

## CLARENCE THOMAS THE QUESTIONER

*By RonNell Andersen Jones<sup>1</sup> and Aaron L. Nielson<sup>2</sup>*

In the quarter century since Clarence Thomas took a seat at the bench for his first oral argument as a Justice of the United States Supreme Court,<sup>3</sup> one of his most-discussed attributes has been his silence. Indeed, Thomas has spoken far fewer words over the course of his entire career than some of his colleagues speak in a single term,<sup>4</sup> and he only recently broke a decade-long streak of no questions at all from the bench.<sup>5</sup> This silence has been subject of significant discussion, debate, and criticism.

We wish that Justice Thomas would participate more often at oral argument, but our reasons differ from those that have been expressed in the past. In particular, we think Thomas should ask more questions because he is good at it. In fact, although counterintuitive, when it comes to asking questions, in many ways Thomas is the model Justice.

Our opinion that Justice Thomas is talented at posing questions is not based on anecdote. Rather, it is the result of empirical research. For this Essay, we have compiled every available question asked by Justice Thomas as a jurist in an appellate argument—both on the Supreme Court and on the

---

<sup>1</sup> Lee Teitelbaum Endowed Chair and Professor of Law, S.J. Quinney College of Law, University of Utah.

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor of Law, J. Reuben Clark Law School, Brigham Young University. For invaluable research, we thank William Gaskill and Shawn Nevers in the BYU Law Library. This project also could not have occurred without the assistance of the Oyez Project, with particular thanks to Jerry Goldman and Matthew Gruhn. The United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit—and particularly Shana Thurman—also provided extraordinary assistance, as did the United States National Archive. Finally, thanks are due to Laura Ashdown, Anna Caruso, Brooke Ellis, Melissa Hartman, Nick Hafen, Neal Hoopes, Jason Housley, Kristine Ingle, Nicolas Nielson, Wright Noel, Rachel Phillips, Laura Shrum, George Simons, Cory Stevens, and Blaine Thomas for research assistance beyond the call of duty.

<sup>3</sup> See *Biographies of the Current Supreme Court Justices*, SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES (last updated April 11, 2017), <https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/biographies.aspx> [<https://perma.cc/L7LQ-KD4T>].

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Mark Sherman, *Justice Thomas Asks No Questions During Entire Court Term*, USA TODAY (May 18, 2007), [https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-05-18-760030917\\_x.htm](https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-05-18-760030917_x.htm) [<https://perma.cc/4LVZ-ZXFZ>] (“Thomas has spoken 281 words since court transcripts began identifying Justices by name in October 2004. By contrast, Thomas’ neighbor on the bench, Justice Stephen Breyer, has uttered nearly 35,000 words since January.”).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Adam Liptak, *Thomas Ends 10-Year Silence on the Bench*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 1, 2016, at A1.

D.C. Circuit. Reviewing these questions demonstrates that although Thomas has not frequently spoken, when he *has* posed questions, they have been thoughtful, useful, respectful, and beneficial to his colleagues of whatever ideological stripe.

Indeed, the picture of Justice Thomas the Questioner that emerges is one that exemplifies key attributes of model judicial questioning. Thomas is a Fact Stickler, Boundary Tester, Attorney Respector, Statute Parser, Insight Provider, Plain Speaker, and Team Player. This combination makes Thomas a powerful questioner—when he chooses to ask questions. We thus conclude that Court’s oral arguments would be enhanced if Thomas more regularly did so.

## I. BACKGROUND

Clarence Thomas’s conduct as a Justice presents a puzzle. On one hand, he has more to say than the rest of his colleagues—at least when it comes to written opinions. On this measure, Thomas is far and away the most productive member of the Court.<sup>6</sup> Yet on the other hand, it sometimes seems like he has nothing to say at all. This is especially true when it comes to oral argument; there, he is notorious for not asking questions. In fact, despite the unmatched volume of his written production, some list silence as one of his “signature characteristics.”<sup>7</sup>

It is no secret that Justice Thomas is often mum at oral argument. Indeed, he is the most silent Justice in modern history<sup>8</sup>—so silent, in fact, that when he does ask a question, it elicits gasps in the courtroom and spurs news headlines.<sup>9</sup> Even hearing his voice is deemed newsworthy.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Adam J. White, *Justice Thomas, Undaunted*, WEEKLY STANDARD, July 18, 2016 (“Thomas has been writing a lot—far more than his colleagues, despite his reputation as a ‘silent’ justice. In the Court’s just-concluded term, Thomas wrote 39 opinions, more than double the next most active writer (Alito, with 19). The prior year, he wrote 37 opinions, nearly tripling the output of his colleague and friend, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.”).

<sup>7</sup> KEVIN MERIDA & MICHAEL A. FLETCHER, SUPREME DISCOMFORT: THE DIVIDED SOUL OF CLARENCE THOMAS 309 (2007).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Adam Liptak, *A Thomas Milestone Likely to Pass Quietly*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 2, 2016, at A20 (“It has been at least 45 years since any other member of the court went even a single term without asking a question.”).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Ariane de Vogue, *Justice Clarence Thomas Breaks 10-year Streak; Asks Question in Court*, CNN (Feb. 29, 2016), <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/29/politics/supreme-court-clarence-thomas-10-year-streak-question/> [<https://perma.cc/3EZ7-64MC>]; Ron Elving, *Clarence Thomas Speaks: After a Decade, Questions from the Quiet Justice*, NPR (Feb. 29, 2016) <http://www.npr.org/2016/02/29/468600863/after-a-decade-questions-emerge-from-the-quiet-justice> [<https://perma.cc/8DB4-24YM>].

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Adam Liptak, *Breaking the Silence*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 15, 2013, at A14 (describing how Justice Thomas apparently inserted a joke, suggesting “that a law degree from Yale could actually be proof of incompetence or ineffectiveness”); Robert Barnes, *The Question of Clarence Thomas*, WASH. POST (Feb. 17, 2013), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-question-of-clarence-thomas/2013/>

This silence is surprising, especially because it was so unexpected. By all accounts, Justice Thomas is not a shy person. Indeed, anyone who knows him will attest that his is a boisterous personality. Before joining the Supreme Court on October 23, 1991, Thomas was a judge on the D.C. Circuit. There, no one dubbed him the “silent judge”—instead, one of his D.C. Circuit colleagues observed that “[h]e was talkative, gregarious on our court, a real participant.”<sup>11</sup> He also asked questions as a new Justice, with his first questions coming on November 5, 1991.<sup>12</sup>

Even so, upon joining the Court, he has never been an especially active questioner. Tellingly, as early as 1994, a media report recorded that Justice Thomas’s colleagues “seemed startled when Thomas’s deep voice resounded from the right side of the bench.”<sup>13</sup> Then, in 2006, Thomas essentially stopped asking questions at all—going a full decade before asking another question.<sup>14</sup> Silence does not bother the Justice: he is reported to have said, “One thing I’ve demonstrated often in 16 years is that you can do this job without asking a single question.”<sup>15</sup>

Over the years, Justice Thomas has suggested possible explanations for his silence and commentators have speculated as to others.<sup>16</sup> Some

---

02/17/90f6e678-76e1-11e2-aa12-e6cf1d31106b\_story.html?utm\_term=.7bf8f86a0085 [https://perma.cc/KU2G-LX8D] (noting that after seven years of silence, “Thomas’s joke from the bench last month hit with the surprise and impact of a Russian meteor”).

<sup>11</sup> ANDREW PAYTON THOMAS, CLARENCE THOMAS: A BIOGRAPHY 471 (2001).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Judy Wiessler, *Liability Case Elicits Thomas’ First Query*, HOUS. CHRON., Nov. 6, 1991, at A3 (listing questions for Collins v. City of Harker Heights, 503 U.S. 115 (1992) and Union Bank v. Wolas, 502 U.S. 151 (1991)).

<sup>13</sup> Tony Mauro, *Heads Turn as Thomas Asks a Question*, USA TODAY, Nov. 9, 1994, at 13A.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Robert Barnes, *For the First Time in 10 Years, Justice Clarence Thomas Asks Questions During an Argument*, WASH. POST (Feb. 29, 2016), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/courts\\_law/for-first-time-in-10-years-justice-thomas-asksquestions-during-argument/2016/02/29/b47f2558-df00-11e5-846c-10191d1fc4ec\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.7537f39118db](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/courts_law/for-first-time-in-10-years-justice-thomas-asksquestions-during-argument/2016/02/29/b47f2558-df00-11e5-846c-10191d1fc4ec_story.html?utm_term=.7537f39118db) [https://perma.cc/42L4-BGNC] (“Justice Clarence Thomas on Monday broke his 10-year streak of not asking questions during oral arguments, one of the public’s most enduring curiosities about the Supreme Court.”).

<sup>15</sup> Mark Sherman, *Thomas: No Questions in 2 Years*, USA TODAY, (Feb. 25, 2008), [https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2008-02-25-2677613413\\_x.htm](https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2008-02-25-2677613413_x.htm) [https://perma.cc/Q39B-6KHE].

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Jeff Nesbit, *The Real Reason Clarence Thomas Rarely Speaks*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP. (Mar. 30, 2016), <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-03-30/why-clarence-thomas-rarely-speaks-from-the-supreme-court-bench> [https://perma.cc/3GKM-JZGL] (citing Thomas’s history as a speaker of Gullah in the South and “fear that any trace of that former life . . . would somehow work its way into his speech”); Debra Cassens Weiss, *How Long Has Justice Thomas Declined to Ask Oral Argument Questions? An Anniversary Nears*, ABA J. (Feb. 3, 2016), [http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/how\\_long\\_has\\_justice\\_thomas\\_declined\\_to\\_ask\\_oral\\_argument\\_questions\\_an\\_anni](http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/how_long_has_justice_thomas_declined_to_ask_oral_argument_questions_an_anni) [https://perma.cc/H3EH-6DB9] (“Thomas has offered differing reasons for declining to talk, but he most often says he believes the constant questions are impolite.”); Josh Gerstein, *Clarence Thomas Defends Silence in Supreme Court Health Care Arguments*, POLITICO (Apr. 6, 2012),

commentators, moreover, have been quite critical of his silence. In fact, some critics have blasted Thomas's refusal to ask questions—and his apparent dismissal of the oral argument process<sup>17</sup>—as disrespectful to the Court, unfair to litigants, and evidence that he is not carrying his weight.<sup>18</sup> Thomas, of course, has defenders who note that oral argument has changed in modern times,<sup>19</sup> and that a Justice can do the job just fine without dominating questioning.<sup>20</sup> Even his defenders, however, generally wish he would ask more questions—if for no other reason than to quiet the issue so that commentators will instead focus on Thomas's contributions to the law and the work of the Court.<sup>21</sup>

---

<http://www.politico.com/blogs/under-the-radar/2012/04/clarence-thomas-defends-silence-in-supreme-court-health-care-arguments-119823> [<https://perma.cc/5J2Z-72XJ>] (quoting Thomas as saying of Justices' questions, "I don't see where that advances anything . . . Maybe it's the Southerner in me. Maybe it's the introvert in me, I don't know. I think that when somebody's talking, somebody ought to listen."); Jena McGregor, *Clarence Thomas's Supreme Silence*, WASH. POST (Jan. 17, 2013), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-leadership/2013/01/17/ffd9cf1c-60b4-11e2-9940-6fc488f3fed\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.9c243f94062e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-leadership/2013/01/17/ffd9cf1c-60b4-11e2-9940-6fc488f3fed_story.html?utm_term=.9c243f94062e) [<https://perma.cc/LYA2-LHX6>] (noting that commentators have suggested that Thomas's "brutal confirmation proceedings" may contribute to his "taciturn tenure").

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Adam Liptak, *No Argument: Thomas Keeps 5-Year Silence*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 12, 2011), [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/us/13thomas.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/us/13thomas.html?_r=0) [<https://perma.cc/C3UN-7ZGC>] ("Justice Thomas will spend the arguments as he always does: leaning back in his chair, staring at the ceiling, rubbing his eyes, whispering to Justice Stephen G. Breyer, consulting papers and looking a little irritated and a little bored.").

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., David Karp, *Why Justice Thomas Should Speak at Oral Argument*, 61 FLA. L. REV. 611, 614, 624 (2009) (arguing that "Thomas' nonparticipation in oral argument leaves him unrestrained to advocate far-reaching theories never contemplated by the litigants" and that his "opinions do not benefit from the full adjudicative process"); Editorial, *The Thomas Issue*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 17, 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/18/opinion/18fri3.html> [<https://perma.cc/M989-QY87>] (arguing that Justice Thomas needs to take part in oral arguments to "convey that he honors" the principle of "consider[ing] both sides' arguments," to "show[] open-mindedness in exchanges with them" and to "show his dedication to the court's impartiality and to its integrity as an institution"); Liptak, *supra* note 17 ("His views can be idiosyncratic, and some say lawyers deserve a chance to engage him before being surprised by an opinion setting out a novel and sweeping legal theory.").

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Maureen E. Mahoney, *Texas A&M University School of Law's Distinguished Practitioner Speaker Series Keynote Speaker*, 1 TEX. A&M L. REV. 801, 805 (2014) ("In a nutshell, Justice Thomas does not ask questions because he is too polite, and here is the history. Right now, the Court is in an era where grilling advocates is the norm . . . . But it was not that way in 1979 when I was a clerk there. First of all, oral arguments were not filled with questions. Advocates got up and told their story. They would get interrupted now and then, but it was not constant interruption. Justice Brennan, who has been described as the justice who choreographed the liberal takeover of the Court, did not do it by asking questions at oral argument. He did not ask many questions at all.")

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., David Yin, *In Defense of Clarence Thomas*, HARV. L. & POL'Y REV. (Dec. 20, 2011), <http://harvardlpr.com/2011/12/20/in-defense-of-clarence-thomas/> [<https://perma.cc/976X-5UQ3>] ("I enjoy the verbal sparring and the extemporaneous thinking questioning creates. But to indicate that Thomas' non-participation is somehow indicative of a lack of intelligence or lack of regard is to ignore the history of the Supreme Court . . .").

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Ilya Somin, *Observing Clarence Thomas at Oral Argument*, WASH. POST: VOLOKH CONSPIRACY (Feb. 25, 2014), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/02/>

## II. METHODOLOGY

Much has been written about Justice Thomas's silence on the bench. Our claim, however, is new. We agree that Thomas should ask more questions, but not for the reasons others have offered. Instead, we contend he should ask more questions because he is very good at it. Indeed, we think that judges everywhere can learn lessons from him.

To illustrate this point, we have attempted to build the most comprehensive collection of Thomas questions ever assembled. The Supreme Court's oral argument transcripts first began identifying Justices by name during the Supreme Court's 2004 term.<sup>22</sup> Gathering Justice Thomas's questions since that time thus was fairly simple. We ran a search for "Justice Thomas" in Westlaw's U.S. Supreme Court Oral Arguments database looking for the capitalized phrase "JUSTICE THOMAS," which indicated that he had spoken. This search produced six oral arguments, two of which contained nonsubstantive comments rather than questions.<sup>23</sup> To confirm that we had all the relevant questions from this period, we compared these results with information from several news reports that discussed Justice Thomas's questions.<sup>24</sup>

We next turned to the process of identifying questions by Justice Thomas before 2004. Because oral argument transcripts during this period only included the generic descriptor "Question" when a Justice spoke,<sup>25</sup> Westlaw was no help.<sup>26</sup> We thus called upon the Oyez Project, the popular

---

25/observing-clarence-thomas-at-oral-argument/?utm\_term=.e9b5594c837d [https://perma.cc/D2CT-84L8] (defending Thomas, but agreeing "that he should probably ask more questions at oral argument").

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Lee Epstein, William M. Landes & Richard A. Posner, *Inferring the Winning Party in the Supreme Court from the Pattern of Questioning at Oral Argument*, 39 J. LEGAL STUD. 433, 438 (2010).

<sup>23</sup> It may be of interest to note that one of these nonquestions, a statement in *Veneman v. Livestock Marketing Association* (later *Johanns v. Livestock Marketing Association*) that has often been attributed to Justice Thomas, was not said by him. While the transcripts on Westlaw and Oyez continue to attribute the comment to Justice Thomas, the official transcript has been changed to reflect that this statement was from counsel. See Transcript of Oral Argument, *Johanns v. Livestock Mktg. Assoc.*, 544 U.S. 500 (2004) (Nos. 03–1164, 03–1165).

<sup>24</sup> See Adam Liptak, *supra* note 5 Liptak, *supra* note 10 (discussing Justice Thomas's remark in *Boyer v. Louisiana*).

<sup>25</sup> Ryan C. Black, Timothy R. Johnson & Justin Wedeking, ORAL ARGUMENTS AND COALITION FORMATION ON THE U.S. SUPREME COURT: A DELIBERATE DIALOGUE 20 n.3 (2012).

<sup>26</sup> However, Westlaw did provide us with some instances in which counsel responded directly to Justice Thomas by name, giving us a roundabout way to find relevant oral arguments. One study indicates that in addition to the post-2004 transcripts, some transcripts from the 1960s were indexed. James C. Phillips & Edward L. Carter, *Source of Information or "Dog and Pony Show"?: Judicial Information Seeking During U.S. Supreme Court Oral Argument, 1963–1965 & 2004–2009*, 50 SANTA CLARA L. REV. 79, 82 (2010).

multimedia archive. Oyez contains approximately 10,000 hours of Supreme Court oral argument audio files and accompanying transcripts beginning with the Court's 1955 term.<sup>27</sup> Although not for this specific purpose, a similar methodology has been employed by others in evaluating Supreme Court questions.<sup>28</sup> (An alternative to Oyez—which we also pursued—was gathering news reports that mentioned Thomas speaking during the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>29</sup> Although gathering these sources helps identify many questions, it does not generate a complete list.)

Oyez, however, has limitations. First, it does not have a function that searches all of its transcripts at once.<sup>30</sup> Second, while most transcripts identify the Justices by name, some do not. Accordingly, to create a comprehensive list of Justice Thomas's questions we opted to manually review all of the transcripts available on Oyez from the 1991–2003 terms. This task was assigned to a set of research assistants who examined 1,115

---

<sup>27</sup> See generally, *About Oyez*, Oyez (last visited May 30, 2017), <https://www.oyez.org/about> [<https://perma.cc/C5S2-GSR5>] (“[Oyez] is a complete and authoritative source for all of the Court’s audio since the installation of a recording system in October 1955.”).

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Timothy R. Johnson, Ryan C. Black & Justin Wedeking, *Pardon the Interruption: An Empirical Analysis of Supreme Court Justices’ Behavior During Oral Arguments*, 55 *LOY. L. REV.* 331, 337 n.34 (2009).

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., DAVID C. FREDERICK, *SUPREME COURT AND APPELLATE ADVOCACY* 119–122 (2010) (discussing Justice Thomas’s questioning in *NASA v. Federal Labor Relations Authority*); Kenneth M. Casebeer, *The Empty State and Nobody’s Market: The Political Economy of Non-Responsibility and the Judicial Disappearing of the Civil Rights Movement*, 54 *U. MIAMI L. REV.* 247, 258 (2000) (discussing Justice Thomas’s questioning in *Collins v. City of Harker Heights, Texas*); Joan Biskupic, *Potent Questions From Quiet Justice; Clarence Thomas Speaks Up in Two Significant Sessions*, *WASH. POST*, May 29, 1995, at A13 (discussing Justice Thomas’s questioning in *Capitol Square Review and Advisory Board v. Pinette* and *Miller v. Johnson*); Tony Mauro, *Breyer’s Quick, Costly Way Out*, *LEGAL TIMES*, Nov. 21, 1994, at 10–11 (discussing Justice Thomas’s questioning in *United States v. National Treasury Employees Union*); Jeffrey Rosen, *Bad Thoughts*, *NEW REPUBLIC* (July 4, 1993), <https://newrepublic.com/article/73891/bad-thoughts> [<https://perma.cc/6ZJ3-VPCH>] (discussing Justice Thomas’s questioning in *Wisconsin v. Mitchell*); Tony Mauro, *Justice Thomas Won’t Be Reading This*, *LEGAL TIMES*, Mar. 16, 1992, at 7–8 (discussing Justice Thomas’s questioning in *Morales v. TWA Inc.*); Mike Sacks, *Clarence Thomas’ Questions, Part 3: The Myth of Scalia’s Puppet Is Quashed As Quickly As It’s Created*, *HUFFINGTON POST* (Nov. 21, 2011), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/21/clarence-thomas-antonin-scalia\\_n\\_1105776.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/21/clarence-thomas-antonin-scalia_n_1105776.html) [<https://perma.cc/54ZX-NGUT>] (discussing *United States v. Fordice*); Alyssa Work, *Justice Thomas, Speaking (Or Not) About the First Amendment*, *FIRST AMEND. CTR.* (Oct. 8, 2007), <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/justice-thomas-speaking-or-not-about-the-first-amendment> [<https://perma.cc/CHK6-KGS3>] (listing seven First Amendment cases).

<sup>30</sup> SCOTUS Search (currently in beta) is a website that makes it possible to search across Supreme Court oral argument transcripts. At the time of this writing, however, SCOTUS Search could not search by Justice without also entering some search term. Additionally, since much of its data comes from Oyez, it suffers from some of the same indexing problems that Oyez does, which it clearly points out in its search guide. *Guide*, SCOTUS SEARCH (Nov. 23, 2015), <http://www.scotussearch.com/pages/guide> [<https://perma.cc/WJ8M-X5MM>].

individual transcripts, searching for Thomas's name.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the research assistants also checked each transcript to determine whether it indicated the names of the Justices who were speaking. This process produced a preliminary list of oral arguments in which Thomas had spoken, as well as a list of 119 oral arguments whose transcripts did not identify the Justices. We contacted Oyez about these transcripts and they graciously were able to update many of them. Our research assistants checked the updated transcripts and discovered three additional oral arguments in which Thomas had spoken. In order to ensure completeness, we assigned another set of research assistants to examine the transcripts from 1991–2003 to see if any questions had been missed.<sup>32</sup> At the end of this review we identified (by our count) 87 oral arguments with outstanding problems, including 14 with no audio at all. Research assistants listened to the 73 oral arguments that had audio and were able to identify two additional oral arguments in which Thomas spoke.<sup>33</sup>

All told, our efforts have produced the most complete compendium of Justice Thomas's oral argument questions to date. The relevant arguments are listed in appendix to this Essay.

---

<sup>31</sup> Upon opening each oral argument transcript, research assistants would perform a "Control+F" search for "Clarence," looking for any relevant hits. Oyez transcripts identify the Justices by first and last names, allowing the searcher to use "Clarence" instead of the more common "Thomas" as the primary search term.

<sup>32</sup> This process was necessary because it was discovered that while some transcripts indicated Justices' names for part of the oral argument, a large portion of the transcripts did not indicate which Justices were speaking.

<sup>33</sup> This leaves fourteen cases that have not been checked because no audio was available from Oyez. Half of these oral arguments, however, are from the 1993 term, which some sources indicate was Justice Thomas's first term without asking questions. See, e.g., Joan Biskupic, *Justices Question Honoraria Ban; Limits on Federal Workers' Speech Criticized in Oral Arguments*, WASH. POST (Nov. 9, 1994), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/11/09/justices-question-honoraria-ban/2ffb077c-d7f5-41a2-8ac1-d339a0a81967/?utm\\_term=.9036f529eea1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/11/09/justices-question-honoraria-ban/2ffb077c-d7f5-41a2-8ac1-d339a0a81967/?utm_term=.9036f529eea1) [<https://perma.cc/C5QG-7FXW>] (stating that Thomas had not posed a question "for more than a year").

The process of manually examining the transcripts, while tedious for our dutiful research assistants, proved invaluable—particularly in instances where Oyez's identification of Justices was incomplete. One example of the value of this process can be seen when looking at a study that analyzed the Justices' use of oral argument to communicate with each other. See Johnson, *supra* note 28. A portion of that study examined how often individual Justices spoke at argument. *Id.* at 341. For each argued case during the 1998–2006 terms, the authors "downloaded the voice-identified transcripts from the Oyez Project and counted the number of times each Justice spoke." *Id.* at 337. The authors identified 34 utterances by Justice Thomas. *Id.* at 343 n.46. After Oyez added Justice identification for a number of cases during our project, 34 utterances seemed low. To test our suspicion, we looked at the Oyez transcript for each case in which we knew Thomas had spoken and counted the number of times he was named. We counted 90 utterances during the 1998–2006 terms. Similarly, the First Amendment Center has collected a list of Thomas's questions in First Amendment cases that notes that because Oyez had not identified Justices by name in all oral arguments it was possible that Justice Thomas had spoken in other First Amendment cases that were not listed. In fact, one of the cases discovered in our process, *Nixon v. Shrink Mo. Gov't PAC*, 528 U.S. 377 (2000), was a First Amendment case.

## III. ANALYSIS

With so much focus on Justice Thomas's failure to speak, little attention has been given to quality and character of the questions the Justice has actually asked. To be sure, in a few instances, it has been noted that his questions have impacted the argument, seemingly influencing both the dialogue and perhaps even the ultimate resolution of a case.<sup>34</sup> But in dozens of other less-recognized instances, Thomas's contributions during oral argument have aided the Court's inquiry in concrete ways, and his pattern of questioning has been consistently beneficial. Our review of the full set of questions asked by Thomas reveals that when he acts as questioner, he exemplifies a number of model behaviors for judges at oral argument.

A. *Fact Stickler*

First, Justice Thomas's style of questioning indicates that he is very much a Fact Stickler—a jurist who uses his queries to hone in on the crucial factual details of the case and to highlight aspects of the record that might alter the analysis, impact the outcome, or both. A review of his questions reveals a consistent mastery of the factual record and a commitment to clarifying the aspects of the record that remain unclear or that have been muddled by counsel.

Indeed, Justice Thomas's oral argument questioning shows him to be quick when invoking relevant portions of the record that seem to contradict arguments offered by counsel. For instance, he regularly points to pages within the joint appendix, cites specific findings from the court below, or reads exact language from the record, and then asks something like, "Doesn't *X* aspect of the record conflict with much of what you've just said?" or "Isn't it more accurate to say that the trial court found *Y*?"<sup>35</sup> When attorneys assert that a particular behavior might occur or a particular risk might exist, he asks if they know of specific instances or can offer actual

---

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Guy-Uriel E. Charles, *Colored Speech: Cross Burnings, Epistemics, and the Triumph of the Critics*, 93 GEO. L. J. 575, 610 (2005) (noting that "by all accounts, Justice Thomas's statements" during oral argument in *Virginia v. Black*, which focused on the history of cross-burning "appeared to have a tremendous effect on his fellow Justices").

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Oral Argument at 43:29, *Holmes v. South Carolina*, 547 U.S. 319 (2006) (No. 04-1327), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2005/04-1327> (quoting the record and asking, "Isn't it more accurate that the trial court actually found that the evidence met the Gregory standard?") (Appendix at 228); Oral Argument at 4:05, *United States v. Chesapeake & Potomac Tel. Co.*, 516 U.S. 415 (1996) (No. 94-1893), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1995/94-1893> ("Well, doesn't the Third Report . . . conflict with much of what you've just said[?]") (Appendix at 221); Oral Argument at 26:19, *Morales v. Trans World Airlines*, 504 U.S. 374 (1992) (No. 90-1604), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1991/90-1604> [hereinafter *Morales* Oral Argument] (citing and quoting language from a specific page in the Joint Appendix and pointing out, "That seems to undermine what you just said.") (Appendix at 216).

examples.<sup>36</sup> While avoiding a “gotcha” tone, his questioning demonstrates fidelity to precision, coupled with a keen awareness of the facts.

Nor are the Justice’s fact-focused inquiries and frequent references to the lower-court record empty pop quizzes.<sup>37</sup> They have evident purpose. Sometimes they position the attorney to offer to the Court a tutorial about the real-world operation of a particular legal or business scheme.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes they tee up clarifications.<sup>39</sup> In short, they focus the Court on the real story.

### B. Boundary Tester

A second prominent trait of Justice Thomas as an oral argument questioner is that he repeatedly and consistently has been a Boundary Tester—posing smart, precise hypotheticals that explore the scope of the arguments and that are designed to help the Court work out the edges of the legal principles at stake.

This testing of boundaries regularly comes in the form of compare-and-contrast questions, with Justice Thomas asking advocates to articulate

---

<sup>36</sup> Oral Argument at 41:50, *NASA v. FLRA*, 527 U.S. 229 (1999) (No. 98-369), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1998/98-369> [hereinafter *NASA* Oral Argument] (“Do you know of any instance where . . . an IG has been directed by an agency head to conduct an audit?”) (Appendix at 224); *id.* (“Now, do you have any examples of that?”) (Appendix at 224).

<sup>37</sup> *See, e.g.*, Oral Argument, *Rogers v. United States*, 522 U.S. 252 (1998), (No. 96-1279), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1997/96-1279> [hereinafter *Rogers* Oral Argument] (Appendix at 223); *Morales* Oral Argument, *supra* note 35 (Appendix at 216).

<sup>38</sup> *See, e.g.*, Oral Argument at 53:07, *Boggs v. Boggs*, 520 U.S. 833 (1997) (No. 96-79), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1996/96-79> [hereinafter *Boggs* Oral Argument] (“[W]ould you explain for us what happened to the lump sum that was alienated, or that was distributed?”) (Appendix at 222); Oral Argument at 4:05, *United States v. Chesapeake & Potomac Tel. Co.*, 516 U.S. 415 (1996) (No. 94-1893), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1995/94-1893> (“[T]he cable industry is no longer at its infancy state; it is a developed industry with over 90 percent saturation, right?”) (Appendix at 221); Oral Argument at 15:21, *Union Bank v. Wolas*, 502 U.S. 151 (1991) (No. 90-1491), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1991/90-1491> [hereinafter *Wolas* Oral Argument] (“[A]re [the fees and the interest payments] due monthly, or are they long-term debt also?”) (Appendix at 215).

<sup>39</sup> Oral Argument at 53:31, *Rice v. Collins*, 546 U.S. 333 (2006) (No. 04-52), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2005/04-52> [hereinafter *Rice* Oral Argument] (“Counsel, is there anything in the record to alert us to the race of the prosecutor?”); Oral Argument at 18:56, *Dep’t of Hous. & Urban Dev. v. Rucker*, 535 U.S. 125 (2002) (No. 00-1770), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2001/00-1770> (“How big a problem is this in the housing authority?”) (Appendix at 226); Oral Argument at 55:01, *Capitol Square Review & Advisory Bd. v. Pinette*, 515 U.S. 753 (1995) (No. 94-780) <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1994/94-780> [hereinafter *Capitol Square* Oral Argument] (“As I understand the record, there were some concerns that some of the citizens of Columbus, when they saw that, could actually see fire on that cross . . . But doesn’t the record suggest, though, that there was some concern that people would see more than the religious symbol in that cross?”) (Appendix at 221); Oral Argument at 12:43, *Arave v. Creech*, 507 U.S. 463 (1993) (No. 91-1160), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1992/91-1160> (clarifying findings from a sentencing judge that a murder “took on many aspects of an assassination”) (Appendix at 218).

distinctions between differently situated people or entities, different legal rules, or different motivations.<sup>40</sup> He asks lawyers to consider whether one set of arguments is stronger than another, or whether they might have a better case if something about the facts or law was changed.<sup>41</sup> In so doing, the Justice not only demonstrates sophisticated analysis, but also helps his colleagues develop the rule of law beyond the four corners of the case at hand. Because of these sorts of questions, the principle ultimately announced by the Court will reflect more nuanced and farsighted analysis.

Justice Thomas the Boundary Tester has such a propensity for asking questions that tweak the facts that the “let me change the facts just a little”<sup>42</sup> set-up may be the most common theme of his entire oral-argument repertoire. “Would it change your analysis,” he asked counsel in his very first oral argument as a Justice, if the individual bringing the Section 1983

---

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Oral Argument at 41:36, *Voisine v. United States*, 136 S. Ct. 2272 (2016) (No. 14-10154), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2015/14-10154> [hereinafter *Voisine* Oral Argument] (“Can you give me another area where a misdemeanor violation suspends a constitutional right?”) (Appendix at 229); Oral Argument at 56:59, *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 244 (2003) (No. 02-516), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2002/02-516> [hereinafter *Gratz* Oral Argument] (“Would the same arguments with respect to diversity apply to those institutions?”) (Appendix at 227); Oral Argument at 54:38, *Wisconsin v. Mitchell*, 508 U.S. 476 (1993) (No. 92-515), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1992/92-515> [hereinafter *Wisconsin* Oral Argument] (“Let’s assume that five were told to attack a white person and five said they would attack a black person, for whatever reasons. Now, the first five of course would be covered by the statute. Would the second five not be covered?”) (Appendix at 220); Oral Argument at 46:10, *Ankenbrandt v. Richards*, 504 U.S. 689 (1992) (No. 91-367), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1991/91-367> [hereinafter *Ankenbrandt* Oral Argument] (“Let’s assume that the domestic relations exception applies to the father, Respondent Richards. How does it apply to his companion, Respondent Kesler?”) (Appendix at 217); *Wolas* Oral Argument, *supra* note 38 at 15:21 (“Is there any distinction between the fees and the monthly payments of interest, and the actual pay-down of the principal?”) (Appendix at 215); see also *Rice* Oral Argument, *supra* note 39 at 53:44, (“Would it make any difference? There seemed to be some suggestion that there are stereotypes at play in these Batson cases.”) (Appendix at 228); Oral Argument at 28:02, *Georgia v. Randolph*, 547 U.S. 103 (2006) (No. 04-1067), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2005/04-1067> [hereinafter *Georgia* Oral Argument] (“Mr. Dreeben, is it . . . is this case materially different if she simply ran upstairs, grabbed the straw, brought it down, and handed it to the police officer?”) (Appendix at 228); Oral Argument at 23:41, *United States v. Olano*, 507 U.S. 725 (1993) (No. 91-1306), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1992/91-1306> (“General Starr, would we analyze this differently if there had been a consent to the alternate jurors?”) (Appendix at 218).

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., *Voisine* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 46:23 (“Would you have a better case if this were a gun crime?”) (Appendix at 229); *Boggs* Oral Argument, *supra* note 38, at 56:00 (“But do you have a better argument for the lump sum than the annuity?”) (Appendix at 222); Oral Argument at 56:51, *United States v. Nat’l Treasury Emps. Union*, 513 U.S. 454 (1995) (No. 93-1170), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1994/93-1170> [hereinafter *Nat’l Treasury* Oral Argument] (“Do you think that the Government could, consistent with the First Amendment, simply ban all moonlighting? . . . So it would seem to me that the Government would have a stronger case for banning moonlighting than it does for speeches at the civil servant level.”) (Appendix at 220).

<sup>42</sup> Oral Argument at 31:12, *Miller v. Johnson*, 515 U.S. 900 (1995) (No. 94-631), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1994/94-631> [hereinafter *Miller* Oral Argument] (“Mr. Parks, let me change the facts just a little.”) (Appendix at 220).

suit for injury while cleaning the sewers “were a city prisoner” rather than a municipal employee?<sup>43</sup> This approach—using questions that start with “let’s say . . .” or “what if . . .”<sup>44</sup> is his calling card. Indeed, the most recent line of questioning from Thomas, in the February 2016 case of *Voisine v. United States*,<sup>45</sup> took this same format. In that case, which focused on a statute forbidding those convicted of misdemeanor crimes of domestic violence from possessing firearms, the Justice offered a “let’s say” hypothetical question,<sup>46</sup> and then followed it up with two classic compare-and-contrast questions: “[H]ow is that different from . . . ?” and “Would you have a better case if . . . ?”<sup>47</sup> Thomas made headlines for those questions, which marked the first time he had spoken from the bench in over a decade. Unrecognized, though, was the fact that his boundary-testing approach had picked up exactly where it had left off.

Boundary testing, of course, can be dangerous. Oral argument centered on hypotheticals, counter-narratives, and fact swaps can easily become meandering and puzzling—even a series of Justice-focused soliloquies rather than a productive information-seeking exchange with an advocate. But that risk never comes to fruition with Justice Thomas. His boundary testing avoids becoming circuitous, long-winded, or confusing.

---

<sup>43</sup> Oral Argument at 41:25, *Collins v. City of Harker Heights*, 503 U.S. 115 (No. 90-1279) (“Would it change your analysis, Mr. Powe, if Mr. Collins were a city prisoner, required to clean the sewers?”) (Appendix at 215).

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Oral Argument at 43:55, *US Airways, Inc. v. Barnett*, 535 U.S. 391 (2002) (No. 00-1250), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2001/00-1250> (“Say that your client could be bumped by someone who’s more severely handicapped if he were in that position?”) (Appendix at 226); Oral Argument at 44:26, *Boggs* Oral Argument, *supra* note 38, at 53:07 (“Let’s say that . . . she passed away in 1979, that he was quite grieved, and did not remarry. . . . What would the children get in those circumstances? . . . Okay, let’s say he did not remarry”) (Appendix at 222); Oral Argument at 55:42, *Capitol Square* Oral Argument, *supra* note 39, at 55:46 (“Let’s say, 50-50, 50 whatever other reasons, and 50 religious, then how does that become a free exercise problem?”) (Appendix at 221); *Miller* Oral Argument, *supra* note 42, at 31:12 (“Mr. Parks, let me change the facts just a little. Let’s say that the Georgia legislature, anticipating that they were going to have some difficulty in retaining the white vote . . .”) (Appendix at 220); Oral Argument at 56:48, *Lamb’s Chapel v. Ctr. Moriches Union Free School Dist.*, 508 U.S. 385 (1993) (No. 91-2024), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1992/91-2024> [hereinafter *Lamb’s Chapel* Oral Argument] (“Well let’s say it’s an atheist and an agnostic debating one minister. . . . Well, I’m just wondering . . . what is it about the debate that changes when you add a minister to an atheist and an agnostic[?]”) (Appendix at 219); Oral Argument at 51:52, *Lincoln v. Vigil*, 508 U.S. 182 (1993) (No. 91-1833), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1992/91-1833> (“Let’s say . . . they decided to deploy them to Phoenix.”) (Appendix at 219).

<sup>45</sup> 136 S. Ct. 2272 (2016).

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., *Voisine* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 45:09 (“[L]et’s say that a publisher is reckless about the use of children, and what could be considered indecent displays and that that triggers a violation of, say, a hypothetical law against the use of children in these ads, and let’s say it’s a misdemeanor violation.”) (Appendix at 229).

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 45:55, 46:23 (“[H]ow is that different from suspending your Second Amendment right?”), (“Would you have a better case if this were a gun crime?”) (Appendix at 229).

### C. *Attorney Respector*

Justice Thomas's full oral-argument record also demonstrates that he is an Attorney Respector—the Justice's exchanges with counsel are characterized by politeness.

More often than not, when Justice Thomas has launched into a question, he has prefaced it with a courteous interjection<sup>48</sup>—or even an explicit apology for interrupting the attorney,<sup>49</sup> despite such interruptions being the increasingly common practice at the Court.<sup>50</sup> Occasionally, he has even asked the arguing attorney permission to ask a question.<sup>51</sup> When his questions are not sufficiently answered, he does not badger or disparage counsel, but instead politely presses for additional explanation, saying he “hate[s] to belabor the point,”<sup>52</sup> or he “[woul]d like to revisit” an issue.<sup>53</sup>

To be sure, he is not soft, and he does not merely walk away from a question if it has been dodged. But he treats the exchange with lawyers appearing before the Court as a conversation of equals, assuming the best of them, taking responsibility for any confusion that might be occurring in the exchange, and moving the discussion forward with civility and consideration.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 41:36 (“Ms. Eisenstein, one question.”) (Appendix at 229); *Wisconsin* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 54:32 (“One question, Mr. Adelman.”) (Appendix at 220); *Ankenbrandt* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 46:10 (Counsel, one question for clarification.”) (Appendix at 217); *Morales* Oral Argument, *supra* note 35, at 26:13 (“I’d like to ask you one question, counsel.”) (Appendix at 216).

<sup>49</sup> *Boggs* Oral Argument, *supra* note 38, at 56:00 (“I’m sorry to interrupt.”) (Appendix at 222); Oral Argument at 54:15, *Capitol Square* Oral Argument, *supra* note 39, (“Mr. Wolman . . . I hate to interrupt you.”) (Appendix at 221); *Miller* Oral Argument, *supra* note 42, at 32:22 (“I’m sorry to interrupt you.”) (Appendix at 220).

<sup>50</sup> *Clarence Thomas’ Two Years of Silence*, NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO (Feb. 28, 2008) <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=26913288> [<https://perma.cc/2AG8-MBDP>] (Supreme Court reporter Dahlia Lithwick opining that Thomas’s silence is particularly stark in contrast to a Court that is “particularly hot right now” such that “it’s not just that he’s quiet, it’s that he’s quiet in contrast to eight people who talk relentlessly”).

<sup>51</sup> Oral Argument at 46:55, *Robinson v. Shell Oil Co.*, 519 U.S. 337 (1997) (No. 95-1376), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1996/95-1376> [hereinafter *Robinson* Oral Argument] (“Mr. Butler, may I ask you one question?”) (Appendix at 222); *Capitol Square* Oral Argument, *supra* note 39, at 54:16 (“I’d like to ask just a couple of questions, if I may.”) (Appendix at 221).

<sup>52</sup> Oral Argument at 52:00, *US Airways, Inc. v. Barnett*, 535 U.S. 391 (2002) (No. 00-1250), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2001/00-1250> (Appendix at 226).

<sup>53</sup> *NASA* Oral Argument, *supra* note 36, at 40:01 (Appendix at 224).

<sup>54</sup> *Gratz* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 56:59 (“You may have misunderstood me. I mean . . .”) (Appendix at 227); Oral Argument at 49:53, *Apprendi v. New Jersey*, 530 U.S. 466 (2000) (No. 99-478), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1999/99-478> (“The difficulty I have is that nowhere have we defined what the distinction is between an element of the offense and an enhancement factor, and if you could do that in your few minutes it would be very helpful.”) (Appendix at 225); *Boggs* Oral Argument, *supra* note 38, at 56:00 (“I’m sorry to interrupt, but where you’re losing me is, if he had not remarried, what is there to give away?”) (Appendix at 222).

A related virtue is that Justice Thomas often does not ask questions until the end of counsel's presentation—before interrupting, he waits to see if counsel will answer his questions without his prompting. *Rogers v. United States* is an excellent example of this.<sup>55</sup> In this case, Justice Thomas actually spoke a great deal, but not until the argument was nearing its end. Indeed, he followed the same “wait and see” pattern *twice*—both when questioning the petitioner and when questioning the respondent.<sup>56</sup> Each time, he waited until everyone had their say, and only then did he begin asking his questions. This is par for the course for Thomas.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, in *Burlington Northern Railroad v. Ford*, Thomas did not ask his question until after counsel said “[i]f there are no further questions,” at which point he said that he did have “one question,” which consisted of a single sentence: “Did you consider arguing that this venue statute violated the commerce clause?”<sup>58</sup> It is safe to assume that the question was important to the Justice,<sup>59</sup> but not—in his view—important enough to interrupt counsel's prepared argument.

Justice Thomas's approach to questioning shows respect for the attorneys who are the recipients of his questions and for the proceeding in which those questions occur. It preserves the decorum of the Court and furthers its ultimate goal of efficiently seeking the truth. Oral argument everywhere would be better off if Justice Thomas's example became the norm.

#### D. Statute Parser

A review of Justice Thomas's questions also reveals that he is a Statute Parser—inclined to focus both the parties and his colleagues on the specific language of the statute.

Consider the oral arguments for *Evans v. United States*,<sup>60</sup> a case about the scope of the offense of extortion “under color of official right” under the Hobbs Act. Here, Justice Thomas focused the entirety of his questioning on the key language of the Act. He compared that language to language in a similar statute, highlighted the differences between the two

---

<sup>55</sup> 522 U.S. 252 (1998).

<sup>56</sup> *Rogers* Oral Argument, *supra* note 37 (Appendix at 223).

<sup>57</sup> *See, e.g., Morales* Oral Argument, *supra* note 35 (Appendix at 216); *Ankenbrandt* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40 (Appendix at 217).

<sup>58</sup> Oral Argument at 52:30, *Burlington N. R.R. v. Ford*, 504 U.S. 648 (1992) (No. 91-779), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1991/91-779> (Appendix at 217).

<sup>59</sup> *See, e.g., United States v. Lopez*, 514 U.S. 549, 584 (1995) (Thomas, J., concurring) (offering detailed analysis of the Commerce Clause).

<sup>60</sup> 504 U.S. 255 (1992).

provisions,<sup>61</sup> and thrice read the statute’s definitional phrase out loud to the advocate.<sup>62</sup> He structured his questions around that language, and when the attorney made arguments not rooted in the text, Thomas responded simply, “Well, I understand that, but the statute doesn’t say that.”<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, Justice Thomas has a laser-like focus on the text. He pushes advocates to break down statutory provisions to understand their peripheries, walks them through the scope of statutory exceptions, and poses specific questions designed to clarify application of statutory language to different individuals or circumstances.<sup>64</sup> Although respectful to other types of arguments,<sup>65</sup> his most common refrain is some variation of “the statute says . . . .”<sup>66</sup>

Putting aside the merits of textualism as an ending point—or even as a starting point—in statutory interpretation, the merits of having an active voice in oral argument that demands investigation of and discussion about the statutory language seem incontrovertible. The same is true of oral argument questioning that parses the complexities of statutory exceptions and wrestles with the hard questions of the scope of statutory application in differing scenarios. With Justice Antonin Scalia’s departure from the U.S. Supreme Court, the need for a Justice to ask these sorts of questions is obvious. Hence, Justice Thomas’s skills as a Statute Parser—evident in his full history of oral argument questioning—are more valuable today than ever before, and his silence potentially more harmful.

#### *E. An Insight Provider*

As the Court’s only Southerner, African American, former state attorney, former corporate counsel, and former head of a federal agency,

---

<sup>61</sup> Oral Argument at 47:59, *Evans v. United States*, 504 U.S. 255 (1992) (No. 90-6105), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1991/90-6105> [hereinafter *Evans* Oral Argument] (“Our statute is quite different. It refers only to obtaining property from another with his consent under color of official right. It doesn’t have a limiting factor. It doesn’t say in excess of.”) (Appendix at 216).

<sup>62</sup> *See id.*

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*

<sup>64</sup> *See, e.g., Wisconsin* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 54:38 (presenting a hypothetical to test the application of a sentence-enhancement statute to differently situated parties) (Appendix at 220); *NASA* Oral Argument, *supra* note 36, at 45:11 (“[Y]ou can’t point to any provision authorizing the agency head to direct the IG to include a union representative in such a meeting or interview.”) (Appendix at 224).

<sup>65</sup> *See, e.g., Wisconsin* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 54:38 (inquiring about the ways a statutory requirement had been interpreted in relevant cases) (Appendix at 220).

<sup>66</sup> *See, e.g., Nat’l Treasury* Oral Argument, *supra* note 41, at 59:16 (“This law simply says you can’t get paid for speeches and articles, right?”) (Appendix at 220); *Wisconsin* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 55:02 (“The statute says because of race.”) (Appendix at 220); *Evans* Oral Argument, *supra* note 61, at 49:24 (“The statute doesn’t say that.”) (Appendix at 216).

Justice Thomas's background is unusual. Unsurprisingly, this distinct background often shines through in his questions. Indeed, by drawing on his experiences and infusing his inquiries with these real-world observations, Thomas can be a powerful Insight Provider.

Justice Thomas's path to the Court is a tale that has been told before.<sup>67</sup> For purposes here, it enough to observe that Thomas comes from a different place than the rest of the Justices—literally. He is the only Justice from the South, being raised primarily in Pin Point, Georgia, just outside of Savannah. He also, of course, is the Court's only African American. And although “well-off by the standards of Savannah's black community”—Thomas, after all, had a “secure roof” and an “indoor toilet”—no one would say that Thomas grew up wealthy.<sup>68</sup> After graduating from law school, with a host of fascinating stories along the way, Thomas's first job was as an Assistant Attorney General in Missouri, where he practiced tax law. He then worked in-house for Monsanto Chemical Company, followed eventually by an eight-year stint as Chairman of the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).<sup>69</sup> No one else on the Court has a backstory even remotely like this.

This unusual path to the Supreme Court allows Justice Thomas to provide unique insights—most prominently about issues of race.

For instance, no doubt Justice Thomas's most famous argument exchange comes from *Virginia v. Black*, which addressed the constitutionality of Virginia's cross-burning statute.<sup>70</sup> It is impossible to forget Justice Thomas's powerful observation that “we had almost 100 years of lynching and activity in the South by the Knights of Camellia and the Ku Klux Klan, and this was a reign of terror, and the cross was a symbol of that reign of terror.”<sup>71</sup> Not only was his moral authority obvious, but he also spoke with the power of superior knowledge—of all the Justices, he alone had experienced that life. Thomas also addressed the Ku Klux Klan's use of a cross in *Capitol Square Review & Advisory Board v. Pinette*, pointedly asking, “What is the religion of the Klan?” and whether, if the Klan were “carrying a cross down Pennsylvania Avenue,” anyone would think it was “engaged in an exercise of religion” rather than “a

---

<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., CLARENCE THOMAS, MY GRANDFATHER'S SON: A MEMOIR (2007).

<sup>68</sup> KEN FOSKETT, JUDGING THOMAS: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CLARENCE THOMAS 9, 18 (2004).

<sup>69</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 3 (recounting biography).

<sup>70</sup> See 538 U.S. 343, 343 (2003).

<sup>71</sup> Oral Argument at 23:32, *Virginia v. Black*, 538 U.S. 343 (2003) (No. 01-1107), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2002/01-1107> (Appendix at 227).

political statement.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Thomas expressed concern in *Gratz v. Bollinger* about historically black colleges.<sup>73</sup>

Justice Thomas’s role as an Insight Provider, however, is not limited to race cases. His questions, for instance, also offer insights into discrimination. Consider, for instance, the oral argument in *Robinson v. Shell Oil Co.*<sup>74</sup> The question there was whether a *former* employee can bring an action under Title VII for actions allegedly taken in retaliation for filing a charge with the EEOC.<sup>75</sup> Thomas, presumably recalling his days at the EEOC, wondered aloud whether former employers, who often are asked to provide recommendations to future employers, really could say, “Look, you file a charge against me, and I will see to it that you will never work in this business again[.]”<sup>76</sup> Similar recollections may have influenced his questioning in *Pennsylvania Department of Corrections v. Yeskey*, which addressed disability discrimination in the penal context.<sup>77</sup> Thomas explained that when it comes to “ramps” and the like, accommodating a disability seems “fairly easy and straightforward,” but that “reasonable accommodation is a bit more difficult than our discussion’s been so far”; after all, in a prison, what would be a reasonable accommodation for someone who, say, “has a history of claustrophobia”?<sup>78</sup> (In both cases, Thomas sided with the party alleging discrimination.)

Justice Thomas’s ability to offer real-world experience is also shown in cases involving federal agencies. Again, recall that Justice Thomas headed the EEOC for eight years; few people, to say nothing of judges, have lived so many years so deep in the belly of administrative law. In *NASA v. FLRA*, Thomas drew on that experience to explain his understanding of the role of an agency head when it comes to inspectors general, suggesting that there was “an attitude in Congress that the investigation should not be controlled by the agency heads,” and explaining that “if the Administrator can’t direct the IG to do precisely [what the

---

<sup>72</sup> *Capitol Square* Oral Argument, *supra* note 39, at 54:15 & 57:11.

<sup>73</sup> *Gratz* Oral Argument, *Gratz*, *supra* note 40, at 56:59 (Appendix at 227); *see also Miller* Oral Argument, *supra* note 42, at 31:12 (asking about distinguishing between political and racial gerrymandering in Georgia) (Appendix at 220); Oral Argument at 36:26, *United States v. Fordice*, 505 U.S. 717 (2012) (No. 90-1205), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1991/90-1205> (asking about desegregation in Mississippi) (Appendix at 216).

<sup>74</sup> 519 U.S. 337 (2003).

<sup>75</sup> *Id.* at 339.

<sup>76</sup> *Robinson* Oral Argument, *supra* note 51, at 47:11, (Appendix at 222).

<sup>77</sup> 524 U.S. 206 (1998).

<sup>78</sup> Oral Argument at 45:21, *Pa. Dep’t. of Corrs. v. Yeskey*, 524 U.S. 206 (1998) (No. 97-634), <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1997/97-634> (Appendix at 223).

Administrator thinks] the IG should be doing, then I don't know how you can say that the IG reports to the Administrator.”<sup>79</sup>

Justice Thomas, of course, is not the only Justice who brings a distinct background to the bench. Each sometimes plays the role of Insight Provider. But when Thomas has personal familiarity with the subject, his questions can be especially formidable.

#### F. A Plain Speaker and Team Player

Finally, two additional characteristics stand out: Justice Thomas is a Plain Speaker and Team Player. By this, we mean that his questions are crisp; he does not wander from his point or disrupt the flow of the argument. Instead, when it comes to asking a question, he gets in, gets out, and moves things along without wasting time or creating confusion.

It is no secret that the other Justices speak a lot during argument—indeed, “their barrage of questions sometimes leav[es] the lawyers arguing before them as bystanders in their own cases.”<sup>80</sup> Frankly, this is concerning, particularly if it means that the Justices are talking more and listening less. In fact, this trend is one reason that Justice Thomas himself has offered to explain his reticence to ask questions at argument: “We have a lifetime to go back in chambers and to argue with each other,” but counsel “have 30, 40 minutes per side . . . .”<sup>81</sup>

Especially in light of the modern Court's penchant for bombarding counsel with questions, there is much to be said for making sure that questions are succinct.<sup>82</sup> Here again, Justice Thomas is a model Justice. Consider, for instance, Thomas's approach to *Georgia v. Randolph*, which concerned whether a police officer may search a dwelling if one person there consents while the other person objects.<sup>83</sup> Thomas wondered why the woman who consented could not have just grabbed the evidence and given it to the police. If she could do that, how could it be unreasonable for the police—with her consent—to instead enter and obtain the same evidence?

---

<sup>79</sup> *NASA Oral Argument*, *supra* note 36, at 46:39; *see also Nat'l Treasury Oral Argument*, *supra* note 41, at 59:38 (considering the difference between “moonlighting” and “honorariums” for government employees) (Appendix at 220).

<sup>80</sup> Adam Liptak, *A Most Inquisitive Court? No Argument There*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 8, 2013, at A14.

<sup>81</sup> Josh Gerstein, *Clarence Thomas Defends Silence in Supreme Court Health Care Arguments*, POLITICO (Apr. 6, 2012), <http://www.politico.com/blogs/under-the-radar/2012/04/clarence-thomas-defends-silence-in-supreme-court-health-119823.html>. [<https://perma.cc/B6HC-9TKH>]

<sup>82</sup> *Cf.* Barry Sullivan & Megan Canty, *Interruptions in Search of a Purpose: Oral Argument in the Supreme Court, October Terms 1958–60 and 2010–12*, 2015 UTAH L. REV. 1005, 1028 n.60 (“[S]ome Justices may be more or less inclined to ask questions, and some Justices may be better questioners—or at least able to ask questions more succinctly—than others.”).

<sup>83</sup> 547 U.S. 103 (2006).

Rather than belabor that point, Thomas simply asked whether “this case [would be] materially different if she simply ran upstairs, grabbed the straw, brought it down, and handed it to the police officer?”<sup>84</sup> His question had no lengthy wind-up, outlandish hypothetical, or attempt at humor. Instead, Thomas asked his question and then stepped back. In both his choice of questions and his rate of participation, he signals an awareness of the group nature of the endeavor and a commitment to using the limited argument time to benefit the full Court.

In short, Justice Thomas’s questions do not represent wild tangents. They do not take up more than his share of the argument time. They are very often crisp, concise, and useful. They do not interrupt the line of inquiry of a colleague or detract from themes being developed by the other Justices. Indeed, Thomas often follows up on questions of other Justices.<sup>85</sup> To be sure, his questions sometimes suggest he disagrees with his colleagues and often present counterexamples to theirs. But his mode of questioning respects the give-and-take of the group dynamic. In total, the complete set of questions asked by Thomas suggest that he is not seeking to pontificate about his own pet issues, but rather to obtain answers to the questions he knows his colleagues have and to amplify the ideas they have already brought to the exchange.

#### CONCLUSION

Justice Clarence Thomas, known for his silence, ought to be known for his questions. When he has asked them, they have been almost uniformly well-constructed, contributory, interesting, and helpful to both the advocates and his peers on the Court. Whether he is clarifying the facts, parsing statutory language, or playing out a hypothetical to test the boundaries of a rule, his oral-argument style is thoughtful, respectful to the attorneys, and cooperative with his fellow Justices. Using plain language, he asks questions that matter and offers insights without wasting time or drawing unnecessary attention to himself. In many key respects, Justice Thomas, the Justice least likely to ask a question, is a model questioner. He should ask more of them.

---

<sup>84</sup> *Georgia* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 43:29.

<sup>85</sup> *See, e.g., Gratz* Oral Argument, *supra* note 40, at 56:59 (referencing an earlier question from Justice O’Connor in the same oral argument) (Appendix at 227); *Rogers* Oral Argument, *supra* note 37, at 26:25 (following up on a question from Justice Breyer) (Appendix at 223); *Lamb’s Chapel* Oral Argument, *supra* note 44, at 55:35 (beginning his questioning with a reference to earlier questioning by Justice Stevens) (Appendix at 219).

## APPENDIX

## JUSTICE CLARENCE THOMAS'S QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS DURING ORAL ARGUMENT

*This appendix lists every oral argument we have found in which Justice Clarence Thomas asked a question at oral argument, arranged chronologically from date of argument. Our methodology is set forth infra Section II. For each argument, our respective first paragraph either quotes or paraphrases the question presented. The second paragraph lists some or all of Justice Thomas's questions during the argument. The third paragraph lists the winner and the fourth sets out Justice Thomas's vote. Because it can be difficult to understand the questions without context, we have opted not to simply directly reproduce the relevant transcript pages. All of these arguments are available at Oyez.com.*

*COLLINS V. CITY OF HARKER HEIGHTS*, 503 U.S. 115 (1992), ARGUED NOVEMBER 5, 1991.

Whether the Due Process Clause imposes an independent federal obligation on municipalities to provide minimal levels of safety and security in the workplace, providing a remedy for a municipal employee killed because the municipality failed to train or warn its employees about known hazards in the workplace.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas inquired whether it would change the party's analysis if, rather than being a city employee, the worker had been a "city prisoner required to clean the sewers." He also questioned the respondent's assertion that municipalities owe city prisoners a higher duty of protection than employees, asking, "But where's the underlying constitutional right?"

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Stevens's opinion for a unanimous Court.

*UNION BANK V. WOLAS*, 502 U.S. 151 (1991), ARGUED NOVEMBER 5, 1991.

Whether payments on long-term debt qualify for the ordinary course of business exception to the trustee's power to avoid preferential transfers made by the debtor in the 90-day period preceding bankruptcy.

Question directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas wanted to determine whether each element of the loan was treated as long-term debt, asking if there was "any distinction between the fees and the monthly payments of interest and the actual pay-down of the principal."

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Stevens's opinion for a unanimous Court.

*UNITED STATES V. FORDICE*, 505 U.S. 717 (1992), ARGUED NOVEMBER 13, 1991.

Whether eight public universities in Mississippi had sufficiently desegregated, meeting their obligations under the Equal Protection Clause.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas responded to the assertion that a university is not necessarily providing inadequate education simply because it is underfunded and small, asking whether there is any difference between a school that "is underfunded as a result of prior segregation policies" and a "school that has never been discriminated against." He also responded to the assertion that students in today's world have genuine freedom of choice regarding university education, countering that "your argument then would have been that 20 years ago you had freedom of choice?"

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined the majority opinion and wrote a separate concurring opinion.

*EVANS V. UNITED STATES*, 504 U.S. 255 (1992), ARGUED DECEMBER 9, 1991.

Whether an affirmative act of inducement by a public official, such as a demand, is an element of the offense of extortion "under color of official right" prohibited by the Hobbs Act.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas followed up on a question by the Chief Justice about whether a \$10 fee that a registrar of deeds charges is extortion, asking, "why isn't the \$10 fee extortion?" After the respondent explained the reasoning for excluding fees charged by a registrar of deeds, Justice Thomas responded, "But you will admit that on its face [the statute] has no limiting principle?"

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas wrote the dissenting opinion.

*MORALES V. TRANS WORLD AIRLINES, INC.*, 504 U.S. 374 (1992), ARGUED MARCH 3, 1992.

Whether the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 preempts the states from prohibiting allegedly deceptive airline fare advertisements through enforcement of their general consumer protection statutes.

Questions directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas questioned the petitioner's declaration that the state endeavored to enforce state law rather than NAAG guidelines, responding, "You say you're not enforcing the NAAG guidelines?" Justice Thomas then proceeded to read an excerpt from a letter that stated "we continue to support and intend to enforce the NAAG guidelines."

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Scalia's majority opinion.

*ANKENBRANDT V. RICHARDS*, 504 U.S. 689 (1992), ARGUED MARCH 31, 1992.

Whether federal courts have jurisdiction in a case involving alleged torts committed by the petitioner's former husband (Richards) and his female companion (Kesler) against petitioner's children, when the sole basis for federal jurisdiction is diversity.

Question directed to respondent: Justice Thomas wanted to explore the domestic relations exception to diversity jurisdiction, asking, "Let's assume that the domestic exception applies to the father, Respondent Richards. How does it apply to his companion, Respondent Kesler?"

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Stevens's dissenting opinion.

*BURLINGTON NORTHERN RAILROAD V. FORD*, 504 U.S. 648 (1992), ARGUED APRIL 20, 1992.

Whether Montana's venue rule, specifying that a plaintiff may sue a corporation incorporated in Montana only in the county of its principal place of business but permits suit in any county against a corporation incorporated elsewhere, violates the Equal Protection Clause.

Question directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas asked, "Did you consider arguing that this venue statute violated the Commerce Clause?"

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Souter's opinion for a unanimous Court.

*CINCINNATI V. DISCOVERY NETWORK, INC.*, 507 U.S. 410 (1993), ARGUED NOVEMBER 9, 1992.

Whether Cincinnati's refusal to allow respondent to distribute its commercial publications through freestanding newsracks located on public property is consistent with the First Amendment.

Question directed to respondent: Justice Thomas responded to the assertion that, under the city's policy, commercial publications could not be

distributed in the streets by any means, asking whether the respondent could distribute its publications “by adding them as inserts to the newspaper.”

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Chief Justice Rehnquist’s dissenting opinion.

*ARAVE V. CREECH*, 507 U.S. 463 (1993), ARGUED NOVEMBER 10, 1992.

Whether the “utter disregard for human life” standard for capital punishment, as interpreted by the Idaho Supreme Court, is unconstitutionally vague under the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments.

Questions directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas asked counsel to confirm that the victim had a handicap, and then asked for clarification about the facts, whether the actual murder “took on many aspects of an assassination” even though “the victim provoked the altercation.”

Petitioner prevailed in part and prevailed on the constitutional question.

Justice Thomas joined Justice O’Connor’s majority opinion.

*BUILDING & CONSTRUCTION TRADES COUNCIL V. ASSOCIATED BUILDERS & CONTRACTORS*, 507 U.S. 218 (1993), ARGUED DECEMBER 9, 1992.

Whether the National Labor Relations Act allows a state authority, acting as the owner of a construction project, to enforce an otherwise lawful pre-hire collective-bargaining agreement negotiated by private parties.

Question directed to respondent: Justice Thomas responded to the assertion that government interference in the negotiation process was unwarranted, asking why a state cannot “make a judgment that this is a long-term project and we don’t want this project disrupted?”

Petitioners prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Blackmun’s opinion for a unanimous Court.

*UNITED STATES V. OLANO*, 507 U.S. 725 (1993), ARGUED DECEMBER 9, 1992.

Whether the presence of alternate jurors during jury deliberations was a “plain error” that the Court of Appeals was authorized to correct under Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 52(b).

Question directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas asked, “[W]ould we analyze this differently if there had been consent to the alternative jurors?”

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice O'Connor's majority opinion.

*LAMB'S CHAPEL V. CENTER MORICHES UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT*, 508 U.S. 384 (1993), ARGUED FEBRUARY 24, 1993.

Whether a school district violated the First and Fourteenth Amendments by denying a church access to school premises to show a film series dealing with family and child-rearing issues.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas tested the fringes of the respondent's proposed rule, asking, "[Y]ou indicated that communists would be able to give their perspective on family. I assume from that that atheists would be able to give theirs under your rules?" Justice Thomas proceeded to pose several hypotheticals, including, "[L]et's say it's an atheist and an agnostic debating one minister." Finally, the Justice confirmed that the respondent's position was "the addition of the minister is a problem, regardless of what the content is or the composition is."

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Scalia's concurring opinion.

*LINCOLN V. VIGIL*, 508 U.S. 182 (1993), ARGUED MARCH 3, 1993.

Whether the Indian Health Service's decision to terminate the Indian Children's Program was a decision committed to agency discretion by law and therefore not subject to judicial review under the Administrative Procedure Act.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas followed up on Justice White's question about whether a reduction in work force would be considered a rule, inquiring, what if "they decided to deploy them to Phoenix?" He pressed the issue further, asking, "If you reduced the staff by 50 percent, that's not a rule?"

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Souter's opinion for a unanimous Court.

*SMITH V. UNITED STATES*, 508 U.S. 223 (1993), ARGUED MARCH 23, 1993.

Whether the exchange of a gun for narcotics constitutes "use" of a firearm "during and in relation to . . . [a] drug trafficking crime," resulting in a significant sentence enhancement.

Question directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas, wanting to understand the ordinary usage of the term, asked, "Let's assume that your client was successful and was not arrested and a friend approached him the next day and asked him what happened to his Mack 10. Could he reasonably respond, 'I used it to obtain cocaine?'" Expanding his hypothetical to a

different scenario, Justice Thomas asked, if a carpenter “traded his hammer for the board, and he was asked what happened to his hammer, and reasonably . . . he said I used it to obtain this board, would one reasonably think that he used it to hammer someone’s head to obtain the board?”

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice O’Connor’s majority opinion.

*WISCONSIN V. MITCHELL*, 508 U.S. 476 (1993), ARGUED APRIL 21, 1993.

Whether sentence enhancements for intentionally selecting a victim on account of race are constitutional under the First and Fourteenth Amendments.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas posed a hypothetical about a group of ten black persons, five who said they wanted to attack a white person and five who said they wanted to attack a black person, asking, “Would the second five not be covered?” He subsequently pressed the issue further, asking “So where is the bias in the second five?” Finally, Justice Thomas requested clarification that in all the relevant cases “the state actually had to prove that there was a bias, not simply that . . . the victim was chosen because of his or her race?”

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Chief Justice Rehnquist’s opinion for a unanimous Court.

*UNITED STATES V. NATIONAL TREASURY EMPLOYEES UNION*, 513 U.S. 454 (1995), ARGUED NOVEMBER 8, 1994.

Whether the federal prohibition on federal employees receiving any compensation for making speeches or writing articles abridges the freedom of speech.

Questions directed to respondent: “Would you have a First Amendment problem with a total ban on moonlighting” by federal employees? Justice Thomas subsequently asked if a complete ban on moonlighting would have a different effect on honorariums than the current law and responded, “So the government can solve its First Amendment problem simply by banning all moonlighting?”

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Chief Justice Rehnquist’s dissenting opinion.

*MILLER V. JOHNSON*, 515 U.S. 900 (1995), ARGUED APRIL 19, 1995.

Whether Georgia’s congressional redistricting plan gives rise to a valid equal protection claim because of its apparent effect of separating

voters on the basis of race, and if so, whether it can nonetheless be sustained as narrowly tailored to serve a compelling governmental interest.

Question directed to appellees: Justice Thomas posed a hypothetical where the Georgia legislature, for purely political reasons, creates three districts with loyal Democratic voters, who happen to be black. The Justice then asked, “What is wrong with that?”

Appellees prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Kennedy’s majority opinion.

*CAPITOL SQUARE REVIEW & ADVISORY BOARD V. PINETTE*, 515 U.S. 753 (1995), ARGUED APRIL 26, 1995.

Whether a state violates the Establishment Clause when, pursuant to a religiously neutral state policy, it permits a private party (the Ku Klux Klan) to display a religious symbol in a traditional public forum located adjacent to its statehouse.

Question directed to respondent: Justice Thomas wanted to understand the religious nature of symbol at issue, asking, “What is the religion of the [Ku Klux] Klan?” He inquired whether the record showed the symbolism of the cross itself and also of the burning cross. Finally, attempting to determine whether the issue truly invoked the Establishment Clause, Justice Thomas queried, if a member of the Klan were “carrying a cross down Pennsylvania Avenue,” would a reasonable person believe “the Klan is engaged in an exercise of religion, or a political statement?”

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Scalia’s majority opinion and wrote a separate concurring opinion.

*UNITED STATES V. CHESAPEAKE & POTOMAC TELEPHONE CO.*, 516 U.S. 415 (1996), ARGUED DECEMBER 6, 1995.

Whether 47 U.S.C. 533(b), which bars local telephone companies from directly providing video programming to their local phone service subscribers, violates the Free Speech Clause.

Question directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas asked whether competition between cable companies exists or “are they equally in the monopoly position, and are we just talking about monopolists versus monopolists?”

A per curiam opinion remanded the case to the Fourth Circuit to consider whether the issues were moot.

*ROBINSON V. SHELL OIL CO.*, 519 U.S. 337 (1997), ARGUED NOVEMBER 6, 1996.

Whether the term “employees,” as used in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, includes former employees, such that a person may bring suit against a former employer for post-employment actions allegedly taken in retaliation for having filed a charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas set up a hypothetical, probing the respondent’s proposed definition, by asking, “How often do you give references in discharge cases?” He followed up by asking what should happen if an employer were to say, “Look, you file a charge against me, and I will see to it that you will never work in this business again.”

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas wrote the opinion for a unanimous Court.

*BOGGS V. BOGGS*, 520 U.S. 833 (1997), ARGUED JANUARY 15, 1997.

Whether the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA), pre-empts a state law allowing a nonparticipant spouse to transfer by testamentary instrument an interest in undistributed pension plan benefits.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas posed a hypothetical, asking what the children would have received if the decedent had not remarried after the death of the children’s mother. He also challenged the respondent’s answer that the estate would have increased if the decedent “decided to go to the river boats and just feed the slot machines.”

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Kennedy’s majority opinion.

*KLEHR V. A.O. SMITH CORP.*, 521 U.S. 179 (1997), ARGUED APRIL 21, 1997.

First, whether the statute of limitations starts to run for a Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act claim when the last predicate act occurs or when the RICO violation first occurs. Second, whether the statute of limitations is tolled because of “fraudulent concealment” if the injured party is not reasonably diligent in trying to discover the injury.

Question directed to respondent: Justice Thomas clarified the respondent’s assertion that to allege fraud, the party must be able to “prove it at the time.”

Respondent prevailed in the case.  
Justice Thomas joined Justice Scalia's concurring opinion.

*ROGERS V. UNITED STATES*, 522 U.S. 252 (1998), ARGUED NOVEMBER 5, 1997.

Whether a district court's failure to instruct the jury on an element of an offense is harmless error where, at trial, the defendant admitted that element.

Questions directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas wanted clarification regarding the meaning of the jury instructions. He read off the jury instructions, which required that a defendant knowingly possess "the item as charged" and asked, "The item as charged, was that . . . a 9-inch by 1 3/4-inch silencer?" He also challenged counsel's reading of a precedent case, *Staples*.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas read an excerpt of the Court of Appeals opinion and inquired whether the government conceded that the failure to give a jury instruction "is an error." He also asked "whether *Staples* requires that there be an instruction that . . . [the defendant] knowingly possessed a firearm under the Act?"

The Court dismissed the writ as improvidently granted.  
Justice Thomas joined Justice Stevens's plurality opinion.

*PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS V. YESKEY*, 524 U.S. 206 (1998), ARGUED APRIL 28, 1998.

Whether Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), which prohibits a "public entity" from discriminating against a "qualified individual with a disability" on account of that individual's disability, covers inmates in state prisons.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas first commented that the "case of ramps and some of the fixtures are fairly easy and straightforward" but asked whether the respondent sought "a redesigning of the boot camp to accommodate an individual who is disabled in some way." In an effort to show that "reasonable accommodation is a bit more difficult than our discussion's been so far," Justice Thomas also posed a hypothetical: "Well, let's say . . . this individual can prove that claustrophobia is [his] disability, and let's say this person has a history of claustrophobia as a disability. . . . Now, how do you accommodate that?"

Respondent prevailed in the case.  
Justice Thomas joined Justice Scalia's opinion for a unanimous Court.

*NASA V. FEDERAL LABOR RELATIONS AUTHORITY*, 527 U.S. 229 (1999),  
ARGUED MARCH 23, 1999.

Whether an investigator employed in NASA's Office of Inspector General can be considered a "representative" of NASA when examining a NASA employee, such that the right to union representation in the Federal Service Labor-Management Relations Statute may be invoked.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas first asked, "Wasn't there then an attitude in Congress that the investigation should not be controlled by the agency heads?"

He also commented that "I don't think you can have it both ways. You can't say that the Inspector General is under the agency head when we know that the purpose was to do just the opposite and to get the investigation from under the agency heads." To further illustrate the IG's independent nature, Justice Thomas asked several questions along the same lines: "If the IG said, I want to investigate this matter in this manner, can the agency head say, you cannot?"; "Isn't it true that the IG has a separate line of communication and separate reporting authority to Congress?"; "Do you know of any instance where . . . an IG has been directed by an agency head to conduct an audit or an investigation in a certain way?" Finally, Justice Thomas summed up the purpose behind his questions by saying, "[I]f the Administrator can't direct the IG to do precisely what [the Administrator thinks] the IG should be doing, then I don't know how you can say that the IG reports to the Administrator."

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas wrote the dissenting opinion.

*NIXON V. SHRINK MISSOURI GOVERNMENT PAC*, 528 U.S. 377 (2000),  
ARGUED OCTOBER 5, 1999.

Whether *Buckley v. Valeo* is authority for state limits on contributions to state political candidates and whether the federal limits approved in *Buckley*, with or without adjustment for inflation, define the scope of permissible state limitations today.

Questions directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas commented that the petitioner had forcefully made the point that even an "appearance of corruption" is sufficient "to regulate the amount of money in the [political] process" and then posed a hypothetical. He asked whether it would pass First Amendment muster if the state begins to "limit the amount of money that can be charged by [news] organizations to run political ads?" Justice Thomas then challenged the petitioner to articulate the distinction between his argument and Justice Thomas's hypothetical.

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas wrote a separate dissenting opinion.

*APPRENDI V. NEW JERSEY*, 530 U.S. 466 (2000), ARGUED MARCH 28, 2000.

Whether the Due Process Clause requires that any fact that increases the penalty for a crime beyond the prescribed statutory maximum be submitted to a jury and proved beyond a reasonable doubt.

Question directed to the United States, as amicus curiae, arguing in favor of the respondent's position: Justice Thomas confirmed that the United States believed "an element of the offense goes to the jury" but an "enhancement goes to the judge." He proceeded to ask the United States to provide the distinction "between an element of the offense and an enhancement factor."

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Stevens's majority opinion and wrote a separate concurrence.

*BUCKHANNON BOARD & CARE HOME, INC. V. WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN RESOURCES*, 532 U.S. 598 (2001), ARGUED FEBRUARY 27, 2001.

Whether the term "prevailing party" includes a party that has failed to secure a judgment on the merits or a court-ordered consent decree but has nonetheless achieved the desired result because the lawsuit brought about a voluntary change in the defendant's conduct.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas wanted confirmation that the lower court's holding in *Farrar*, a precedent case, was that "they were not a prevailing party." He later clarified for his colleagues that in *Farrar*, "we found that they were a prevailing party but there [were] nominal damages so the attorney's fees were reduced."

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Chief Justice Rehnquist's majority opinion and Justice Scalia's concurring opinion.

*LORILLARD TOBACCO CO. V. REILLY*, 533 U.S. 525 (2001), ARGUED APRIL 25, 2001.

Whether Massachusetts's tobacco regulations, significantly regulating the advertising and sale of cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, and cigars, are pre-empted by the Federal Cigarette Labeling and Advertising Act. Whether Massachusetts's regulations governing the advertising and sale of tobacco products violate the First Amendment.

Question directed to the United States, as amicus curiae, arguing in support of the respondent's position: Justice Thomas posed a hypothetical to test the United States' proposed rule, asking, "Let's assume that it can be demonstrated that eating regularly at fast food joints, including McDonald's, causes health problems throughout life for kids. Would you give me the principle in your reasoning that would prevent the State of Massachusetts from similarly restricting advertising by McDonald's?"

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice O'Connor's opinion for a unanimous Court as to Part I, II-C, and II-D, joined Justice O'Connor's majority opinion except as to Part III-B-1, and joined Justice Kennedy's concurring opinion.

*US AIRWAYS, INC. V. BARNETT*, 535 U.S. 391 (2002), ARGUED DECEMBER 4, 2001.

Whether the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires an employer to reassign a disabled employee to a less physically demanding position as a reasonable accommodation even though another employee is entitled to hold the position under the employer's seniority system.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas asked respondent to define her client's disability. He also asked if a disabled person could be bumped from his or her position "by someone who's more severely handicapped." Justice Thomas then inquired about the practical differences between a severely handicapped person taking a position from a less severely handicapped person and a handicapped person taking a position from a nondisabled person. He commented that if a severely disabled person "has to be accommodated and we only have to look at that person's needs in making our reasonableness determination, I don't understand why [a less severely disabled person] can't be bumped if he were in that position."

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Scalia's dissenting opinion.

*DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING & URBAN DEVELOPMENT V. RUCKER*, 535 U.S. 125 (2002), ARGUED FEBRUARY 19, 2002.

Whether the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988 allows local public housing agencies to evict tenants for the drug-related activity of nontenant relatives or guests regardless of whether tenants knew, or should have known, about the activity.

Question directed to petitioner: Justice Thomas asked, "[H]ow big a problem is [drug abuse by nontenant guests] in this housing authority?"

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Chief Justice Rehnquist's opinion for a unanimous Court.

*UNITED STATES V. DRAYTON*, 536 U.S. 194 (2002), ARGUED APRIL 16, 2002.

Whether police officers must advise passengers of their right not to cooperate when searching buses at random to ask questions and to request passengers' consent to search.

Question directed to respondent: Justice Thomas asked, "[I]s there anything in the record about what the innocent people actually felt when the police officers came on the bus?"

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Kennedy's majority opinion.

*VIRGINIA V. BLACK*, 538 U.S. 343 (2003), ARGUED DECEMBER 11, 2002.

Whether the Commonwealth of Virginia's cross-burning statute, which prohibits the burning of a cross with the intent of intimidating any person or group of persons, violates the First Amendment.

Questions directed to the United States, as amicus curiae, arguing in favor of the petitioner's position: Justice Thomas responded to the United States' characterization of the burning cross's symbolism by asking, "[A]ren't you understating the effects of the burning cross?" Justice Thomas proceeded to comment that "we had almost 100 years of lynching and activity in the South by the Knights of Camellia and the Ku Klux Klan, and this was a reign of terror, and the cross was a symbol of that reign of terror. . . . [I]t was intended to have a virulent effect. . . . [I]t is unlike any symbol in our society."

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Scalia's dissenting (in part) opinion and wrote a separate dissenting opinion.

*GRATZ V. BOLLINGER*, 539 U.S. 244 (2003), ARGUED APRIL 1, 2003.

Whether the University of Michigan's use of racial preferences in undergraduate admissions violates the Equal Protection Clause and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas acknowledged that elite law schools do not wish to choose between being elite and being diverse but inquired whether "it would be easier to accomplish [diversity]" if admission standards were lowered. He also asked whether there were benefits to diversity at historically black colleges.

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Chief Justice Rehnquist's majority opinion and wrote a separate concurring opinion.

*GEORGIA V. RANDOLPH*, 547 U.S. 103 (2006), ARGUED NOVEMBER 8, 2005.

Whether a police officer may search a home when one present resident consents and the other present resident objects.

Question directed to the United States, as amicus curiae, arguing in favor of the petitioner's position: Justice Thomas inquired whether the case at hand, where the wife consented to the search but the husband did not, is "materially different [than] if she simply ran upstairs, grabbed the straw, brought it down, and handed it to the police officer."

Question directed to respondent: Justice Thomas challenged the assertion that the search was "an uncabined search." He also questioned the respondent's position, stating, "But you're saying it is an unreasonable search for her to lead the police officer to the straw, which is what she did."

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas wrote a separate dissenting opinion.

*RICE V. COLLINS*, 546 U.S. 333 (2006), ARGUED DECEMBER 5, 2005.

Whether a federal court may set aside reasonable state-court determinations of fact in favor of its own debatable interpretation of the record, when a state court determined that a prosecutor dismissed a juror for nonracial factors.

Questions directed to the respondent: Justice Thomas inquired whether "there is anything in the record to alert us to the race of the prosecutor" and then proceeded to ask whether the race of the prosecutor would "make any difference."

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Kennedy's opinion for a unanimous Court.

*HOLMES V. SOUTH CAROLINA*, 547 U.S. 319 (2006), ARGUED FEBRUARY 22, 2006.

Whether South Carolina's rule governing the admissibility of evidence of third-party guilt, rejecting evidence that merely casts suspicion on another person, violates a defendant's Fourteenth Amendment right to due process and Sixth Amendment rights to confrontation and compulsory process (the ability to compel witnesses to testify).

Question directed to respondent: Justice Thomas wanted clarification about the findings of the lower court, asking, “[I]sn’t it more accurate that the trial court actually found that the evidence met the *Gregory* standard?” Justice Thomas then proceeded to read from the trial court’s opinion that seemed at odds with the respondent’s initial assertion.

Petitioner prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas joined Justice Alito’s opinion for a unanimous Court.

*VOISINE V. UNITED STATES*, 136 S. CT. 2272 ARGUED FEBRUARY 29, 2016.

Whether misdemeanor assault convictions for reckless conduct—as contrasted to knowing or intentional conduct—trigger the statutory firearms ban.

Questions directed to respondent: Justice Thomas inquired whether counsel could give “another area where a misdemeanor violation suspends a constitutional right.” After commenting that a ban on possessing a firearm is permanent, Justice Thomas renewed his question by asking “can you think of a . . . suspension of a First Amendment right that is permanent?” He questioned the analysis by posing a hypothetical, asking whether the government could “suspend [a] publisher’s right to ever publish again” if the publisher printed indecent displays of children. He also questioned whether the government could impose a weapons ban on someone who committed a misdemeanor assault without using a weapon, commenting that the ban “is not directly related to the use of a weapon. It is a suspension that is actually indirectly related or actually unrelated.”

Respondent prevailed in the case.

Justice Thomas wrote the dissenting opinion.