

Question 4

Dan stood on the steps of the state capitol and yelled to a half-dozen people entering the front doors: “Listen citizens. Prayer in the schools means government-endorsed religion. A state church! They can take your constitutional rights away just as fast as I can destroy this copy of the U.S. Constitution.”

With that, Dan took a cigarette lighter from his pocket and ignited a parchment document that he held in his left hand. The parchment burst into flame and, when the heat of the fire burned his hand, he involuntarily let it go. A wind blew the burning document into a construction site where it settled in an open drum of flammable material. The drum exploded, killing a nearby pedestrian.

A state statute makes it a misdemeanor to burn or mutilate a copy of the U.S. Constitution.

It turned out that the document that Dan had burned was actually a copy of the Declaration of Independence, not of the U.S. Constitution, as he believed.

Dan was arrested and charged with the crimes of murder and attempting to burn a copy of the U.S. Constitution. He has moved to dismiss the charge of attempting to burn a copy of the U.S. Constitution, claiming that (i) what he burned was actually a copy of the Declaration of Independence and (ii) the state statute on which the charge is based violates his rights under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

1. May Dan properly be found guilty of the crime of murder or any lesser-included offense? Discuss.
2. How should the court rule on each ground of Dan’s motion to dismiss the charge of attempting to burn a copy of the U.S. Constitution? Discuss.

Answer A to Question 4

1. Murder or Any Lesser-Included Offense

Elements of a Crime

The four elements of a crime consist of (i) a guilty act, (ii) a guilty mind, (iii) concurrence, and (iv) causation.

For a person to be found guilty of a crime, the guilty act must be voluntary. Here, Dan appeared to only want to burn the document, not let it go and have it drift away. On the facts, it seems like he only let the document go involuntarily when the heat of the fire burned his hand. So it appears that Dan may not have committed the requisite guilty act. However, if we frame Dan's actions on a broader level, Dan did voluntarily burn the document and set into motion the chain of events leading to the ultimate killing of the pedestrian. The element of a guilty act is satisfied.

As to concurrence and causation, Dan's intentional act of igniting the parchment document set into motion a chain of events: he let go of the burning document, it settled in an open drum of flammable material, and it caused the drum to explode and kill a nearby pedestrian. On the one hand, it appears that there is no proximate causation because it is arguably unforeseeable for someone to die from an explosion as a result of burning a document. On the other hand, courts are generally flexible when it comes to foreseeability, and there is a viable argument that the result was foreseeable because playing with fire is a dangerous activity. A court will probably find causation.

However, what we need to establish is whether Dan possessed the requisite guilty mind. The discussion below addresses this element.

Murder

At common law, murder is the unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought, which is established by any one of the following states of mind: (i) intent to kill, (ii) intent to do serious bodily harm, (iii) reckless indifference to an unjustifiably high risk to human life (i.e., depraved heart murder), and (iv) intent to commit a felony underlying the felony-murder rule.

Intent to Kill

From the facts, it does not appear that Dan knew any of the following facts: the nearby presence of the open drum with flammable material, the pedestrian's presence near the drum, or the pedestrian's identity. Therefore, he could not have formed a specific intent to kill the pedestrian. Dan cannot be found guilty of intent to kill murder.

Intent to Do Serious Bodily Harm

On the facts, Dan did not intend to do any harm, let alone serious bodily harm. He was merely burning the document as a form of symbolic speech and probably did not even want to let go of the document.

Reckless Indifference to an Unjustifiably High Risk to Human Life

Dan's act of igniting the document and letting it go did not reflect reckless indifference to an unjustifiably high risk to human life. No reasonable person would think that a burning document could ultimately kill someone. For example, Dan did not carry a dangerous weapon such as a gun and fire it into a crowded room.

Felony Murder

Under the felony-murder rule, a person can be found guilty of a killing that occurs during the commission of an underlying felony that is inherently dangerous, usually burglary, arson, rape, robbery, or kidnapping. Dan did not have the intent to commit any of these felonies.

Lesser Included Offenses

Voluntary Manslaughter

Voluntary manslaughter is an intentional killing committed with adequate provocation causing one to lose self-control. We have already established above that Dan cannot be found guilty of an intentional killing, so we need not determine whether it can be reduced to voluntary manslaughter. In any event, Dan was not even provoked to begin with.

Involuntary Manslaughter

Involuntary manslaughter is an unintentional killing that results either from (i) criminal negligence or (ii) misdemeanor-murder, which is a killing that occurs during the commission of a misdemeanor that is malum in se or inherently dangerous.

Criminal negligence exceeds tort negligence but is less than the reckless indifference of depraved heart murder. Significantly, for a person to be criminally negligent, he must have been aware of the risk. Here, Dan could have been aware of a general risk that results from a fire, which is an accidental burning of another object that occurs from a strong wind carrying the flame. On the other hand, Dan was not aware of the particular risk that an open drum of flammable material was nearby, which could kill someone. Dan cannot be found guilty of criminal negligence.

On the other hand, Dan may be found guilty of misdemeanor-murder, because he committed the misdemeanor of burning or mutilating a copy of the U.S. Constitution, and the commission of the misdemeanor caused the ultimate death of the pedestrian. On the other hand, the misdemeanor was not malum in se and not inherently dangerous. Dan should not be found guilty of involuntary manslaughter.

Conclusion: Dan cannot be found guilty of the crime of murder or any lesser-included offense.

(2) Dan's Motion to Dismiss the Charge of Attempting to Burn a Copy of the U.S. Constitution

(i) What he burned was actually a copy of the Declaration of Independence

Dan is being charged with attempting to burn a copy of the U.S. Constitution, but what he actually burned was the Declaration of Independence. At common law, factual impossibility is not a defense for attempting a crime. For example, if a person intends to shoot another with a gun and the gun happened to be out of bullets, the man is still guilty. However, legal impossibility is a defense to attempt. That is, if what the person was attempting to do was actually not a crime even though he thought it was, then he could not be found guilty of attempt.

Here, Dan's assertion that he actually burned the Declaration of Independence is a claim of factual impossibility. From the facts, we know that he had the specific intent to destroy a copy of the U.S. Constitution, so even though it was factually impossible for him to do it because he was holding the Declaration of Independence, he can still be found guilty of attempting to burn a copy of the U.S. Constitution.

Conclusion: The Court should deny Dan's motion to dismiss based on this ground.

(ii) The state statute on which the charge is based violates his rights under the First Amendment of the Constitution

The First Amendment protects free speech, and it is applicable to the states through the Fourteenth Amendment. The state action requirement is easily met here because it is a state statute making the act of burning or mutilating a copy of the U.S. Constitution a misdemeanor.

Symbolic Speech

Dan's act was a form of symbolic speech. For a regulation of symbolic speech to be valid and not violative of the First Amendment, the law must have a purpose independent of and incidental to the suppression of speech and the restriction on speech must not be greater than necessary to achieve that purpose.

Here, the state statute does not appear to have a purpose independent of and incidental to the suppression of speech. For example, the burning of draft cards was upheld, because it was found that the government has a valid interest in facilitating the draft, and that the suppression of the speech was incidental and no greater than necessary. Here, preventing the burning of the Constitution does not appear to serve any significant government interest other than to prevent people from showing their anger toward the government, which is within their rights under the First Amendment.

Unprotected Speech

The government may attempt to frame Dan's acts as unprotected speech that presents a clear and present danger. Such speech is intended to incite imminent unlawful action and is likely to result in imminent unlawful action, so that the state can regulate it. On the facts, Dan stood on the steps of the state capitol and yelled to a half dozen people entering the front doors while destroying what he thought was a copy of the U.S. Constitution, so arguably, he was trying to incite those people and get them enraged. On the other hand, there was no indication of encouraging harmful acts in his statement and burning a document in and of itself does not promote violence.

Moreover, even if the government can show that what Dan was specifically doing was inciting imminent unlawful speech, the government still cannot show that the state statute at issue is designed to restrain this kind of unprotected speech. The state statute merely bans burning the Constitution, but does not, for example, limit such acts to the steps of the state capitol, where the state might have an argument that doing such acts so close to government activity is dangerous and disruptive. The statute is overbroad and does not strive to only limit unprotected speech that is likely to incite imminent unlawful action.

Conclusion: The Court should grant Dan's motion to dismiss based on this ground.

Answer B to Question 4

Murder Charges Against Dan (“D”)

The first issue is whether Dan may properly be found guilty of murder or any other lesser included offense.

Murder

Murder is defined as the killing of another human being with malice aforethought. In order to be found guilty of murder a Defendant must have committed a voluntary act and must have possessed the requisite mental state at the time of the act. A defendant will be guilty of murder if he committed the act (1) with the intent to kill, (2) with the intent to inflict great bodily injury, (3) if he acted in such a way as to demonstrate a reckless disregard for human life (often termed as having an “abandoned and malignant heart”), (4) or if the murder resulted during the commission of a highly dangerous felony.

Here, D’s act of igniting the document constituted a voluntary act. The fact that the heat of the fire had burned his hand, and caused him to involuntarily let it go does not negate the fact that his act of burning the document in the first place was voluntary. However, an act, in and of itself, is not sufficient to convict D of a crime. The State must also prove that, at the time D committed the act of burning the document, he had the intent to commit murder.

On these facts, it is clear that Dan did not set the document on fire with an intent to kill. While an intent to kill may be inferred in cases where the D uses a deadly, dangerous weapon against a victim (a gun, knife, etc.), that is not the case here. Additionally, D did not act with an intent to inflict great bodily injury on anyone. Instead, his act of burning the paper was done to make a political point to those that were present nearby.

The State may try and argue that Dan’s acts were done with an abandoned and malignant heart because, by igniting the document around individuals, he acted in a way that demonstrated reckless and unjustifiable disregard for human life. The State will not be able to meet their burden of proof under this theory either. Here, D’s act of burning the paper is not the type of act that an individual could expect would lead to someone’s death. The law demands more in order to show a reckless disregard for human life.

Felony Murder Rule

The state may try and argue that D should be convicted of murder based on the Felony Murder Rule (“FMR”). Under this rule, a D is liable for all deaths that occur during the commission of a highly dangerous felony, whether he intended to cause them or not. Instead, the intent is inferred from his intent to commit the underlying felony. In addition, the deaths caused during the commission of the felony must be foreseeable and must result before D has reached a point of temporary safety. Generally, the FMR has been reserved for deaths that occur during highly dangerous felonies, such as rape, arson,

kidnapping, robbery, and burglary.

Here, the issue is whether D can be found guilty of one of these underlying felonies so that the FMR applies. The only one that would be applicable would be the crime of arson. In order to show that D is guilty of arson, the State must prove that D (1) acted with the intent, or was at least reckless, (2) in burning, (3) the dwelling, (4) of another. Here it is clear that D did not intend to burn the nearby construction yard. Instead, the fire resulted because a wind blew the lit paper into an open drum of flammable material. However, the State may try and argue that the act of igniting a document on fire and allowing the wind to carry it away constituted a reckless act. However, the State will also have to prove that D burned a dwelling. Here, the paper did not cause a dwelling to burn, but rather flew into a construction site.

Thus, D could not be convicted of the murder of the Pedestrian based on the Felony Murder Rule because he did not commit a highly dangerous felony.

Voluntary Manslaughter

Voluntary Manslaughter is a killing of another human being while acting under the heat of passion. Voluntary Manslaughter is generally reserved for cases in which the D kills another because of an “adequate provocation”. Here, Voluntary Manslaughter does not apply because there was no provocation which would have caused D to act the way that he did.

Involuntary Manslaughter / Misdemeanor Manslaughter

The remaining consideration is whether the State could properly convict D of involuntary manslaughter. Involuntary manslaughter is appropriate where the D is criminally negligent. Criminal negligence is a higher standard than is used in the tort context for negligence cases. In the criminal context, while D may not have been acting with an intent to kill, he nonetheless acted in a way that was so extremely unreasonable that a reasonable person in his shoes would have recognized that such actions are performed with a reckless disregard for the life of others. Here, the State will have to prove that not only was D’s act criminally negligent, but also that the Death was caused by D’s actions.

The State will likely fail on these facts because D’s act of burning a document does not rise to the level of a criminally negligent act. D’s conduct was not reckless in the sense that a reasonable person could have contemplated that burning a document could eventually lead to another person’s death. Moreover, the State will have a tough time meeting the causation requirement because, while D was the but-for cause in P’s death, the death was not foreseeable. Here, the death was caused by the explosion when the paper settled into an open drum of flammable material at the construction site. Thus, D could not, nor could a reasonable person foresee that such an act would result in a death due to such an explosion.

The State may also try and argue for misdemeanor manslaughter, which is appropriate

when a death is caused during the commission of a lesser-included felony or by those specified by state statute. Here, it is highly doubtful that the burning of the Constitution is the type of misdemeanor that would be included under such a rule. As a result, the State will not succeed on these grounds.

2. Dan's Motions to Dismiss

Attempt Charges vs. Dan

In order to prove attempt, the State must show that (1) D intended to commit the crime, and (2) he took a substantial step towards completing the crime. Regardless of the underlying crime, attempt is always a specific intent crime.

Here, the State will be able to show that D's burning of a document that he believed to be the U.S. Constitution demonstrates his intent to commit the crime. Additionally, because he actually ignited the document, the second element is also satisfied. The issue thus is whether D has any valid defenses to the charge.

Mistake of Fact

D's motion to dismiss is based on a mistake of fact defense. Namely, he is arguing that, because he actually burned a copy of the Declaration of Independence, not the U.S. Constitution as he thought, he should not be found guilty for attempt.

D will fail in this defense because mistake of fact is not a good defense to attempt. That is because, here, if the circumstances had been as D believed (to burn the Constitution), he would have been guilty of the misdemeanor. By way of analogy, a thief who attempts to receive stolen goods may not later argue that, because the police had secured the drugs and transferred them to him undercover, he cannot be guilty because the goods were no longer "stolen". The fact remains that, had the circumstances been the way he believed them to be, he would have been guilty of the crime of receipt of stolen goods. Here, D's mistake of fact may be a defense to the actual misdemeanor itself, but will not provide a defense to attempt.

First Amendment

The First Amendment protects an individual's freedom of speech. However, included in the First Amendment is a protection of expressive activities that constitute speech. Here, it is clear that D's act of burning the Constitution was an act of expression as it was intended to convey his political views regarding the problems inherent with government-endorsed religion and the commingling of church and state.

Statutes may limit expressive activity if they are unrelated to the expression that constitutes speech and are narrowly tailored to serve such goals. Here, the State may have a difficult time proving that this act is unrelated to expression because it seems to want to prevent individuals from burning or mutilating the Constitution as a way of

expressing their political views.

The State would likely try and analogize to the U.S. Supreme Court case of O'Brien. There, a statute made it a crime to burn draft cards. When the defendant burned his draft card as a way of protesting against the war, he was prosecuted under the statute. The Court held that the statute was constitutional because it was not aimed solely at curtailing individuals' ability to express their viewpoints. Instead, the County had an interest in the administrative matters of the draft and that draft cards were essential to the country keeping track of its draft members, soldiers, etc. Thus, because this statute was content-neutral, the Court applied intermediate scrutiny and found that the statute was narrowly tailored to a compelling state interest.

However, as noted above, no such interest appears to exist for the state's statute in this case.

D will likely point to the flag burning cases, such as Johnson, where the Court has held that statutes making it a crime to burn the U.S. flag are unconstitutional because they restrict speech under the First Amendment. In the flag burning cases, the Court has noted that these statutes are aimed at curbing an individual's right to express his views and thus warrant strict scrutiny. Because they are not necessary to advance a compelling interest, they are violative of the First Amendment.

The present case seems much closer to Johnson than O'Brien because the statute is aimed at expression rather than activities unrelated to expression. As such, it is unconstitutional because it impermissibly burdens the freedom of speech under the First Amendment. The State will have to meet a very high burden because strict scrutiny would be applied and thus it would have to show that the statute is necessary to advance a compelling state interest. Because no compelling interest appears to exist, the statute will be struck down.