Forward: Defining and Enforcing the Federal Prosecutor's Duty to Disclose Exculpatory Evidence

James P. Fleissner  
Mercer University School of Law, fleissner_jp@law.mercer.edu

Patrick Emery Longan  
Mercer University School of Law, LONGAN_P@law.mercer.edu

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Foreword

Defining and Enforcing the Federal Prosecutor’s Duty to Disclose Exculpatory Evidence

by James P. Fleissner* and Patrick Emery Longan**

Mercer University's Walter F. George School of Law was pleased to host the Thirteenth Annual Georgia Symposium on Ethics and Professionalism on October 4th and 5th, 2012. This series of symposia was made possible by the vision of the Honorable Hugh Lawson, United States District Judge for the Middle District of Georgia. In 1999, Judge Lawson oversaw the settlement of a matter involving allegations of

* Professor of Law and Co-Director, LL.M. Program in Federal Criminal Practice and Procedure, Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University. Marquette University (B.A., 1979); University of Chicago (J.D., 1986). Member, State Bars of Georgia and Illinois.

** William Augustus Bootle Chair in Ethics and Professionalism in the Practice of Law, Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University. Washington University (A.B., 1979); University of Sussex (M.A., 1980); University of Chicago (J.D., 1983). Member, State Bars of Georgia and Texas.
litigation misconduct, and as part of the settlement, four of Georgia's law schools each received an endowment to fund symposia dedicated to ethics and professionalism. The symposium series began in 2001 and rotates among Mercer University, Georgia State University, the University of Georgia, and Emory University.

For several reasons, we chose the topic of the federal prosecutor's duty to disclose exculpatory evidence—commonly known as the *Brady* obligation in homage to the Supreme Court case that created it. First, there have been several high-profile cases in recent years in which prosecutors have been found by courts to have not fulfilled their *Brady* obligations, the most notorious being the prosecution of former United States Senator Ted Stevens.¹ Second, Congress has turned its attention to the issue. In 2012, Senator Murkowski introduced the Fairness in Disclosure of Evidence Act "[t]o require the attorney for the Government to disclose favorable information to the defendant in criminal prosecutions brought by the United States, and for other purposes."² The introduction of the Murkowski bill, which was the subject of a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing in 2012, highlighted the need for robust debate on the merits of federal criminal discovery reform and the alternative approaches to achieving that end. Third, we sought to use the occasion to feature Mercer's expertise and emphasis on criminal procedure, as exemplified particularly by its new LL.M. Program on Federal Criminal Practice and Procedure.³

The Symposium began with a dinner and welcoming keynote by Andrew Goldsmith, the National Coordinator of Criminal Discovery Initiatives for the United States Department of Justice. Mr. Goldsmith described the efforts of the Department of Justice, under Attorney General Eric Holder, to educate federal prosecutors about their discovery obligations and to ensure that those obligations are being fulfilled. He communicated the Department of Justice's position that discovery violations are rare, current remedial measures are sufficient, and further reform efforts are unnecessary and potentially harmful to law enforcement.

The next day we had four panels, each with a principal speaker and
two responders. Bruce Green, the Louis Stein Professor at Fordham
Law School, presented his paper regarding the legislative approach to
federal criminal discovery reform. His responders were Professor
Fleissner and Peter Joy, Hitchcock Professor of Law at Washington
University. Professor Bennett Gershman from Pace University School
of Law spoke regarding "Lessons from the Schuelke Report," and his
responders were Marc Treadwell, United States District Judge for the
Middle District of Georgia, and Seth Kirschenbaum, a former Assistant
United States Attorney who is now a prominent defense lawyer in
Atlanta. Professor Kevin McMunigal, the Ben C. Green Professor of Law
at Case Western University School of Law, made his presentation about
the best way to enforce the Brady obligation and, in particular, discussed
using punishment, education, or both. His responders were Professors
Jennifer Laurin of the University of Texas School of Law and Roberta
Flowers of Stetson University College of Law. We finished the day with
a session led by Rory Little, Professor of Law at the Hastings College of
Law, regarding the American Bar Association Criminal Justice
Standards. Cynthia Roseberry, Executive Director of the Federal
Defender for the Middle District of Georgia, and Charysse Alexander, the
Executive Assistant United States Attorney for the Northern District of
Georgia, provided the responses.

We hope the proceedings and the articles that follow will contribute
meaningfully to the ongoing debate about the best ways to define and
enforce the federal prosecutor's obligation to turn over exculpatory
evidence. The prosecutor occupies an inherently difficult position in our
system of justice. The Assistant United States Attorney has the power
of the federal government behind him or her and is duty-bound to be an
advocate for the government. Yet we expect, and have a right to expect,
that this lawyer will understand and respect that prosecutors ultimately
are "ministers of justice" and will routinely deliver evidence to adversar-
ies in full knowledge that the evidence may lead to defeat of the
government's case. That is asking much of a lawyer. The least we can
do for that lawyer, from whom so much is expected, is to provide clear
guidance about the scope of the duty of disclosure. The least we can do for defendants, whose constitutional rights to due process are at stake,
is not only to provide that guidance but also to find the best means of
enforcing the obligation. Academic discussions and symposia occur far
from the arena, but we hope this Symposium was one step toward a
better understanding of the scope of the Brady obligation and a more
reliable means of enforcing it.

We wish to extend our thanks to all the speakers who were with us for
the Symposium and to the Mercer Law Review members who made sure
the proceedings went smoothly. We are grateful to Judge Lawson for his leadership and generosity in the creation of the endowment for these symposia. Finally, as always, we extend our thanks to Yonna Shaw, without whom neither the event nor this publication could have occurred.