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MUNICIPALITY’S COMMON LAW LIABILITY FOR POLICE TORTS

*Marusa v. District of Columbia, 484 F.2d 828 (D.C. Cir. 1973)*

An off-duty officer of the District of Columbia Police Department became intoxicated and for no apparent reason shot plaintiff with his service revolver.\(^1\) Plaintiff sued the District of Columbia, alleging (a) that the District was liable, either directly for its own negligence, or vicariously for the negligence of the police chief, in hiring, training, and supervising the policeman, and (b) that the District was vicariously liable for the policeman’s intentional tort by virtue of the agency theory of respondeat superior.\(^2\) The Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit reversed the district court’s dismissal of the action,\(^3\) and held: The District of Columbia is liable at common law to the victims of its policemen’s torts.\(^4\)

At early common law, municipalities were not liable for torts committed by their employees.\(^5\) Later, in the nineteenth century, courts

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2. Causes of action were also alleged against the police officer personally for an intentional tort, against the police chief for negligence, and against the officer, the police chief, and the District of Columbia under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 (1970). See notes 3 & 4 infra. The officer was never served with process, however, and hence was not a party to the litigation. *Marusa v. District of Columbia, 484 F.2d 828, 830 (D.C. Cir. 1973).*

3. The actions against the District of Columbia and the police chief had been dismissed by the district court on the ground that plaintiff’s cause of action was barred by the one-year statute of limitations for “wounding” in D.C. Code Ann. § 12-301(4) (1973). 484 F.2d at 830.

4. 484 F.2d 828 (D.C. Cir. 1973). The court held that the applicable statute of limitations was the three-year statute for negligence actions imposed by D.C. Code Ann. § 12-301(8) (1973), and therefore reversed the common law claims against the other defendants. 484 F.2d at 833. The dismissals of the § 1983 claims, *see note 2 supra*, were affirmed on the basis of District of Columbia v. Carter, 409 U.S. 418 (1973), which held that the District is not a “state or territory” within the terms of that statute.

in most jurisdictions drew a distinction between torts committed by municipal employees in the course of proprietary activities, for which the municipality was liable, and torts committed in the course of governmental activities, for which the municipality remained immune from liability.6

This distinction between governmental and proprietary activities is still recognized in twenty-two jurisdictions.7 In these states, the opera-

6. The terms "governmental" and "proprietary" were not widely used until the twentieth century, but soon after the first decisions on municipal immunity were handed down, the division of functions of municipal corporations was recognized. See, e.g., Dargan v. Mayor of Mobile, 31 Ala. 469, 474 (1858); Jewett v. City of New Haven, 38 Conn. 368, 377 (1871); Cook v. Mayor & Council, 54 Ga. 468, 469 (1875); Wilcox v. City of Chicago, 107 Ill. 334, 338 (1883); Brinkmeyer v. City of Evansville, 29 Ind. 187, 191 (1867); Ogg v. City of Lansing, 35 Iowa 495, 499 (1872); City of Atchison v. Challiss, 9 Kan. 603, 613 (1872); Moulton v. Inhabitants of Scarborough 71 Me. 267, 270 (1880); Bigelow v. Inhabitants of Randolph, 80 Mass. (14 Gray) 541, 545 (1860); City of Detroit v. Blackeby, 21 Mich. 84, 106 (1870).

tion of a police department is considered a governmental activity, either on the theory that police work is done in the public interest, or that, since municipalities are required by the state constitution to maintain police departments, the department partakes of the state's sovereign immunity. Apart from the governmental-proprietary distinction as a


Some cases focus on the particular tortious police activity, and if that is proprietary, hold the city liable. City of Anniston v. Hillman, 220 Ala. 505, 126 So. 169 (1930) (police supervision of prisoners in street maintenance work held proprietary); Jones v. Sioux City, 185 Iowa 1178, 1188, 170 N.W. 445, 449 (1919) (driving policemen to their beats held proprietary); City of Meridian v. Beeman, 175 Miss. 527, 336, 166 So. 757, 758 (1936) (patrolling police beat held "corporate" rather than governmental insofar as municipal ordinances required police to maintain lookout for defects in public utilities); Carrington v. City of St. Louis, 89 Mo. 208, 215-16, 1 S.W. 240, 242 (1886) (municipality liable for injury caused by condition negligently maintained on sidewalk by police); Levin v. City of Omaha, 102 Neb. 328, 331, 167 N.W. 214, 215 (1918) (policeman working as foreman of city garage held working in proprietary capacity); Oklahoma City v. Bailey, 405 P.2d 115, 117 (Okla. 1965) (policeman driving police car home after work held proprietary); Oklahoma City v. Foster, 118 Okla. 120, 124, 247 P. 80, 83 (1926) (maintenance of police garage held proprietary); Bucholz v. City of Sioux Falls, 77 S.D. 322, 91 N.W.2d 606 (1958) (police rifle range used by public for recreational purposes held proprietary); Crow v. City of San Antonio, 157 Tex. 250, 253, 301 S.W.2d 628, 629 (1957) (police blocking traffic to help children go to Bible class held proprietary).


South Carolina holds that municipalities are immune from liability for police torts on the ground of the state's sovereign immunity, but does not use the governmental-
means for avoiding liability, some of these states refuse to hold municipalities liable for policemen's torts on an agency theory by reasoning that police torts are necessarily outside the scope of employment. Other courts hold that they simply lack the power to overrule the immunity doctrine, while still other courts reason that they lack the administrative competence to subject the diverse range of governmental activities to tort liability. Whatever reasoning is used to justify the proprietary distinction in police tort cases. McKenzie v. City of Florence, 234 S.C. 428, 433, 108 S.E.2d 825, 827 (1959).


A reason often given for such holdings is that the state legislatures, by passing legislation affecting certain areas of governmental immunity, preempt the entire field. See Parish v. Pitts, 244 Ark. 1239, 1255-59, 429 S.W.2d 45, 53-55 (1968) (dissenting opinion); Muskopf v. Cornning Hosp. Dist., 55 Cal. 2d 211, 221-24, 359 P.2d 457, 463-64, 11 Cal. Rptr. 89, 95-96 (1961) (dissenting opinion); Parker v. City of Hutchinson, 196 Kan. 148, 152-54, 410 P.2d 347, 350-52 (1966); Montoya v. City of Albuquerque, 82 N.M. 90, 95, 476 P.2d 54, 65 (1970); Conway v. Humbert, 82 S.D. 317, 322-24, 145 N.W.2d 524, 527-29 (1970). In Molitor v. Kaneland Community Unit Dist. No. 302, 18 Ill. 2d 11, 16, 163 N.E.2d 89, 91, cert. denied, 362 U.S. 968 (1959), however, the Illinois Supreme Court believed that such legislation merely evidenced the legislature's dissatisfaction with the immunity rule. Other courts agree with the reasoning of the court in Abeyta v. City & County, 165 Colo. 58, 59, 437 P.2d 67, 68 (1968), which held: "Once such a doctrine has become so deeply embedded in the law of this state, it is the legislature which must change it, and not the judiciary." See Haney v. City of Lexington, 386 S.W.2d 738, 743 (Ky. 1964); Kingfisher v. City of Forsyth, 132 Mont. 39, 45, 314 P.2d 876, 879-80 (1957); McKenzie v. City of Florence, 234 S.C. 428, 433-36, 108 S.E.2d 825, 827-28 (1954).

In Maffei v. Incorporated Town of Kemmerer, 80 Wyo. 33, 34-44, 338 P.2d 808, 811 (1959), the court held:

Section 16-301, W.C.S. 1945, says the Common Law of England prior to the fourth year of James I (1607) "shall be the rule of decision in this state." Thus, by statute the doctrine of municipal immunity became the rule of decision in our state and it is only by statute that the doctrine should be abrogated.


12. Liber v. Flor, 143 Colo. 205, 239, 353 P.2d 590, 608 (1960) (dissenting opin-
immunity rule, it appears that some courts are motivated to retain the rule by a fear that imposing liability on municipalities would precipitate a flood of litigation\(^{13}\) that would dissipate city treasuries.\(^{14}\)

In fifteen jurisdictions, however, it has been held that municipalities are liable for police torts.\(^{15}\) These jurisdictions have criticized the doc-

\(^{13}\) Molitor v. Kaneland Community Unit Dist. No. 302, 18 Ill. 2d 11, 35, 163 N.E.2d 89, 101, \textit{cert. denied}, 362 U.S. 968 (1959) (dissenting opinion); Anderson v. Vander-
slice, 240 Miss. 55, 58, 126 So. 2d 522, 523 (1961); Fette v. St. Louis, 366 S.W.2d 446, 448 (Mo. 1963); Gossler v. City of Manchester, 107 N.H. 310, 313-14, 221 A.2d 242, 245 (1966); Coffman v. City of Pulaski, 220 Tenn. 642, 651, 422 S.W.2d 429, 432-

\(^{14}\) Typical of the reasoning behind such a holding is the following statement in Bale

\(^{15}\) Marusa v. District of Columbia, 484 F.2d 828 (D.C. Cir. 1973) (vicarious liability for police intentional tort); Graham v. District of Columbia, 433 F.2d 536 (D.C. Cir. 1961) (negligent tort); Scheele v. City of Anchorage, 385 P.2d 582 (Alas. 1963) (intentional tort); City of Phoenix v. Camfield, 97 Ariz. 316, 400 P.2d 115 (1965) (negligent tort); City of Scottsdale v. Kokaska, 17 Ariz. App. 120, 495 P.2d 1327 (1972) (negligent tort); Scruggs v. Haynes, 252 Cal. App. 2d 256, 60 Cal. Rptr. 355 (1967) (intentional tort under statute imposing vicarious liability for municipal employees' torts); Fisher v. City of Miami, 172 So. 2d 455 (Fla. 1965) (punitive damages not recoverable for police torts); City of Miami v. Simpson, 172 So. 2d 435 (Fla. 1965) (liability on agency theory for police intentional tort); Hargrove v. Town of Cocoa Beach, 96 So. 2d 130 (Fla. 1957) (liability on agency theory for police negligent
trine of municipal immunity in general, and particularly the govern-

16. Colorado Racing Comm'n v. Brush Racing Ass'n, 136 Colo. 279, 284, 316 P.2d 582, 585 (1957): "In Colorado, 'sovereign immunity' may be a proper subject for discussion by students of mythology, but finds no haven or refuge in this Court." But see Abeyta v. City & County, 165 Colo. 58, 437 P.2d 67 (1968); Faber v. State, 143 Colo. 240, 353 P.2d 609 (1960); Liber v. Flor, 143 Colo. 205, 353 P.2d 590 (1960); City & County v. Madison, 142 Colo. 1, 351 P.2d 826 (1960).

Sovereign immunity has been referred to as: a "defense... based on neither justice nor reason," Spanel v. Mounds View School Dist. No. 621, 264 Minn. 279, 285, 118 N.2d 795, 799 (1962); "an anachronism that has long outlived its purpose, design, or reasoning," Newman v. State ex rel. Bd. of Regents, 490 P.2d 1079, 1081 (Okla. 1971) (dissenting opinion). Judge Musmanno, dissenting in Graysneck v. Heard, 422 Pa. 111, 114-16, 220 A.2d 893, 895-96 (1966), referred to municipal immunity from tort liability as an imperfect rule. Governmental immunity is so wrong in principle, so contrary to the most elementary principles of justice, and so opposed to the modern and healthy doctrine that the government should not enjoy any privilege denied to the people who constitute it, that this Court should welcome the opportunity—any opportunity—to eradicate, abolish, and forever wipe out the fallacious, unjust, cruel proposition that the king can do no wrong.

The immunity rule is said to be based on the idea that "the King can do no wrong," which has been characterized as un-American. Parish v. Pitts, 244 Ark. 1239, 1250, 429 S.W.2d 45, 51 (1968), overruled by implication by Ark. Stat. Ann. § 12-2901 (Supp. 1973); Liber v. Flor, 143 Colo. 205, 228, 353 P.2d 590, 603 (1960) (dissenting opinion); Graysneck v. Heard, 422 Pa. 111, 114, 220 A.2d 890, 895 (1966) (Musmanno, J., dissenting); Hohltz v. City of Milwaukee, 17 Wis. 2d 26, 30-31, 115 N.W.2d 618, 620 (1962).

The floodgates argument, see note 13 supra, and the possibility of financial disaster, see note 14 supra, have been dismissed as unlikely or unpersuasive compared to the need to discourage police abuse of power and spread the loss evenly among the taxpayers. Sec Parish v. Pitts, 244 Ark. 1239, 1246-50, 429 S.W.2d 45, 49-50 (1968), overruled by implication by Ark. Stat. Ann. § 12-2901 (Supp. 1973); Scruggs v. Hanes, 252 Cal. App. 2d 256, 267, 60 Cal. Rptr. 355, 362 (1967); Molitor v. Kaneland

mental-proprietary distinction, which is said to produce "legalistic distinctions only remotely related to fundamental considerations of municipal tort responsibility." Having concluded that the immunity rule must be abolished, these courts reject the argument that they lack the power to do so, reasoning that since the rule was created by courts,


The governmental-proprietary distinction has caused typical line-drawing difficulties, and the decisions often are inconsistent. In Scibilia v. Philadelphia, 279 Pa. 549, 124 A. 273 (1924), a municipal garbage truck going to the municipal dump was held a governmental activity, but in Hill v. Allentown Housing Author., 373 Pa. 92, 95 A.2d 519 (1953), the maintenance of a municipal dump was held proprietary. In Marshall v. Town of Brattleboro, 121 Vt. 417, 423, 160 A.2d 762, 766 (1966), the court stated:

The application of this doctrine has produced anomalous results in particular cases. In the case of Welsh v. Village of Rutland, supra, 56 Vt. 228 [(1883)], the plaintiff was denied recovery for injuries to his wife because the ice upon which she slipped and fell was produced by water escaping from a fire hydrant connected to the village water system while a routine thawing operation was being carried out by the village firemen. But in Wagner v. Village of Waterbury, 109 Vt. 368, 196 A. 745 [(1938)], the plaintiff prevailed against the municipality for the death of his son on the grounds that the ice which caused a car to skid and strike the son was on the highway due to a leak in the village water main.

In Haney v. Town of Rainelle, 125 W. Va. 397, 25 S.E.2d 207 (1943), the court recognized that the town could be liable for injuries caused by negligent maintenance of sidewalks, but held that because the walkway where plaintiff was injured led up to the town police station, its maintenance was a governmental activity and therefore the town was immune from liability for plaintiff's injuries. See generally Seasongood, Municipal Corporations: Objections to the Governmental or Proprietary Test, 22 Va. L. Rev. 910 (1936); 1973 Wash. U.L.Q. 716.
it can be judicially overruled.18

Prior to Marusa v. District of Columbia,19 the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit had ceased using the governmental-proprietary distinction and had held the District of Columbia liable only for torts arising out of ministerial as opposed to discretionary activities.20 The Marusa court did not mention the ministerial-discretionary

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Typical of the reasoning employed by these courts is that in Stone v. Arizona State Highway Comm'n, 93 Ariz. 384, 393, 381 P.2d 107, 113 (1963):

We realize that the doctrine of governmental immunity was originally judicially created. We are now convinced that a court-made rule, when unjust or outmoded, does not necessarily become with age invulnerable to judicial attack. This doctrine having been engrafted upon Arizona law by judicial enunciation may properly be changed or abrogated by the same process.


It will be observed that the District of Columbia's pre-Marusa discretionary-ministerial distinction bears no relationship to the governmental-proprietary distinction. See note 7 supra.

Two of the three jurisdictions applying a ministerial-discretionary distinction as a
distinction, but instead spoke simply of the District's "duty to minimize the risk" 21 it had created by requiring its policemen to be armed at all times. This duty demanded prudent hiring, training, and supervising procedures:

Thus, if the officer misuses his weapon, a judge or jury might reasonably find that misuse to have been proximately caused by the government's negligence in hiring, training, or supervising the policeman. 22

The court rejected the argument that the Federal Tort Claims Act, 23 which grants immunity to the federal government for most intentional torts, indicates a congressional intent that immunity be extended to the District of Columbia government. 24 Similarly, the court rejected the theory that the District's police department is necessarily a federal agency simply because tort judgments against it are satisfied with federal funds. 25

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21. 484 F.2d at 831.
22. Id.

The provisions of this chapter and section 1346(b) of this title shall not apply to—

(a) . . . a discretionary function or duty . . .

. . . . .

(h) Any claim arising out of assault, battery, false imprisonment, false arrest, malicious prosecution, abuse of process, libel, slander, misrepresentation, deceit, or interference with contract rights.


This argument is based on the unique relationship between the federal government and the District of Columbia.

25. 484 F.2d at 832. But see Graves v. District of Columbia, 287 A.2d 524, 527 (D.C. App. 1972) (dissenting opinion). The court in the principal case noted that if the source of funds were to determine whether a District government activity were local
The court conceded that abolition of municipal immunity from liability for police torts might decrease police efficiency, but stated:

"The threat of damage suits does not significantly impede the effective operation of a police department, when the impediment is weighed against the public interest in a tort remedy for police misconduct."  

In several states where courts have abrogated municipalities' immunity from liability for their employees' torts, the legislatures have responded either by reinstating immunity to some degree or by codifying the judge-made liability.  

Either alternative seems preferable to a federal, the District would have no local government at all. 484 F.2d at 832.


rule of blanket immunity that would appear increasingly anachronistic in contemporary tort law. Marusa, by requiring the District of Columbia to compensate victims of its policemen's torts out of public revenues, enhances the modern tendency to assign tort liability according to considerations of risk-shifting and deep pockets rather than according to fault.


31. See Parish v. Pitts, 244 Ark. 1239, 1247, 429 S.W.2d 45, 49 (1968): The considered conclusion of legal commentators has been that this burden [of bearing the loss to the tort victim] should be treated as any other cost of administration of municipal activity and thereby be spread by taxes among the public receiving the benefits.


The former, and contrary, view was expressed in O. Holmes, The Common Law 96 (1881):

The state might conceivably make itself a mutual insurance company against accidents, and distribute the burden of its citizens' mishaps among all its members . . . . Universal insurance, if desired, can be better and more cheaply accomplished by private enterprise.