BRARY E COURT, U. E.

Supreme Court of the United States

October Term, 1968

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JOHN F. BAVIS, CLERK

In the Matter of:

JOHN H. BINGLER, DISTRICT DIRECTOR OF INTERNAL REVENUE,

Petitioner,

VS.

RICHARD E. JOHNSON, et al.,

Respondent.

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Place

Washington, D. C.

Date

March 3, 1969

ALDERSON REPORTING COMPANY, INC.

300 Seventh Street, S. W.

Washington, D. C.

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Docket No. 473

Pt. 1

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# IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

October Term, 1968

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JOhn H. Bingler, District Director : of Internal Revenue, :

Petitioner,

v. : No. 473

Richard E. Johnson, et al.,

Respondents.

Washington, D. C.
Monday, March 3, 1969.

The above-entitled matter came on for argument at

1:55 p.m.

#### BEFORE:

EARL WARREN, Chief Justice
HUGO L. BLACK, Associate Justice
WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS, Associate Justice
JOHN M. HARLAN, Associate Justice
WILLIAM J. BRENNAN, JR., Associate Justice
POTTER STEWART, Associate Justice
BYRON R. WHITE, Associate Justice
ABE FORTAS, Associate Justice
THURGOOD MARSHALL, Associate Justice

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## PROCEEDINGS

MR. CHIEF JUSTICE WARREN: No. 473, John H. Bingler,
District Director of Internal Revenue, Petitioner, versus
Richard E. Johnson, et al.

THE CLERK: Counsel are present.

MR. CHIEF JUSTICE WARREN: Mr. Weinstein.

ORAL ARGUMENT OF HARRIS WEINSTEIN, ESQ.

#### ON BEHALF OF PETITIONER

MR. WEINSTEIN: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it please the Court.

This Federal income tax case comes to this court on a writ of certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit.

The issue involves the meaning of the words scholar-ship and fellowship grant which are used in Section 117 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954. That section of the Code allows the recipient to exclude the amount of scholarships or fellowships from his gross income.

That is, it makes scholarships and fellowships tax exempt.

This case typifies a tax problem that seems to have arisen since the 1954 Code was adopted. At least Congress in writing Section 117 in the legislative history showed no then awareness of this type of problem.

It is basically this: It goes to the meaning of the

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word scholarship and fellowship in a commercial setting. Do those words encompass the situation where an employer gives his employee leave from his regular duties and continues the employee's regular salary or the greater part of it while the employee is taking a graduate degree on the subject matter of his employment.

And at the same time the employer obligates the employee to return to work for some specified minimum period of time.

The issue comes to the court because of a split of authority among the lower Federal Courts. The Fifth and Sixth Circuits and the Court of Claims have each sustained Treasury regulations tending to the view that payments made in this type of commercial setting are not scholarships or fellowships.

The Third Circuit in this case has rejected those regulations, has ruled that these payments are a scholarship or fellowship and has reversed a jury verdict in favor of the United States.

The precise problem comes out of payments that the Westinghouse Electric Corporation made to three respondents before this court, at a time when those respondents were on leave on doctoral discertations.

These amounts were paid pursuant to a program available to engineers and scientists employed at the Bettis Atomic Power Laboratory at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

That is a laboratory owned by the Atomic Energy

Commission and most if not all of its activities seem to be

in the design of nuclear reactors for producing electric power.

Westinghouse operates the laboratory under a costplus contract with the Atomic Energy Commission.

In this particular program we are concerned with here,

I think it is typical of similar programs, is intended as the

testimony here shows to meet the needs that Westinghouse and

the AEC have for highly trained technical people to help them

recruit these people to keep them over a long period of time and

to keep them up to date on technical requirements of their job.

The program we are concerned with is broken into two phases: The first one, which is called the work-study phase has not given rise to any tax dispute, at least up to now.

It lasts for four years and it begins when the employee is accepted by Westinghouse into this Bettis Program. In the case of two of the respondents that occurred when they agreed to work for Westinghouse; with the third respondent it occurred sometime after he had come to work for Westinghouse.

During this four-year work-study phase the employee holds down a regular job at the Bettis Laboratory and he attends classes part time either at the University of Pittsburgh or the Carnegie Institute of Technology, which I think since the events in this case has become the Carnegie-Mellon University.

Westinghouse pays the employee for 40 hours a week

but allows him 8 hours weekly, up to I think a total of 156 hours each year to go to class.

Westinghouse pays his tuition and fees during that period. At the end of this four-year period the employee is supposed to have met his preliminary requirements for the doctoral degree in engineering or science.

When all of his course work and his language studies are finished and he has passed the qualification examinations for the doctoral degree he applies for a leave of absence to work on his discertation.

He receives a leave of absence if Westinghouse and the AEC each approve the applicant -- not all are approved -- and if Westinghouse and the AEC each approve his thesis topic which is in the first instance approved by the University.

If he is granted leave, he then agrees to come back to Westinghouse for some ---

Q I beg your pardon, is it clearly understood that they will approve his discertation subject only if it is connected with the work of this particular plant? I think your brief indicates that.

A I believe, Mr. Justice Fortas, that testimony that the testimony which is, as I recall, on this topic was a representative of the AEC, was that they wanted the topic to be work connected.

Now I think that has a broad scope and it certainly

does not mean a topic of current use or of current concern to the laboratory, but I would suppose that it rather means a topic that, by its nature, helps the man learn better how to work on the problems at the laboratory.

Q May I take it for granted, take it as not disputed that the dissertation topic is a topic that is of commercial interest to Westinghouse and official interest to AEC in terms of its governmental assignment?

A I think, Mr. Justice Fortas, I would go too far if I said that it was of immediate commercial value at the time that it was performed.

It may or may not be. I think that work connected was used in a somewhat more general sense. The topics here were chosen in this case were chosen by the respondents. They were generally related to the area of interest which I think were the areas where the respondents had worked, generally speaking, before taking their leave.

The topics were approved by the AEC and Westinghouse.

There is apparently precedent for disapproval but it did not happen with any of these three respondents.

Now in return for this leave the respondent agrees to return to Westinghouse at Bettis for a minimum period of ---

Q Excuse me, but on page 3 of your brief, and this is what caught my eye, you say each applicant must be approved and the topic of his proposed thesis is reviewed to insure that

it is relevent to the work program of the laboratory, relevant to the work program of the laboratory.

A I think, Mr. Justice Fortas, that if there is a vagueness there it is a vagueness that reflects the record.

This record did not involve any topics that had been disapproved and beyond inquiring whether there was approval or whether there had been any instances of disapproval I do not believe there was any inquiry into what might lead the AEC and Westinghouse to disapprove a particular contract.

I don't want to suggest that the topics were reviewed for immediate commercial benefit at that point.

This minimum period of obligation after the leave was in the case of two respondents here, two years, and in the case of the third who came under an earlier version of the same program. He was committed to return to Westinghouse for one year after his leave.

During the leave Westinghouse pays all tuition and fees and those amounts are not in dispute here. They have not been taxed and there is no contention that they should be taxed.

The dispute goes to an amount that is paid calculated on the basis of prior salary and family size. It ranges from 70 to 90 percent of prior salary depending on, the low end a single man -- at the high end, a man with a wife and two or more children.

Q Is there any indication why it is less than his

full salary?

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A No, the record doesn't go into that. I suppose,
Mr. Justice, there could be a variety of reasons. It might
just be an inducement to be done with his work and come back as
soon as possible.

Q Do you suppose that reflects any anticipated tax he might have?

A The record bears on that indirectly in showing that Westinghouse on advice of their tax counsel withheld taxes from this portion of the benefits. No one asked ---

Q So as far as their conduct is concerned the answer is the contrary?

A Well, certainly the record doesn't show that it was an anticipation of tax consequences.

I might add that this program is typical, yet the payments might not be. For example, the Federal Government sends a good number of civilian and military employees to school, many of whom study for degrees. These people receive their full salaries.

I think it rather hard to distinguish in defining a scholarship or fellowship between whether a man gets 100 percent of his salary or 90 percent as one of the respondents did here.

Q I suppose if some foundation had made these grants to these people in the same amounts you wouldn't be here?

A No, because the statute is very specific on

that and if they are a degree candidate it would be excluded.

If they are not a degree candidate it would be excluded up to \$300 a month for 36 months.

Q Well, for a degree candidate the statute isn't any more specific about this than about a grant from a foundation and from a commercial source?

A I think the legislative history bears on this subject.

Q Not the statute?

A No, the statute is completely neutral, I would say, on it.

Q But you would draw a distinction as between a grant from a foundation and a grant from a company like this?

A Yes, I would. And I would say that that is supported by the expressions of opinion in the committee reports that Congress did not want to exempt or didn't that it was exemptive from tax what it called continuing salary payments to an employee who was on leave from his regular job.

I really think that that legislative history is the basic support for the regulations that we are relying on here.

The three respondents here were on leave at varying times between 1960 and 1962. Two of them for nine months, they received \$630 a month which is 80 percent of their prior salaries and the third wone was on leave for a full year. He received during that period just under \$9700 and that was 90

percent of the salary he had been receiving before beginning the leave.

Q Did they actually move to the campuses of Carnegie Tech or the University of Pittsburgh? Well, actually, these were local universities so I suppose they continued to live at home?

A Again, Mr. Justice, I would suppose so. These questions weren't asked. The laboratory is in Pittsburgh.

They are restricted to the choice of these two universities to participate.

Q Both of which are local?

A They are both local and, of course, they have been going to classes there for four years at least before they take their leave.

Q I understood you to say that the employer company paid all the tuition and fees and that you concede that that was not taxable income?

A I think that technically, Mr. Justice, that might be includable in gross income but at the same time they would be given a deduction for it.

O Yes.

A Under the Educational Expense Provision so it would be a wash and there has been no dispute about that part of the case.

Q As I understood your brief you don't make any

real distinction between a -- or at least you don't make the distinction made by respondent between a scholarship and a fellowship?

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A As we say in our reply brief, we understand that distinction to rest on the idea that scholarship means degree candidate and fellowship means nondegree candidate and we have just found no support for that kind of distinction.

Q A scholarship might be a candidate of any kind, it might be a man out travelling around because he got a nice stipend from the Ford Foundation.

- A It might be although ---
- Q It might be a former candidate.

A I would think it would come down to this. In a grant to a undergraduate I think is always called a scholar-ship. A grant to somebody who is not seeking any kind of degree is, I think, generally called a fellowship.

When you go to graduate students it could be either. The only definition that we found was in the catalog of MIT which says that a scholarship to a graduate student means something that just covers tuition and the fellowship to a graduate student means something that covers tuition plus other things.

Q I thought that perhaps Congress meant the two generically to be different. That a scholarship was something that was given to somebody who was in school at any level,

undergraduate or graduate level or even high school, and that a fellowship grant, a fellowship grant was and could be given to somebody not -- he might or might not be an academic person but it didn't have anything to do with school, as such.

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That is the respondent's submission, as I understand.

A I think our answer to it is two things.

First, we don't understand that that has ever been the accepted understanding of those words in any place, which would lead us to think that if Congress had meant that rather unusual distinction it would have been more direct in saying so.

And, I think the other answer really comes down to why these regulations exist and perhaps I ought to turn to those because this case, I think, focuses on the validity of these regulations.

The statute really has no definition. You are left on this statute, I think, to infer from why the statute was adopted and what Congress said about it, how this sort of case ought to be resolved.

The Treasury, which has general rule-making power, has sought to use that power to fill what is really an interstice in the statute.

These regulations that the Treasury has adopted were accepted as the controlling legal theory by the District Judge.

They form the basis for instructions for rulings on evidence and for that reason I think that the basis for the regulations

is the heart really of this case.

If those regulations are reasonable, if they are rational interpretations of the statute, then we would suggest that the Treasury has properly exercised its power in drawing a rather hard line on what we would agree is a rather hard case of statutory interpretation.

These regulations, if I can turn to their language, start out with a general definition that says generally speaking that a scholarship is an amount paid to allow a student to pursue studies. A fellowship to allow a student to pursue studies or research.

If the regulations stop there this case would not have arisen because these payments would have qualified. But the dispute focuses on two exceptions that are in these regulations.

Q As I look at these regulations they do seem to me superficially at least to make close to this distinction by the respondent, forwhatever it is worth, 117-3 says a scholarship is something which is given to a student whether an undergraduate or a graduate and fellowship grant generally means an amount paid or allowed to an individual to aid him in the pursuit.

- A Of study or research.
- Q And one is a student and the other is an individual. There must be some reason for the difference in

language.

A I think the reason is that an individual could be either. It could be a student or a nonstudent. I don't believe that these regulations were intended in that subparagraph (c) to not to apply to a student but rather the word individual was used to encompass a student as well as somebody who was not.

I think that that would agree with the general understanding of a fellowship which might be to a graduate student or might not be.

The exceptions which are also set out in our Appendix to these general definitions are twofold.

One says that a scholarship or fellowship does not include amounts that represent compensation for past, present or future employment services.

The second says that a scholarship or fellowship does not encompass amounts that are paid to finance study or research undertaken and the words are primarily for the benefit of the grantor.

Both of these exceptions represent generalizations of concerns Congress evidenced for things that Congress did when it was drafting this part of the Revenue Code. This part of the Code was a direct response to some very specific problems that the Treasury had in years preceding 1954.

These were how to treat amounts paid research and

teaching assistants and how to treat foundation grants to the nonstudent, often an established research or a professional who wanted to continue his area of activity.

The only way of doing this before 1954 was to apply concepts of gift. And 39 Code is now, a gift was intended the amount was not taxable.

Now the difficulty with this was that it was a rather anomalous approach. As things worked out the foundation grant to an established professional which is a reasonably substantial amount, proceeds from what could be called the disinterested generosities, so it is a gift, the small amounts paid graduate students who were required to teach or do research are paid to an employee so those are taxed.

This is a sensible interpretation of gift. But in terms of tax policy and in terms of what one might want to exempt or not exempt it is questionable whether this makes sense.

adopted. It has in its first section, 117-A, a general exclusion of amounts paid as scholarships or fellowships. Then 117-B expressly deals with these two problems; 117-B-1 deals with the research assistant or teaching assistant and it expressly provides that amounts paid to that type of person are to be taxed unless that person is performing duties, for example, practice teaching, that are required of all candidates

for the degree including those, of course, who would not have fellowships or scholarships.

Now in drafting these provisions Congress said two things. The parts of the regulations that we are concerned with here represent generalizations of what Congress said.

In dealing with the nondegree candidates in establishing this \$300 per month exclusion, both Houses of Congress
in their committee reports, said that they did not intend to
grant exclusions for amounts that could fairly be called
continuing payments of salary during a period when the recipient
is on leave from his regular job.

That is the language of the House report. It is essentially repeated in the Senate report. The House did this in the context of an objective formula which would have excluded fellowships only if the fellowship grant and the employee's compensation from a prior employer were less than 75 percent of this prior salary.

The Senate changed the formula but expressed the same general idea. The reason the Senate changed the formula does not bear on this case. It is because it was called to the Senate's attention that certain people, for example, people who just got a medical degree and were being given a fellowship would, under the House formula, have been taxed because they had no real income before they started on their research or post doctoral fellowship.

Now the part of the regulation that excludes from a fellowship or a scholarship compensation from past, present or future services, we suggest has its direct antecedent in this aspect of the legislative history.

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Congress was quite clear that it did not want to exempt payments of salary while the recipient is on leave from his regular job. We suggest in this part of the regulation the Treasury has quite directly implemented that expression of Congressional concern.

The second part of the regulation which speaks of the primary purpose of the grant comes out of the legislative history of Section 117(b)(1) which taxes amounts paid to teaching and research assistants.

That exemption does not apply if the teaching or research is required of everybody who is a candidate for the degree even if he doesn't have a scholarship. Congress in explaining that dichotomy said it was drafting the statute so that it would not tax a grant which involves research or teaching services performed primarily for the training and education of the recipient.

So the second exclusion of the regulation finds its direct antecedent in that portion of the legislative history. So what we have is a Treasury attempt to synthesize and give expression to the general concerns that Congress showed in drafting this statute.

There are several arguments made against us, both by respondent and by the court below which I would like to deal with very briefly.

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Congress said that it was trying to avoid a case by case inquiry into the existence of gift. From this it has been suggested, and argued, that Congress was trying to avoid a case by case inquiry into anything, even compensation.

We find no support for that in the legislative history, none has ever been cited. Congress rather made clear that it did not want to let compensatory or bargain for arrangements escape tax.

And this is the effect of the Treasury regulations is to support that purpose.

The second point which I think is really at the basis of the Third Circuit opinion here, is the view that Congress in Section 117 wanted to do everything it could to encourage education and that the interpretation rendered below encourages education.

That is true that Congress wanted to encourage education through certain tax exempt incentives but that is not the function of Section 117.

Congress' attempts to encourage education are in other parts of the code in Section 501 which allows tax free foundationstand educational institutions and in Section 170 which allows deductions for donations to that sort of organization.

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Neither of these bear on this case which is a commercial enterprise, arises in a commercial setting and a bargained-for arrangement.

Q May I ask you this question? Suppose an employee of Westinghouse went to his superiors and he said, "I want to take a year off to work on my doctoral thesis," and they said, "Well, that is fine, Westinghouse likes to encourage its young people and we will give you a scholarship of say \$10,000."

So they just give him the \$10,000. Nothing more. Those are the total facts. How would that be treated?

- A With no quid pro quo.
- Q No quid pro quo.
- A He was not promised that when he first came to work?
  - Q No.
  - A He was not obligated to come back?
- Q No, Westinghouse says, "We encourage this sort of thing. We will give you a scholarship of \$10,000."
- A I don't think we would assert that that is compensation.
- Q Really what you are settled down to here is the intimate tie between the terms and conditions of employment of Westinghouse business interests and the payments made on the one hand and the tie between the payments made here and the

usual ordinary compensation of the person on the other?

A Yes, we rely on that bundle of facts and I think that bundle is typical of the cases we have been litigating.

Thank you.

MR. CHIEF JUSTICE WARREN: Mr. Larrimer.

ORAL ARGUMENT OF JAMES C. LARRIMER, ESQ.

ON BEHALF OF RESPONDENT

MR. LARRIMER: May it please the Court.

If I may I would like to direct my initial comments to the question proposed by Mr. Justice Fortas on the selection of the thesis topic.

The section of the topic itself is confined to the area in which this scholarship was granted and this is the requirement of Westinghouse that it be in engineering field.

That is the broad limit of the topic itself. The selection of the thesis ---

Q Well, the Government says something more specific than that. The Government says something much more specific than that.

A They say it, your Honor, yes.

Q I haven't had a chance to check into the record but the Government says it has got to be connected with the -- it has to be relevant to the work program of the laboratory, and you say the record does not support that?

A The record does not support that. The record,

the testimony of the witness was that it must be of general interest and very general in nature I think are the exact terms that were used by the witness.

The thesis topic is essentially a learning process or a teaching process. The university has a condition of granting the degree of the doctor of philosophy must be satisfied that these men have the ability to undertake what they call original research.

They must first select a topic and in selecting the topic they must make a search of the records in order to ascertain that this particular topic has not been researched before. This selection must be made and submitted to the faculty and the university for approval and after the selection is approved, as constituting original research, then the individual student is permitted to pursue his research in order to secure an answer to the problem he has selected.

Q Well then the company does have the right to determine whether or not the proposal of the employee for a thesis is to be permitted?

A The program, yes, your Honor. The program under which the scholarship is granted states that the topic should be of interest to Bettis, the Atomic Energy and it should be submitted to them for approval.

Q In other words he is not aentirely a free agent to acquire a doctorate without regard to his work? Supposing

Atomic Energy he wanted to write a thesis on English.

- A It would not be approved.
- Q It would not be approved.
- A Because ---

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Q Because there is no specific interest of the company in that?

A Well, not for that reason, but for a different reason and that is this: That when these individuals, when these students are accepted under this scholarship program they are accepted as a candidate for a degree in the Department of Engineering and Science and necessarily their thesis topic must be involved with a topic which is in that department.

Q Is that interest only as general as science, anything in science whether it affected their work or not would be approved?

- A Yes.
- Q Of necessity they would have to approve it?
- A No, the program does not say that. The program can be terminated at any time by Westinghouse for any reason. There is no vested interest in this student in continuation of the program. Westinghouse has a right to continue or to discontinue it at any time for whatever reason they choose.

But the testimony in the court below was that it had to be in engineering and it could be of very general nature, related to the Westinghouse or Bettis Atomic Laboratory, which,

of course, was involved with engineering principles and scientific principles.

Now the Government's premise, which is stated throughout its brief, and is stated unequivocally, is that Congress
plainly intended that the view that the exclusion would not
apply to grants that are in effect merely payments of a salary
during a period while the recipient is on leave from his
regular job.

This statement is repeated again and again. It is repeated again on page 9 of their brief, it is repeated again on page 12, repeated again on page 18, and on page 21, page 30, page 4 and 8 of the reply brief.

Now, I suggest to this court that this statement is not supported by a legislative history. Directing my argument to that aspect of it, in the backdrop of this case ---

MR. CHIEF JUSTICE WARREN: We will let you start that in the morning. We will recess now, Mr. Larrimer.

(Whereupon, at 2:30 p.m. the Court recessed, to reconvene at 10 a.m. Tuesday, March 4, 1969.)