No. 18-_____

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

MICHAEL DEMON NIXON

Petitioner

v.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

Respondent

Petition for Writ of Certiorari
to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

I. Whether 18 U.S.C. §922(g) authorizes conviction upon proof that a firearm once crossed state lines at an unspecified prior occasion, when there is no evidence that the defendants' conduct caused such movement, nor that it moved in the recent past?

II. Whether the sufficiency of a factual basis for a defendant's plea should be subject to plain error review, or whether, under *Sullivan v. Louisiana*, 508 U.S. 275 (1993), such a case lacks "an object" upon which review for harmless and plain error may operate?

PARTIES

Michael Demon Nixon is the petitioner; he was the defendant-appellant below. The United States of America is the respondent; it was the plaintiff-appellee below.

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PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

Petitioner Michael Demon Nixon respectfully petitions for a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.

OPINIONS BELOW

The unpublished opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit is captioned as *United States v. Nixon*, 747 Fed. Appx. 995 (5th Cir. January 16, 2019)(unpublished), and is provided in the Appendix to the Petition. [Appx. A]. The district court entered judgment on March 30, 2018, which judgment is attached as an Appendix. [Appx. B].

JURISDICTIONAL STATEMENT

The instant Petition is filed within 90 days of an opinion affirming the judgment, which was entered on January 16, 2019. *See* SUP. CT. R. 13.1. This Court's jurisdiction to grant *certiorari* is invoked under 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1).

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS, RULES, AND STATUTES INVOLVED

Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution provides in part:

> The Congress shall have power... [t]o regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states, and with the Indian [sic] tribes

Title 18, Section 921(a)(2) provides:

> The term "interstate or foreign commerce" includes commerce between any place in a State and any place outside of that State, or within any possession of the United States (not including the Canal Zone) or the District of Columbia, but such term does not include commerce between places within the same State but through any place outside of that State. The term "State" includes the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the possessions of the United States (not including the Canal Zone).

Title 18, Section 922(g) of the United States Code provides in relevant part:

> It shall be unlawful for any person—
>
> (1) who has been convicted in any court of, a crime punishable by imprisonment for a term exceeding one year...
>
> to ship or transport in interstate or foreign commerce, or possess in or affecting commerce, any firearm or ammunition; or to receive any firearm or ammunition which has been shipped or transported in interstate or foreign commerce.

Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 11(b)(3) provides:

Determining the Factual Basis for a Plea. Before entering judgment on a guilty plea, the court must determine that there is a factual basis for the plea.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

A. Facts and Trial Proceedings

Petitioner Michael Demon Nixon was indicted on one count of possessing a firearm following a prior felony. He pleaded guilty , but did not waive appeal. His factual resume admitted that the firearm had been previously shipped and transported across state lines. He received a sentence of 105 months.

B. Appellate Proceedings

On appeal, Petitioner contended that the factual resume failed to admit a prosecutable offense. Specifically, he argued that 18 U.S.C. §922(g) should be construed to require either recent movement of firearms in interstate commerce, or movement of the firearm as a result of the defendant's conduct, and 2) that if it could not be so construed, it exceeded Congressional power to regulate interstate commerce under Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution. He cited *Bond v. United States*, __U.S.__, 134 S. Ct. 2077 (2014), in support of these contentions. Although he conceded that his claim had not been preserved in district court, he contended that the failure of the factual basis to admit a prosecutable offense could not be forfeited.

The court below concluded that these arguments were foreclosed by circuit precedent and accordingly affirmed. [Appx. B].

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE WRIT

I. The decision below conflicts with *Bond v. United States*, __U.S.__, 134 S.Ct. 2077 (2014).

Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 11 requires that the admissions made by the defendant in connection with a plea establish a prosecutable offense. *See* Fed. R. Crim. P. 11(b)(3). In Petitioner's district, these admissions are called the "factual resume." Petitioner's factual resume admitted that the possessed firearm had been transported across state lines. It did not admit that the offense itself caused the movement of the firearm, nor that the movement of the firearm was recent. Nor did it admit any other fact establishing that the offense involved the buying, selling, or movement of any commodity. Petitioner contended below that the factual resume was therefore insufficient to establish a violation of 18 U.S.C. §922(g).

Section 922(g) of Title 18 authorizes conviction when the defendant possesses a firearm, "in or affecting commerce, any firearm or ammunition...." 18 U.S.C. §922(g). To be sure, the statute may be read to include conduct that has little or nothing to do with the movement of commodities in interstate commerce, such as the possession of a firearm that crossed state lines years ago for entirely innocent purposes. But *Bond v. United States*, __U.S.__, 134 S. Ct. 2077 (2014), suggests that this is not the proper reading.

Bond was convicted of violating 18 U.S.C. §229, a statute that criminalized the knowing possession or use of "any chemical weapon." *Bond*, 134 S.Ct. at 2085-2086; 18 U.S.C. §229(a). She placed toxic chemicals – an arsenic compound and potassium dichromate – on the doorknob of a romantic rival. *See id.* This Court reversed her conviction, holding that any construction of the statute capable of reaching such conduct would compromise the chief role of states and localities in the suppression of crime. *See id.* at 2093. It instead construed the statute to reach only the kinds of weapons and conduct associated with warfare. *See id.* at 2090-2091.

Notably, §229 defined the critical term "chemical weapon" broadly as "any chemical which through its chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals. The term includes all such chemicals, regardless of their origin or of

their method of production, and regardless of whether they are produced in facilities, in munitions or elsewhere." 18 U.S.C. §229F(8)(A). Further, it criminalized the use or possession of "any" such weapon, not of a named subset. 18 U.S.C. §229(a). This Court nonetheless applied a more limited construction of the statute, reasoning that statutes should not be read in a way that sweeps in purely local activity:

> The Government's reading of section 229 would "'alter sensitive federal-state relationships,'" convert an astonishing amount of "traditionally local criminal conduct" into "a matter for federal enforcement," and "involve a substantial extension of federal police resources." [*United States v.*]*Bass*, 404 U.S. [336] 349-350, 92 S. Ct. 515, 30 L. Ed. 2d 488 [(1971)]. It would transform the statute from one whose core concerns are acts of war, assassination, and terrorism into a massive federal anti-poisoning regime that reaches the simplest of assaults. As the Government reads section 229, "hardly" a poisoning "in the land would fall outside the federal statute's domain." *Jones* [*v. United States*], 529 U.S. [848,] 857, 120 S. Ct. 1904, 146 L. Ed. 2d 902 [(2000)]. Of course Bond's conduct is serious and unacceptable—and against the laws of Pennsylvania. But the background principle that Congress does not normally intrude upon the police power of the States is critically important. In light of that principle, we are reluctant to conclude that Congress meant to punish Bond's crime with a federal prosecution for a chemical weapons attack.

Bond, 134 S. Ct. at 2091-2092.

As in *Bond*, it is possible to read §922(g) to reach the conduct admitted here: possession of an object that once moved across state lines, without proof that the defendant's conduct caused the object to move across state lines, nor even proof that it moved across state lines in the recent past. But to do so would intrude deeply on the traditional state responsibility for crime control. Such a reading would assert the federal government's power to criminalize virtually any conduct anywhere in the country, with little or no relationship to commerce, or to the interstate movement of commodities.

It is plain that Congress intended the "interstate commerce" requirement to bind §922(g) to federal interests in interstate commerce. This prong of the statute should therefore be read in a way that accomplishes this purpose. The better reading of the phrase "possess in or affecting commerce" – which appears in §922(g) – therefore requires a meaningful connection to interstate commerce. Such a reading would require either: 1) proof that the defendant's offense caused the firearm to move

in interstate commerce, or, at least, 2) proof that the firearm moved in interstate commerce at a time reasonably near the offense.

The court below rejected these claims. This Court should grant *certiorari* clarify that the federalism presumptions employed in *Bond* are not limited to the treaty power or to statutes closely related to international relations. This Court has long cautioned that federal criminal statutes are presumed to respect the traditional balance of federal and state authority, absent strong indications to the contrary. *See Jones v. United States*, 529 U.S. 848, 858 (2000)("We have cautioned, as well, that 'unless Congress conveys its purpose clearly, it will not be deemed to have significantly changed the federal-state balance' in the prosecution of crimes.")(citing *United States v. Bass*, 404 U.S. 336, 349 (1971)). This presumption applies to all criminal enactments that carry a risk of intrusion into the state domain. It is not limited to statutes like that at issue in *Bond*.

II. The applicability of *Sullivan v. Louisiana*, 508 U.S. 275 (1993), to a guilty plea is an important question of federal law that has not been, but should be, resolved by this Court.

Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 11 requires that the district court "determine that there is a factual basis for the plea" before entering judgment thereon. *See* Fed. R. Crim. P. 11(b)(3). The act of admitting guilt is unlike the other protections – like admonishment about the penalties and foregone rights – that accompany a defendant's decision to enter a plea of guilty. *See* Fed. R. Crim. P. 11(b)(1-2). The admission of guilt is the very heart of the plea – it is in the ordinary case the sole moral and legal justification for punishment in the absence of trial. *North Carolina v. Alford*, 400 U.S. 25, 32 (1970)("Ordinarily, a judgment of conviction resting on a plea of guilty is justified by the defendant's admission that he committed the crime charged against him and his consent that judgment be entered without a trial of any kind.") Thus, while *Boykin v. Alabama*, 395 U.S. 238 (1969), observed that "[a] plea of guilty is more than a confession which admits that the accused did various acts," there is ordinarily no plea without a confession. *Boykin*, 395 U.S. at 242.

The court below found that the plain error doctrine, codified in Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 52, applies to breaches of this requirement. *See* [Appendix A]. This conclusion seriously undermines the defendant's protections against erroneous pleas of guilty, misunderstands the function of Rule 52, and reflects confusion as to the proper application of *Sullivan v. Louisiana*, 508 U.S. 275 (1993).

In *Sullivan v. Louisiana*, 508 U.S. 275 (1993), this Court evaluated the applicability of the harmless error doctrine to a claim of instructional error, specifically to a claim that the jury was not properly instructed on reasonable doubt. *See Sullivan*, 508 U.S. at.277. The State argued that the verdict would have been the same but for the misinstruction. But this Court unanimously held that it would violate the defendant's right to trial by jury for an appeals court to overlook the error. *See id.* at 281. This Court reasoned that criminal defendants have a right to have the jury determine in the first instance that they are guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, and that to ignore the faulty instruction would essentially substitute the court of appeals' opinion for that of a jury. *See id.* It explained further:

> Once the proper role of an appellate court engaged in the *Chapman* inquiry is understood, the illogic of harmless-error review in the present case becomes evident. Since, for the reasons described above, there has been no jury verdict within the meaning of the Sixth Amendment, the entire premise of *Chapman* review is simply absent. There being no jury verdict of guilty-beyond-a-reasonable-doubt, the question whether the same verdict of guilty-beyond-a-reasonable-doubt would have been rendered absent the constitutional error is utterly meaningless. There is no object, so to speak, upon which harmless-error scrutiny can operate. The most an appellate court can conclude is that a jury would surely have found petitioner guilty beyond a reasonable doubt -- not that the jury's actual finding of guilty beyond a reasonable doubt would surely not have been different absent the constitutional error. That is not enough. The Sixth Amendment requires more than appellate speculation about a hypothetical jury's action, or else directed verdicts for the State would be sustainable on appeal; it requires an actual jury finding of guilty.

See Sullivan, 508 U.S. at 280.

In *United States v. Dominguez-Benitez*, 542 U.S. 74 (2004), however, this Court made clear that the logic of *Sullivan* does not apply to all claims of error in the taking of a plea. Rather, this Court held that in the absence of an objection at the colloquy, the doctrine of plain error applied to the failure of the district court to provide the defendant with the proper warnings. *See Dominguez-*

Benitez, 542 U.S. at 82. This required the defendant to show a" reasonable probability that, but for the error, he would not have entered the plea." *See id.* at 83.

Dominguez-Benitez, however, deals with claims of "error" in the taking of a plea – it does not purport to establish a standard of review for the absence of a cognizable plea. *See id.* Indeed, *Dominguez-Benitez* establishes that the "outcome" presumed to exist when the doctrine of plain error is applied in the Rule 11 context ***is*** the plea, which in the ordinary case is the admission of guilt. It would appear at least arguable under *Sullivan*, that the plea of guilty is the "object" upon which harmless or plain error analysis acts. By this logic, the defendant's claim that he never admitted guilt, and accordingly that he entered an incomplete plea, is thus arguably not subject to either doctrine. The courts of appeals have nonetheless applied the doctrine of plain error to claims of this kind. *See United States v. Garcia*, 587 F.3d 509, 515 (2d Cir. 2009); *United States v. Tann*, 577 F.3d 533, 535 (3d Cir. 2009)*; United States v. Edgerton*, 408 Fed. Appx. 733, 735-736 (4th Cir. 2011)*; United States v. Marek*, 238 F.3d 310, 315 (5th Cir. 2001)*(en banc*); *United States v. Maye*, 582 F.3d 622, 626-627 (6th Cir. 2009)*; United States v. Luna-Orozco*, 321 F.3d 857, 860 (9th Cir. 2003).

The issue merits this Court's attention. First, the application of plain error review to the sufficiency of the defendant's plea effectively renders Federal Rule 11(b)(3) unenforceable. This provision "is designed to 'protect a defendant who is in the position of pleading voluntarily with an understanding of the nature of the charge but without realizing that his conduct does not actually fall within the charge.'" *McCarthy v. United States*, 394 U.S. 459, 467, 22 L. Ed. 2d 418, 89 S. Ct. 1166 (1969) (quoting Fed. R. Crim. P. 11, Notes of Advisory Committee on Criminal Rules). A defendant who ***does not understand*** that his conduct falls outside the statute of conviction is obviously very unlikely to object to the inadequacy of her own factual basis. Given the function of the factual basis requirement – to protect the defendant from inadvertent pleas to non-existent offenses – it is bizarre to suggest that the defendant, rather than the court, should bear the burden of identifying such misapprehension.

Second, the application of the plain and harmless error doctrines to the insufficiency of the factual basis misunderstands the function of Rule 52. Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 52 is the foundation for the doctrines of harmless and plain error. The doctrine of harmless error provides that an error may be ignored if it had no effect on the outcome. *See* Fed. R. Crim. P. 52(a). The doctrine of plain error provides that a party complaining of unpreserved error must demonstrate plain or obvious error and that the error affects the defendant's substantial rights. *See* Fed. R. Crim. P. 52(b). These Rules deal with "error," what this Court has described as "deviation from a legal rule." *United States v. Olano*, 507 U.S. 725, 732-733 (1993). And while the entry of conviction without a factual basis is an error in this sense – it is something more as well. It is the total absence of a plea, akin to the absence of a verdict of guilty in a trial. Conviction in the absence of plea or verdict is not the type of "error" that can be plausibly subjected to harmless or plain error review.

Third, the failure of this Court to specify the analog of *Sullivan* in the plea context has generated inconsistent opinions within the courts of appeals. The D.C. Circuit has suggested that some Rule 11 errors, such as extensive judicial participation in a plea agreement, may be beyond the reach of the plain error doctrine. *See United States v. Baker*, 489 F.3d 366, 372 (D.C. Cir. 2007)(observing that "not all Rule 11 violations are created equal" and finding the standard of review a "difficult question"). The Fourth Circuit, however, cited this Court's decisions in *Dominguez-Benitez* and *United States v. Vonn*, 535 U.S. 55 (2002), for the proposition that "all forfeited Rule 11 errors were subject to plain error review." *United States v. Bradley*, 455 F.3d 453, 461 (4th Cir. 2006). This confusion regarding the scope of Rule 52 as it relates to pleas of guilty should be addressed by granting *certiorari* in this case.

CONCLUSION

FOR THESE REASONS, Petitioner asks that this Honorable Court issue an order granting the writ of *certiorari* to review the decision below.

Respectfully submitted this 12th day of April, 2019,

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