

No. 18-918

In The
Supreme Court of the United States

JOHN COPELAND, PEDRO PEREZ, AND
NATIVE LEATHER, LTD.,

Petitioners,

-v-

CYRUS VANCE, JR. IN HIS OFFICIAL CAPACITY AS
THE NEW YORK COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY, AND
CITY OF NEW YORK,

Respondents.

**On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the United
States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit**

SUPPLEMENTAL BRIEF FOR PETITIONERS

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June 7, 2019

TABLE OF APPENDIX

E-mail from New York Police Department
Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Public
Information to Jesse McKinley, Albany
Bureau Chief, The New York Times (May 31,
2019).....Supp.App.1a

Jesse McKinley, *The ‘Gravity Knife’ Led to
Thousands of Questionable Arrests. Now It’s
Legal*, N.Y. Times, May 31, 2019.....Supp.App.3a

ARGUMENT

I. Assembly Bill 5944 Did Not Moot the Petition Because Gravity Knives Remain Illegal on New York City Subways and Buses, and the NYPD has Announced its Intention to Enforce Those Prohibitions

In their letter dated June 4, 2019, Respondents New York County District Attorney Cyrus A. Vance, Jr. (the “DA”) and the City of New York (the “City”) argue that legislation signed into law on May 30, 2019 renders the Petition moot. Respondents, however, misleadingly failed to inform the Court that gravity knives remain illegal on public transportation in the City, and the New York Police Department (“NYPD”) intends to continue enforcing these unconstitutionally vague prohibitions.

Respondents are correct that Assembly Bill 5944 (“AB 5944”) was signed on May 30, 2019 by Governor Andrew Cuomo, repealing the prohibition on gravity knives found in N.Y. PENAL LAW § 265.01(1). However, Respondents failed to inform the Court that AB 5944 did not repeal the definition of “gravity knife” found in N.Y. PENAL LAW § 265.00(5), which as Respondents acknowledge, is one of the statutory provisions being challenged in this lawsuit, and which is the very source of the unconstitutionally

vague “Wrist Flick Test” -- the main subject of this vagueness challenge.

Further, Respondents failed to inform the Court that AB 5944 did not remove all gravity knife prohibitions from the law. Gravity knives remain illegal on New York City subways and buses, and therefore the unconstitutionally vague definition of gravity knife found in § 265.00(5) will continue to place Petitioners and other New Yorkers in jeopardy,

Rules of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority governing subway and bus operations throughout the City provide as follows:

Section 1050.8 - Weapons and other dangerous instruments

(a) No weapon, dangerous instrument, or any other item intended for use as a weapon may be carried in or on any facility or conveyance. . . . For the purposes hereof, a weapon or dangerous instrument shall include, but not be limited to, a firearm, switchblade knife, boxcutter, straight razor or razor blades that are not wrapped or enclosed in a protective covering, *gravity knife*, sword, shotgun or rifle. [Emphasis added.]

21 NYCRR § 1050.8.

Section 1040.9 - Firearms or other weapons

No weapon, dangerous instrument, or any other item intended for use as a weapon may be carried in or on any facility or train. . . . For the purposes hereof, a weapon or dangerous instrument shall include, but not be limited to, a firearm, switchblade knife, *gravity knife*, boxcutter, straight razor or razorblades that are not wrapped or enclosed in a protective covering, sword, shotgun or rifle. [Emphasis added.]

21 NYCRR § 1040.9.

Section 1044.11 - Firearms or other weapons

No weapon, dangerous instrument, or any other item intended for use as a weapon may be carried in or on any facility or conveyance. . . . For the purposes hereof, a weapon or dangerous instrument shall include, but not be limited to, a firearm, switchblade knife, *gravity knife*, box cutter, straight razor or razorblades that are not wrapped or enclosed in a protective covering, sword, shotgun or rifle. [Emphasis added.]

21 NYCRR § 1044.11.

Penalties for violating these prohibitions include fines or civil penalties up to \$100 and up to 30 days in prison. *See* 21 NYCRR § 1040.12; 21 NYCRR § 1044.14; 21 NYCRR § 1050.10.

(The foregoing, collectively, the “MTA Rules.”)

Thus, in reality, gravity knives remain illegal to possess in the City if you happen to be one of the more than 5 million New Yorkers who ride the subway or the nearly 2 million New Yorkers who ride the bus to work every day. *See* <http://web.mta.info/nyct/facts/ridership/> (last accessed June 6, 2019). Significantly, Petitioner Pedro Perez’s 2010 arrest took place in the subway. C.A.App.59.

The City has explicitly declared its intention to continue to enforce this gravity knife prohibition in, at least, the New York City subways. One day after AB 5944 was signed into law, the NYPD issued the following statement from its office of the Deputy Commissioner, Public Information (“DCPI”) to Albany Bureau Chief Jesse McKinley of the New York Times:

The NYPD opposed the legislation because gravity knives are in reality rapidly-deployable combat knives, and there have been more than 1600 stabbings and slashings

in New York City so far this year.¹ The public should also be aware that the possession of gravity knives in the New York City subway system remains illegal. The NYPD will continue its work to ensure New York City remains the safest big city in America.

(See e-mail from DCPI to New York Times Albany Bureau Chief Jesse McKinley and New York Times story dated May 31, 2019. Supp.App.1a-8a.)

The NYPD statement makes it clear that the City does not consider AB 5944 the end of the story regarding gravity knife enforcement against ordinary law abiding New Yorkers possessing common folding knives, the most commonly possessed pocket knives in the United States. The use of aggressive and misleading hyperbole such as “rapidly-deployable combat knives” (which they are not) and the promise that NYPD will “continue its work” in this regard makes the City’s intention to continue its unconstitutionally vague gravity knife enforcement activities unmistakable. Indeed, the inconsistent messages from the state and the City do little more than set a trap for the unwary and compounds the existing vagueness and notice problems – New Yorkers who believe the Governor

¹ Notably, the City cannot actually connect these crimes to the every-day common folding knives law abiding folks carry and which the City tries to label “gravity knives.” The juxtaposition of this number with the inflammatory phrase “rapidly-deployable combat knives” appears intentionally misleading.

that the ban has been repealed may be fooled into mistakenly believing that they can carry their work tools on their person and find themselves confronted by the police on public transportation as a result.

Continued gravity knife enforcement action under the MTA Rules would require the NYPD to apply exactly the same unconstitutionally vague Wrist Flick Test from N.Y. PENAL LAW § 265.00(5) as was previously used unconstitutionally to enforce the now repealed N.Y. PENAL LAW § 265.01(1).

Thus, in reality, little has changed with the signing of AB 9544. Law abiding New Yorkers are still at risk of being charged by the NYPD with unlawful gravity knife possession using the unconstitutionally vague Wrist Flick Test that is being challenged in this lawsuit, and Petitioners John Copeland and Pedro Perez, and millions of other New Yorkers remain prospectively in jeopardy. Accordingly, the Petition is not moot.

II. Assembly Bill 5944 Did Not Moot the Petition Because Retailers Potentially Remain Subject to Future Prosecution for Conduct Prior to the Repeal

There is a second reason the Petition is not moot after the signing of AB 9544. Nothing in AB 9544 indicates that it is intended to be retroactive. Thus, in accordance with New York's "savings statute," N.Y. GEN. CONSTR. LAW § 93, this means that there

is a potential for any New York City retailer, including Petitioner Native Leather, Ltd., to be prosecuted for selling common folding knives during the two year statute of limitations period prior to May 30, 2019. *See* N.Y. CRIM. PROC. LAW § 30.10 (2)(c). For the same reason that Petitioners Copeland and Perez could not know which common folding knives were legal for them to possess due to the inherent vagueness of the Wrist Flick Test, retailers could not be sure which knives were legal for them to sell. Until the two year statute of limitations runs out, they all remain at risk, and therefore the Petition is not moot.

CONCLUSION

The Petition is not moot, and for all the reasons previously presented to the Court, the Petition should be granted.

Respectfully submitted,

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JUNE 7, 2019

Supp. App. 1

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **DCPI** <DCPI.DCPI@nypd.org>

Date: Fri, May 31, 2019 at 5:48 PM

Subject: RE: NYT: Gravity knife ban - any comment

To: McKinley, Jesse <jemcki@nytimes.com>

The NYPD opposed the legislation because gravity knives are in reality rapidly-deployable combat knives, and there have been more than 1600 stabbings and slashings in New York City so far this year. The public should also be aware that the possession of gravity knives in the New York City subway system remains illegal. The NYPD will continue its work to ensure New York City remains the safest big city in America.

--

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Supp. App. 2

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Supp. App. 3

The New York Times

The ‘Gravity Knife’ Led to Thousands of Questionable Arrests. Now It’s Legal.

Black and Latino men had often been charged under New York’s unusual ban on the knives, which are opened with a flick of the wrist.



The Manhattan district attorney, Cyrus Vance, has said that the ban on gravity knives has enhanced public safety and pushed lawmakers to keep it.

Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

By Jesse McKinley

May 31, 2019

Over the past 60 years, tens of thousands of black and Latino New Yorkers have been arrested for carrying so-called gravity knives – small, easy-to-access blades

Supp. App. 4

that are used by everyone from stagehands to steelworkers.

But on Thursday, in another demonstration of New York's surging progressive wing's influence, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo ended that practice, signing a bill to remove such knives from the category of "deadly weapons," a designation reserved for guns, daggers and switchblades, and allow their possession.

New York law defines a gravity knife as a knife with the blade in the handle that can be opened with a one-handed flick of the wrist. They differ from switchblades, which use a spring to propel the blade into an open position automatically with the push of a button.

But critics of the old law said common folding knives and tradespeople's knives could be deemed gravity knives if an officer was able to flick them open with centrifugal force, and some people had been arrested for possessing ordinary knives they needed for work.

In signing the bill – passed unanimously by the Democratic-led Legislature – the governor cited a March decision from the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, which found the gravity-knife law "presents a high risk of arbitrary and discriminatory enforcement" and was "unconstitutionally vague."

The decision was immediately hailed by public defenders and other legal advocates.

The ban and the way it was enforced constituted "one of the most discriminatory policing practices in our

Supp. App. 5

state,” said Tina Luongo, a lawyer with the Legal Aid Society, which issued a 2018 report showing the racial disparity in the way the law was carried out.

“For far too long, the N.Y.P.D. exploited the gravity-knife ban to drive up arrest numbers at the expense of our clients,” she said.

Gravity knives have been outlawed in New York since 1958, when the State Legislature banned a Nazi-era weapon known as “the Luftwaffe gravity knife,” according to Martin J. LaFalce, another Legal Aid lawyer.

The decision by the governor came after seven years of lobbying by lawmakers and two previous vetoes of similar legislation by Mr. Cuomo in the face of opposition from law enforcement and elected officials.

The bill’s signing on Thursday marked the latest setback for the state’s prosecutors, traditionally a powerful political force. In March, Mr. Cuomo approved legislation to create a commission to investigate prosecutorial misconduct. That commission has been challenged by the District Attorneys Association of the State of New York, which also had lobbied in the past against lifting the gravity-knife ban.

Prosecutors have also been adapting to recent changes in the state’s discovery law and its bail system, both of which were hailed as major victories by advocates for criminal justice reform, particularly in regard to treatment of minority groups.

The association held tight to its position on gravity knives on Friday.

Supp. App. 6

“We continue to believe that gravity knives are dangerous weapons which do not belong in densely populated areas,” said Albany County District Attorney David Soares, the association’s president. “The governor and State Legislature have made it clear they feel differently.”

In a statement after the bill was signed, the New York Police Department said it had “opposed the legislation because gravity knives are in reality rapidly deployable combat knives.”

“There have been more than 1,600 stabbings and slashings in New York City so far this year,” the department said, adding, “The public should also be aware that the possession of gravity knives in the New York City subway system remains illegal.”

The Assembly sponsor of the gravity knife bill, Dan Quart, a Democrat from Manhattan, said that the bill signing was a clear victory over “a deep problem in the penal law” and the policies of Cyrus R. Vance Jr., the borough’s district attorney.

“It’s impossible not to look at the arrest and prosecution numbers in Manhattan, under Cy Vance, and not see a deep disproportionate racial impact,” Mr. Quart said.

A spokesman for Mr. Vance, Danny Frost, struck a conciliatory tone. “We continue to believe that gravity knives make our streets and subways less safe,” Mr. Frost said in a statement on Friday. “But we respect

Supp. App. 7

that state lawmakers have a different view and we are moving swiftly to implement this legislative change.”

Mr. Quart said that a gravity knife “doubles as a work tool,” and indeed, the Legal Aid Society’s 2018 report found that such knives are easily found at scores of hardware stores.

Eric Correa, a 34-year-old New York City parks department employee who was arrested on charges of possessing a knife last year, said he bought his at a uniform shop in Jamaica, Queens.

Mr. Correa said in an interview that he used it to clean his weed-whacker at work, as well as to open cans of paint. But when an officer noticed it clipped to his pants on the subway, Mr. Correa was arrested.

“It felt like maybe it was a quick collar,” said Mr. Correa, who is part Latino and part African-American. The charges against him were eventually dismissed in exchange for community service, but he lost time at work.

In previous vetoes, Mr. Cuomo had acknowledged the tension “between protecting public safety and addressing an absurd contradiction in existing commercial and enforcement practices.”

But he wrote on Thursday: “While I remain aware of the cautious community voices, I cannot veto a bill passed by the Legislature to address a decided constitutional infirmity.”

Mr. Cuomo added: “I remain confident that our law enforcement community will continue to keep our

Supp. App. 8

communities safe by pursuing anyone who uses, or attempts to use, one of these knives in an unlawful manner.”

Jesse McKinley is The Times’s Albany bureau chief. He was previously the San Francisco bureau chief, and a theater columnist and Broadway reporter for the Culture Desk. @jessemckinley

A version of this article appears in print on, on Page A19 of the New York edition with the headline: ‘Gravity Knives,’ Which Led to Questionable Arrests, Are Now Legal. Order Reprints | Today’s Paper | Subscribe
