1	IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES				
2	x				
3	DELBERT WILLIAMSON, ET AL., :				
4	Petitioners :				
5	v. : No. 08-1314				
6	MAZDA MOTOR OF AMERICA, INC., :				
7	ET AL. :				
8	x				
9	Washington, D.C.				
L O	Wednesday, November 3, 2010				
L1					
L2	The above-entitled matter came on for oral				
L3	argument before the Supreme Court of the United States				
L 4	at 11:06 a.m.				
L5	APPEARANCES:				
L6	MARTIN N. BUCHANAN, ESQ., San Diego, California; on				
L7	behalf of Petitioner.				
L8	WILLIAM M. JAY, ESQ., Assistant to the Solicitor				
L9	General, Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.; on				
20	behalf of the United States, as amicus curiae,				
21	supporting Petitioners.				
22	GREGORY G. GARRE, ESQ., Washington, D.C.; on behalf of				
23	Respondents.				
24					
25					

1	CONTENTS	
2	ORAL ARGUMENT OF	PAGE
3	MARTIN N. BUCHANAN, ESQ.	
4	On behalf of the Petitioners	3
5	ORAL ARGUMENT OF	
6	WILLIAM M. JAY, ESQ.	
7	On behalf of the United States, as	
8	amicus curiae, supporting the Petitioners	16
9	ORAL ARGUMENT OF	
10	GREGORY G. GARRE, ESQ.	
11	On behalf of the Respondents	25
12	REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF	
13	MARTIN N. BUCHANAN, ESQ.	
14	On behalf of the Petitioners	49
15		
16		
17		
18		
19		
20		
21		
22		
23		
24		
25		

1	PROCEEDINGS			
2	(11:06 a.m.)			
3	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We will hear			
4	argument next in Case 08-1314, Williamson v. Mazda.			
5	Mr. Buchanan.			
6	ORAL ARGUMENT OF MARTIN N. BUCHANAN,			
7	ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONERS			
8	MR. BUCHANAN: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it			
9	please the Court:			
10	The issue here is whether a common law claim			
11	that Mazda should have equipped Mrs. Williamson's			
12	seating position with a lap/shoulder belt is impliedly			
13	preempted under the rationale of Geier v. American			
14	Honda. The claim is not preempted, because it is			
15	perfectly consistent with and would not frustrate the			
16	objectives of the operative 1989 version of Standard 208			
17	governing Type 2 seatbelts in rear seats.			
18	One point that is clear from this Court's			
19	express preemption holding in Geier is that Congress			
20	intended common law to play a complementary role in			
21	achieving the objectives of the Motor Vehicle Safety			
22	Act.			
23	Based on the savings clause, the Court			
24	decided that Congress intended to preserve a significant			
25	role for State tort law to operate in compensating			

- 1 accident victims and promoting greater safety in vehicle
- 2 design. And, on the issue of implied obstacle
- 3 preemption, the majority also agreed with the dissent
- 4 that State common law will not be preempted unless there
- 5 is clear evidence of a conflict with Federal objectives.
- 6 JUSTICE SCALIA: Why would -- why would the
- 7 Federal Government do that? I mean, trust juries to
- 8 supplement whatever -- whatever the Federal rules are,
- 9 but not permit State agencies who -- who studied the
- 10 matter with experts, to supplement what the Federal
- 11 rules are?
- 12 MR. BUCHANAN: Justice Scalia --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: Why does that make any
- 14 sense, to just say, oh, you know, we -- we don't want
- 15 the State mucking around in this area, but of course
- 16 juries can do so? Why does that make any sense?
- 17 MR. BUCHANAN: Justice Scalia, I think the
- 18 Court answered the question in Sprietsma when it said
- 19 common law has an important role to play in providing
- 20 compensation to victims. And therefore the Court found
- 21 it rational in Sprietsma to make that distinction; and
- 22 ultimately it's a -- it's a judgment call for Congress
- 23 to make.
- 24 JUSTICE SCALIA: I don't -- I don't doubt
- 25 they made it. I'm just curious as to why it could

- 1 possibly have been?
- 2 MR. BUCHANAN: Well --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: Unless I -- unless lawyers
- 4 bring suits before -- before juries, maybe.
- 5 MR. BUCHANAN: Well, Justice Scalia, I
- 6 believe common law has an important role to play, not
- 7 only in compensating victims but also in providing
- 8 manufacturers with an incentive to develop safer
- 9 vehicles, even safer than the Federal minimum standards.
- 10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I thought the reason
- 11 that the Solicitor General gives for not -- that NHTSA
- 12 did not immediately require the type 2 seatbelt is
- 13 because the costs would have been higher. Is that your
- 14 understanding?
- 15 MR. BUCHANAN: Mr. Chief Justice, for the
- 16 aisle seating position that we are talking about in this
- 17 case, the reason NHTSA decided not to mandate it
- 18 immediately was, A, a concern about obstructing the
- 19 aisleway with the shoulder belt; and B, a concern, yes,
- 20 about the cost of a possible alternative design.
- 21 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: How come allowing --
- 22 or why doesn't allowing the relief you seek under State
- 23 law impose those same costs, contrary to NHTSA's
- 24 objective in not making those mandatory?
- MR. BUCHANAN: Well, Your Honor, any time

- 1 NHTSA creates a safety standard it necessarily takes
- 2 into account costs and benefits and the safety
- 3 attributes. So --
- 4 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: And a State tort
- 5 action does not?
- 6 MR. BUCHANAN: A State tort action does.
- 7 What I'm trying to -- the point I'm trying to make,
- 8 Mr. Chief Justice, is that if that were sufficient to
- 9 preempt, then any minimum standard that NHTSA creates
- 10 would therefore preempt State law and it would nullify
- 11 the savings clause.
- 12 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I suppose -- I
- 13 understand the argument. I'm not sure it's right,
- 14 though, in the sense that NHTSA may decide not to make
- 15 particular standards mandatory for reasons other than
- 16 cost. It may decide it doesn't think the technology is
- 17 adequately developed. It may decide that it doesn't
- 18 think there are adequate, you know, mechanics prepared
- 19 or involved.
- But here it's because of the cost, and the
- 21 relief you are seeking it seems to me directly imposes
- 22 the costs that NHTSA decided not to require.
- MR. BUCHANAN: Well, NHTSA made a decision
- 24 as of 1989 that the technology -- it obviously had
- 25 concerns about the technology and costs. But any type

- 1 of -- of consideration of technology and costs is as of
- 2 that moment in time, and the agency specifically
- 3 encouraged manufacturers to install Type 2 lap/shoulder
- 4 belts in these types of seating positions. And our
- 5 lawsuit is perfectly consistent with the agency's
- 6 objective of encouraging lap/shoulder belts in these
- 7 seating positions. By 1993 --
- 8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, every -- there
- 9 is no objective that the government pursues regardless
- 10 of cost. I understand that their objective was to
- 11 encourage this, but it was clearly not to impose it,
- 12 because it thought at that time that the costs were too
- 13 great. So to simply say their objective was to get
- 14 these in ignores the other side of the cost/benefit
- 15 analysis.
- MR. BUCHANAN: Well, I think what the agency
- 17 did with respect to these seating positions in 1989 is
- 18 it, A, it recognized that there were tremendous safety
- 19 benefits for Type 2 lap/shoulder belts. And yes, it
- 20 found enough countervailing considerations in terms of
- 21 cost and feasibility not to mandate that as part of the
- 22 Federal minimum standard. And so from the Federal
- 23 Government's perspective, for these seating positions,
- 24 the government was neutral as between Type 1 and Type 2
- 25 belts.

Т	Either one of those belts would have
2	sufficed to satisfy the Federal agency's objectives.
3	And therefore a State law claim that eliminates
4	effectively one of those options does not in any way
5	frustrate the agency's objectives. The government has
6	explained in its brief that its objectives would have
7	been fully satisfied if all car manufacturers had
8	installed Type 2 lap/shoulder belts immediately.
9	JUSTICE SCALIA: Why is that different from
10	Geier? Didn't the automobile manufacturer in Geier
11	wasn't weren't the manufacturers similarly left to
12	do, choose for themselves whether to have one type of
13	constraint or another?
14	MR. BUCHANAN: They were, Justice Scalia,
15	but the Court's decision in Geier did not turn on the
16	mere fact that the manufacturers had a choice, and Mazda
17	is not asserting that claim here either. The
18	determinative agency policy at issue in Geier was that
19	the agency deliberately sought a variety of different
20	passive restraint types. It was concerned about a
21	public backlash against airbags, and it wanted to
22	encourage the development of alternative passive
23	restraint systems.
24	JUSTICE KENNEDY: But you are saying that
25	once the government gives the manufacturer a choice,

- 1 then the jury -- the -- the tort system can second-guess
- 2 it; and that is not consistent with a likely government
- 3 intent to allow the manufacturers a choice based on the
- 4 technical advances to that date.
- 5 MR. BUCHANAN: Justice Kennedy, I don't
- 6 think that the government gave manufacturers a choice.
- 7 It gave them two different options for complying with a
- 8 minimum standard; but it didn't suggest that foreclosing
- 9 one of those options would in any way frustrate its
- 10 objectives. It didn't suggest that it thought State --
- 11 that there should be some --
- 12 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, suppose the
- 13 government says you have a choice and the State of Iowa
- 14 passes a law and says you don't have a choice. No
- 15 frustration of the governmental purpose there?
- MR. BUCHANAN: It depends what the reason
- 17 for the choice is, Justice Kennedy.
- 18 JUSTICE KENNEDY: No, there's just -- just
- 19 the statutes as I have given them to you. That there --
- 20 is there preemption just on the face of the statute?
- 21 MR. BUCHANAN: Not if it's a -- not if it's
- 22 just simply creating a minimum standard. There is no
- 23 preemption.
- JUSTICE GINSBURG: That's what the statute
- 25 calls for, minimum.

1	MR. BUCHANAN: Yes, that's				
2	JUSTICE GINSBURG: That the agency is to set				
3	minimum standards. And then I take it that the Court in				
4	Geier says it wasn't it wasn't a minimum standard,				
5	because if a State deviated from it, it would detract;				
6	it would be an obstacle to the realization of the				
7	Federal standard.				
8	But here the a minimum standard was				
9	adopted, minimal standard, and I think the agency is				
10	telling us just the opposite of what it said in Geier;				
11	right?				
12	MR. BUCHANAN: Exactly correct, Justice				
13	Ginsberg. In Geier the agency was the entity putting				
14	forward the theory of exemption, that this claim by				
15	Geier that all Honda vehicles should have been equipped				
16	with airbags, frustrated its intent to accomplish a				
17	whole variety or mix of passive restraint devices.				
18	It was a direct conflict with the agency's				
19	objectives. Here, the agency is telling us the exact				
20	opposite. It was not trying to further choice or				
21	variety. It was not trying to maintain a diversity of				
22	Type 1 and Type 2 seatbelts in rear seating positions.				
23	Its objective was to obtain the greater safety benefits				
24	of Type 2 seatbelts.				
25	The agency found that Type 2 seatbelts were				

- 1 more effective in preventing fatalities and serious
- 2 injuries, that they offered greater overall protection
- 3 for children, and, most fundamentally, that they
- 4 actually increased seatbelt usage in rear seating
- 5 positions.
- 6 Our common law theory seeks to obtain all
- 7 those exact same safety benefits for aisle seating
- 8 positions. And we know by 1993, when this vehicle was
- 9 manufactured, at least one major manufacturer, GM, was
- 10 in fact installing Type 2 lap/shoulder belts in aisle
- 11 seating positions. Our complaint alleges that it was
- 12 perfectly feasible for Mazda to do so in 1993 when it
- 13 manufactured this vehicle, and that it was unreasonable
- 14 not to do so, and that's the important --
- JUSTICE KENNEDY: Of course, your theory is,
- 16 if I understand your case -- correct me if I am wrong --
- if GM had installed Type 2, they could have been sued on
- 18 the theory that Type 1 was better and there would have
- 19 been no preemption.
- 20 MR. BUCHANAN: I think that would be a much
- 21 more difficult case, Justice Kennedy, but --
- JUSTICE KENNEDY: But under the theory of
- 23 your case, that suit could go forward.
- 24 MR. BUCHANAN: That's correct.
- 25 Theoretically, that suit could move forward. But the

- 1 question that the Supremacy Clause asks is not whether
- 2 hypothetically, there might be future conflicting jury
- 3 verdicts. The question is: Does our claim here that we
- 4 are asserting under California State law conflict with
- 5 the Federal objectives? It does not. The agency has
- 6 told us it does not.
- 7 There is nothing in the contemporaneous
- 8 regulatory history of the Type 2 seatbelt rule that --
- 9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: What if the rule
- 10 here had another provision that said you must have
- 11 Type 1? You can have Type 2 --
- MR. BUCHANAN: Cannot?
- 13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: You can have Type 2,
- 14 right? But we are not requiring Type 2, because we
- 15 think the costs on manufacturers would be too great. We
- 16 may require it in the future, but not now.
- Is it the same? Is your position the same?
- 18 MR. BUCHANAN: My position would be the
- 19 same. There is no preemption there.
- 20 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, doesn't the --
- 21 doesn't the increased costs that are imposed by the tort
- 22 liability conflict with NHTSA's determination in my
- 23 hypothetical that they're not requiring Type 2 because
- 24 of the cost?
- 25 MR. BUCHANAN: Your Honor, any time the

- 1 agency considers costs, it is at a particular moment in
- 2 time. It is not necessarily a determination that for
- 3 all the future, this should never be done and no State
- 4 law should ever mandate that it be done.
- 5 And that's -- what we have here is not only
- 6 a determination that there were cost issues, but an
- 7 affirmative encouragement to manufacturers to do what
- 8 our State --
- 9 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, then, if the
- 10 regulation comes out July 1, you say there is a
- 11 preemption until midnight July 1, but as of July 2 there
- 12 could be a suit?
- 13 MR. BUCHANAN: I think there was never
- 14 preemption under this regulation.
- 15 JUSTICE GINSBURG: I think what you are
- 16 saying -- the statute says "minimal standards" and the
- 17 agency says "no obstacle," and that's it, that if there
- 18 is a preemptive force to the -- to the safety standards,
- 19 that it is for the government to say that.
- 20 MR. BUCHANAN: Correct, Justice Ginsburg.
- 21 And not only does it say "minimum standards," it
- 22 explicitly says in the savings clause that mere
- 23 compliance with a motor vehicle safety standard shall
- 24 not exempt the manufacturer from common law liability.
- 25 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, it said all

- 1 those thing in Geier, too, didn't it?
- 2 MR. BUCHANAN: It did. But again, the key
- 3 dispositive fact in Geier was the agency's desire to
- 4 achieve a variety of different passive restraint
- 5 devices, and a claim that the entire Honda fleet should
- 6 have had airbags would directly conflict with that.
- 7 That was the dispositive fact in this Court's decision
- 8 in Geier, and that is what is lacking here. And what we
- 9 have here is much more --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: Your judgment here doesn't
- 11 apply to the entire Mazda fleet, supposedly, right?
- 12 Just to the car that caused harm to the plaintiff?
- MR. BUCHANAN: No, that's not correct,
- 14 Justice Scalia. It's not a matter of whether it's the
- 15 entire fleet or not. It's a matter of whether the
- 16 common law claim conflicts with the Federal objective.
- 17 And in Geier, it conflicted, because the objective was
- 18 variety.
- 19 JUSTICE SCALIA: What about the next case?
- 20 Let's assume a similar case. Is that jury bound to come
- 21 out the same way as to whether there should have been a
- 22 shoulder constraint or not?
- 23 MR. BUCHANAN: No, Justice Scalia, and
- 24 that's something that the Court in Geier contemplated
- 25 and discussed. The Court in Geier acknowledged that --

- 1 JUSTICE SCALIA: Geier came out against you.
- 2 Why are you appealing to Geier?
- 3 MR. BUCHANAN: It came out -- I don't -- I
- 4 think Geier fully supports us, Justice Scalia. And
- 5 certainly on the express preemption issue, the Court
- 6 acknowledged the possibility that there could be
- 7 conflicting results, inconsistent jury verdicts, which
- 8 is always --
- 9 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Why are we looking to
- 10 Geier when you have a statute that says common law
- 11 remedies are safe? I mean, as long as it says that --
- 12 maybe it didn't make a whole lot of sense, but they did
- 13 it.
- MR. BUCHANAN: I agree with you, Justice
- 15 Ginsburg. But I think Geier also says that. Geier
- 16 relies on the savings clause to say that there's a
- 17 significant role for common law actions to play. And
- 18 specifically with regard to the possibility of
- 19 inconsistent jury verdicts, the Court in Geier said the
- 20 possible -- the possibility of nonuniformity, the
- 21 Savings Clause reflects a congressional determination
- 22 that that's a small price to pay for a system where
- 23 juries create and enforce safety standards and
- 24 simultaneously provide compensation to victims. So I
- 25 think that's something the Court considered in Geier.

1	I would like to reserve the rest of my time			
2	for rebuttal, please.			
3	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.			
4	Mr. Jay.			
5	ORAL ARGUMENT OF WILLIAM M. JAY,			
6	ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED STATES, AS AMICUS CURIAE,			
7	SUPPORTING THE PETITIONERS			
8	MR. JAY: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it			
9	please the Court:			
10	Respondents chose to comply with the Federal			
11	minimum safety standard by installing a Type 1 seatbelt,			
12	but the savings clause makes clear that they are not			
13	exempted from the consequences of that choice under			
14	State common law when that choice results in injury.			
15	They must show that, as Geier makes clear, that the			
16	State law rule of decision would pose a conflict with ar			
17	articulable Federal policy. They haven't shown that			
18	here.			
19	I would like to go first to the question the			
20	Chief Justice asked my friend Mr. Buchanan about cost-			
21	benefit analysis and the Federal judgment that at the			
22	time the imposition of a national uniform Federal			
23	minimum standard of Type 2 seatbelts wasn't warranted at			

Simply saying that, and I -- simply saying

these seating positions.

24

25

- 1 that is not enough to establish that the Federal agency
- 2 wished for the adoption of Type 2 seatbelts not to
- 3 happen. As Mr. Buchanan said, every Federal
- 4 rulemaker -- certainly every NHTSA safety standard
- 5 adoption must include --
- 6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: No -- I agree with
- 7 you, it doesn't require. It doesn't support the
- 8 inference that they did not want Type 2 seatbelts to
- 9 happen, to be used.
- 10 It does, in my hypothetical view, support
- 11 the inference that it didn't want to mandate Type 2
- 12 seatbelts because it was worried, as you said in your
- 13 brief at page 9, about the cost. And yet its worries
- 14 about the cost, it seems to me, are overridden by the
- 15 position that State tort suits can go on for the absence
- 16 of Type 2 seatbelts.
- 17 MR. JAY: Well, of course the baseline is
- 18 that State tort suits can always go forward. And in
- 19 this case, the agency decided not to impose this
- 20 nationwide mandate because of the tradeoff between costs
- 21 and benefits.
- The benefits were significant. Everyone
- 23 recognizes that. Everyone recognizes that Type 2
- 24 seatbelts were better for -- better or at least
- 25 equivalent for all categories of passengers, and I will

- 1 come back to that. But as far as the imposition of
- 2 costs go, NHTSA decided that it was not worth it at that
- 3 time for NHTSA to require that. That doesn't mean that
- 4 NHTSA wanted to adopt the policy of freeing
- 5 manufacturers of -- of any obligation to incur those
- 6 costs, let alone that it wanted -- for example, if NHTSA
- 7 had thought that it would harm safety for manufacturers
- 8 to spend that money on Type 2 seatbelts instead of
- 9 something else, it could have said that.
- In Geier, for example, the reason that the
- 11 agency deliberately sought variety --
- 12 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, it did say that
- 13 earlier, didn't it?
- 14 MR. JAY: I'm sorry, Justice Sotomayor?
- 15 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Earlier, it said that
- 16 there was difficulties with -- pre-1989, '82 or '84,
- 17 that there were difficulties with Type 2 belts and
- 18 children's safety. So was this preempted in '82-'84 and
- 19 not preempted by '89?
- 20 MR. JAY: No, Justice Sotomayor. It was not
- 21 preempted at any time. What you're --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So what do you need for
- 23 the agency to say before Geier comes into effect? For
- 24 the lower courts, what's the minimum that lower courts
- 25 missed here in not -- in coming to the conclusion they

- 1 did in their application of Geier?
- 2 MR. JAY: The contrast between this case and
- 3 Geier is that this case, like Geier, involves options,
- 4 but it does not involve a Federal policy that the
- 5 manufacturer must remain free to choose among those
- 6 options as it sees fit. In Geier --
- JUSTICE ALITO: Mr. Jay -- I'm sorry.
- 8 MR. JAY: I was going to say in Geier the
- 9 manufacturer -- the agency concluded that it would
- 10 disserve safety if automatic seatbelts and airbags were
- 11 not both on the market. There has been no such
- 12 determination here either in 1984 or at any other time.
- 13 JUSTICE ALITO: Isn't it true that for a
- 14 period of 10 years the lower courts uniformly held that
- 15 there wasn't any preemption here? And if that's the
- 16 case, why didn't the Federal Government come forward at
- 17 any point during that time and say that this is
- 18 preempted?
- 19 MR. JAY: Two responses, Justice Alito.
- 20 First, the question presented here about Type 1 versus
- 21 Type 2 seatbelts has only been by decided by a couple of
- 22 federal courts of appeals, no states courts at last
- 23 resort.
- Second, on the more general question, why
- 25 doesn't NHTSA participate in these cases, NHTSA as a

- 1 matter of course does not usually participate in private
- 2 party litigation under State common law, even when that
- 3 litigation might touch on a State -- the interpretation
- 4 of a Federal safety standard. And when the courts asked
- for NHTSA's views, NHTSA generally responds, as this
- 6 Court asks for the government's views in this case and
- 7 the government responded. And I think if the Court were
- 8 to look back to the first brief in a string of briefs
- 9 that the government has filed about these issues under
- 10 this act, the brief in Wood versus General Motors filed
- in 1990, you could predict the position that the
- 12 government would take in this case from that brief. The
- 13 government said in that case that options don't preempt,
- 14 merely because they are options. In most cases there
- 15 will be no federal policy that presents a conflict.
- 16 That case presented the case of the passive
- 17 restraint phase-in and there it was the rare
- 18 circumstance, as the Court later held in Geier, where
- 19 there was frustration of the Federal policy, but that's
- 20 because the Federal policy was to encourage variety, not
- 21 just for its own sake, but because variety would serve
- 22 safety. The roads would be measurably less safe if
- 23 airbags were rushed into service.
- 24 By contrast, in this case NHTSA would have
- 25 been perfectly happy if every manufacturer had installed

- 1 Type 2 seatbelts the day after the 1989 rulemaking. So
- 2 there was no conflict.
- 3 As far as the child safety concern to which
- 4 Justice Sotomayor alluded, it is referred to in the 1984
- 5 denial of a request to impose the rule that later was
- 6 imposed in 1989. The agency said that it had concerns
- 7 about how particular child seats, which at the time were
- 8 anchored with a form of tether. And it said that it
- 9 thought the continued use of tethered car seats was
- 10 something that it chose to encourage rather than
- 11 anchoring them with Type 2 seats.
- 12 The agency did not speak at all to whether
- 13 Type 2 versus Type 1 was better for child safety and the
- 14 agency then answered that in the 1989 rulemaking. So
- 15 for adults Type 2 seatbelts are safer and they encourage
- 16 seatbelt use because they are more popular. For
- infants, the agency specifically asked whether Type 2
- 18 seatbelts could be as efficacious as Type 1 seatbelts in
- 19 holding an infant car seat in place. It concluded that
- 20 they could. That's set out at page 25 of our brief.
- 21 And for toddlers, children who are too small to sit in a
- 22 Type 2 seatbelt without assistance, the agency
- 23 recommended booster seats. And if there was no booster
- 24 seat the agency recommended that they not use the
- 25 shoulder belt. Not that they detached the shoulder

- 1 belt. The agency indeed specifically rejected the idea
- 2 that the shoulder belt should be removed at page 47990
- 3 of the notice of proposed rulemaking.
- 4 JUSTICE ALITO: If the child were injured by
- 5 a Type 2 belt, would a suit based on that be preempted?
- 6 MR. JAY: If the child were injured by the
- 7 Type 2 belt and the suit would be on the theory that a
- 8 Type 1 belt should have been installed?
- 9 JUSTICE ALITO: Yes.
- 10 MR. JAY: At the time, no, that lawsuit
- 11 would not have been preempted. Mr. Buchanan said that
- 12 that would be harder case and I think he said that
- because the agency was specifically encouraging Type 2
- 14 seatbelts, and in this case Respondents can't show
- 15 anything suggesting that the agency was encouraging Type
- 16 1 seatbelts. So it might be a harder case for that
- 17 reason, but at that time there were two ways of
- 18 complying with the Federal minimum standard and the
- 19 savings clause provides that simply complying with the
- 20 Federal standard does not preempt the operation of State
- 21 common law.
- So we discussed the child safety, the
- 23 alleged child safety rationale. I want to say a word
- 24 about the idea that aisle seats were unsafe for the
- 25 installation of these seatbelts. As Mr. Buchanan

- 1 mentioned, the agency specifically encouraged the
- 2 installation of those seats where it was feasible. It
- 3 was found to be feasible in 1991 by General Motors,
- 4 which installed them. But another word about that,
- 5 because Respondents have suggested that the chief
- 6 counsel of NHTSA has said in 1994 in a letter something
- 7 favorable to their position, and that letter is
- 8 reproduced in the appendix to the Petitioner's reply
- 9 brief.
- 10 I urge the Court to look at the entire
- 11 letter and not the sentence that was excerpted several
- 12 times in Respondents' brief. Because what the agency
- 13 said was that, in response to someone who complained
- 14 that manufacturers were installing Type 2 seatbelts and
- 15 they said, the complainant said that makes these
- 16 minivans unsafe because people will be trapped in the
- 17 back seat. The agency said it disagreed, that people
- 18 could go under the safety belt, that they could detach
- 19 the safety belt, that the safety benefits of a Type 2
- 20 seatbelt outweighed any convenience concern about access
- 21 to or egress from the rear seat.
- 22 And I think that is perfectly consistent
- 23 with the policy NHTSA has taken all along. Type 2
- 24 seatbelts are safer, more effective and to be
- 25 encouraged. When NHTSA decided not to mandate that

- 1 based on its understanding at the time of who used
- 2 seatbelts, who used seatbelts in the rear center seats
- 3 and what the -- how many fatalities and injuries would
- 4 be prevented and whether the dollar cost would be
- 5 justified by -- by the dollar equivalent of injuries and
- 6 fatalities prevented, it wasn't making a preemptive
- 7 judgment that Type 2 seatbelts, therefore, should not be
- 8 installed. And for that reason there is no frustration
- 9 of anything that NHTSA had in mind in the 1989
- 10 rulemaking by allowing this tort suit to proceed as
- 11 saved by the Savings Clause.
- 12 JUSTICE ALITO: If we adopt your view, would
- 13 Geier apply to any other regulation?
- MR. JAY: I don't think that Geier is good
- 15 for that day only. I do think, as we said in Geier and
- 16 the brief in Wood to which we alluded and so on, that
- 17 Geier is the exceptional circumstance. That was, of
- 18 course, an exceptionally difficult and unusual
- 19 rulemaking. The phase-in concern in Geier one can
- 20 easily envision being replicated in another safety
- 21 standard issue where the agency were to conclude that
- 22 it's going to impose a new requirement, but it does not
- 23 want it rushed into service in the entire fleet right
- 24 away and so it affirmatively discourages hurried
- 25 installation. But that's not the case here because the

2 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.

agency actually encouraged earlier compliance.

Mr. Garre.

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- 4 ORAL ARGUMENT OF GREGORY G. GARRE
- 5 ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENTS
- 6 MR. GARRE: Thank you, Mr. Chief Justice,
- 7 and may it please the Court:
- 8 In 1984 and again in 1989 the agency
- 9 specifically determined that the statutory safety and
- 10 practicability objectives would be best served by giving
- 11 manufacturers the flexibility to install a lap-only or
- 12 lap/shoulder seatbelt.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Can I ask you a
- 14 question? How is this case different from a situation
- where the agency looks at a request for a minimum
- 16 standard, says: Require that a certain light be added
- 17 to the lights in a car. The agency comes back and says,
- 18 you know, there are so many designs of cars; in some
- 19 cars, particularly sedans, the light is an added safety
- 20 feature; in vans it may not be because of the size of
- 21 vans. And so we are not going to require it. We are
- 22 going to let manufacturers, depending on what design
- 23 their car has, to choose between the two, so that we're
- 24 not going to set a minimum standard for every one
- 25 because there are too many different designs.

- 1 Despite that ruling, the manufacturer says it costs
- 2 two pennies more to put this light in a sedan. I know
- 3 the agency has said it's safer, but I don't want to do
- 4 it. I don't have a van, I don't have any reason except
- 5 the two pennies that I don't want to do it. Is that
- 6 case preempted? Because you were just merely given the
- 7 option?
- 8 MR. GARRE: The typical case where a Federal
- 9 motor vehicle safety standard establishes only a
- 10 minimum, like the standard for braking performance or
- 11 roof structure is not going to be preempted. Geier says
- 12 that and we're not challenging that.
- 13 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: How is this different
- 14 from the hypothetical where the agency said there could
- 15 be an obstruction with the entry, but manufacturers who
- 16 can design it without the obstruction should really do
- 17 it. How is this, this case, different than the one
- 18 hypothetical?
- 19 MR. GARRE: This case is different because
- 20 the agency specifically recognized in 1984 and 1989 that
- 21 there were serious safety and practicability tradeoffs
- 22 between these two different design options and
- 23 specifically gave manufacturers the option of installing
- 24 one type of seatbelt or the other.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Nothing in the agency that

- 1 I can find says that the agency really wanted a mix of
- 2 options. I mean, they said it's up to the manufacturer.
- 3 But in Geier which I think all of this could be just
- 4 avoided.
- 5 MR. GARRE: I think --
- 6 JUSTICE BREYER: And the agency would simply
- 7 say, do they want to have this to be a maximum or just
- 8 the minimum. It's so easy to say that, but I haven't
- 9 found agencies saying it. I don't know why.
- MR. GARRE: We are not here --
- 11 JUSTICE BREYER: We are forced to deal with
- 12 the situation we have; and the situation we have in
- 13 Geier is filled with indications that they really wanted
- 14 a mix because of the unusual circumstances present
- 15 there.
- MR. GARRE: What the agency --
- 17 JUSTICE BREYER: You have to point to
- 18 something here that shows that.
- MR. GARRE: What the agency wanted here was
- 20 flexibility. It wanted flexibility because it
- 21 recognized that there were safety tradeoffs and that the
- 22 safety and practicability objectives were best served by
- 23 leaving --
- 24 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But wait a minute. What
- 25 that -- what you are not answering is flexibility to

- 1 ensure that a manufacturer imposes or thinks about
- 2 safety and chooses the option that is safest.
- 3 MR. GARRE: And --
- 4 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So what's the inducement
- 5 for a manufacturer to put the light into a sedan or to
- 6 put a seatbelt 2, when it can, without causing an added
- 7 safety risk? If it's preempted, there is no inducement.
- 8 MR. GARRE: The agency recognized here that
- 9 Type 1 seatbelts, the lap-only seatbelts, themselves
- 10 posed unique safety risks. It did so to children. If
- 11 you look at the 1984 rulemaking, the agency couldn't
- 12 have been more clear that we are not going to impose a
- 13 Type 2 mandate for rear seats, because that's going to
- 14 be harmful to children.
- JUSTICE GINSBURG: Mr. Garre --
- MR. GARRE: The agency preserved that very
- 17 status quo in 1989. Petitioners recognize that in note
- 18 1 of their brief.
- 19 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Mr. Garre, in -- in Geier
- 20 I think it was Justice Breyer who called attention to
- 21 the agency having informed the Court that if tort suits
- 22 were to go on, at -- in -- in contradiction to the
- 23 government's view that there should be both of these --
- 24 that the safety standards that were set there, it would
- 25 be disturbed. It would be impeded.

1	And the opinion said we assign weight to the				
2	Department of Transportation there, to their view that a				
3	tort suit there would stand as an obstacle to the				
4	accomplishment of the Federal safety standards. And if				
5	the Court gives weight to what the agency says in Geier,				
6	shouldn't it equally give weight here when NHTSA is				
7	telling us there is no conflict? It says its rule sets				
8	out what the statute calls for, a minimum standard.				
9	MR. GARRE: We don't think the Court should				
10	defer to the agency's position. We don't think the				
11	Court should adopt it. In Geier the Court found that				
12	the regulatory record was clear enough that it didn't				
13	have to rely on the agency position. So we think				
14	JUSTICE GINSBURG: But then the Court				
15	what was the Court doing in saying that? Was it just				
16	wanted the agency to feel good?				
17	MR. GARRE: Well, I think what it said, and				
18	obviously Justice Breyer can correct me; he wrote the				
19	opinion for the Court was that it thought the				
20	regulatory record was clear enough, but it did				
21	ultimately say that it did agree with the agency,				
22	although it didn't make a difference to the Court's				
23	opinion.				
24	JUSTICE BREYER: It also said it did say				
25	as a practical thing, not not some theoretical legal				

- 1 thing. Who is most likely to know what 40,000 pages of
- 2 agency record actually mean and say? People in the
- 3 agency. And the second most likely is the SG's office,
- 4 because they will have to go tell them.
- 5 MR. GARRE: But if --
- 6 JUSTICE BREYER: So if the government
- 7 continuously says, this is what the agency means and the
- 8 agency is telling them, yes, this is what it means, the
- 9 chances are they will come to a better, correct
- 10 conclusion than I will with my law clerks --
- MR. GARRE: And --
- 12 JUSTICE BREYER: -- because I have a lot to
- 13 do. All right.
- 14 (Laughter.)
- MR. GARRE: Of course, from --
- JUSTICE BREYER: That's the practical. I'm
- 17 sorry, but that is the practical idea that I think
- 18 underlies what was said in Geier.
- 19 MR. GARRE: And from the Wyeth case we know
- 20 that the Court isn't always going to agree with the
- 21 agency. Here I think what's different from Geier is
- 22 that you have no contemporaneous interpretation of the
- 23 agency. The agency is looking at a cold record going
- 24 back 20 years, and it's not taking into account
- 25 everything that's in the record.

- JUSTICE BREYER: No, but it did -- we are
- 2 dealing with 1989 primarily.
- 3 MR. GARRE: That's right.
- 4 JUSTICE BREYER: And in 1989, I think -- we
- 5 are at least quoted on the other side -- what the agency
- 6 said was, well, we see these lap and shoulder belts are
- 7 actually more effective. Now, we are reluctant to
- 8 recommend them for the center seat or aisle seat because
- 9 people might get caught in the spools. On the other
- 10 hand, manufacturers may be able to work out that
- 11 problem. Therefore, we encourage the manufacturer to
- 12 try to figure out a way around it.
- And the SG, looking at all that stuff, says,
- 14 you see, they didn't mind if manufacturers were put
- under another legal obligation to do it, because they'd
- 16 have no objection to making the manufacturers do it,
- 17 they are just not certain yet.
- MR. GARRE: And --
- 19 JUSTICE BREYER: Now that's -- that's how I
- 20 read what was said.
- 21 MR. GARRE: And I think that's what the SG
- 22 says and we think that -- that the SG is wrong.
- We think the agency said in 1989 and it said
- 24 in 1984 it could not have been more clear that they did
- 25 not want to mandate the Type 2 belt, the very rule that

- 1 the Petitioners want to mandate through this State law
- 2 tort action. They didn't want to do it because they
- 3 were concerned about child safety, they were concerned
- 4 about aisle safety, they were concerned about
- 5 practicability.
- 6 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But that's always the
- 7 case when the agency sets a minimum. By setting a
- 8 minimum, it's basically saying we don't want to mandate
- 9 more.
- MR. GARRE: That's --
- 11 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But -- but you are not
- 12 disagreeing that the statute by its term says that a
- 13 minimum doesn't preempt State common law.
- MR. GARRE: The statute says that and from
- 15 Geier we know that that doesn't resolve the preemption
- 16 question.
- 17 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So I'm still not sure
- 18 why creating an option is any different than the
- 19 minimum.
- MR. GARRE: Where the option is designed to
- 21 protect flexibility that serves the statutory safety and
- 22 practicability objectives --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But the default is
- 24 always that the manufacturers have an option. A minimum
- 25 by definition gives manufacturers options.

- 1 MR. GARRE: It's not that. As a practical
- 2 matter, that kind of option, like the minimum for
- 3 Federal braking standards is fundamentally different
- 4 than the kind of option is Geier and the kind of option
- 5 here.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But you haven't
- 7 explained why.
- 8 MR. GARRE: The reason why is because --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: If the minimum by its
- 10 own definition gives freedom to the manufacturer to
- impose more if it chooses, or not, why does the option
- 12 to tell a manufacturer, pick what you think is safest,
- 13 why does that do more?
- MR. GARRE: Because the agency determined
- 15 here that the flexibility was necessary to advance
- 16 Federal safety and practicability objectives, and that
- 17 that -- those objectives would be frustrated by a Type 2
- 18 mandate. And flexibility -- this Court has
- 19 recognized --
- 20 JUSTICE GINSBURG: But there is no such
- 21 statement. I mean there was a statement we don't want
- 22 to impose those costs, but we have the agency in
- 23 court -- we have the Solicitor General's office in court
- 24 telling us, the statute says minimum, the statute says
- 25 the common law isn't displaced, and we are telling the

- 1 Court that we think this is a situation where it is
- 2 minimum and so the common law isn't displaced.
- 3 Shouldn't we assume that the standard that
- 4 the agency set, that as the agency said is a minimum
- 5 standard unless the agency tells us that it should be
- 6 preemptive of tort suits?
- 7 MR. GARRE: Not when you have the kind of
- 8 unique standard here. Granted, this is going to be the
- 9 rare situation. But if you look at, for example, take
- 10 child safety. The agency couldn't have been clearer in
- 11 1984. Look at 49 Federal Register 15241, the final
- 12 rule, that it was not going to mandate Type 2 seatbelts
- 13 because they found that that would harm child safety.
- 14 The agency specifically carried forward that rule in
- 15 1989 for the rear inboard seats at issue in this case.
- Note 1 of Petitioner's reply brief said that
- 17 the law is exactly the same in 1989 as to these seats as
- 18 in 1984. It -- hasn't been preempted in 1984,
- 19 notwithstanding what my friend said here from the
- 20 government today; and if it was preempted in 1984 it has
- 21 to be preempted in 1989.
- The tradeoffs here, we have talked about the
- 23 lawsuit involving a -- a child who was -- who was
- 24 restrained by a shoulder belt and harmed as a -- as a
- 25 result of that belt, which is a concern that NHTSA has

1		1.1 1- 1- 1	1. 1	1- 1 - 1
1	recognized	throughout	lts	nistory.

- 2 Under their position, the manufacturer could
- 3 be sued for having a Type 2 belt by the child who was
- 4 harmed or by the person in the back row that had
- 5 difficulty getting out of the car in the event of an
- 6 accident, just as they could be sued under Petitioner's
- 7 theory for having a Type 1 belt. This -- the agency
- 8 recognized, this was a unique situation where there were
- 9 serious safety and practicability tradeoffs; they wanted
- 10 to give the -- the manufacturers the flexibility to make
- 11 this decision, and that flexibility served, the agency
- 12 concluded, the Federal safety and -- and practicability
- 13 objectives.
- If you look at this Court's decision --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But I'm sorry, you still
- 16 haven't responded to me. Manufacturers are always at
- 17 risk for common law claims under this statute, because
- 18 this statute expressly says they are. Every design
- 19 choice a manufacturer makes under almost any situation
- 20 where the common law is in effect puts it at risk that a
- 21 jury will decide whether it did enough or not, under
- 22 cost/ benefit analysis and technology.
- 23 So I don't know why when the agency creates
- 24 a minimum by choice or not, it should be implicitly
- 25 preempted in -- from the application of State law.

1 MR. GARRE: Justice Sotomayor, there are 2 hundreds of Federal motor vehicle safety standards, and 3 I would agree with you for virtually all of them, except you have the rare standards -- and they are rare, like 4 5 the one in Geier and like the one here -- where the agency quite obviously is doing something much б 7 different. It's expressly granting options and it's making clear in the record that the reason it is doing 8 that is to serve Federal objectives that would be 9 10 frustrated by the imposition of a particular rule. 11 I think you have to look at this from the 12 standpoint of the manufacturers who are told that they 13 can manufacture this car with this design or that 14 design, and you can go look at the Federal Register and 15 see that the reason the agency is doing that is to advance safety and practicability objectives. 16 17 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: How do you tell --18 in response to Justice Sotomayor, how do you tell 19 whether the agency is giving options or simply setting a 2.0 minimum? MR. GARRE: Well, first you would look --21 22 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Because a minimum, of course, always gives you options. 23 24 In a very generalized sense. MR. GARRE:

But we know from Geier that that doesn't resolve the

25

- 1 preemption question, because the same could have been
- 2 said with respect to the rule in Geier.
- First you look at the rule, and you are just
- 4 not going to find very many rules at all in the
- 5 Federal -- in the Code of Federal Regulations that
- 6 provide this kind of express option for equipment
- 7 design. And then second, you go look and you -- and you
- 8 see what the agency said about that in its final rules
- 9 and the commentary accompanying the final rules.
- 10 And here, if you look, not only would you
- 11 find that the agency granted this flexibility to serve
- 12 Federal safety and practicability objectives, you would
- 13 find that it specifically rejected the very rule that
- 14 Petitioners want to impose on State tort law, because it
- 15 concluded that that rule would be counterproductive from
- 16 the standpoint of safety and practicability. So there
- 17 couldn't be --
- 18 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Was that in 1989? I
- 19 thought there was some advance in the child seats
- 20 between the early '80s and '89.
- 21 MR. GARRE: There was some question about a
- 22 movement from tethered to non-tethered, but that only
- 23 created the compatibility issue that the agency
- 24 recognized in the 1989 rulemaking and 1984.
- I mean, at the same time the agency is

- 1 telling manufacturers: Install your -- manufacture your
- 2 car seats so they can be installed with a
- 3 Type 1 lap-only belt, and it's telling parents:
- 4 Parents, put your children in the rear center seat
- 5 because that's going to be the safest seat, which, by
- 6 the way, is the seat that is going to have a lap-only
- 7 belt. And so it's clear --
- 8 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Was that in 1989?
- 9 MR. GARRE: That was true at the time of
- 10 1989, as well as --
- 11 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But this wasn't the
- 12 center seat. This was an aisle seat.
- 13 MR. GARRE: It was -- as the plaintiffs
- 14 called it in their complaint, it was the middle seat in
- 15 the middle row. It was a center seat in every practical
- 16 sense. It just happened to be an aisle seat as well,
- 17 because there was a space on the --
- 18 JUSTICE SCALIA: I don't understand that,
- 19 and I looked for a diagram. It talked about the center
- 20 seat, aisle seat --
- 21 MR. GARRE: Unfortunately, the diagrams --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: Do you know what the
- 23 terminology is?
- MR. GARRE: It's not in the record, Justice
- 25 Scalia.

Τ	JUSTICE SCALIA: Where is it?
2	MR. GARRE: You have three rows in the car.
3	In the front row, you've got the driver's side and the
4	front row driver on the right-hand side. And then you
5	have the middle row of seat, and then have you a back
6	row.
7	The middle row seat had a seat on the side,
8	which was the outboard seat, a seat in the middle, which
9	is where the descendent in this case was sitting, and
10	then it had an aisle next to it. So it was a center
11	seat
12	JUSTICE SCALIA: The aisle was not between
13	the two seats?
14	MR. GARRE: No, it was on the side of the
15	vehicle. So it was the center seat in every practical
16	sense, and therefore provided the same structural
17	concerns that NHTSA recognized.
18	JUSTICE BREYER: They wrote: "Of course, in
19	those cases where manufacturers are able to design and
20	install lap/shoulder belts at seating positions adjacent
21	to aisleways without interfering with the aisleway's
22	purpose of allowing access to more rearward seating
23	positions, NHTSA encourages the manufacturers to do so."
24	It doesn't sound like they are against a
25	tort suit that would require you to do so, because, in

- 1 principle at least, all of those things should be taken
- 2 into account.
- 3 MR. GARRE: If I could make three points in
- 4 response to that.
- 5 First, as the language you just read
- 6 indicates, it didn't require -- they didn't encourage at
- 7 all costs. They encouraged where this specific safety
- 8 concern could be addressed.
- 9 Second, there is a world of difference
- 10 between saying, we encourage manufacturers to do what's
- 11 appropriate when they can practically do so, and a world
- 12 in which a jury could have decided the day after --
- 13 JUSTICE BREYER: Those arguments are what I
- 14 think Justice Sotomayor was saying: It is a huge
- 15 problem for manufacturers. It's called tort suits in
- 16 different places and different juries and different
- 17 States. But that is beyond the scope of this case.
- 18 If the agency wants to displace those tort
- 19 suits often, all they have to do is say that the purpose
- 20 is something like you are saying and that they are
- 21 intended to be displaced.
- MR. GARRE: We know from Geier that the
- 23 agency doesn't have to make a formal statement to
- 24 justify its intent.
- 25 JUSTICE BREYER: It doesn't have to. That's

- 1 why I am only making this comment, rather than in the
- 2 form of this question that maybe I don't understand why
- 3 they don't. It would make our job simpler.
- 4 MR. GARRE: I think the record -- we
- 5 certainly think the record here -- the agency really
- 6 couldn't have been clearer in saying: We don't want the
- 7 Type 2 mandate, the lap/shoulder mandate the Petitioners
- 8 are trying to impose here. It said it unambiguously --
- 9 JUSTICE GINSBURG: If the government doesn't
- 10 mean what it says the way you do -- we are being told
- 11 here that far from encouraging Type 1, all along, the
- 12 government says: Yes, Type 2 is a better seatbelt.
- MR. GARRE: Well, that's just not true. And
- 14 with respect to the government, I don't think that the
- 15 regulatory record supports that generalized statement
- 16 that it was Type 2 at all -- at all costs. It was clear
- 17 that the agency recognized --
- 18 JUSTICE GINSBURG: No, they did say that the
- 19 reason that we are not making it mandatory is because of
- 20 some cost benefit analysis. We don't think we should
- 21 impose that as a minimum then.
- MR. GARRE: And gave the very unique kind of
- 23 option here. The agency identified several costs with
- 24 imposing a Type 2 mandate here. It recognized the
- 25 unique safety concerns present when you are trying to

- 1 stretch a Type 2 belt across the aisle, which is going
- 2 to block access, which is a clear safety concern. It
- 3 identified the child safety concerns which were the
- 4 basis for this very same option in 1984 and which were
- 5 carried forward when the agency preserved the status quo
- 6 for the rear inboard seats at issue here. It recognized
- 7 other safety concerns, including obstructing the
- 8 rearward vision of drivers when you install the Type 2
- 9 belt in the center seat, because --
- JUSTICE ALITO: By 1989, hadn't the agency
- 11 decided that the child safety concerns were no longer
- 12 applicable?
- 13 MR. GARRE: No, and the portion of the
- 14 notice of proposed rulemaking that's cited refers to the
- 15 no positive or negative effects. And that language, it
- 16 does not lead to the conclusion that the government and
- 17 Petitioner suggests, for a few reasons.
- 18 First, the agency was referring only to rear
- 19 outboard seats, not rear inboard seats, the kind of seat
- 20 at issue. And that's important because NHTSA was
- 21 telling parents: Put your children in the rear center
- 22 seat, the inboard seat, because that -- that seat also
- 23 was the seat that was most likely to have the lap belt,
- 24 which is how NHTSA was telling child seat manufacturers
- 25 to install their child seats, that you could install

- 1 them with a lap belt because it was more compatible with
- 2 that.
- 3 Second of all, that, the reference to the no
- 4 positive or negative, was a tentative assessment. If
- 5 you look in the Federal Register where that language
- 6 appears -- it's on 53 Federal Register 47988 to 47989 --
- 7 the agency said: This is a tentative assessment; we
- 8 want your comments on this. Comments came back and the
- 9 agency backed off from that and said, we have to examine
- 10 this more.
- 11 And secondly, that positive -- no positive
- 12 or negative statement -- could only apply when child --
- when children were using the boosters which would help
- 14 with the Type 2 shoulder belt so the belt wasn't going
- 15 over the neck. But NHTSA knew at that time that very
- 16 few, less than 1 percent, of parents were actually
- 17 putting their kids in the booster seats. This was
- 18 20 years ago. This was at a time when many children
- 19 weren't in any car seats at all, no matter what NHTSA
- 20 was saying.
- 21 So they recognized that they were at real
- 22 risk here, that children -- children with a Type 2 belt,
- 23 just to be clear -- and NHTSA recognized this during the
- 24 1989 rulemaking -- that belt is going to pose an obvious
- 25 safety risk to children, because the shoulder belt that

- 1 is terrific for adults is going to take -- is going to
- 2 create unique chest loads on children. And if the
- 3 children is not on a booster, as virtually all were not,
- 4 the belt is going to appear too high on the head -- on
- 5 the neck or head, which is a safety problem.
- 6 JUSTICE SCALIA: Why didn't they prohibit
- 7 it, if they were so sure about that? They allowed it,
- 8 didn't they?
- 9 MR. GARRE: Well, because this -- this was
- 10 something, Justice Scalia, that the agency struggled
- 11 with for almost a decade until it ultimately adopted the
- 12 latch system, which resolved the compatibility issue of
- the lap belt versus the lap/shoulder belt for installing
- 14 the child car seat. I mean, anyone who has tried to
- install a child car seat with a Type 2 belt, the
- 16 lap/shoulder belt, knows how difficult it was. And the
- 17 agency went back and forth on this and ultimately went
- 18 in a completely different direction in 1999 and
- 19 installed the lap system.
- 20 And another thing that happened is over
- 21 time, booster seats became more accepted. More parents
- 22 were putting children in booster seats. And we solved
- 23 that safety concern as well. But 20 years ago, at the
- 24 time that this rule was adopted, the agency clearly
- 25 appreciated the child safety risk. Again, in 1984 --

Τ	JUSTICE SCALIA: Why shouldn't we allow the
2	juries to take account of those changes over time?
3	MR. GARRE: Because it would
4	JUSTICE SCALIA: I mean, as you say, the
5	agency's rule only spoke of the situation at that time.
6	MR. GARRE: This was an area that NHTSA was
7	carefully monitoring. You had rulemakings in '84 and
8	'89 and it adopted a very unique approach to resolving
9	the safety issue, which was to expressly give
10	manufacturers this option to advance Federal safety and
11	practicability objectives. We haven't talked as much
12	about the practicability objectives, but that is one of
13	the statutory objectives of the act.
14	Congress couldn't have been more clear on
15	that and the agency in 1989 couldn't have been more
16	clear in the final notice, saying we are not going to
17	require manufacturers to install Type 2 belts in the
18	rear center and aisle seats because that's just too
19	costly. It's substantially expensive and the agency
20	well knew based on its history that imposing this sort
21	of overly costly safety measures that the Type 2 belt
22	would have been for these seats at that time could have
23	proved counterproductive with the agency's long-term
24	safety mission.
25	The agency said that in the rulemaking in

1	this case at 52 Federal Register 22819 where it said
2	that requiring these kind of overly costly measures
3	created a lost opportunity to improve safety through
4	other means.
5	This is something that Congress gave the
6	agency the expert judgment to make on these matters and
7	the practicability objectives, which was just as much a
8	statutory objective as a safety objective, would have
9	been directly frustrated if, as could have happened
LO	under the Petitioners position in this case, on the very
L1	day after the agency passed this rule in 1989 and said
L2	we are not going to require rear inboard seats to have
L3	Type 2 lap/shoulder belts. A jury in California hit my
L 4	client with a multimillion dollar punitive damages award
L5	because they did not install a Type 2 belt in that seat.
L6	That would have been directly contrary to
L7	the Federal objectives. It would have undermined the
L8	safety objectives that the agency recognized and it
L9	would have undermined the practicability objectives that
20	the agency recognized, and then you have this world in
21	which manufacturers like my client could be hit with
22	multimillion dollar punitive damages award in one state
23	for installing the Type 2 belt where a child was injured
24	or someone was in the back seat and couldn't get out.

JUSTICE GINSBURG: I thought we were told

25

- 1 that there was one manufacturer, I think General Motors
- 2 was mentioned, that was doing this Type 2 belt
- 3 uniformly?
- 4 MR. GARRE: I think that was later in time.
- 5 It wasn't in 1989. Truthfully, if you look at late as
- 6 2004 when the agency adopted so-called Anton's law rule,
- 7 which eventually did mandate Type 2 belts in these kinds
- 8 of seats. Even then the agency recognized that there
- 9 were still technical feasibility concerns with
- 10 installing the Type 2 belts in these seats.
- 11 And just to be clear, the problem is, is
- 12 finding the anchor to install the shoulder belt in rear
- 13 center or aisle seats. You have got to anchor it
- 14 somewhere. If you put it in the side wall you are going
- 15 to have straps crossing across the aisle and obstructing
- 16 access. If you put it in the roof you are going to have
- 17 something --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But that is not the
- 19 issue here. The issue is whether it was feasible in
- 20 this car, not whether or not it was not feasible
- 21 elsewhere.
- MR. GARRE: And the agency resolved
- 23 conclusively that it was not practical in 1989. Was it
- 24 theoretically possible? Eventually manufacturers --
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: That goes to my point of

- 1 the light in the sedan versus the van. It's letting the
- 2 manufacturers decide what's the best choice.
- 3 MR. GARRE: It gave them that flexibility,
- 4 the agency determined in the 1994 chief counsel letter
- 5 and we hope the Court does read it, makes it clear that
- 6 the agency concluded that in this situation, and it's a
- 7 rare situation, the manufacturer was in the best
- 8 position to decide what was most appropriate for its
- 9 vehicles. And, again, there is this flexibility
- 10 objective.
- 11 If you look at Fidelity Federal Savings &
- 12 Loan v. A. la Cuesta, the decision cited on page 19 of
- 13 our brief, you have this Court recognizing that a
- 14 Federal law that gave flexibility where you have a state
- 15 mandate that interferes with that flexibility, that is
- 16 an actual conflict. Ultimately under Geier, this Court
- 17 is looking for the existence of an actual conflict. We
- 18 think a rule that says manufacturers, you are free to
- 19 choose between this type of seatbelt and that type of
- 20 seatbelt, and the reason we are giving you that
- 21 flexibility is to advance federal safety and
- 22 practicability objectives.
- We are not going to require you to put a
- 24 lap/shoulder belt in there because that would frustrate
- 25 those Federal objectives, the state law tort suit that

clear up the child safety issue and I know Mr. Jay has addressed this to some extent, but let me be perfectly clear, there is absolutely nothing in the '87 to '89 regulatory history that mentions anything about child safety being a consideration in the agency's decision not to mandate Type 2 shoulder belts for aisle and center seating positions. Specifically, Justice Ginsberg asked Mr. Garre about whether there is anything about the rear center seat being the safest place for children in that regulatory history. There is no mention whatsoever in		
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20 that regulatory history about that issue, and the reason	18	center seat being the safest place for children in that
	19	regulatory history. There is no mention whatsoever in
21 for that is this: The reason the rear center seat was	20	that regulatory history about that issue, and the reason
	21	for that is this: The reason the rear center seat was

24 It's considered safest for children because

type of seatbelt that was installed in that seat.

considered safer for children had nothing to do with the

25 it's farthest from the potential point of impact in a

22

23

- 1 side impact collision.
- 2 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: When you talk about
- 3 safety to children, are you also addressing the strap
- 4 going across the aisle or the strap interfering with
- 5 vision? I know that is not directly related to
- 6 children, but it affects what type of belt might be the
- 7 safest overall.
- 8 MR. BUCHANAN: You are right,
- 9 Mr. Chief Justice, that was not expressed in any way in
- 10 terms of a child safety concern. I would also, minor
- 11 correction, the interference with rear vision was a
- 12 comment that a commenter made in the regulatory history
- 13 and the agency never really expressed an opinion one way
- or the other about whether that was a concern.
- I think what's really important here is that
- 16 state tort law provides an incentive for manufacturers
- 17 to exercise their options reasonably. And whether that
- 18 option is to exceed a minimum standard that doesn't have
- 19 options, or to choose between two different options that
- 20 a minimum standard provides, state tort law ensures that
- 21 manufacturers act reasonably. Our contention --
- 22 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But state tort law
- 23 doesn't, juries typically don't take into account the
- 24 fleet costs of avoiding liability, which as I understand
- 25 from the SG's brief in this case was the reason that

- 1 Type 2 was not mandated, because of the overall costs.
- 2 You have a jury with an injured plaintiff, they are not
- 3 likely to weigh heavily the fact that this would cost 3
- 4 extra cents per car fleet wide. I think that is the
- 5 sort of thing NHTSA considers.
- 6 MR. BUCHANAN: Mr. Chief Justice, under any
- 7 state's tort law, I think cost and feasibility would be
- 8 practical considerations for the jury under the jury
- 9 instructions given. Those are liability issues, cost
- 10 and feasibility in any tort system. And so that's a
- 11 liability issue down the road.
- 12 Here it's important to preserve state tort
- 13 law because Congress said state tort law shall be
- 14 preserved. And again, whether it's a choice between
- options, Type 1 or Type 2, or whether it's potential
- 16 liability for not going beyond the minimum braking
- 17 standard, either way manufacturers should be held
- 18 accountable according to Congress in its enactment of
- 19 the statute for the design choices they make. There is
- 20 nothing different about a design standard option 1
- 21 versus option 2.
- The final point I want to make before I sit
- 23 down is that I think in some respects this case with
- 24 regard to the question about whether Congress intended
- 25 for the agency to be the exclusive authority for

- 1 weighing these types of considerations, in some respects
- 2 Wyeth versus Levine is instructive here.
- 3 Because I think that was the same argument
- 4 that was made in Wyeth versus Levine, that a jury should
- 5 not be allowed to second-quess the FDA's labeling issues
- 6 and to allow the jury to do so would subvert the
- 7 exclusive authority of a Federal agency, and the Court
- 8 rejected that argument in Wyeth, and as the dissent
- 9 pointed out in Wyeth, that statute did not even have a
- 10 Savings Clause. And it did not define the labeling
- 11 standards as minimum standards.
- Here we have a much more clear expression of
- 13 congressional intent. They intended these to be minimum
- 14 standards. They have a savings clause that says common
- 15 law liability shall be preserved. Obviously Congress
- 16 did not intend NHTSA to be the exclusive safety standard
- 17 cook. They deliberately preserved state court juries as
- 18 also providing for additional vehicle safety and for an
- 19 incentive to manufacture safer vehicles.
- 20 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- 21 The case is submitted.
- 22 (Whereupon, at 12:03 p.m., the case in the
- 23 above-entitled matter was submitted.)

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A	47:6	51:25 52:7	16:21 35:22	34:3
able 31:10 39:19	adoption 17:2,5	agency's 7:5 8:2	41:20	attention 28:20
above-entitled	adults 21:15 44:1	8:5 10:18 14:3	anchor 47:12,13	attributes 6:3
1:12 52:23	advance 33:15	29:10 45:5,23	anchored 21:8	authority 51:25
absence 17:15	36:16 37:19	49:13	anchoring 21:11	52:7
absolutely 49:11	45:10 48:21	ago 43:18 44:23	answered 4:18	automatic 19:10
accepted 44:21	49:2	agree 15:14 17:6	21:14	automobile 8:10
access 23:20	advances 9:4	29:21 30:20	answering 27:25	avoided 27:4
39:22 42:2	affirmative 13:7	36:3	Anton's 47:6	avoiding 50:24
47:16	affirmatively	agreed 4:3	appealing 15:2	award 46:14,22
accident 4:1 35:6	24:24	airbags 8:21	appeals 19:22	a.m 1:14 3:2
accompanying	agencies 4:9	10:16 14:6	appear 44:4	
37:9	27:9	19:10 20:23	APPEARANC	B
accomplish	agency 7:2,16	aisle 5:16 11:7	1:15	B 5:19
10:16	8:18,19 10:2,9	11:10 22:24	appears 43:6	back 18:1 20:8
accomplishment	10:13,19,25	31:8 32:4 38:12	appendix 23:8	23:17 25:17
29:4	12:5 13:1,17	38:16,20 39:10	applicable 42:12	30:24 35:4 39:5
account 6:2	17:1,19 18:11	39:12 42:1	application 19:1	43:8 44:17
30:24 40:2 45:2	18:23 19:9 21:6	45:18 47:13,15	35:25	46:24
50:23	21:12,14,17,22	49:14 50:4	apply 14:11	backed43:9
accountable	21:24 22:1,13	aisleway 5:19	24:13 43:12	backlash 8:21
51:18	22:15 23:1,12	aisleways 39:21	appreciated	based 3:23 9:3
achieve 14:4	23:17 24:21	aisleway's 39:21	44:25	22:5 24:1 45:20
achieving 3:21	25:1,8,15,17	AL 1:3,7	approach 45:8	baseline 17:17
acknowledged	26:3,14,20,25	Alito 19:7,13,19	appropriate	basically 32:8
14:25 15:6	27:1,6,16,19	22:4,9 24:12	40:11 48:8	basis 42:4
act 3:22 20:10	28:8,11,16,21	42:10	area 4:15 45:6	behalf 1:17,20
45:13 50:21	29:5,13,16,21	alleged 22:23	argument 1:13	1:22 2:4,7,11
action 6:5,6 32:2	30:2,3,7,8,21	alleges 11:11	2:2,5,9,12 3:4,6	2:14 3:7 16:6
actions 15:17	30:23,23 31:5	allow9:3 45:1	6:13 16:5 25:4	25:5 49:7
actual 48:16,17	31:23 32:7	52:6	49:6 52:3,8	believe 5:6
added 25:16,19	33:14,22 34:4,4	allowed 44:7	arguments 40:13	belt 3:12 5:19
28:6	34:5,10,14 35:7	52:5	articulable 16:17	21:25 22:1,2,5
additional 52:18	35:11,23 36:6	allowing 5:21,22	asked 16:20 20:4	22:7,8 23:18,19
addressed 40:8	36:15,19 37:8	24:10 39:22	21:17 49:16	31:25 34:24,25
49:10	37:11,23,25	alluded 21:4	asks 12:1 20:6	35:3,7 38:3,7
addressing 50:3	40:18,23 41:5	24:16	asserting 8:17	42:1,9,23 43:1
adequate 6:18	41:17,23 42:5	alternative 5:20	12:4	43:14,14,22,24
adequately 6:17	42:10,18 43:7,9	8:22	assessment 43:4	43:25 44:4,13
adjacent 39:20	44:10,17,24	AMERICA 1:6	43:7	44:13,15,16
adopt 18:4 24:12	45:15,19,25	American 3:13	assign 29:1	45:21 46:15,23
29:11	46:6,11,18,20	amicus 1:20 2:8	assistance 21:22	47:2,12 48:24
adopted 10:9	47:6,8,22 48:4	16:6	Assistant 1:18	50:6
44:11,24 45:8	48:6 49:1 50:13	analysis 7:15	assume 14:20	belts 7:4,6,19,25
,2 . 13.0		_		8:1,8 11:10
	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

	1	i	i	1
18:17 31:6	11:20,24 12:12	center 24:2 31:8	10:20 16:13,14	comes 13:10
39:20 45:17	12:18,25 13:13	38:4,12,15,19	35:19,24 48:2	18:23 25:17
46:13 47:7,10	13:20 14:2,13	39:10,15 42:9	51:14	coming 18:25
49:14	14:23 15:3,14	42:21 45:18	choices 51:19	comment 41:1
benefit 16:21	16:20 17:3	47:13 49:15,18	choose 8:12 19:5	50:12
35:22 41:20	22:11,25 49:5,6	49:21	25:23 48:19	commentary
benefits 6:2 7:19	49:8 50:8 51:6	cents 51:4	50:19	37:9
10:23 11:7		certain 25:16	chooses 28:2	commenter
17:21,22 23:19	C	31:17	33:11	50:12
best 25:10 27:22	C 2:1 3:1	certainly 15:5	chose 16:10	comments 43:8,8
48:2,7	California 1:16	17:4 41:5	21:10 49:1	common 3:10,20
better 11:18	12:4 46:13	challenging	circumstance	4:4,19 5:6 11:6
17:24,24 21:13	call 4:22	26:12	20:18 24:17	13:24 14:16
30:9 41:12	called 28:20	chances 30:9	circumstances	15:10,17 16:14
beyond 40:17	38:14 40:15	changes 45:2	27:14	20:2 22:21
51:16	calls 9:25 29:8	chest 44:2	cited 42:14 48:12	32:13 33:25
block 42:2	car 8:7 14:12	chief 3:3,8 5:10	claim 3:10,14 8:3	34:2 35:17,20
booster 21:23,23	21:9,19 25:17	5:15,21 6:4,8	8:17 10:14 12:3	52:14
43:17 44:3,21	25:23 35:5	6:12 7:8 12:9	14:5,16	compatibility
44:22	36:13 38:2 39:2	12:13,20 13:25	claims 35:17	37:23 44:12
boosters 43:13	43:19 44:14,15	16:3,8,20 17:6	clause 3:23 6:11	compatible 43:1
bound 14:20	47:20 51:4	23:5 25:2,6	12:1 13:22	compensating
braking 26:10	carefully 45:7	36:17,22 48:4	15:16,21 16:12	3:25 5:7
33:3 51:16	carried34:14	49:4 50:2,9,22	22:19 24:11	compensation
Breyer 26:25	42:5	51:6 52:20	52:10,14	4:20 15:24
27:6,11,17	cars 25:18,19	child 21:3,7,13	clear 3:18 4:5	complainant
28:20 29:18,24	case 3:4 5:17	22:4,6,22,23	16:12,15 28:12	23:15
30:6,12,16 31:1	11:16,21,23	32:3 34:10,13	29:12,20 31:24	complained
31:4,19 39:18	14:19,20 17:19	34:23 35:3	36:8 38:7 41:16	23:13
40:13,25	19:2,3,16 20:6	37:19 42:3,11	42:2 43:23	complaint 11:11
brief 8:6 17:13	20:12,13,16,16	42:24,25 43:12	45:14,16 47:11	38:14
20:8,10,12	20:24 22:12,14	44:14,15,25	48:5 49:9,11	complementary
21:20 23:9,12	22:16 24:25	46:23 49:9,12	52:12	3:20
24:16 28:18	25:14 26:6,8,17	50:10	clearer 34:10	completely 44:18
34:16 48:13	26:19 30:19	children 11:3	41:6	compliance
50:25	32:7 34:15 39:9	21:21 28:10,14	clearly 7:11	13:23 25:1
briefs 20:8	40:17 46:1,10	38:4 42:21	44:24	comply 16:10
bring 5:4	50:25 51:23	43:13,18,22,22	clerks 30:10	complying 9:7
Buchanan 1:16	52:21,22	43:25 44:2,3,22	client 46:14,21	22:18,19
2:3,13 3:5,6,8	cases 19:25	49:18,22,24	Code 37:5	concern 5:18,19
4:12,17 5:2,5	20:14 39:19	50:3,6	cold 30:23	21:3 23:20
5:15,25 6:6,23	categories 17:25	children's 18:18	collision 50:1	24:19 34:25
7:16 8:14 9:5	caught 31:9	choice 8:16,25	come 5:21 14:20	40:8 42:2 44:23
9:16,21 10:1,12	caused 14:12	9:3,6,13,14,17	18:1 19:16 30:9	50:10,14
	causing 28:6			
	<u> </u>	·	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

		Ì	Ì	ı
concerned 8:20	14:24	couple 19:21	dealing 31:2	determined 25:9
32:3,3,4	contemporane	course 4:15	decade 44:11	33:14 48:4
concerns 6:25	12:7 30:22	11:15 17:17	decide 6:14,16	detract 10:5
21:6 39:17	contention 50:21	20:1 24:18	6:17 35:21 48:2	develop 5:8
41:25 42:3,7,11	continued 21:9	30:15 36:23	48:8	developed 6:17
47:9	continuously	39:18	decided 3:24	development
conclude 24:21	30:7	court 1:1,13 3:9	5:17 6:22 17:19	8:22
concluded 19:9	contradiction	3:23 4:18,20	18:2 19:21	deviated 10:5
21:19 35:12	28:22	10:3 14:24,25	23:25 40:12	devices 10:17
37:15 48:6	contrary 5:23	15:5,19,25 16:9	42:11	14:5
conclusion 18:25	46:16	20:6,7,18 23:10	decision 6:23	diagram 38:19
30:10 42:16	contrast 19:2	25:7 28:21 29:5	8:15 14:7 16:16	diagrams 38:21
conclusively	20:24	29:9,11,11,14	35:11,14 48:12	Diego 1:16
47:23	convenience	29:15,19 30:20	49:13	difference 29:22
conflict 4:5 10:18	23:20	33:18,23,23	default 32:23	40:9
12:4,22 14:6	cook 52:17	34:1 48:5,13,16	defer 29:10	different 8:9,19
16:16 20:15	correct 10:12	52:7,17	define 52:10	9:7 14:4 25:14
21:2 29:7 48:16	11:16,24 13:20	courts 18:24,24	definition 32:25	25:25 26:13,17
48:17	14:13 29:18	19:14,22,22	33:10	26:19,22 30:21
conflicted 14:17	30:9	20:4	DELBERT 1:3	32:18 33:3 36:7
conflicting 12:2	correction 50:11	Court's 3:18 8:15	deliberately 8:19	40:16,16,16
15:7	cost 5:20 6:16,20	14:7 29:22	18:11 52:17	44:18 50:19
conflicts 14:16	7:10,21 12:24	35:14	denial 21:5	51:20
Congress 3:19	13:6 16:20	create 15:23	Department 1:19	difficult 11:21
3:24 4:22 45:14	17:13,14 24:4	44:2	29:2	24:18 44:16
46:5 51:13,18	35:22 41:20	created 37:23	depending 25:22	difficulties 18:16
51:24 52:15	51:3,7,9	46:3	depends 9:16	18:17
congressional	costly 45:19,21	creates 6:1,9	descendent 39:9	difficulty 35:5
15:21 52:13	46:2	35:23	design 4:2 5:20	direct 10:18
consequences	costs 5:13,23 6:2	creating 9:22	25:22 26:16,22	direction 44:18
16:13	6:22,25 7:1,12	32:18	35:18 36:13,14	directly 6:21
consideration	12:15,21 13:1	crossing 47:15	37:7 39:19	14:6 46:9,16
7:1 49:13	17:20 18:2,6	Cuesta 48:12	51:19,20	50:5
considerations	26:1 33:22 40:7	curiae 1:20 2:8	designed 32:20	disagreed 23:17
7:20 51:8 52:1	41:16,23 50:24	16:6	designs 25:18,25	disagreeing
considered 15:25	51:1	curious 4:25	desire 14:3	32:12
49:22,24	cost/benefit 7:14		Despite 26:1	discourages
considers 13:1	counsel 16:3	D	detach 23:18	24:24
51:5	23:6 25:2 48:4	D 3:1	detached 21:25	discussed 14:25
consistent 3:15	49:4 52:20	damages 46:14	determination	22:22
7:5 9:2 23:22	counterproduc	46:22	12:22 13:2,6	displace 40:18
constraint 8:13	37:15 45:23	date 9:4	15:21 19:12	displaced 33:25
14:22	countervailing	day 21:1 24:15	determinative	34:2 40:21
contemplated	7:20	40:12 46:11	8:18	dispositive 14:3
<u>.</u>		deal 27:11		
	l	l	l	l

14.7	20.22	40.17	42 6 45 10 46 1	6: 116.20
14:7	39:23	existence 48:17	43:6 45:10 46:1	friend 16:20
dissent 4:3 52:8	encouraging 7:6	expensive 45:19	46:17 48:11,14	34:19
disserve 19:10	22:13,15 41:11	expert 46:6	48:21,25 49:2	front 39:3,4
distinction 4:21	enforce 15:23	experts 4:10	52:7	frustrate 3:15
disturbed 28:25	ensure 28:1	explained 8:6	feel 29:16	8:5 9:9 48:24
diversity 10:21	ensures 50:20	33:7	Fidelity 48:11	frustrated 10:16
doing 29:15 36:6	entire 14:5,11,15	explicitly 13:22	figure 31:12	33:17 36:10
36:8,15 47:2	23:10 24:23	express 3:19	filed 20:9,10	46:9
dollar 24:4,5	entity 10:13	15:5 37:6	filled 27:13	frustration 9:15
46:14,22	entry 26:15	expressed 50:9	final 34:11 37:8,9	20:19 24:8
doubt 4:24	envision 24:20	50:13	45:16 51:22	fully 8:7 15:4
driver 39:4	equally 29:6	expression 52:12	find 27:1 37:4,11	fundamentally
drivers 42:8	equipment 37:6	expressly 35:18	37:13	11:3 33:3
driver's 39:3	equipped3:11	36:7 45:9	finding 47:12	further 10:20
D.C 1:9,19,22	10:15	extent 49:10	first 16:19 19:20	49:3
	equivalent 17:25	extra 51:4	20:8 36:21 37:3	future 12:2,16
E	24:5		40:5 42:18 49:8	13:3
E 2:1 3:1,1	ESQ 1:16,18,22	F	fit 19:6	
earlier 18:13,15	2:3,6,10,13	face 9:20	fleet 14:5,11,15	G
25:1	establish 17:1	fact 8:16 11:10	24:23 50:24	G 1:22 2:10 3:1
early 37:20	establishes 26:9	14:3,7 51:3	51:4	25:4
easily 24:20	ET 1:3,7	far 18:1 21:3	flexibility 25:11	Garre 1:22 2:10
easy 27:8	event 35:5	41:11	27:20,20,25	25:3,4,6 26:8
effect 18:23	eventually 47:7	farthest 49:25	32:21 33:15,18	26:19 27:5,10
35:20	47:24	fatalities 11:1	35:10,11 37:11	27:16,19 28:3,8
effective 11:1	evidence 4:5	24:3,6	48:3,9,14,15	28:15,16,19
23:24 31:7	exact 10:19 11:7	favorable 23:7	48:21	29:9,17 30:5,11
effectively 8:4	exactly 10:12	FDA's 52:5	force 13:18	30:15,19 31:3
effects 42:15	34:17	feasibility 7:21	forced 27:11	31:18,21 32:10
efficacious 21:18	examine 43:9	47:9 51:7,10	foreclosing 9:8	32:14,20 33:1,8
egress 23:21	example 18:6,10	feasible 11:12	form 21:8 41:2	33:14 34:7 36:1
either 8:1,17	34:9	23:2,3 47:19,20	formal 40:23	36:21,24 37:21
19:12 51:17	exceed 50:18	feature 25:20	forth 44:17	38:9,13,21,24
eliminates 8:3	exceptional	federal 4:5,7,8	forward 10:14	39:2,14 40:3,22
enactment 51:18	24:17	4:10 5:9 7:22	11:23,25 17:18	41:4,13,22
encourage 7:11	exceptionally	7:22 8:2 10:7	19:16 34:14	42:13 44:9 45:3
8:22 20:20	24:18	12:5 14:16	42:5	45:6 47:4,22
21:10,15 31:11	excerpted 23:11	16:10,17,21,22	found 4:20 7:20	48:3 49:17
40:6,10	exclusive 51:25	17:1,3 19:4,16	10:25 23:3 27:9	Geier 3:13,19
encouraged 7:3	52:7,16	19:22 20:4,15	29:11 34:13	8:10,10,15,18
23:1,25 25:1	exempt 13:24	20:19,20 22:18	four 49:5	10:4,10,13,15
40:7	exempt 13:24	22:20 26:8 29:4	free 19:5 48:18	14:1,3,8,17,24
encouragement	exemption 10:14	33:3,16 34:11	freedom 33:10	14:25 15:1,2,4
13:7	exercise 50:17	35:12 36:2,9,14	freeing 18:4	15:10,15,15,19
encourages	CACICISC 50.17	37:5,5,12 43:5	10.7	15:25 16:15
<i>G</i>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

18:10,23 19:1,3	26:11 28:12,13	held 19:14 20:18	33:11,22 37:14	24:25
19:3,6,8 20:18	30:20,23 34:8	51:17	41:8,21	installed 8:8
24:13,14,15,17	34:12 37:4 38:5	help 43:13	imposed 12:21	11:17 20:25
24:19 26:11	38:6 42:1 43:14	high 44:4	21:6	22:8 23:4 24:8
27:3,13 28:19	43:24 44:1,1,4	higher 5:13	imposes 6:21	38:2 44:19
29:5,11 30:18	45:16 46:12	history 12:8 35:1	28:1	49:23
30:21 32:15	47:14,16 48:23	45:20 49:12,19	imposing 41:24	installing 11:10
33:4 36:5,25	50:4 51:16	49:20 50:12	45:20	16:11 23:14
37:2 40:22	good 24:14 29:16	hit 46:13,21	imposition 16:22	26:23 44:13
48:16	governing 3:17	holding 3:19	18:1 36:10	46:23 47:10
general 1:19	government 4:7	21:19	improve 46:3	instructions 51:9
5:11 19:24	7:9,24 8:5,25	Honda 3:14	inboard 34:15	instructive 52:2
20:10 23:3 47:1	9:2,6,13 13:19	10:15 14:5	42:6,19,22	intend 52:16
generalized	19:16 20:7,9,12	Honor 5:25	46:12	intended 3:20,24
36:24 41:15	20:13 30:6	12:25	incentive 5:8	40:21 51:24
generally 20:5	34:20 41:9,12	hope 48:5	50:16 52:19	52:13
General's 33:23	41:14 42:16	huge 40:14	include 17:5	intent 9:3 10:16
getting 35:5	governmental	hundreds 36:2	including 42:7	40:24 52:13
Ginsberg 10:13	9:15	hurried 24:24	inconsistent 15:7	interference
49:16	government's	hypothetical	15:19	50:11
Ginsburg 9:24	7:23 20:6 28:23	12:23 17:10	increased 11:4	interferes 48:15
10:2 13:15,20	granted 34:8	26:14,18	12:21	interfering 39:21
15:9,15 28:15	37:11	hypothetically	incur 18:5	50:4
28:19 29:14	granting 36:7	12:2	indicates 40:6	interpretation
33:20 37:18	great 7:13 12:15		indications 27:13	20:3 30:22
38:8 41:9,18	greater 4:1 10:23	I	inducement 28:4	involve 19:4
46:25	11:2	idea 22:1,24	28:7	involved 6:19
give 29:6 35:10	GREGORY 1:22	30:17	infant 21:19	involves 19:3
45:9	2:10 25:4	identified41:23	infants 21:17	involving 34:23
given 9:19 26:6		42:3	inference 17:8	Iowa 9:13
51:9	<u>H</u>	ignores 7:14	17:11	issue 3:10 4:2
gives 5:11 8:25	hand 31:10	immediately	informed 28:21	8:18 15:5 24:21
29:5 32:25	happen 17:3,9	5:12,18 8:8	injured 22:4,6	34:15 37:23
33:10 36:23	happened 38:16	impact 49:25	46:23 51:2	42:6,20 44:12
giving 25:10	44:20 46:9	50:1	injuries 11:2 24:3	45:9 47:19,19
36:19 48:20	happy 20:25	impeded 28:25	24:5	49:9,20 51:11
GM 11:9,17	harder 22:12,16	implicitly 35:24	injury 16:14	issues 13:6 20:9
go 11:23 16:19	harm 14:12 18:7	implied 4:2	install 7:3 25:11	51:9 52:5
17:15,18 18:2	34:13	impliedly 3:12	38:1 39:20 42:8	
23:18 28:22	harmed 34:24	important 4:19	42:25,25 44:15	J
30:4 36:14 37:7	35:4	5:6 11:14 42:20	45:17 46:15	Jay 1:18 2:6 16:4
goes 47:25	harmful 28:14	50:15 51:12	47:12	16:5,8 17:17
going 19:8 24:22	head 44:4,5	impose 5:23 7:11	installation	18:14,20 19:2,7
25:21,22,24	hear 3:3	17:19 21:5	22:25 23:2	19:8,19 22:6,10
	heavily 51:3	24:22 28:12		24:14 49:9
		1		

			l	
job 41:3	39:1,12,18	39:20 41:7	longer42:11	28:1,5 31:11
judgment 4:22	40:13,14,25	44:13,16 46:13	long-term 45:23	33:10,12 35:2
14:10 16:21	41:9,18 42:10	48:24	look 20:8 23:10	35:19 47:1 48:7
24:7 46:6	44:6,10 45:1,4	latch 44:12	28:11 34:9,11	manufacturers
July 13:10,11,11	46:25 47:18,25	late 47:5	35:14 36:11,14	5:8 7:3 8:7,11
juries 4:7,16 5:4	49:4,16 50:2,9	Laughter 30:14	36:21 37:3,7,10	8:16 9:3,6
15:23 40:16	50:22 51:6	law3:10,20,25	43:5 47:5 48:11	12:15 13:7 18:5
45:2 50:23	52:20	4:4,19 5:6,23	looked 38:19	18:7 23:14
52:17	justified 24:5	6:10 8:3 9:14	looking 15:9	25:11,22 26:15
jury 9:1 12:2	justify 40:24	11:6 12:4 13:4	30:23 31:13	26:23 31:10,14
14:20 15:7,19		13:24 14:16	48:17	31:16 32:24,25
35:21 40:12	K	15:10,17 16:14	looks 25:15	35:10,16 36:12
46:13 51:2,8,8	Kennedy 8:24	16:16 20:2	lost 46:3	38:1 39:19,23
52:4,6	9:5,12,17,18	22:21 30:10	lot 15:12 30:12	40:10,15 42:24
Justice 1:19 3:3	11:15,21,22	32:1,13 33:25	lower 18:24,24	45:10,17 46:21
3:8 4:6,12,13	13:9	34:2,17 35:17	19:14	47:24 48:2,18
4:17,24 5:3,5	key 14:2	35:20,25 37:14		50:16,21 51:17
5:10,15,21 6:4	kids 43:17	47:6 48:14,25	M	market 19:11
6:8,12 7:8 8:9	kind 33:2,4,4	50:16,20,22	M 1:18 2:6 16:5	MARTIN 1:16
8:14,24 9:5,12	34:7 37:6 41:22	51:7,13,13	maintain 10:21	2:3,13 3:6 49:6
9:17,18,24 10:2	42:19 46:2	52:15	major 11:9	matter 1:12 4:10
10:12 11:15,21	kinds 47:7	lawsuit 7:5 22:10	majority 4:3	14:14,15 20:1
11:22 12:9,13	knew43:15	34:23	making 5:24 24:6	33:2 43:19
12:20 13:9,15	45:20	lawyers 5:3	31:16 36:8 41:1	52:23
13:20,25 14:10	know4:14 6:18	lead 42:16	41:19	matters 46:6
14:14,19,23	11:8 25:18 26:2	leaving 27:23	mandate 5:17	maximum 27:7
15:1,4,9,14	27:9 30:1,19	left 8:11	7:21 13:4 17:11	Mazda 1:6 3:4
16:3,8,20 17:6	32:15 35:23	legal 29:25 31:15	17:20 23:25	3:11 8:16 11:12
18:12,14,15,20	36:25 38:22	letter 23:6,7,11	28:13 31:25	14:11
18:22 19:7,13	40:22 49:9 50:5	48:4	32:1,8 33:18	mean 4:7 15:11
19:19 21:4 22:4	knows 44:16	letting 48:1	34:12 41:7,7,24	18:3 27:2 30:2
22:9 24:12 25:2		Let's 14:20	47:7 48:15 49:1	33:21 37:25
25:6,13 26:13		Levine 52:2,4	49:14	41:10 44:14
26:25 27:6,11	la 48:12	liability 12:22	mandated 51:1	45:4
27:17,24 28:4	labeling 52:5,10	13:24 50:24	mandatory 5:24	means 30:7,8
28:15,19,20	lacking 14:8	51:9,11,16	6:15 41:19	46:4
29:14,18,24	language 40:5	52:15	manufacture	measurably
30:6,12,16 31:1	42:15 43:5	light 25:16,19	36:13 38:1	20:22
31:4,19 32:6,11	lap 31:6 42:23	26:2 28:5 48:1	52:19	measures 45:21
32:17,23 33:6,9	43:1 44:13,19	lights 25:17	manufactured	46:2
33:20 35:15	lap-only 25:11	litigation 20:2,3	11:9,13	mechanics 6:18
36:1,17,18,22	28:9 38:3,6	loads 44:2	manufacturer	mention 49:19
37:18 38:8,11	lap/shoulder	Loan 48:12	8:10,25 11:9	mentioned 23:1
38:18,22,24	3:12 7:3,6,19	long 15:11	13:24 19:5,9	47:2
	8:8 11:10 25:12	_	20:25 26:1 27:2	
	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

mentions 49:12	3:1,6 49:6	objectives 3:16	26:22 27:2	perfectly 3:15
mere 8:16 13:22	national 16:22	3:21 4:5 8:2,5,6	32:25 36:7,19	7:5 11:12 20:25
merely 20:14	nationwide 17:20	9:10 10:19 12:5	36:23 50:17,19	23:22 49:10
26:6	necessarily 6:1	25:10 27:22	50:19 51:15	performance
middle 38:14,15	13:2	32:22 33:16,17	oral 1:12 2:2,5,9	26:10
39:5,7,8	necessary 33:15	35:13 36:9,16	3:6 16:5 25:4	period 19:14
midnight 13:11	neck 43:15 44:5	37:12 45:11,12	outboard 39:8	permit 4:9
mind 24:9 31:14	need 18:22	45:13 46:7,17	42:19	person 35:4
minimal 10:9	negative 42:15	46:18,19 48:22	outweighed	perspective 7:23
13:16	43:4,12	48:25 49:2	23:20	Petitioner 1:17
minimum 5:9 6:9	neutral 7:24	obligation 18:5	overall 11:2 50:7	42:17
7:22 9:8,22,25	never 13:3,13	31:15	51:1	Petitioners 1:4
10:3,4,8 13:21	50:13	obstacle 4:2 10:6	overly 45:21	1:21 2:4,8,14
16:11,23 18:24	new24:22	13:17 29:3	46:2	3:7 16:7 28:17
22:18 25:15,24	NHTSA 5:11,17	obstructing 5:18	overridden 17:14	32:1 37:14 41:7
26:10 27:8 29:8	6:1,9,14,22,23	42:7 47:15		46:10 49:7
32:7,8,13,19	17:4 18:2,3,4,6	obstruction	P	Petitioner's 23:8
32:24 33:2,9,24	19:25,25 20:5	26:15,16	P 3:1	34:16 35:6
34:2,4 35:24	20:24 23:6,23	obtain 10:23 11:6	page 2:2 17:13	phase-in 20:17
36:20,22 41:21	23:25 24:9 29:6	obvious 43:24	21:20 22:2	24:19
50:18,20 51:16	34:25 39:17,23	obviously 6:24	48:12	pick 33:12
52:11,13	42:20,24 43:15	29:18 36:6	pages 30:1	place 21:19
minivans 23:16	43:19,23 45:6	52:15	parents 38:3,4	49:18
minor 50:10	51:5 52:16	offered 11:2	42:21 43:16	places 40:16
minute 27:24	NHTSA's 5:23	office 30:3 33:23	44:21	plaintiff 14:12
minutes 49:5	12:22 20:5	oh 4:14	part 7:21	51:2
missed 18:25	nonuniformity	once 8:25	participate 19:25	plaintiffs 38:13
mission 45:24	15:20	operate 3:25	20:1	play 3:20 4:19
mix 10:17 27:1	non-tethered	operation 22:20	particular 6:15	5:6 15:17
27:14	37:22	operative 3:16	13:1 21:7 36:10	please 3:9 16:2,9
moment 7:2 13:1	note 28:17 34:16	opinion 29:1,19	particularly	25:7
money 18:8	notice 22:3 42:14	29:23 50:13	25:19	point 3:18 6:7
monitoring 45:7	45:16	opportunity 46:3	party 20:2	19:17 27:17
motor 1:6 3:21	notwithstanding	opposite 10:10	passed 46:11	47:25 49:25
13:23 26:9 36:2	34:19	10:20	passengers	51:22
Motors 20:10	November 1:10	option 26:7,23	17:25	pointed 52:9
23:3 47:1	nullify 6:10	28:2 32:18,20	passes 9:14	points 40:3
move 11:25		32:24 33:2,4,4	passive 8:20,22	policy 8:18 16:17
movement 37:22	0	33:11 37:6	10:17 14:4	18:4 19:4 20:15
mucking 4:15	O 2:1 3:1	41:23 42:4	20:16	20:19,20 23:23
multimillion	objection 31:16	45:10 50:18	pay 15:22	popular 21:16
46:14,22	objective 5:24	51:20,21	pennies 26:2,5	portion 42:13
	7:6,9,10,13	options 8:4 9:7,9	people 23:16,17	pose 16:16 43:24
N	10:23 14:16,17	19:3,6 20:13,14	30:2 31:9	posed 28:10
N 1:16 2:1,1,3,13	46:8,8 48:10	17.5,0 20.15,11	percent 43:16	P 3504 23.10
	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	-	<u> </u>

position 3:12	13:11,14 15:5	46:22	rearward 39:22	13:14 24:13
5:16 12:17,18	19:15 32:15	purpose 9:15	42:8	Regulations 37:5
17:15 20:11	37:1	39:22 40:19	reason 5:10,17	regulatory 12:8
23:7 29:10,13	preemptive	pursues 7:9	9:16 18:10	29:12,20 41:15
35:2 46:10 48:8	13:18 24:6 34:6	put 26:2 28:5,6	22:17 24:8 26:4	49:12,19,20
positions 7:4,7	prepared 6:18	31:14 38:4	33:8 36:8,15	50:12
7:17,23 10:22	present 27:14	42:21 47:14,16	41:19 48:20	rejected 22:1
11:5,8,11 16:24	41:25	48:23	49:20,21 50:25	37:13 52:8
39:20,23 49:15	presented 19:20	puts 35:20	reasonably	related 50:5
positive 42:15	20:16	putting 10:13	50:17,21	relief 5:22 6:21
43:4,11,11	presents 20:15	43:17 44:22	reasons 6:15	relies 15:16
possibility 15:6	preserve 3:24	p.m 52:22	42:17	reluctant 31:7
15:18,20	51:12		rebuttal 2:12	rely 29:13
possible 5:20	preserved 28:16	Q	16:2 49:6	remain 19:5
15:20 47:24	42:5 51:14	question 4:18	recognize 28:17	remedies 15:11
possibly 5:1	52:15,17	12:1,3 16:19	recognized 7:18	removed 22:2
potential 49:25	prevented 24:4,6	19:20,24 25:14	26:20 27:21	replicated 24:20
51:15	preventing 11:1	32:16 37:1,21	28:8 33:19 35:1	reply 23:8 34:16
practicability	pre- 1989 18:16	41:2 51:24	35:8 37:24	reproduced 23:8
25:10 26:21	price 15:22	questions 49:3	39:17 41:17,24	request 21:5
27:22 32:5,22	primarily 31:2	quite 36:6	42:6 43:21,23	25:15
33:16 35:9,12	principle 40:1	quo 28:17 42:5	46:18,20 47:8	require 5:12 6:22
36:16 37:12,16	private 20:1	quoted 31:5	recognizes 17:23	12:16 17:7 18:3
45:11,12 46:7	problem31:11		17:23	25:16,21 39:25
46:19 48:22	40:15 44:5	R	recognizing	40:6 45:17
practical 29:25	47:11	R 3:1	48:13	46:12 48:23
30:16,17 33:1	proceed 24:10	rare 20:17 34:9	recommend 31:8	requirement
38:15 39:15	prohibit 44:6	36:4,4 48:7	recommended	24:22
47:23 51:8	promoting 4:1	rational 4:21	21:23,24	requiring 12:14
practically 40:11	proposed 22:3	rationale 3:13	record 29:12,20	12:23 46:2
predict 20:11	42:14	22:23	30:2,23,25 36:8	reserve 16:1
preempt 6:9,10	protect 32:21	read 31:20 40:5	38:24 41:4,5,15	resolve 32:15
20:13 22:20	protection 11:2	48:5	reference 43:3	36:25
32:13	proved45:23	real 43:21	referred 21:4	resolved 44:12
preempted 3:13	provide 15:24	realization 10:6	referring 42:18	47:22
3:14 4:4 18:18	37:6	really 26:16 27:1	refers 42:14	resolving 45:8
18:19,21 19:18	provided 39:16	27:13 41:5	reflects 15:21	resort 19:23
22:5,11 26:6,11	provides 22:19	50:13,15	regard 15:18	respect 7:17 37:2
28:7 34:18,20	50:16,20	rear 3:17 10:22	51:24	41:14
34:21 35:25	providing 4:19	11:4 23:21 24:2	regardless 7:9	respects 51:23
49:2	5:7 52:18	28:13 34:15	Register 34:11	52:1
preemption 3:19	provision 12:10	38:4 42:6,18,19	36:14 43:5,6	responded 20:7
4:3 9:20,23	public 8:21	42:21 45:18	46:1	35:16
11:19 12:19	punitive 46:14	46:12 47:12	regulation 13:10	Respondents
11.17 12.17	Pulluve 40.14	49:17,21 50:11	regulation 15.10	Respondents

	1	1	1	1
1:23 2:11 16:10	46:11 47:6	46:3,8,18 48:21	42:22,23,24	see 31:6,14
22:14 23:5,12	48:18	49:9,13 50:3,10	44:14,15 46:15	36:15 37:8
25:5	rulemaker 17:4	52:16,18	46:24 49:18,21	seek 5:22
responds 20:5	rulemaking 21:1	sake 20:21	49:23	seeking 6:21
response 23:13	21:14 22:3	San 1:16	seatbelt 5:12	seeks 11:6
36:18 40:4	24:10,19 28:11	satisfied 8:7	11:4 12:8 16:11	sees 19:6
responses 19:19	37:24 42:14	satisfy 8:2	21:16,22 23:20	sense 4:14,16
rest 16:1	43:24 45:25	saved 24:11	25:12 26:24	6:14 15:12
restrained 34:24	rulemakings	savings 3:23	28:6 41:12	36:24 38:16
restraint 8:20,23	45:7	6:11 13:22	48:19,20 49:23	39:16
10:17 14:4	rules 4:8,11 37:4	15:16,21 16:12	seatbelts 3:17	sentence 23:11
20:17	37:8,9	22:19 24:11	10:22,24,25	serious 11:1
result 34:25	ruling 26:1	48:11 52:10,14	16:23 17:2,8,12	26:21 35:9
results 15:7	rushed 20:23	saying 8:24	17:16,24 18:8	serve 20:21 36:9
16:14	24:23	13:16 16:25,25	19:10,21 21:1	37:11
right 6:13 10:11		27:9 29:15 32:8	21:15,18,18	served 25:10
12:14 14:11	S	40:10,14,20	22:14,16,25	27:22 35:11
24:23 30:13	S 2:1 3:1	41:6 43:20	23:14,24 24:2,2	serves 32:21
31:3 50:8	safe 15:11 20:22	45:16	24:7 28:9,9	service 20:23
right-hand 39:4	safer 5:8,9 21:15	says 9:13,14	34:12	24:23
risk 28:7 35:17	23:24 26:3	10:4 13:16,17	seating 3:12 5:16	set 10:2 21:20
35:20 43:22,25	49:22 52:19	13:22 15:10,11	7:4,7,17,23	25:24 28:24
44:25	safest 28:2 33:12	15:15 25:16,17	10:22 11:4,7,11	34:4
risks 28:10	38:5 49:18,24	26:1,11 27:1	16:24 39:20,22	sets 29:7 32:7
road 51:11	50:7	29:5,7 30:7	49:15	setting 32:7
roads 20:22	safety 3:21 4:1	31:13,22 32:12	seats 3:17 21:7,9	36:19
ROBERTS 3:3	6:1,2 7:18	32:14 33:24,24	21:11,23 22:24	SG 31:13,21,22
5:10,21 6:4,12	10:23 11:7	35:18 41:10,12	23:2 24:2 28:13	SG's 30:3 50:25
7:8 12:9,13,20	13:18,23 15:23	48:18 52:14	34:15,17 37:19	shoulder 5:19
13:25 16:3 17:6	16:11 17:4 18:7	Scalia 4:6,12,13	38:2 39:13 42:6	14:22 21:25,25
25:2 36:17,22	18:18 19:10	4:17,24 5:3,5	42:19,19,25	22:2 31:6 34:24
49:4 50:2,22	20:4,22 21:3,13	8:9,14 14:10,14	43:17,19 44:21	43:14,25 47:12
52:20	22:22,23 23:18	14:19,23 15:1,4	44:22 45:18,22	49:14
role 3:20,25 4:19	23:19,19 24:20	38:18,22,25	46:12 47:8,10	show 16:15 22:14
5:6 15:17	25:9,19 26:9,21	39:1,12 44:6,10	47:13	shown 16:17
roof 26:11 47:16	27:21,22 28:2,7	45:1,4	second 19:24	shows 27:18
row35:4 38:15	28:10,24 29:4	scope 40:17	30:3 37:7 40:9	side 7:14 31:5
39:3,4,5,6,7	32:3,4,21 33:16	seat 21:19,24	43:3	39:3,4,7,14
rows 39:2	34:10,13 35:9	23:17,21 31:8,8	secondly 43:11	47:14 50:1
rule 12:8,9 16:16	35:12 36:2,16	38:4,5,6,12,12	second-guess	significant 3:24
21:5 29:7 31:25	37:12,16 40:7	38:14,15,16,20	9:1 52:5	15:17 17:22
34:12,14 36:10	41:25 42:2,3,7	38:20 39:5,7,7	sedan 26:2 28:5	similar 14:20
37:2,3,13,15	42:11 43:25	39:8,8,11,15	48:1	similarly 8:11
44:24 45:5	44:5,23,25 45:9	42:9,19,22,22	sedans 25:19	simpler41:3
	45:10,21,24			_
	I	I	I	I

		 I	 I	
simply 7:13 9:22	spools 31:9	33:24,24 35:17	9:12	theoretical 29:25
16:25,25 22:19	Sprietsma 4:18	35:18 51:19	supposedly	theoretically
27:6 36:19	4:21	52:9	14:11	11:25 47:24
simultaneously	stand 29:3	statutes 9:19	Supremacy 12:1	theory 10:14
15:24	standard 3:16	statutory 25:9	Supreme 1:1,13	11:6,15,18,22
sit 21:21 51:22	6:1,9 7:22 9:8	32:21 45:13	sure 6:13 32:17	22:7 35:7
sitting 39:9	9:22 10:4,7,8,9	46:8	44:7	they'd 31:15
situation 25:14	13:23 16:11,23	strap 50:3,4	system 9:1 15:22	thing 14:1 29:25
27:12,12 34:1,9	17:4 20:4 22:18	straps 47:15	44:12,19 51:10	30:1 44:20 49:1
35:8,19 45:5	22:20 24:21	stretch 42:1	systems 8:23	51:5
48:6,7	25:16,24 26:9	string 20:8		things 40:1
size 25:20	26:10 29:8 34:3	structural 39:16	T	think 4:17 6:16
small 15:22	34:5,8 50:18,20	structure 26:11	T 2:1,1	6:18 7:16 9:6
21:21	51:17,20 52:16	struggled44:10	take 10:3 20:12	10:9 11:20
Solicitor 1:18	standards 5:9	studied 4:9	34:9 44:1 45:2	12:15 13:13,15
5:11 33:23	6:15 10:3 13:16	stuff 31:13	50:23	15:4,15,25 20:7
solved 44:22	13:18,21 15:23	submitted 52:21	taken 23:23 40:1	22:12 23:22
sorry 18:14 19:7	28:24 29:4 33:3	52:23	takes 6:1	24:14,15 27:3,5
30:17 35:15	36:2,4 52:11,11	substantially	talk 50:2	28:20 29:9,10
sort 45:20 51:5	52:14	45:19	talked 34:22	29:13,17 30:17
Sotomayor 18:12	standpoint 36:12	subvert 52:6	38:19 45:11	30:21 31:4,21
18:14,15,20,22	37:16	sued 11:17 35:3	talking 5:16	31:22,23 33:12
21:4 25:13	state 3:25 4:4,9	35:6	technical 9:4	34:1 36:11
26:13 27:24	4:15 5:22 6:4,6	sufficed 8:2	47:9.	40:14 41:4,5,14
28:4 32:6,11,17	6:10 8:3 9:10	sufficient 6:8	technology 6:16	41:20 47:1,4
32:23 33:6,9	9:13 10:5 12:4	suggest 9:8,10	6:24,25 7:1	48:18 50:15
35:15 36:1,18	13:3,8 16:14,16	suggested 23:5	35:22	51:4,7,23 52:3
38:11 40:14	17:15,18 20:2,3	suggesting 22:15	tell 30:4 33:12	thinks 28:1
47:18,25	22:20 32:1,13	suggests 42:17	36:17,18	thought 5:10
sought 8:19	35:25 37:14	suit 11:23,25	telling 10:10,19	7:12 9:10 18:7
18:11	46:22 48:14,25	13:12 22:5,7	29:7 30:8 33:24	21:9 29:19
sound 39:24	50:16,20,22	24:10 29:3	33:25 38:1,3	37:19 46:25
so-called 47:6	51:12,13 52:17	39:25 48:25	42:21,24	three 39:2 40:3
space 38:17	statement 33:21	suits 5:4 17:15	tells 34:5	time 5:25 7:2,12
speak 21:12	33:21 40:23	17:18 28:21	tentative 43:4,7	12:25 13:2 16:1
specific 40:7	41:15 43:12	34:6 40:15,19	term 32:12	16:22 18:3,21
specifically 7:2	states 1:1,13,20	supplement 4:8	terminology	19:12,17 21:7
15:18 21:17	2:7 16:6 19:22	4:10	38:23	22:10,17 24:1
22:1,13 23:1	40:17	support 17:7,10	terms 7:20 50:10	37:25 38:9
25:9 26:20,23	state's 51:7	supporting 1:21	terrific 44:1	43:15,18 44:21
34:14 37:13	status 28:17 42:5	2:8 16:7	tether 21:8	44:24 45:2,5,22
49:16	statute 9:20,24	supports 15:4	tethered 21:9	47:4
spend 18:8	13:16 15:10	41:15	37:22	times 23:12
spoke 45:5	29:8 32:12,14	suppose 6:12	Thank 16:3 25:2	today 34:20
			25:6 49:4 52:20	
	•	•	<u>'</u>	•

4. 1.11 21.21	10 17 10 20 21	II. 4. 11 1 12 20	l	XX/*II*
toddlers 21:21	18:17 19:20,21	United 1:1,13,20	W	Williamson's
told 12:6 36:12	21:1,11,13,13	2:7 16:6	wait 27:24	3:11
41:10 46:25	21:15,17,18,22	unreasonable	wall 47:14	wished 17:2
tort 3:25 6:4,6	22:5,7,8,13,15	11:13	want 4:14 17:8	Wood 20:10
9:1 12:21 17:15	23:14,19,23	unsafe 22:24	17:11 22:23	24:16
17:18 24:10	24:7 26:24 28:9	23:16	24:23 26:3,5	word 22:23 23:4
28:21 29:3 32:2	28:13 31:25	unusual 24:18	27:7 31:25 32:1	work 31:10
34:6 37:14	33:17 34:12	27:14	32:2,8 33:21	world 40:9,11
39:25 40:15,18	35:3,7 38:3	urge 23:10	37:14 41:6 43:8	46:20
48:25 50:16,20	41:7,11,12,16	usage 11:4	51:22	worried 17:12
50:22 51:7,10	41:24 42:1,8	use 21:9,16,24	wanted 8:21 18:4	worries 17:13
51:12,13	43:14,22 44:15	usually 20:1	18:6 27:1,13,19	worth 18:2
touch 20:3	45:17,21 46:13	$\overline{\mathbf{v}}$	27:20 29:16	wrong 11:16
tradeoff 17:20	46:15,23 47:2,7	v 1:5 3:4,13	35:9	31:22
tradeoffs 26:21	47:10 48:19,19	48:12	wants 40:18	wrote 29:18
27:21 34:22	49:14,23 50:6	van 26:4 48:1	warranted 16:23	39:18
35:9	51:1,15,15	van 20:4 48:1 vans 25:20,21	Washington 1:9	Wyeth 30:19
Transportation	types 7:4 8:20		1:19,22	52:2,4,8,9
29:2	52:1	variety 8:19 10:17,21 14:4	wasn't 8:11 10:4	X
trapped 23:16	typical 26:8	· ·	10:4 16:23	
tremendous 7:18	typically 50:23	14:18 18:11	19:15 24:6	x 1:2,8
tried44:14	U	20:20,21	38:11 43:14	Y
true 19:13 38:9		vehicle 3:21 4:1	47:5	years 19:14
41:13	ultimately 4:22	11:8,13 13:23	way 8:4 9:9 14:21	30:24 43:18
trust 4:7	29:21 44:11,17	26:9 36:2 39:15	31:12 38:6	44:23
Truthfully 47:5	48:16	52:18	41:10 50:9,13	77.23
try 31:12	unambiguously	vehicles 5:9	51:17	0
trying 6:7,7	41:8	10:15 48:9	ways 22:17	08-1314 1:5 3:4
10:20,21 41:8	underlies 30:18	52:19	Wednesday 1:10	
41:25	undermined	verdicts 12:3	weigh 51:3	1
turn 8:15	46:17,19	15:7,19	weighing 52:1	1 7:24 10:22
two 9:7 19:19	understand 6:13	version 3:16	weight 29:1,5,6	11:18 12:11
22:17 25:23	7:10 11:16	versus 19:20	went 44:17,17	13:10,11 16:11
26:2,5,22 39:13	38:18 41:2	20:10 21:13	weren't 8:11	19:20 21:13,18
50:19	50:24	44:13 48:1	43:19	22:8,16 28:9,18
type 3:17 5:12	understanding	51:21 52:2,4	we're 25:23	34:16 35:7 38:3
6:25 7:3,19,24	5:14 24:1	victims 4:1,20	26:12	41:11 43:16
7:24 8:8,12	Unfortunately	5:7 15:24	whatsoever	51:15,20
10:22,22,24,25	38:21	view 17:10 24:12	49:19	10 19:14
11:10,17,18	uniform 16:22	28:23 29:2	wide 51:4	11:06 1:14 3:2
12:8,11,11,13	uniformly 19:14	views 20:5,6	WILLIAM 1:18	12:03 52:22
12:14,23 16:11	47:3	virtually 36:3	2:6 16:5	15241 34:11
16:23 17:2,8,11	unique 28:10	44:3	Williamson 1:3	16 2:8
17:16,23 18:8	34:8 35:8 41:22	vision 42:8 50:5	3:4	19 48:12
	41:25 44:2 45:8	50:11		
	I	<u> </u>	I	I

		erar - Subject to I mar ic		
1984 19:12 21:4	2004 47:6			
25:8 26:20	2010 1:10			
28:11 31:24	208 3:16			
34:11,18,18,20	22819 46:1			
37:24 42:4	25 2:11 21:20			
44:25	25 2.11 21.20			
1989 3:16 6:24	3			
7:17 21:1,6,14	3 1:10 2:4 51:3			
24:9 25:8 26:20				
28:17 31:2,4,23	4			
34:15,17,21	40,000 30:1			
37:18,24 38:8	47988 43:6			
38:10 42:10	47989 43:6			
43:24 45:15	47990 22:2			
46:11 47:5,23	49 2:14 34:11			
1990 20:11				
1990 20.11 1991 23:3	5			
1993 7:7 11:8,12	52 46:1			
1994 23:6 48:4	53 43:6			
1999 44:18	8			
	80s 37:20			
2	82 18:16,18			
2 3:17 5:12 7:3	84 18:16,18 45:7			
7:19,24 8:8	87 49:11		•	
10:22,24,25	89 18:19 37:20			
11:10,17 12:8	45:8 49:11			
12:11,13,14,23	45.0 45.11			
13:11 16:23	9			
17:2,8,11,16	9 17:13			
17:23 18:8,17				
19:21 21:1,11				
21:13,15,17,22				
22:5,7,13 23:14				
23:19,23 24:7				
28:6,13 31:25				
33:17 34:12				
35:3 41:7,12,16				
41:24 42:1,8				
43:14,22 44:15				
45:17,21 46:13				
46:15,23 47:2,7				
47:10 49:14				
51:1,15,21				
20 30:24 43:18				
44:23				
1				