Comment

ADMINISTRATIVE LAW: RETROACTIVE REVISION OF INVALID REGULATIONS.

On Christmas day, 1946, the Administrator of the Wage and Hour Division of the Department of Labor issued a regulation with no designated effective date.\(^1\) The accompanying press release stated that for enforcement purposes the regulation would be applied beginning March 1, 1947.\(^2\) For purposes of determining the liability of employers for back wages, however, the effective date of the regulation is October 22, 1938.

This extreme retroactivity is required by the 1944 Supreme Court decision of Addison v. Holly Hill Co.,\(^3\) where the Court held an earlier regulation invalid and remanded the case to await issuance of a valid substitute, to be retroactively applied. Employees of a cannery were suing for back wages under the Fair Labor Standards Act.\(^4\) The employer contended that the cannery was located within the "area of production" engaged in canning agricultural commodities for market\(^5\) and, therefore, that the employees were not covered by the Act. To this the employees pointed out that (1) the "area of production" exemption in the Act depends upon "area of production (as defined by the Administrator)"\(^6\), (2) the Administrator had defined "area of production" by regulation,\(^7\) and (3) that the cannery did not meet the requirements of the regulation and thus was not exempt.\(^8\) The employer answered that the Administrator had exceeded the scope of his authority by including in the definition certain requirements

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\(^2\) 1946 W.H. 1515.

\(^3\) (June 5, 1944) 322 U.S. 607; Notes (1944) 153 A.L.R. 1026, 1188.


\(^5\) Ibid. at 1060, 1067, 29 U.S.C. (1940) § 213: "The provisions of sections 6 and 7 of this title [prescribing maximum hours, minimum wages, and time and a half for overtime], shall not apply with respect ... (10) to any individual employed within the area of production (as defined by the Administrator), engaged in ... canning of agricultural or horticultural commodities for market."

\(^6\) 52 Stat. (1938) 1060.

\(^7\) 29 C.F.R. (1938 Supp.) § 536.2(b), as amended, 29 C.F.R. (1939 Supp.) § 536.2(a), (d), (e). The first cited regulation is typical: "An individual shall be regarded as employed in the 'area of production' ... (b) if the agricultural or horticultural commodities are obtained by the establishment where he is employed from farms in the immediate locality and the number of employees in such establishment does not exceed seven . . . ."

\(^8\) The cannery had more than seven employees.
which Congress had not authorized. The Court sustained this contention and held the regulation invalid.\(^9\)

Had the definition been expressed in a mere interpretive regulation (one not based on a delegation of legislative power), the Court itself would have redefined "area of production" and applied its new definition retroactively. But this was a legislative regulation (one based on an actual and proper delegation of legislative power)\(^10\) and hence the Court conceded that it would be out of its province if it attempted to redefine the term.\(^11\)

Having decided that the Administrator should redefine, the Court had three alternatives with respect to the application of a definition to the past: (1) To direct that the new regulation be applied retroactively, beginning with the date of the invalid regulation. This was the position of the majority (and October 22, 1938 is thus the effective date for the regulation issued on Christmas day, 1946). (2) To direct that the new regulation be applied prospectively, and for the past to hold that no regulation existed. This was the position of Justices Rutledge, Black, and Murphy.\(^12\) (3) To direct that the new regulation be applied prospectively, and for the past to allow the invalid regulation to stand as the rule for persons who have relied on it. This is the position advocated in this comment.

**ALTERNATIVE 1: APPLY THE NEW REGULATION RETROACTIVELY.**

Is there justification for holding in 1944 that a regulation issued in 1946 should be effective as of 1938?\(^13\) Ordinarily, because of general objections to retroactivity, we dislike the prescription of rules of conduct for the past.\(^14\) The prescription of such rules necessarily subjects the maker to greater temptation to partiality. The objectivity expected in general rules of conduct is well-nigh impossible to attain

\(^9\) The Court held that the administrator had exceeded the scope of his authority in defining "area" in terms of "number" of employees. Rutledge, Black, Murphy, and Douglas, JJ., dissented on this point.


\(^12\) This was their second ground of dissent.

\(^13\) Courts have occasionally remanded cases pending a decision by administrative agencies, but the awaited action either has been adjudication or has affected only parties before the court. See Notes (1944) 153 A. L. R. 1026; (1939) 53 Harv. L. Rev. 105; (1939) 39 Col. L. Rev. 1406.

when those rules are to be retroactive. Further, since there is no advance notice, nothing can be done to conform. One who happened to follow the correct course is safe; otherwise, in spite of all he may do, he is subject to penalty.

If the Administrator's Christmas-day regulation fails to exempt a cannery that was exempt under the invalid regulation, the employees of that cannery can sue for back wages under the Fair Labor Standards Act. This would increase the cannery's production costs retroactively: a hardship to the employer, and a windfall to the employee, neither of which is favored by the law.

The basic objection to retroactive civil laws is analogous to the objection that led the framers of the Constitution to forbid the passage of ex post facto criminal laws: an inherent feeling of injustice in the matter. For this reason courts turn to retroactivity only as a lesser evil.

It is true that court decisions which overrule previous decisions are normally applied retroactively. But here the analogy is not judicial, but legislative: legislative power has been delegated to an administrative officer. If Congress itself had defined "area of production", and if employers and employees had acted in reliance on this definition, a retroactive revision by Congress would have been unconstitutional. Does it not follow here, where Congress had delegated the power to define, that if the Administrator himself had held his definition incorrect, he could not have revised it retroactively? To permit him to do so would be to permit him to rise above his source and do what his creator could not do.

The cases on this subject fall into two classes: (1) tax cases, where moderate retroactivity is normally permitted, and (2) non-
tax cases, where retroactivity is normally objectionable. The leading non-tax case supported the legislative analogy by holding that the Interstate Commerce Commission could not retroactively revise rates on which carriers had relied any more than Congress could have done. Does it not seem, then, that the drastic retroactivity required by the Holly Hill case lacks justification, and that such retroactivity will lack justification in most instances?

ALTERNATIVE 2: APPLY THE NEW REGULATION PROSPECTIVELY, WITH NO REGULATION FOR THE PAST.

If in the future, when a court declares a legislative regulation invalid, there is no justification for a holding that a new regulation be applied retroactively, the new regulation must be applied prospectively. The question then is what should be done about the past: should a court hold there was no regulation (Alternative 2), or leave the invalid regulation with enough vitality to protect those who have relied on it (Alternative 3)?

Proponents of Alternative 2 might claim an analogy to one of the theories as to the effect of an unconstitutional statute: a legislature's going beyond its authority usually results in the extinguishment of the statute as a rule for past conduct. In some cases such a holding in connection with invalid regulations might not lead to either an inequitable result or a result opposed to what the delegating source of power (here the legislature) would have wanted. But certainly regulations dealing with a statute's coverage, such as the "area of production" regulation, cannot be declared never to have existed without reaching a result that is both inequitable and opposed to what the legislature would have wanted.

By its terms the Fair Labor Standards Act indicates that Congress wanted some canneries to be exempt and others to be covered. To hold that the Administrator, by exceeding his authority, in effect denied exemption to all canneries is to fly in the face of the statute. In the Holly Hill case the Court said it was the Administrator's duty


Query: Will the statute of limitations protect employers, i.e., can the statute run on a retroactive regulation?

Norton v. Shelby County (1886) 118 U. S. 425; Field, EFFECT OF AN UNCONSTITUTIONAL STATUTE (1935) 3; (1937) 14 Tenn. L. Rev. 634.
to define "area of production", not the Court's. One might well won-
der if there is any point to the Court's refraining from prescribing
the rule for the Administrator and Congress if the Court nevertheless
proceeds to bend its process to bring a result contrary to the intent of
both the Administrator and Congress. The great hardship to all who
have relied on the previous regulation is apparent; and the same
considerations discussed in connection with retroactivity apply with
even greater force. Under Alternative 1, the new regulation may deny
exemption to a cannery that was previously exempt. Under Alterna-
tive 2, this hardship for the employer and windfall for the employee
exists in all instances, since there can be no exemption if there is no
regulation defining the exemption.

Furthermore, does not Alternative 2 make it possible for the Ad-
inistrator to deny exemption to anyone, merely by exceeding his
authority? The result seems similar to permitting the Administrator
to deny all exemptions, by refusing to issue a regulation.

It is suggested that the argument that an invalid legislative regu-
lation should be completely ignored for the past, as is an unconстi-
tutional statute, fails on other scores. The federal Constitution does
not lay down a specific policy, as do most enabling statutes. Hence,
declaring that the past was a void does not lead to a result contrary
to constitutional intent. Furthermore, a court's declaring a statute
unconstitutional does not always result in an absolute void—the stat-
ute frequently retains enough force to protect those who relied on
or acted under it.

ALTERNATIVE 3: APPLY THE NEW REGULATION PROSPECTIVELY,
WITH THE INVALID REGULATION AS THE RULE FOR THE PAST.

The Holly Hill case is a strong precedent for the desirable rule
that when a legislative regulation is held invalid the Court will not
rewrite it. The basis for the Court's self-restraint was congressional
intent: Congress wanted the Administrator, and no one else, to define
"area of production". With this primary emphasis on intent, should

29 E.g., U. S. Const., Art. I, § 8, cl. 3: "The Congress shall have Power ... To regu-
late Commerce ... among the several States ..." is a bald grant of power without policy
or even standards.
30 Chicot County Dist. v. Baxter State Bank (1940) 308 U. S. 371; Waring v. Col-
31 This is implicit from the holding of the majority and the position of the minority.
Language in the opinion further strengthens this rule as a precedent. 322 U. S. at 618.
Mr. Justice Roberts seemingly disagreed on this point (322 U. S. at 623).
held that the part of the regulation referring to the number of employees was invalid,
but allowed the remainder of the regulation to stand. In overruling the circuit court
not the Court's next inquiry have been: what did Congress want to happen if the Administrator exceeded his authority?

In some instances, Congress has made clear the result it wanted, but more often, as in the Fair Labor Standards Act, a statute does not expressly provide for such an eventuality. This does not mean, however, that the Court should abandon its deference to congressional intent. As was previously pointed out, there is an express intent against Alternative 2. When an intent against (or for) Alternative 1 or Alternative 3 cannot be found, it seems the Court should choose the one giving the most equitable result. This would be Alternative 3.

The impromptu objection to Alternative 3 is likely to be a supposed metaphysical difficulty in saying in one breath that a regulation went beyond the drafter's authority and in the next allowing it to stand for the past. This difficulty does not actually exist, of course, if congressional intent points to it as the desirable result. Even if such an intent is not apparent, mere metaphysics should not force a court to an inequitable result, or prevent its reaching the most just result.

Alternative 3 has additional justification. In overruling previous judicial interpretations, courts have held it proper to limit the overruling-decision to prospectivity, and to allow the old decision to stand for the past. The opinions justifying such decisions have used language of "vested rights", "reliance", "change of position", and "contract impairment". The decisions recognize that in many instances great injustice results from retroactively overruling a prior decision. Would not the same injustice fall upon one who relied on a legislative regulation if its invalidity resulted in a retroactive regulation, or no regulation at all?

If the metaphysical objections, which are based on the declaratory theory of Blackstone, can be disregarded when courts interpret a statute against the background of previous judicial interpretations, cannot they be overcome when courts interpret a statute against the background of previous administrative interpretations?

Those who have difficulty in disregarding the unconstitutional-statute analogy may find some justification for Alternative 3 in the infrequent cases where courts have given an unconstitutional statute enough force to protect those who relied on it. Such holdings recog-

the Supreme Court said it could not assume the Administrator would have redefined "area of production" merely by leaving out the number-of-employees section had he known it were invalid. Hence even the Administrator's intent was emphasized.


34 Great Northern Ry. v. Sunburst Oil Co. (1932) 287 U.S. 358, 364, 365, n. 1; (1933) 85 A. L. R. 262.

35 (1933) 42 YALE L. J. 779.

36 Cases cited supra note 30.
nize that merely saying there was no statute (or, in this case, no regulation) does not make it so. The statute (or regulation) was an operative fact—it did exist, and aloofness to this fact will result in injustice, and hardship.

The practical aspects of this alternative are its greatest support. Obviously there is no such thing as complete certainty, but should not one have some security for the past? A person who has complied with a legislative regulation, one that was given the force of law by statute, reasonably expects protection for his compliance. Alternative 3 corresponds to the reasonable expectations of the parties.

Perhaps this alternative would not only be more equitable but would also come closer to the policy of the statute. An administrator makes his regulation only after extensive study of congressional intent and practical necessity. His old regulation, even though invalid, will often come closer to what Congress actually wanted than a retroactive regulation which attempts the difficult task of reconstructing the past (Alternative 1), and certainly closer than no regulation at all (Alternative 2).

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