other judgments as well. The housemaid the onliest one stupid enough to admit it. Maybe ’cause she got the least to lose.

They call these things opinions for a reason. In the stupidest housemaid’s opinion, the government should not stand a person on a platform, tie a rope around his neck, and then kick the platform out from under him. And invite guests to watch him vomit blood. In the first place, who but the stupidest housemaid gone be left to scrub the blood out the city square? She good at cleaning up white folks’ ugly messes, but it hard work and it take a long time.

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