

In the Supreme Court of the United States

STATE OF OKLAHOMA,

Petitioner,

v.

STEWART WAYNE COFFMAN,

Respondent.

**On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the
Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals**

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether a State has authority to prosecute non-Indians who commit crimes against Indians in Indian country.
2. Whether *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, 140 S.Ct. 2452 (2020), should be overruled.

LIST OF PROCEEDINGS

Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals

F-2018-1268

Stewart Wayne Coffman, Appellant v.
The State of Oklahoma, Appellee

Date of Final Opinion: August 26, 2021

Oklahoma District Court (McCurtain County)

No. CF-2017-301

The State of Oklahoma, Plaintiff v.
Stewart Wayne Coffman, Defendant

Date of Judgment and Sentence: December 17, 2018

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OPINIONS BELOW

The opinion of the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, dated August 26, 2021, is included in the Appendix at App.1a-10a. The order of the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, dated August 14, 2020, remanding the case for an evidentiary hearing is included below at App.17a-21a. The Order of the District Court in and for McCurtain County, State of Oklahoma, dated October 5, 2020, is included below at App.11a-16a. These opinions and orders were not designated for publication.



JURISDICTION

The judgment of the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals was entered on August 26, 2021. App.1a. The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked under 28 U.S.C. 1257(a).



STATUTORY PROVISIONS INVOLVED

18 U.S.C. § 1151 (in relevant part) Indian country defined

[T]he term ‘Indian country’, as used in this chapter, means (a) all land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the United States Government, notwithstanding the issuance of any patent, and, including rights-of-way running through the reservation.

18 U.S.C. § 1152 (in relevant part) Law governing (Indian country)

Except as otherwise expressly provided by law, the general laws of the United States as to the punishment of offenses committed in any place within the sole and exclusive jurisdiction of the United States, except the District of Columbia, shall extend to the Indian country.



STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Thousands of state criminal prosecutions have been called into question by this Court’s decision in *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, 140 S.Ct. 2452 (2020). Like in other pending petitions before this Court, this case presents the question whether *McGirt* should be overruled and, even if not, whether the State has authority to prosecute non-Indians who commit crimes against Indians in Indian country. For the same reasons given in the petition in *Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta*, No. 21-429, review is warranted to examine those questions. The petition for a writ of certiorari in this case should be held pending consideration of the *Castro-Huerta* petition or, in the alternative, granted.

1. On October 5, 2017, respondent had a group of friends, including Joe Battiest, over to drink. Tr. 103-06, 130-35, 138, 150-53, 168-74, 197-201, 210-12, 243-46.* Mr. Battiest had refused several requests by respondent to leave. Tr. 136, 154-55, 179, 182-83, 188-89. After Mr. Battiest and another guest began fighting, respondent hit Mr. Battiest at least six times with a metal pipe. Tr. 136-43, 151-60, 166, 175-78, 184-87, 247-49, 252-56.

Several hours later, respondent borrowed a flashlight from a couple who lived in a trailer on respondent’s property. Tr. 200-03, 207, 210-16, 221-22. The couple later heard the sound of metal hitting PVC

* All fact citations are to the transcript of respondent’s trial (Tr.), which is available below. See Sup. Ct. R. 12.7.

pipe, gurgling noises, and Mr. Battiest saying, “stop.” Tr. 203-04, 207-08, 218-20, 228.

Mr. Battiest was found dead on respondent’s property two days later. Tr. 114-15. He was lying on a piece of PVC pipe. Tr. 114-15. Both of Mr. Battiest’s tibias were fractured below the knee caps. Tr. 304. He died of blunt force trauma to the head, with multiple skull fractures. Tr. 303-06, 322.

Respondent was convicted of first degree manslaughter and sentenced to forty years of imprisonment. He then appealed to the Court of Criminal Appeals, claiming the State lacked authority to prosecute him because Mr. Battiest was Indian and he killed Mr. Battiest in Indian country.

2. After this Court issued its decision in *McGirt*, the Court of Criminal Appeals remanded the case to the trial court for an evidentiary hearing. The parties entered into stipulations, which were accepted by the district court. App.12a, 13a-16a. The court found that Mr. Battiest was a member of the Choctaw Nation with Indian blood, and the crime occurred within the boundaries of the Choctaw Nation. App.12a.

After the state district court issued its order on remand, the case returned to the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals. There, the State argued—as it had in the trial court—that it has concurrent prosecutorial authority over the non-Indian respondent. App.5a. The Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed the district court’s findings and rejected the State’s argument for concurrent prosecutorial authority, which it found unpersuasive, referencing its earlier decision in *Bosse v. State*, 2021 OK CR 3, 484 P.3d 286, *opinion withdrawn by Bosse v. State*, 2021 OK CR 30, ___ P.3d

_____. App.6a. The court reversed the conviction “[p]ursuant to *McGirt*.” App.6a-7a. Judge Lumpkin, who authored the opinion, “included a footnote in which he referenced” his previously expressed view that *McGirt* was wrongly decided. App.1a-2a, n.1. Two judges wrote separate opinions.

Judge Hudson specially concurred based on *stare decisis*, but stated his “previously expressed views on the significance of *McGirt*, its far-reaching impact on the criminal justice system in Oklahoma and the need for a practical solution by Congress.” App.9a.

Judge Lewis also concurred in the result based on his previous writings in *Bosse v. State*, 2021 OK CR 3, 484 P.3d 286, *opinion withdrawn by Bosse v. State*, 2021 OK CR 30, ____ P.3d ___, and *Hogner v. State*, 2021 OK CR 4, ____ P.3d ___. App.10a.



REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION

In the decision below, the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals applied *McGirt* to free yet another criminal—this time a non-Indian—from state custody, exacerbating the crisis in the criminal-justice system in Oklahoma. As the State of Oklahoma explains in its petition in *Castro-Huerta*, reconsideration of *McGirt* is the only realistic avenue for ending the ongoing chaos affecting every corner of daily life in Oklahoma. At a minimum, the impact of *McGirt* can be partially mitigated by affirming the State’s jurisdiction over non-Indians who commit crimes against Indians on a reservation. This case thus presents still one more opportunity to end or limit the damage caused by

McGirt. This petition should be held pending the disposition of the petition in *Castro-Huerta* and then disposed of as is appropriate, or this petition should be granted.

As explained more fully in *Castro-Huerta*, *McGirt* was wrongly decided, and the Court’s review is urgently needed because no recent decision has had a more immediate and disruptive effect on life in an American State. *McGirt* contravened longstanding precedent on the disestablishment of Indian reservations. 140 S.Ct. at 2485 (Roberts, C.J., dissenting). It did so by wrongly reasoning that historical materials showing the original public meaning of statutes may be considered in the disestablishment inquiry “only” to “clear up” statutory ambiguity. *See id.* at 2467-2468, 2469-2470 (majority opinion). But consideration of history is necessary precisely because it is unclear whether Congress’s alienation of Indian lands at the turn of the century changed the Indian country status of the land. *See id.* at 2488 (Roberts, C.J., dissenting). Under the correct framework prescribed by this Court’s precedent, it is clear that Congress disestablished the Creek territory in Oklahoma, as well as the territories of the four other Oklahoma tribes. And with that conclusion, it is clear the decision below is incorrect and warrants reversal.

Overruling *McGirt* and restoring the state jurisdiction it stripped is important not only for this case and the victim of the terrible crime at issue. As the Chief Justice correctly predicted, the “burdens” of the *McGirt* decision on the State of Oklahoma have been “extraordinary.” 140 S.Ct. at 2500. The challenges from that seismic shift in jurisdiction have rippled through every aspect of life in Oklahoma. Most immediately,

McGirt has jeopardized the State’s jurisdiction over thousands of criminal cases—this case being just one of them.

Even assuming nearly half of Oklahoma properly constitutes Indian country for purposes of federal criminal jurisdiction, review is also warranted on the question whether a State has jurisdiction to prosecute a non-Indian, like respondent, for crimes committed against Indians in Indian country. The petition in *Castro-Huerta* sets forth why review of this question is urgent and demonstrates Oklahoma’s continued jurisdiction over these crimes is consistent with statute and precedent. As this Court has repeatedly held, “absent a congressional prohibition,” a State has the right to “exercise criminal (and implicitly, civil) jurisdiction over non-Indians located on reservation lands.” *County of Yakima v. Confederated Tribes & Bands of Yakima Indian Nation*, 502 U.S. 251, 257-58 (1992); *see also United States v. McBratney*, 104 U.S. (14 Otto.) 621, 624 (1881). Meanwhile, nothing in the text of the General Crimes Act, nor any other Act of Congress, prohibits States from exercising jurisdiction over crimes committed by non-Indians against Indians. *See* 18 U.S.C. § 1152.

Thus, this Court in the past has upheld state laws protecting Indians from crimes committed by non-Indians on a reservation. *New York ex rel. Cutler v. Dibble*, 62 U.S. (21 How.) 366, 370-71 (1858). And this Court in *Oklahoma v. Bosse*, No. 20A161, granted a stay presenting this and another question, indicating that these issues involve “extraordinary circumstances” where there is “a reasonable probability that four members of the Court will consider the issue sufficiently meritorious to grant certiorari” and “five Justices are

likely to conclude that the case was erroneously decided below.” *Graves v. Barnes*, 405 U.S. 1201, 1203 (1972) (Powell, J., in chambers).

The questions presented in this case are materially identical to those presented in other petitions already pending before this Court, including *Castro-Huerta*. This Court should hold this petition pending the resolution of those questions in *Castro-Huerta*. Alternatively, in the event certiorari is more appropriate in this case than in another case, the Court should grant review in this case to answer the questions common to all of them.



CONCLUSION

The petition for a writ of certiorari in *Castro-Huerta* should be granted, and the petition in this case should be held pending a decision there and then disposed of as is appropriate. In the alternative, this petition should be granted.

Respectfully submitted,

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