

Opinion of the Court

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SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

No. 99–1613

ROBERT SHAW, ET AL., PETITIONERS
v. KEVIN MURPHY, RESPONDENT

ON WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF
APPEALS FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

[April 18, 2001]

JUSTICE THOMAS delivered the opinion of the Court.

Under our decision in *Turner v. Safley*, 482 U. S. 78 (1987), restrictions on prisoners’ communications to other inmates are constitutional if the restrictions are “reasonably related to legitimate penological interests.” *Id.*, at 89. In this case, we are asked to decide whether prisoners possess a First Amendment right to provide legal assistance that enhances the protections otherwise available under *Turner*. We hold that they do not.

I

While respondent Kevin Murphy was incarcerated at the Montana State Prison, he served as an “inmate law clerk,” providing legal assistance to fellow prisoners. Upon learning that inmate Pat Tracy had been charged with assaulting Correctional Officer Glen Galle, Murphy decided to assist Tracy with his defense. Prison rules prohibited Murphy’s assignment to the case,¹ but he none-

¹Tracy had requested that Murphy be assigned to his case. App. 84. Prison officials, however, denied that request because prison policy forbade high-security inmates, such as Murphy, from meeting with

Opinion of the Court

theless investigated the assault. After discovering that other inmates had complained about Officer Galle's conduct, Murphy sent Tracy a letter, which included the following:

"I do want to help you with your case against Galle. It wasn't your fault and I know he provoked whatever happened! Don't plead guilty because we can get at least 100 witnesses to testify that Galle is an over zealous guard who has a personal agenda to punish and harrass [sic] inmates. He has made homo-sexual [sic] advances towards certain inmates and that can be brought up into the record. There are petitions against him and I have tried to get the Unit Manager to do something about what he does in Close II, but all that happened is that I received two writeups from him myself as retaliation. So we must pursue this out of the prison system. I am filing a suit with everyone in Close I and II named against him. So you can use that too!

"Another point [sic] is that he grabbed you from behind. You tell your lawyer to get ahold of me on this. Don't take a plea bargain unless it's for no more time." App. 50.

In accordance with prison policy, prison officials inter-
cepted the letter, and petitioner Robert Shaw, an officer in
the maximum-security unit, reviewed it. Based on the
accusations against Officer Galle, Shaw cited Murphy for
violations of the prison's rules prohibiting insolence, inter-
ference with due process hearings, and conduct that dis-
rupts or interferes with the security and orderly operation
of the institution. After a hearing, Murphy was found
guilty of violating the first two prohibitions. The hearings

maximum-security inmates, including Tracy. App. to Pet. for Cert. 19.
Prison officials offered Tracy another law clerk to assist him. App. 84.

Opinion of the Court

officer sanctioned him by imposing a suspended sentence of 10 days' detention and issuing demerits that could affect his custody level.

In response, Murphy brought this action, seeking declaratory and injunctive relief under Rev. Stat. §1979, 42 U. S. C. §1983. The case was styled as a class action, brought on behalf of himself, other inmate law clerks, and other prisoners. The complaint alleged that the disciplining of Murphy violated due process, the rights of inmates to access the courts, and, as relevant here, Murphy's First Amendment rights, including the right to provide legal assistance to other inmates.

After discovery, the District Court granted petitioners' motion for summary judgment on all of Murphy's claims. On the First Amendment claim, the court found that Murphy was not formally acting as an inmate law clerk when he wrote the letter, and that Murphy's claims should therefore "be analyzed without consideration of any privilege that law clerk status might provide." App. to Pet. for Cert. 24. The District Court then applied our decision in *Turner v. Safley*, 482 U. S. 78 (1987), which held that a prison regulation impinging on inmates' constitutional rights is valid "if it is reasonably related to legitimate penological interests," *id.*, at 89. Finding a "valid, rational connection between the prison inmate correspondence policy and the objectives of prison order, security, and inmate rehabilitation," the District Court rejected Murphy's First Amendment claim. App. to Pet. for Cert. 25.

The Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit reversed. It premised its analysis on the proposition that "inmates have a First Amendment right to assist other inmates with their legal claims." 195 F.3d 1121, 1124 (1999). Murphy enjoyed this right of association, the court concluded, because he was providing legal advice that potentially was relevant to Tracy's defense. The Court of Appeals then applied our decision in *Turner*, but it did so

Opinion of the Court

only against the backdrop of this First Amendment right, which, the court held, affected the balance of the prisoner's interests against the government's interests. Concluding that the balance tipped in favor of Murphy, the Court of Appeals upheld Murphy's First Amendment claim.

Other Courts of Appeals have rejected similar claims. See, e.g., *Gibbs v. Hopkins*, 10 F. 3d 373, 378 (CA6 1993) (no constitutional right to assist other inmates with legal claims); *Smith v. Maschner*, 899 F. 2d 940, 950 (CA10 1990) (same); *Gassler v. Rayl*, 862 F. 2d 706, 707–708 (CA8 1988) (same). To resolve the conflict, we granted certiorari. 530 U. S. 1303 (2000).

II

In this case, we are not asked to decide whether prisoners have *any* First Amendment rights when they send legal correspondence to one another. In *Turner*, we held that restrictions on inmate-to-inmate communications pass constitutional muster only if the restrictions are reasonably related to legitimate and neutral governmental objectives. 482 U. S., at 89. We did not limit our holding to nonlegal correspondence, and petitioners do not ask us to construe it that way. Instead, the question presented here simply asks whether Murphy possesses a First Amendment right to provide legal advice that enhances the protections otherwise available under *Turner*. The effect of such a right, as the Court of Appeals described it, 195 F. 3d, at 1127, would be that inmate-to-inmate correspondence that includes legal assistance would receive more First Amendment protection than correspondence without any legal assistance. We conclude that there is no such special right.

Traditionally, federal courts did not intervene in the internal affairs of prisons and instead “adopted a broad hands-off attitude toward problems of prison administration.” *Procunier v. Martinez*, 416 U. S. 396, 404 (1974).

Opinion of the Court

Indeed, for much of this country's history, the prevailing view was that a prisoner was a mere "slave of the State," who "not only forfeited his liberty, but all his personal rights except those which the law in its humanity accords him." *Jones v. North Carolina Prisoners' Labor Union, Inc.*, 433 U. S. 119, 139 (1977) (Marshall, J., dissenting) (quoting *Ruffin v. Commonwealth*, 62 Va. 790, 796 (1871)) (alterations and internal quotation marks omitted). In recent decades, however, this Court has determined that incarceration does not divest prisoners of all constitutional protections. Inmates retain, for example, the right to be free from racial discrimination, *Lee v. Washington*, 390 U. S. 333 (1968) (*per curiam*), the right to due process, *Wolff v. McDonnell*, 418 U. S. 539 (1974), and, as relevant here, certain protections of the First Amendment, *Turner*, *supra*.

We nonetheless have maintained that the constitutional rights that prisoners possess are more limited in scope than the constitutional rights held by individuals in society at large. In the First Amendment context, for instance, some rights are simply inconsistent with the status of a prisoner or "with the legitimate penological objectives of the corrections system," *Pell v. Procunier*, 417 U. S. 817, 822 (1974). We have thus sustained proscriptions of media interviews with individual inmates, see *id.*, at 833–835, prohibitions on the activities of a prisoners' labor union, see *North Carolina Prisoners' Labor Union, Inc.*, *supra*, at 133, and restrictions on inmate-to-inmate written correspondence, see *Turner*, *supra*, at 93. Moreover, because the "problems of prisons in America are complex and intractable," and because courts are particularly "ill equipped" to deal with these problems, *Martinez*, *supra*, at 404–405, we generally have deferred to the judgments of prison officials in upholding these regulations against constitutional challenge.

Reflecting this understanding, in *Turner* we adopted a

Opinion of the Court

unitary, deferential standard for reviewing prisoners' constitutional claims: "[W]hen a prison regulation impinges on inmates' constitutional rights, the regulation is valid if it is reasonably related to legitimate penological interests." 482 U. S., at 89. Under this standard, four factors are relevant. First and foremost, "there must be a 'valid, rational connection' between the prison regulation and the legitimate [and neutral] governmental interest put forward to justify it." *Ibid.* (quoting *Block v. Rutherford*, 468 U. S. 576, 586 (1984)). If the connection between the regulation and the asserted goal is "arbitrary or irrational," then the regulation fails, irrespective of whether the other factors tilt in its favor. 482 U. S., at 89–90. In addition, courts should consider three other factors: the existence of "alternative means of exercising the right" available to inmates; "the impact accommodation of the asserted constitutional right will have on guards and other inmates, and on the allocation of prison resources generally;" and "the absence of ready alternatives" available to the prison for achieving the governmental objectives. *Id.*, at 90.

Because *Turner* provides the test for evaluating prisoners' First Amendment challenges, the issue before us is whether *Turner* permits an increase in constitutional protection whenever a prisoner's communication includes legal advice. We conclude that it does not. To increase the constitutional protection based upon the content of a communication first requires an assessment of the value of that content.² But the *Turner* test, by its terms, simply does not accommodate valuations of content. On the

²The Court of Appeals made such an assessment when it "balance[d] the importance of the prisoner's infringed right against the importance of the penological interest served by the rule." See 195 F. 3d, 1121, 1127 (CA9 1999) (quoting *Bradley v. Hall*, 64 F. 3d 1276, 1280 (CA9 1995)).

Opinion of the Court

contrary, the *Turner* factors concern only the relationship between the asserted penological interests and the prison regulation. *Id.*, at 89.

Moreover, under *Turner* and its predecessors, prison officials are to remain the primary arbiters of the problems that arise in prison management. *Ibid.*; see also *Martinez*, 416 U. S., at 405 (“[C]ourts are ill equipped to deal with the increasingly urgent problems of prison administration and reform”). If courts were permitted to enhance constitutional protection based on their assessments of the content of the particular communications, courts would be in a position to assume a greater role in decisions affecting prison administration. Seeking to avoid “unnecessarily perpetuat[ing] the involvement of the federal courts in affairs of prison administration,” *Turner*, 482 U. S., at 89 (quoting *Martinez*, *supra*, at 407) (alteration in original), we reject an alteration of the *Turner* analysis that would entail additional federal-court oversight.

Finally, even if we were to consider giving special protection to particular kinds of speech based upon content, we would not do so for speech that includes legal advice.³ Augmenting First Amendment protection for inmate legal advice would undermine prison officials’ ability to address the “complex and intractable” problems of prison administration. *Turner*, *supra*, at 84. Although supervised inmate legal assistance programs may serve valuable ends,

³Murphy suggests that the right to provide legal advice follows from a right to receive legal advice. However, even if one right followed from the other, Murphy is incorrect in his assumption that there is a free-standing right to receive legal advice. Under our right-of-access precedents, inmates have a right to receive legal advice from other inmates only when it is a necessary “means for ensuring a ‘reasonably adequate opportunity to present claimed violations of fundamental constitutional rights to the courts.’” *Lewis v. Casey*, 518 U. S. 343, 350–351 (1996) (quoting *Bounds v. Smith*, 430 U. S. 817, 825 (1977)).

Opinion of the Court

it is “indisputable” that inmate law clerks “are sometimes a menace to prison discipline” and that prisoners have an “acknowledged propensity . . . to abuse both the giving and the seeking of [legal] assistance.” *Johnson v. Avery*, 393 U. S. 483, 488, 490 (1969). Prisoners have used legal correspondence as a means for passing contraband and communicating instructions on how to manufacture drugs or weapons. See Brief for State of Florida et al. as *Amici Curiae* 6–8; see also *Turner, supra*, at 93 (“[P]risoners could easily write in jargon or codes to prevent detection of their real messages”). The legal text also could be an excuse for making clearly inappropriate comments, which “may be expected to circulate among prisoners,” *Thornburgh v. Abbott*, 490 U. S. 401, 412 (1989), despite prison measures to screen individual inmates or officers from the remarks.

We thus decline to cloak the provision of legal assistance with any First Amendment protection above and beyond the protection normally accorded prisoners’ speech. Instead, the proper constitutional test is the one we set forth in *Turner*. Irrespective of whether the correspondence contains legal advice, the constitutional analysis is the same.

III

Under *Turner*, the question remains whether the prison regulations, as applied to Murphy, are “reasonably related to legitimate penological interests.” *Turner, supra*, at 89. To prevail, Murphy must overcome the presumption that the prison officials acted within their “broad discretion.” *Abbott, supra*, at 413. Petitioners ask us to answer, rather than remand, the question whether Murphy has satisfied this heavy burden. We decline petitioners’ request, however, because we granted certiorari only to decide whether inmates possess a special First Amendment right to provide legal assistance to fellow inmates.

Opinion of the Court

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The judgment of the Court of Appeals is reversed, and the case is remanded for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.

It is so ordered.