MASTERING TORTS
FIFTH EDITION

A STUDENT’S GUIDE TO
THE LAW OF TORTS

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CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS
To the memory of
Thomas E. Fairchild (1912-2007),
whose service on the Wisconsin Supreme Court
and the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit
exemplified the best traditions of American justice
# Table of Contents

| Chapter 1: An Overview of Modern Tort Liability | 1 |
| Chapter 2: Basic Intentional Torts | 15 |
| Chapter 3: Defenses and Privileges | 45 |
| Chapter 4: Damages | 63 |
| Chapter 5: Negligence: Basic Principles | 77 |
| Chapter 6: Proving Negligence | 109 |
| Chapter 7: Factual Causation | 119 |
| Chapter 8: Proximate Causation | 131 |
| Chapter 9: Limited Duty: Failure to Act | 151 |
| Chapter 10: Limited Duty: Premises Liability | 167 |
# Table of Contents

Preface ................................................................. XVII
Table of Cases .......................................................... XXI

Chapter 1: An Overview of Modern Tort Liability ................. 1
  1. Personal Injuries and Property Damage ...................... 1
     A. Torts and Crimes ............................................ 1
     B. Torts and Contracts ....................................... 2
     C. Largely a Matter of State Common Law .................. 2
     D. Public Policy and the Costs of Accidents ............... 3
  2. Three Categories of Tort Liability .............................. 4
  3. Intentionally Inflicted Injuries ................................. 5
  4. Failure to Exercise Care ....................................... 6
     A. Negligence .................................................. 6
     B. Recklessness ................................................. 7
     C. Contributory Negligence, Comparative
        Negligence, and Comparative Fault ................... 7
     D. Assumption of the Risk .................................... 9
  5. Strict Liability .................................................. 9
### Chapter 2: Basic Intentional Torts

1. The Concept of Intent
   - A. State of Mind About Results
   - B. Intent to Injure
   - C. Mistake and Intent
   - D. Insanity and Intent
   - E. Transferred Intent

2. Liability for the Torts of Minor Children
3. Battery
4. Assault
5. The Tort of Outrage (Intentional or Reckless Infliction of Emotional Distress)
6. False Imprisonment
7. Trespass to Land (Trespass *Quare Clausum Fregit*)
8. Trespass to Chattels (Trespass *De Bonis Asportatis*)
9. Conversion
   - A. Major Interference
   - B. Thieves, Defrauders, and Bona Fide Purchasers
   - C. Bailees
   - D. Damages and Replevin
   - E. Demand for Return
   - F. What May Be Converted?

### Chapter 3: Defenses and Privileges

1. Consent
   - A. Actual Consent
   - B. Apparent Consent
   - C. Implied Consent
   - D. Capacity to Consent
# Table of Contents

E. Scope of Consent ............................................ 48  
F. Consent Based on Mistake .................................. 48  
G. Consent and Duress ........................................ 50  
H. Consent to a Criminal Act .................................. 50  

2. Privileges and Defenses: In General .......................... 51  
3. Self-Defense ............................................... 51  
4. Defense of Others .......................................... 52  
5. Defense of Property ......................................... 53  
6. Recapture of Chattels ........................................ 54  
7. Privilege to Detain for Investigation .......................... 55  
8. Public and Private Necessity .................................. 56  
9. Recapture of Goods on the Land of Another ....................... 58  
10. Recapture of Land .......................................... 59  
11. Unlawful Conduct .......................................... 59  
12. Privileges to Discipline or Arrest ................................ 60  
13. General Justification ........................................ 60  

Chapter 4: Damages ............................................ 63  
1. Jury Instructions on Damages .................................. 63  
2. Remittitur and Additur ........................................ 64  
3. Pain and Suffering .......................................... 64  
4. “Hedonic” Damages .......................................... 65  
5. Loss of Consortium ........................................... 65  
6. Medical Monitoring and Credit Monitoring ......................... 66  
7. The Collateral-Source Rule .................................... 67  
8. The Avoidable-Consequences Rule ................................ 67  
9. Pre-Judgment Interest ......................................... 68  
10. Survival Actions and Wrongful-Death Actions ....................... 68  
11. Loss of Earning Capacity ..................................... 70  
12. Inflation .................................................. 70  
13. Taxation of Awards .......................................... 70  
14. Punitive Damages .......................................... 71  

Chapter 5: Negligence: Basic Principles .......................... 77  
1. Negligence Defined .......................................... 77  
2. The Concept of Duty .......................................... 77  
3. The Negligence Balancing Test ................................ 79  
4. The Reasonable-Person Standard ................................ 82  
   A. Emergencies .............................................. 83  
   B. Physical Disabilities ....................................... 84  
   C. Religious Beliefs .......................................... 85
D. Age ............................................ 85
E. Mental Deficiency .............................. 86
F. Superior Knowledge, Training, or Skill:
   Professional Malpractice.......................... 88
G. Race, Gender, and Ethnicity .................... 89
H. Legal Malpractice and Medical Malpractice .... 90
I. Informed Consent .................................. 93
J. Educational Malpractice .......................... 95

5. Judge-Made Standards of Care ..................... 96
6. Negligence Based on Violation of Statute ....... 97
   A. Statutes Intended by the Legislature to Set the
      Standard of Care .................................. 97
   B. Statutes Adopted by Courts to Set the
      Standard of Care .................................. 98
   C. The Effect of an Unexcused Violation of a
      Standard-Setting Statute .......................... 101
   D. Excused Violations of Statute .................... 103
   E. Compliance with Statute .......................... 104
   F. Statutes Allowing No Excuse or Defense ......... 105

7. Special Standards of Care .......................... 106

Chapter 6: Proving Negligence ......................... 109
1. Evidence of Custom .............................. 109
2. Circumstantial Evidence .......................... 110
3. Res Ipsa Loquitur .................................. 112
   A. Elements ......................................... 112
   B. Exclusive Control .................................. 112
   C. Superior Knowledge .................................. 113
   D. Rebuttal Evidence .................................. 113
   E. Specific Allegations or Proof .................... 114
   F. Fault on the Part of the Plaintiff ............... 114
   G. Multiple Defendants ............................. 115
   H. Procedural Effect .................................. 116
4. Spoliation of Evidence ............................ 117

Chapter 7: Factual Causation ......................... 119
1. The But-For Test and Alternatives ................ 119
2. The “Loss of a Chance” Doctrine .................. 122
3. Multiple Fault and Alternative Liability ........ 122
4. Enterprise Liability and Market-Share Liability 123
5. Commingled Product Theory of Causation ......... 126
# Table of Contents

6. Concerted-Action Liability ......................................................... 126  
   A. Civil Conspiracy .................................................................. 127  
   B. Aiding-and-Abetting .............................................................. 127  
   C. Joint Enterprise .................................................................... 128  
   D. Incitement ............................................................................. 129

Chapter 8: Proximate Causation ......................................................... 131  
1. A Policy Decision on Fairness ..................................................... 131  
2. Different Ways of Talking About Fairness ................................... 132  
3. Direct Causation Versus Foreseeability ....................................... 132  
4. Modified Foreseeability .............................................................. 133  
5. Result Within the Risk ............................................................... 137  
6. Superseding Causation ............................................................... 138  
   A. Distinguishing Intervening and Superseding Causes ................. 138  
   B. End Results Within the Risk ................................................... 139  
   C. Foreseeable Intervening Acts .................................................. 139  
   D. Exceptions to the General Rule .............................................. 140  
   E. Intervening Criminal or Intentionally Tortious Conduct ........... 140  
   F. “Normal” Developments ......................................................... 142  
   G. The Rescue Doctrine .............................................................. 143  
   H. Intervening Acts of the Victim ................................................ 145  
   I. Limits on Foreseeability .......................................................... 146  
   J. Superseding Causation and Comparative Principles ............... 147

7. Shifting Responsibility ............................................................... 147

Chapter 9: Limited Duty: Failure to Act ............................................ 151  
1. Limited-Duty Rules and No-Duty Rules ...................................... 151  
2. No Duty to Act ........................................................................... 152  
   A. The General Rule ................................................................. 152  
   B. Duties Under Criminal Law and “Good Samaritan” Laws .......... 153  
3. Relationship to the Victim .......................................................... 153  
   A. Family Members, Companions, and Businesses .................... 153  
   B. Possessors of Land ............................................................... 154  
   C. Custodians and Schools ......................................................... 155  
4. Relationship to the Tortfeasor ..................................................... 155  
   A. Parents and Custodians of Dangerous Children ....................... 155  
   B. Information Providers ........................................................... 156  
   C. Mental Health Care Professionals ......................................... 157  
   D. Entrustment of Dangerous Instrumentalities ......................... 158
5. Involvement in an Accident............................................ 159
6. Creating a Dangerous Situation..................................... 159
7. Voluntary Assumption of Duty.................................. 160
8. Abrogation of the General No-Duty Rule..................... 164
9. Interference with Rescue Efforts.............................. 165
10. The Public-Duty Rule........................................ 165

Chapter 10: Limited Duty: Premises Liability............... 167
1. The Common-Law Categories.................................. 167
2. Abrogation and a New Approach............................. 168
3. Trespassers.................................................. 169
4. The Attractive-Nuisance Doctrine.......................... 170
5. Licensees.................................................... 171
6. Invitees........................................................ 172
   A. Business Invitees........................................ 173
   B. Public Invitees.......................................... 174
   C. Scope of the Invitation................................ 174
   D. Protection from Crime................................ 176
   E. Known or Obvious Dangers............................ 177
7. Harm to Persons Outside the Premises...................... 178
8. Abrogation of the Categories............................... 180
9. Lessors and Lessees......................................... 181

Chapter 11: Limited Duty: Negligent Infliction of Severe
            Emotional Distress.................................... 183
1. Assuring Genuineness of the Plaintiff’s Claim.............. 183
2. Limiting the Scope of Liability............................ 186
3. Loss of Consortium......................................... 189
4. Breach of Fiduciary Duty.................................. 190

Chapter 12: Limited Duty: Alcohol-Related Injuries......... 191
1. No Liability at Common Law................................ 191
2. Dram-Shop Laws............................................ 191
3. Social-Host Liability...................................... 192
4. Other Theories of Liability................................. 192

Chapter 13: Torts Involving Conception, Pregnancy, Birth,
            and Adoption........................................... 195
1. Defining the Action.......................................... 195
2. Unwanted Pregnancy....................................... 196
3. Wrongful Birth and Wrongful Life.......................... 197
4. Prenatal Injuries.......................................... 198
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

5. Wrongful Adoption. ........................................... 199

**Chapter 14: Strict Liability** ................................ 201
1. Liability Without Fault. ..................................... 201
2. Workers’ Compensation. ..................................... 202
3. Employer Liability. ........................................... 203
   A. *Respondeat Superior*. .................................. 204
   B. Non-Delegable Duties. ................................... 206
   C. Ostensible or Apparent Agency. ......................... 207
4. Strict Liability for Harm Caused by Animals. ................. 207
5. Strict Liability for Hazardous Activities. ..................... 209
   A. Abnormally-Dangerous Activities under the Second
      Restatement. ........................................... 209
   B. The Single-Injurer Accident Rationale. ................. 210

6. Motor Vehicle Ownership. ................................... 212
   A. Owner Responsibility Statutes. ......................... 212
   B. Family Purpose Doctrine. ............................... 212

**Chapter 15: Products Liability** .............................. 213
1. Three Theories of Liability. ................................ 213
2. Restatement, Second, of Torts § 402A. ..................... 214
   A. Who Is a Seller? ....................................... 215
   B. Products Versus Services. .............................. 215
   C. Types of Defects. ...................................... 215
3. Manufacturing Defects. ...................................... 215
4. Design Defects. ............................................. 216
5. Failure to Warn. ............................................. 219
6. The Third Restatement and the Definition of “Defect.” ........ 220
7. Damage to the “Product Itself”............................... 222
   A. “Other Property” ....................................... 222
   B. The Economic Loss Rule(s). ............................. 223
8. The State-of-the-Art Defense. ................................ 224
9. Government Contractors. ...................................... 224
10. Misconduct by the Plaintiff. ................................. 225
11. Pre-emption by Federal Law. ................................. 225
12. Product-Category Liability. ................................ 227
13. Reform of Products-Liability Law. .......................... 227

**Chapter 16: Defenses Based on Plaintiff’s Conduct** ........... 229
1. Fault on the Part of the Plaintiff. .......................... 229
2. Common-Law Contributory Negligence. ....................... 230
3. Imputed Contributory Negligence. ......................... 230
4. Last Clear Chance .................................................. 231
5. Comparative Negligence .......................................... 232
6. Assumption of the Risk: In General ............................ 233
7. Express Assumption of the Risk .................................. 234
8. Primary Implied Assumption of the Risk ....................... 237
10. Defenses Based on the Plaintiff’s Conduct in Statutory Actions ...................................................... 240
11. Comparative Fault (Comparative Responsibility) ............. 241
12. The “Seatbelt Defense” ........................................... 242

Chapter 17: Joint Tortfeasors ........................................... 243
1. Joint and Several Liability ........................................ 243
2. Divisibility and Apportionment of Harm ........................ 244
3. The Effect of Comparative Principles on Joint and Several Liability ..................................................... 248
4. Settlement Documents ............................................. 249
5. Contribution ........................................................... 250
6. Indemnity .............................................................. 253
7. Mary Carter Agreements .......................................... 254

Chapter 18: Immunities ................................................. 257
1. The Trend Toward Abrogation of Immunities .................. 257
2. Spousal Immunity and Parental Immunity ....................... 258
3. Sovereign Immunity and Governmental Immunity ............ 260
4. Official Immunity ..................................................... 261
5. Charitable Immunity .................................................. 263
6. Immunity of Volunteers ............................................ 264

Chapter 19: Statutes of Limitations .................................... 265
1. Statutes of Limitations .............................................. 265
2. The Discovery Rule and Other Forms of “Tolling” ............. 266
3. Statutes of Repose .................................................... 267

Chapter 20: Interference with Possession or Use of Land: Trespass and Nuisance ................................................. 269
1. Two Actions Protect Interests in Property ....................... 269
2. Trespass to Land ....................................................... 270
   A. The Requirement of Intent ................................. 270
   B. Damages ........................................................... 270
   C. Trespass by Particles ......................................... 271
   D. Trespass Above and Below the Land ....................... 271
## Table of Contents

### Chapter 21: Misrepresentation

1. Contract, Tort, and Other Remedies
2. The Elements of Deceit
3. Scienter
4. What Constitutes Misrepresentation?
5. Actions Based on Nondisclosure (Silence)
6. Opinion v. Fact
   - A. “Puffing”
   - B. Words of Qualification
   - C. Implicit Statements of Fact
   - D. Intentions and Predictions
7. Actionable Statements of Opinion
8. Statements of Law
9. Justifiable Reliance
10. Intent to Induce Reliance or Expectation of Reliance
11. Strict Liability for Misrepresentation
12. Negligent Misrepresentation
13. Defenses
14. Damages

### Chapter 22: Defamation

1. The Elements of Defamation
2. When Is a Statement Defamatory?
3. Libel and Slander
4. Falsity and Substantial Truth
5. Who May Sue

---

E. Privilege and Consent

3. Public Nuisance and Private Nuisance
4. Proof of Unreasonableness
5. Injunctive Relief
6. The Significant-Harm Requirement
7. Zoning Requirements
8. Public Nuisance
   - A. Relationship to Criminal Law
   - B. Statutory Grants of Standing and Harm Different in Kind
9. Public Nuisance and Products Liability
10. Coming to the Nuisance
11. Defenses in a Nuisance Action
12. Abatement of a Nuisance

Chapter 21: Misrepresentation

1. Contract, Tort, and Other Remedies
2. The Elements of Deceit
3. Scienter
4. What Constitutes Misrepresentation?
5. Actions Based on Nondisclosure (Silence)
6. Opinion v. Fact
   - A. “Puffing”
   - B. Words of Qualification
   - C. Implicit Statements of Fact
   - D. Intentions and Predictions
7. Actionable Statements of Opinion
8. Statements of Law
9. Justifiable Reliance
10. Intent to Induce Reliance or Expectation of Reliance
11. Strict Liability for Misrepresentation
12. Negligent Misrepresentation
13. Defenses
14. Damages

Chapter 22: Defamation

1. The Elements of Defamation
2. When Is a Statement Defamatory?
3. Libel and Slander
4. Falsity and Substantial Truth
5. Who May Sue
A. Living Persons and Institutional Plaintiffs. 308
B. Deceased Persons. 309
6. Colloquium, Inducement, and Innuendo. 309
7. Group Defamation and Fictionalized Portrayals. 310
8. Publication. 311
9. Fault as to Falsity and Damages. 314
   A. The Rules at Common Law. 314
   B. The Constitutionalization of Defamation Law. 315
   C. Public Officials and Public Figures. 316
   D. Private Persons Suing with Respect to Matters of Public Concern. 319
   E. Persons Suing with Respect to Matters of Private Concern. 320
10. The Burden of Proving Falsity. 321
11. Fact Versus Opinion. 322
12. Retraction Statutes. 324
13. Privileges. 325
   A. The Reporter’s Privilege. 325
   B. Absolute Privileges. 326
   C. Judicial Proceedings. 326
   D. Legislative Proceedings. 327
   E. Executive Actions. 328
   F. Required Publications. 328
   G. Spousal Communications. 329
   H. Consent to Publication of Defamatory Matter. 329
   I. Qualified Privileges. 329
   J. Abuse of a Qualified Privilege. 330
   K. The Neutral-Reportage Privilege. 331
15. SLAPP Suits. 332
16. The Relationship of Defamation to Other Torts. 333

Chapter 23: Invasion of Privacy. 335
1. Prosser’s Four Categories. 335
3. Intrusion upon Seclusion. 340
4. Publicity in a False Light. 341
5. Appropriation of Name or Likeness. 343
6. Privileges. 346
Mastering Torts is a book for law students—although others may find it useful as well. This book attempts to present, in a clear narrative form, a doctrinal overview of the American law of torts. By clarifying the basic rules governing tort liability and illuminating their application to specific fact situations, Mastering Torts provides the reader with a firm understanding of the main features of the American tort system.

Concise descriptions of more than three hundred and fifty cases are used as illustrations in Mastering Torts. Most of those cases were decided with court opinions which appear, in edited form, in the fifth edition of Studies in American Tort Law (SATL). Law students who are using SATL in their classes will find Mastering Torts to be particularly helpful, for it clarifies how each of the principal cases in SATL fits into the larger legal scheme for providing compensation to victims of personal injury or property damage. Students who are using other casebooks will also benefit from Mastering Torts since it is organized along traditional subject lines and follows a mainstream approach to the task of learning this area of the law.

No law student should think that *Mastering Torts* is a substitute for reading and briefing assigned cases before class, or for the process of consolidating one’s knowledge of torts by reviewing notes and materials after class and building an outline of the subject. Rather, *Mastering Torts* is intended to supplement those efforts by providing a brief hornbook-style treatment of the law of torts. One possible approach is for a student to read the relevant sections of *Mastering Torts* before preparing class assignments, because it is usually easier to reach a destination if one knows where one is going. Another approach is to read *Mastering Torts* after class and before starting to work on an outline, as a means for clarifying the material covered in prior readings and class discussions.

There are many important issues which *Mastering Torts* does not address. For example, the role of public policy in the shaping and application of tort rules is only lightly explored, and many important perspectives on tort law (such as those offered by the law-and-economics school) are almost entirely omitted. The decision not to deal with those subjects in this book does not mean they are unimportant. Rather, it reflects a judgment that, for most students, the best place to begin the study of tort law is with a clear understanding of the current rules. Once that foundation is in place, students are better able to undertake the more-challenging task of considering crucial questions about what the law should be.

In the end, the process of mastering tort law is a matter of personal effort. As John W. Davis, a twentieth-century lawyer-statesman, once said:

> What [one] does for [oneself] is more important than what any school can do.... If you work hard, you’ll come out quite [a] good lawyer.... After all, there are only two classes of lawyers in the world — those who work and those who do not.

This book is intended to help those law students who are willing to work to become good lawyers by making their tasks easier and more effective.

I am indebted to Alan Gunn, John N. Matthews Emeritus Professor of Law at the University of Notre Dame and my co-author on the first three editions of *Studies in American Tort Law* and its companion volume, *Teaching Torts* (Carolina Academic Press), for reviewing and commenting upon the

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2 Authority for the legal propositions advanced in *Mastering Torts* can be found in the fifth edition of *Studies in American Tort Law*, which cites more than 2,500 cases. SATL follows the same pattern of organization as *Mastering Torts*. 
first edition of this book. Alan’s wisdom deepened my understanding of many subjects.

Valuable assistance in the production of the fifth edition of Mastering Torts was provided by several students at St. Mary’s University School of Law. I am particularly grateful to Chad Christenson, Eric Campolo, Leo R. Morales, Bruce A. Minor, and Steven Barnett. The tireless efforts of Leslie McCombs, James Alexander Smith, Taylor Jenkins, and Maggie Langley, greatly aided the editing process. The work performed by Amy Bresnen, Jennifer Bruning, Karen A. Oster, and Melinda Uriegas was truly outstanding and improved the text in many ways.

I am deeply grateful to St. Mary’s University School of Law for supporting this project. Frequent discussions with my faculty colleague, Professor Chenglin Liu, have enriched the text of this book.

This book has Chinese counterparts. The second edition of Mastering Torts was published in Beijing in two Chinese versions by China Renmin University Press, under the title American Tort Law. One of those books is a full Chinese translation; the other is published in English with Chinese keywords in the margins. Both of those books were translated by Professor Zhao Xiuwen of Renmin University, a valued colleague with whom I have collaborated on many occasions. The preparation of the translation was assisted by my former student and friend Cao Jian, now a lawyer in Beijing, who reviewed the translation while pursuing his LL.M. degree at St. Mary’s University. The third Chinese version of Mastering Torts is published in traditional (complex) Chinese characters by Wu-Nan Books in Taipei, Taiwan. That translation is based in part on the Zhao Xiuwen translation.

Mastering Torts is dedicated to the Honorable Thomas E. Fairchild, a judge for whom I had the pleasure of clerking many years ago when he was
Chief Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit. As a jurist and member of the Council of the American Law Institute, Judge Fairchild, over the course of five decades, made a major contribution to American law. He greatly influenced the young lawyers who worked in his chambers by providing an example of how a member of the legal profession can combine compassion with competence and professionalism with good humor. Thomas Fairchild served as a judge in the best traditions of the Common Law.

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Finally, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my wife, Jill Torbert, for the superb example she continually sets in public-spirited lawyering and community service.

Vincent R. Johnson
San Antonio, Texas
May 14, 2013

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# Table of Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adams v. Gillig</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albritton v. Neighborhood Ctr. Ass’n for Child Dev.</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alleman v. Vermillion Pub. Co.</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altamuro v. Milner Hotel, Inc.</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Motorcycle Ass’n v. Superior Court</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anderson v. Minneapolis, St. P. &amp; S.S.M. Ry. Co.</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anderson v. Sears, Roebuck &amp; Co.</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andruschenko v. Silchuk</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anjou v. Boston Elevated Ry. Co.</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armory Park Neighborhood Ass’n v. Episcopal Comm. Servs. in Arizona</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey v. Lewis Farm, Inc.</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balido v. Improved Machinery, Inc.</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banker v. McLaughlin</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barker v. Kallash</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barker v. Lull Eng’g Co.</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barmore v. Elmore</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnes v. Geiger</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belli v. Orlando Newspapers, Inc.</td>
<td>304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beshada v. Johns-Manville Prods. Corp.</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bindrim v. Mitchell</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomet Inc. v. Finneggan Henderson, LLP</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird v. Jones</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishop v. City of Chicago</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BMW of North Am., Inc. v. Gore, 72
Bonkowski v. Arlan’s Dep’t Store, 56
Bonney v. Canadian Nat’l Ry., Co., 169
Borrack v. Reed, 159
Boyce v. Brown, 90
Boyd v. Racine Currency Exch., Inc., 176
Boyle v. United Technologies Corp., 224
Boyles v. Kerr, 189
Bradley v. American Smelting and Refining Co., 271
Brandenburg v. Ohio, 129
Breunig v. American Family Ins. Co., 87
Brochner v. Western Ins. Co., 254
Brown v. Shyne, 103
Brownsville Med. Ctr. v. Garcia, 161
Bruckman v. Pena, 247
Brudney v. Ematrudo, 20
Buckley v. City of New York, 203
Burns Jackson Miller v. Linder, 279
Burr v. Board of County Comm’rs of Stark City, 199
Campbell v. Weathers, 174
Capra v. Thoroughbred Racing Ass’n, 338
Carson v. Here’s Johnny Portable Toilets, Inc., 345
Carter v. Kinney, 171
Cast Art Industries, LLC v. KPMG, LLP, 301

Castiglione v. Galpin, 25
Chapman v. Milford Towing & Service, Inc., 139
Chicago, B & Q. R. R. Co. v. Krayenbuhl, 80
Cipollone v. Liggett Group, 225
Coffee v. McDonnell-Douglas Corp., 162
Cohen v. Herbal Concepts, Inc., 344
Cohen v. Petty, 6
Coleman v. Ramada Hotel Operating Co., 238
Comedy III Productions, Inc. v. Gary Saderup, Inc., 345-46
CompuServe Inc. v. Cyber Promotions, Inc., 38
Control Techniques, Inc. v. Johnson, 147
Corbin v. Safeway Stores, Inc., 111
Cox v. Northwest Airlines, 113
Cox Broadcasting Corp. v. Cohn, 337
Coyle v. Englander’s, 163
Credit Alliance Corp. v. Arthur Andersen & Co., 299
Crisci v. Security Ins. Co. of New Haven, 13
Crown Cork & Seal Co. v. Hires Bottling Co., 290

Daley v. LaCroix, 185
Davies v. Butler, 47
Davies v. Mann, 231
Davis v. Devereux Foundation, 206
Davison v. Snohomish County, 80
De May v. Roberts, 49
Del Lago Partners, Inc. v. Smith, 193
Depue v. Flatau, 58
Derdian v. Felix Contracting Corp., 139
Dillard Department Stores Inc. v. Silva, 55
Dillon v. Legg, 187
DiPonzio v. Riordan, 137
Doe v. Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 199
Doe v. Roe, 6
Dougherty v. Stepp, 270
Drabek v. Sabley, 52
Dun & Bradstreet, Inc. v. Greenmoss Builders, Inc., 320
East River Steamship Corp. v. Transamerica Delaval, 222
Economopoulos v. A.G. Pollard Co., 311
Elbaor v. Smith, 254
Enright v. Groves, 35
Escola v. Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Fresno, 213
Eskin v. Bartee, 187
F.G. v. MacDonnell, 190
Faloona v. Hustler Magazine, Inc., 342
Faniel v. Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co., 35
Farley v. Sartin, 198
Fein v. Permanente Medical Group, 65
Feltmeier v. Feltmeier, 30
Feres v. United States, 260
FMC Corp. v. Capital Cities/ABC Inc., 43
Foster v. Costco Wholesale Corp., 177
Fuller v. Preis, 145
Garratt v. Dailey, 5
Gavcus v. Potts, 270
Geier v. American Honda Motor Co., 226
Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc., 319, 339, 342
Gipson v. Kasey, 98
Glanzer v. Shepard, 299
Glidden v. Syzbiak, 38
Goar v. Village of Stephen, 149
Goddard v. Boston & M.R. Co., 110
Goins v. Clorox Co., 219
Gonzalez v. New York City Hous. Auth., 69
Goss v. Allen, 85
Grant v. Reader’s Digest Ass’n, 304
Greenman v. Yuba Power Prods. Corp., 216
Griffith v. Byers Construction Co., 288
Gross v. Sweet, 235
Guccione v. Hustler Magazine, Inc., 308
Gulf Refining Co. v. Williams, 79
Gyrc v. Dayton-Hudson Corp., 71
Halberstam v. Welch, 128
Hall v. E.I. Du Pont de Nemours & Co., 124
Halvorson v. Birchfield Boiler, Inc., 191
Harris v. Anderson County Sheriff’s Office, 9
Harris v. Jones, 29
Hart v. Geysel, 50
Hayes v. Malkan, 179
Heath v. Swift Wings, Inc., 89
Helfend v. Southern California Rapid Transit Dist., 67
Helling v. Carey, 97
Henson v. Reddin, 40
Herceg v. Hustler Magazine, Inc., 129
Herman v. Wesgate, 126
Hilen v. Hays, 233
Hill v. City of Glenwood, 84
Hodgeden v. Hubbard, 54
Holytz v. Milwaukee, 260
Hoyal v. Pioneer Sand Co., Inc., 71
Hudson v. Craft, 50
Humphers v. First Interstate Bank, 340
Humphrey v. Twin State Gas & Elec. Co., 168
Hustler Magazine v. Falwell, 333
Hymowitz v. Eli Lilly and Co., 125

In re Methyl Tertiary Butyl Ether (MTBE) Products Liability Litigation, 126

In re Polemis, 133
Indiana Harbor Belt Line v. Am. Cyanamid Co., 211
Inkel v. Livingston, 175

Italian Cowboy Partners, Ltd. v. Prudential Ins. Co., 295
International Union v. Garner, 337
Ivancic v. Olmstead, 179
Jailet v. Cashman, 299
James v. Lieb, 187
Jasko v. Woolworth Co., 111
John Doe BF v. Diocese of Gallup, 89
John Doe No. v. Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 286
John R. v. Oakland Unified Sch. Dist., 205
Johnson v. Barnes & Noble, 35-36, 60
Johnson v. Jacobs, 140
Johnson v. Minnesota, 152
Johnson v. New York, 185
Johnson v. Souza, 163
Johnson v. Supersave Markets, Inc., 185
Jones v. Secord, 156
Joye v. Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Co., 111
Judd v. Walker, 294

Kaneko v. Hilo Coast Processing, 241
Kathleen K. v. Robert B., 301
Katko v. Briney, 53
Keel v. Hainline, 19
Kelly v. Gwinnell, 192
Kent v. Gulf States Utilities Co., 210
Kimble v. Mackintosh Hemphill Co., 139
Kinsman No. 1, Petition of Kinsman Transit Co., 134
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinsman No. 2, Petition of Kinsman Transit Co.</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kleinknecht v. Gettysburg College</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kline v. Massachusetts Ave. Apartment Corp.</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koeppe v. Speirs</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kozup v. Georgetown University</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kramer Serv., Inc. v. Wilkins</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kremen v. Cohen</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.S. Ayres &amp; Co. v. Hicks</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Raia v. Superior Court</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambertson v. United States</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langan v. Valicopters, Inc.</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larsen v. General Motors Corp.</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leung v. Verdugo Hills Hospital</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis v. Westinghouse Elec. Corp.</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lickteig v. Kolar</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linden v. CNH America, LLC</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linder v. Bidner</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lipman v. Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Corp.</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low v. Park Price Co.</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lozoya v. Sanchez</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lussier v. Bessette</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahowald v. Minnesota Gas Co.</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandell v. Pivnick</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangual v. Berezinsky</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marlene F. v. Affiliated Psychiatric Med. Clinic</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage of Tigges</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marsalis v. La Salle</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall v. Nugent</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall v. Ranne</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin v. Herzog</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matsuyama v. Birnbaum</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthews v. Amberwood Assoc. Ltd.</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGrath v. Zenith Radio Corp.</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGuire v. Almy</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenna v. Straughan</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKernan v. Aasheim</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMillen v. Klingensmith</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McNamara v. Freedom Newspapers, Inc.</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McPeake v. William T. Cannon, P.C.</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merhi v. Becker</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meyer ex rel. Coplin v. Fluor Corp.</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micari v. Mann</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michie v. Great Lakes Steel Div., Nat’l Steel Corp.</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miglino v. Bally Total Fitness of Greater New York, Inc.</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milkovich v. Lorain Journal Co.</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller v. HCA, Inc.</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnich v. Med-Waste, Inc.</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobil Chemical Co. v. Bell</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldea v. New York Times Co.</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery v. Royal Motel</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery Elevator Co. v. Gordon</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moore v. El Paso Chamber of Commerce</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Moore v. Regents of the Univ. of Cal., 44
Morales v. Lee, 34
Morrison v. National Broadcasting Co., 305
Mostert v. CBL & Assoc., 176
NAACP v. Acusport, Inc., 279
National Conversion Corp. v. Cedar Building Corp., 292
Neiman-Marcus v. Lait, 310
New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 316
Ney v. Yellow Cab Co., 100
Nixon v. Mr. Property Mgt. Co., 140
Noble v. Louisville Transfer Co., 22
Nova Univ. v. Wagner, 156
Nussbaum v. Lacopo, 79
O’Brien v. Cunard S.S. Co., 46
O’Brien v. Muskin Corp., 227
O’Hara v. Western Seven Trees Corp., 285
O’Shea v. Riverway Towing Co., 70
Oltmer v. Zamora, 290
Orthmann v. Apple River Campground, Inc., 175
Otis Eng’g Corp. v. Clark, 192
Pachunka v. Rogers Construction Inc., 240
Pacific Mut. Life Ins. v. Haslip, 72
Padula v. New York, 87
Paglesdorf v. Safeco Ins. Co., 181
Palsgraf v. Long Island R.R. Co., 78
Pannu v. Land Rover North America, Inc., 217
Parker v. St. Lawrence County Public Health Department, 261
Parvi v. City of Kingston, 34
Peck v. Counseling Serv. of Addison County, Inc., 157
Pelkey v. Brennan, 99
Peterson v. Sorlien, 36
Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc. v. Hepps, 321
Phillip Morris USA v. Williams, 73
Picard v. Barry Pontiac-Buick, Inc., 22
Ploof v. Putnam, 57
Pokora v. Wabash Ry. Co., 96
Prah v. Maretti, 274
Price v. Hartford Accident & Indemnity Co., 74
Pring v. Penthouse Int’l, Ltd., 311
Pritsker v. Brudnoy, 322
Ranard v. O’Neil, 104
Ranson v. Kitner, 16
Remsburg v. Docusearch, Inc., 156
Reynolds v. Texas & Pac. Ry. Co., 120
Ricci v. Quality Bakers, 164
Richard v. A. Waldman and Sons, Inc., 296
Richetta v. Stanley Fastening Systems, L.P., 218
Riss v. City of New York, 165
Robinson v. Reed-Prentice Div., 146
Rocha v. Faltys, 160
Rogers v. Board of Road Commissioners, 273
Rose v. Daily Mirror, Inc., 309
Rosenbloom v. Metromedia, Inc., 342
Rousey v. Rousey, 259
Rowland v. Christian, 180
Russell-Vaughn Ford, Inc. v. Rouse, 40
Russo v. Griffin, 92
S & F Corp. v. Daley, 26
Saelzler v. Advanced Group, 121
Sall v. T’s Inc., 163
St. Amant v. Thompson, 317
Salevan v. Wilmington Park, Inc., 178
Schramm v. Lyon, 267
Scott v. Bradford, 94
Seim v. Garavalia, 105
Sepaugh v. LaGrone, 259
Sharyland Water Supply Corp. v. City of Alton, 223
Sheehan v. Roche Brothers Supermarkets, Inc., 111
Sidis v. F-R Publishing Corp., 339
Silas v. Bowen, 51
Sindell v. Abbott Labs., 123
Sindle v. N.Y. Transit Auth., 60
Sippy v. Cristich, 294
600 West 115th Street Corp. v. Von Gutfeld, 323
Slocum v. Food Fair Stores of Florida, Inc., 28
Smith v. Cote, 197
Smith v. Durden, 306
Smith v. Jersey Central Power & Light Co., 275
Smith v. Lannert, 205
Smith v. Superior Court, 117
Soldano v. O’Daniels, 164
Sorichetti v. City of New York, 165
Soule v. General Motors Corp., 221
Sovereign Pocohontas v. Bond, 285
Spears v. Coffee, 140
Spur Indus., Inc. v. Del E. Webb Dev. Co., 281
Stachniewicz v. Mar-Cam Corp., 99
Starr v. Hill, 212
State ex rel. Elvis Presley Int’l Mem. Found. v. Crowell, 345
State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. v. Campbell, 72
State v. Lead Industries Association, Inc., 280
Stout v. Warren, 210
Strauss v. Belle Realty Co., 166
Summers v. Tice, 123
Surocco v. Geary, 57
Tanner v. Ebbole, 345
Tarasoff v. Regents of the Univ. of Cal., 157
Taylor v. Vallelunga, 31
Tennessee ex rel. Swann v. Pack, 277
Terwilliger v. Wands, 315
Tessier v. Rockefeller, 291
The T. J. Hooper, 110
Thompson v. Best, 286
Thompson v. Franciscan Sisters Health Care Corp., 268
Thompson v. Kaczinski, 138
Time, Inc. v. Firestone, 320
Time, Inc. v. Hill, 342
Trammell Crow Central Texas, Ltd. v. Gutierrez, 176
Trevino v. Ortega, 117
Trupia v. Lake George Central School District, 238
Turcotte v. Fell, 237
Tyson v. Tyson, 267

Ultramares v. Touche, Niven & Co., 299
Uniroyal Goodrich Tire Co. v. Martinez, 222
United States v. Carroll Towing Co., 80

Vassiliades v. Garfinckel’s, Brooks Bros., 339
Vaughan v. Menlove, 82
Vosburg v. Putney, 6
Vulcan Metals Co. v. Simmons Mfg., 289

W.J.A. v. D.A., 307
Wagon Mound No. 1, Overseas Tankship (U.K.) Ltd. v. Morts Dock & Eng’g Co., Ltd., 133
Wagon Mound No. 2, Overseas Tankship (U.K.) Ltd. v. Miller Steamship Co., 134
Walker v. Bignell, 98
Watson v. Ky. & Ind. Bridge & R.R. Co., 141
Weintraub v. Krobatsch, 286
West v. East Tennessee Pioneer Oil Co., 192
West v. Media General Convergence, Inc., 343
Western Union Tel. Co. v. Hill, 24
Western Union Tel. Co. v. Hoffman, 230
Whelan v. Van Natta, 175
Whetham v. Bismark Hospital, 188
Whitaker v. Kruse, 143
Whitworth v. Bynum, 106
Wilk v. Georges, 178
Williams v. Bright, 85
Williams v. Rank & Son Buick, Inc., 294
Williams v. Steves Indus., Inc., 119
Wilson v. Piper Aircraft Corp., 218
Winget v. Winn Dixie Stores, Inc., 277
Winterstein v. Wilcom, 235
Wolfe v. MBNA American Bank, 154
Wyeth v. Levine, 226
Wynberg v. National Enquirer, Inc., 332
Ybarra v. Spangard, 115
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Cases</th>
<th>xxix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yommer v. McKenzie, 210</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young v. Clark, 83</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaslow v. Kroenert, 39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeni v. Anderson, 104</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zimmerman v. Ausland, 67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>