

Syllabus

NOTE: Where it is feasible, a syllabus (headnote) will be released, as is being done in connection with this case, at the time the opinion is issued. The syllabus constitutes no part of the opinion of the Court but has been prepared by the Reporter of Decisions for the convenience of the reader. See *United States v. Detroit Timber & Lumber Co.*, 200 U. S. 321, 337.

SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

Syllabus

REEVES *v.* SANDERSON PLUMBING PRODUCTS, INC.CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR
THE FIFTH CIRCUIT

No. 99–536. Argued March 21, 2000– Decided June 12, 2000

Petitioner Reeves, 57, and Joe Oswalt, in his mid-30's, were the supervisors in one of respondent's departments known as the "Hinge Room," which was managed by Russell Caldwell, 45. Reeves' responsibilities included recording the attendance and hours worked by employees under his supervision. In 1995, Caldwell informed Powe Chesnut, the company's director of manufacturing, that Hinge Room production was down because employees were often absent, coming in late, and leaving early. Because the monthly attendance reports did not indicate a problem, Chesnut ordered an audit, which, according to his testimony, revealed numerous timekeeping errors and misrepresentations by Caldwell, Reeves, and Oswalt. Chesnut and other company officials recommended to the company president, Sandra Sanderson, that Reeves and Caldwell be fired, and she complied. Reeves filed this suit, contending that he had been terminated because of his age in violation of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA). At trial, respondent contended Reeves had been fired due to his failure to maintain accurate attendance records. Reeves attempted to demonstrate that this explanation was pretext for age discrimination, introducing evidence that he had accurately recorded the attendance and hours of the employees he supervised, and that Chesnut, whom Oswalt described as wielding "absolute power" within the company, had demonstrated age-based animus in his dealings with him. The District Court denied respondent's motions for judgment as a matter of law under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 50, and the case went to the jury, which returned a verdict for Reeves. The Fifth Circuit reversed. Although recognizing that Reeves may well have offered sufficient evidence for the jury to have found that respondent's explanation was pretextual, the court ex-

Syllabus

plained that this did not mean that Reeves had presented sufficient evidence to show that he had been fired because of his age. In finding the evidence insufficient, the court weighed the additional evidence of discrimination introduced by Reeves against other circumstances surrounding his discharge, including that Chesnut's age-based comments were not made in the direct context of Reeves' termination; there was no allegation that the other individuals who recommended his firing were motivated by age; two of those officials were over 50; all three Hinge Room supervisors were accused of inaccurate recordkeeping; and several of respondent's managers were over 50 when Reeves was fired.

Held:

1. A plaintiff's prima facie case of discrimination (as defined in *McDonnell Douglas Corp. v. Green*, 411 U. S. 792, 802, and subsequent decisions), combined with sufficient evidence for a reasonable factfinder to reject the employer's nondiscriminatory explanation for its decision, may be adequate to sustain a finding of liability for intentional discrimination under the ADEA. In this case, Reeves established a prima facie case and made a substantial showing that respondent's legitimate, nondiscriminatory explanation, *i.e.*, his shoddy recordkeeping, was false. He offered evidence showing that he had properly maintained the attendance records in question and that cast doubt on whether he was responsible for any failure to discipline late and absent employees. In holding that the evidence was insufficient to sustain the jury's verdict, the Fifth Circuit ignored this evidence, as well as the evidence supporting Reeves' prima facie case, and instead confined its review of the evidence favoring Reeves to that showing that Chesnut had directed derogatory, age-based comments at Reeves, and that Chesnut had singled him out for harsher treatment than younger employees. It is therefore apparent that the court believed that only this additional evidence of discrimination was relevant to whether the jury's verdict should stand. In so reasoning, the court misconceived the evidentiary burden borne by plaintiffs who attempt to prove intentional discrimination through indirect evidence. In *St. Mary's Honor Center v. Hicks*, 509 U. S. 502, 511, the Court stated that, because the factfinder's disbelief of the reasons put forward by the defendant, together with the elements of the prima facie case, may suffice to show intentional discrimination, rejection of the defendant's proffered reasons will *permit* the trier of fact to infer the ultimate fact of intentional discrimination. Proof that the defendant's explanation is unworthy of credence is simply one form of circumstantial evidence that is probative of intentional discrimination, and it can be quite persuasive. See *id.*, at 517. In appropriate circumstances, the trier of fact can reasonably infer from the falsity of

Syllabus

the explanation that the employer is dissembling to cover up a discriminatory purpose. See, e.g., *Wright v. West*, 505 U. S. 277, 296. Moreover, once the employer's justification has been eliminated, discrimination may well be the most likely alternative explanation, especially since the employer is in the best position to put forth the actual reason for its decision. Cf. *Furnco Constr. Corp. v. Waters*, 438 U. S. 567, 577. Such a showing by the plaintiff will not *always* be adequate to sustain a jury's liability finding. Certainly there will be instances where, although the plaintiff has established a prima facie case and introduced sufficient evidence to reject the employer's explanation, no rational factfinder could conclude that discrimination had occurred. This Court need not— and could not— resolve all such circumstances here. In this case, it suffices to say that a plaintiff's prima facie case, combined with sufficient evidence to find that the employer's asserted justification is false, may permit the trier of fact to conclude that the employer unlawfully discriminated. Pp. 5–14.

2. Respondent was not entitled to judgment as a matter of law under the particular circumstances presented here. Pp. 14–19.

(a) Rule 50 requires a court to render judgment as a matter of law when a party has been fully heard on an issue, and there is no legally sufficient evidentiary basis for a reasonable jury to find for that party on that issue. The standard for judgment as a matter of law under Rule 50 mirrors the standard for summary judgment under Rule 56. Thus, the court must review all of the evidence in the record, cf., e.g., *Matsushita Elec. Industrial Co. v. Zenith Radio Corp.*, 475 U. S. 574, 587, drawing all reasonable inferences in favor of the non-moving party, but making no credibility determinations or weighing any evidence, e.g., *Lytle v. Household Mfg., Inc.*, 494 U. S. 545, 554–555. The latter functions, along with the drawing of legitimate inferences from the facts, are for the jury, not the court. *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U. S. 242, 255. Thus, although the court should review the record as a whole, it must disregard all evidence favorable to the moving party that the jury is not required to believe. Pp. 14–16.

(b) In holding that the record contained insufficient evidence to sustain the jury's verdict, the Fifth Circuit misapplied the standard of review dictated by Rule 50. The court disregarded evidence favorable to Reeves— the evidence supporting his prima facie case and undermining respondent's nondiscriminatory explanation— and failed to draw all reasonable inferences in his favor. For instance, while acknowledging the potentially damning nature of Chesnut's age-related comments, the court discounted them on the ground that they were not made in the direct context of Reeves' termination. And the court discredited Reeves' evidence that Chesnut was the actual decision-maker by giving weight to the fact that there was no evidence sug-

Syllabus

gesting the other decisionmakers were motivated by age. Moreover, the other evidence on which the court relied— that Caldwell and Oswald were also cited for poor recordkeeping, and that respondent employed many managers over age 50— although relevant, is certainly not dispositive. See *Furnco, supra*, at 580. The ultimate question in every disparate treatment case is whether the plaintiff was the victim of intentional discrimination. Here, the District Court informed the jury that Reeves was required to show by a preponderance of the evidence that his age was a determining and motivating factor in the decision to terminate him. It instructed the jury that, to show respondent’s explanation was pretextual, Reeves had to demonstrate that age discrimination, not respondent’s explanation, was the real reason for his discharge. Given that Reeves established a prima facie case, introduced enough evidence for the jury to reject respondent’s explanation, and produced additional evidence that Chesnut was motivated by age-based animus and was principally responsible for Reeves’ firing, there was sufficient evidence for the jury to conclude that respondent had intentionally discriminated. Pp. 16–19.

197 F. 3d 688, reversed.

O’CONNOR, J., delivered the opinion for a unanimous Court. GINSBURG, J., filed a concurring opinion.