

Reybold Vs. United States

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Court : US Supreme Court

Decided On : 1872

Appeal No. : 82 U.S. 202

Appellant : Reybold

Respondent : United States

Judgement :

Reybold v. United States - 82 U.S. 202 (1872)

U.S. Supreme Court Reybold v. United States, 82 U.S. 15 Wall. 202 202 (1872)

Reybold v. United States

82 U.S. (15 Wall.) 202

APPEAL FROM THE

COURT OF CLAIMS

SYLLABUS

The government chartered a vessel during the war of the rebellion, the owners agreeing to keep her "tight, stanch, strong, well manned," &c.;, and to bear the marine risks, the war risks to be borne by the government. The vessel was to

proceed "with the *first good opportunity* to such ports and places as ordered and directed by the quartermaster of the government." On the 20th January, 1865, the vessel being then in the Potomac at Washington and the navigation considerably obstructed by ice, the quartermaster consulted her captain about her condition and capacity and was informed that she was sheathed with iron, and was of capacity to take a certain number of men and horses which the government wanted to transport. The quartermaster then ordered the captain to receive the men and horses and to proceed on the next morning down the river to City Point. The captain made no objection to the order, because, as he testified,

"he considered it imperative as a military order, and as such obeyed it, though if he had considered that he could have used his judgment, he would not have left the wharf, as he did not consider

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it safe."

Having accordingly received the men and horses, he set off. In going down the river, the vessel, though "tight, stanch, strong, well manned &c.;" was wrecked by the ice. *Held* that the risk was a marine risk, not one of war, and that though the acquiescence of the master deprived the act of the quartermaster of being a tortious act, no recovery could be had in the Court of Claims.

Reybold, owner of the steamer *Express*, chartered her to the government under a charter party, whereby it was agreed

"That the vessel now is and shall be kept and maintained tight, stanch, strong, and well and sufficiently manned, victualed, tackled, appareled, and ballasted, and furnished in every respect fit for merchant service at the cost and charge of her owner. And when laden shall proceed, *with the first good opportunity*, to such ports and places as ordered and directed by the quartermaster of the United States."

"The war risks to be borne by the United States, the marine risks to be borne by the owner."

On the 20th and 21st of January, 1865, the vessel was at Washington, the Potomac River being then frozen over from bank to bank, the ice eight inches thick, and the channel alone, in which, nevertheless, masses of ice were floating, kept open by the current and by the passage of vessels. In consequence of this condition of the river, the navigation was suspended except by government steamers and the ferry boats. On the 20th of January, the master received an order from the quartermaster to take certain men and horses on board and proceed "tomorrow morning" to a place called City Point.

Previous to giving this order, the quartermaster, in answer to his inquiries, was informed that the vessel was sheathed with iron, and was of *capacity* to take the men, horses &c.;, by the captain, who made no objection to the order, because, as he testified,

"he considered it imperative as a military order, and as such obeyed it, though if he had considered he could have used his judgment, he would not have left the wharf, as he did not consider it safe. "

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Having taken the men and horses on board on the 20th, he set off on the following morning for City Point.

While the vessel was crossing the river, her hull was crushed by heavy cakes of ice, and she filled and sank. The injury in sinking did not arise from any defect in the vessel or any fault on the part of her officers or crew. The Court of Claims found as conclusions of law:

1. That the peril was within the term "marine risks," and therefore to be borne by the owner.
2. That the charter party placed the steamer in the military service of the United States in a time of war, and that the term was to be construed in reference to that

service, and included risks from perils of the sea and seasons incident to that service, and its exigencies.

3. That the steamer, being in the military service, was subject to military orders necessary for the proper performance of the service.

It accordingly gave its decree for the United States. And from that decree the owner of the vessel appealed.

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MR. JUSTICE DAVIS delivered the opinion of the Court.

This case is in only one particular different from that of *Morgan v. United States*, decided at the last term. [[Footnote 1](#)] Both were contracts of affreightment, with stipulations that the United States should bear the war risk and the owners the marine risk. The hiring in each case was for a particular purpose, the transportation of troops and munitions of war from place to place, as the necessities of the service might require, and although the United States were empowered to direct the manner of loading the vessels and their points of destination, yet the owners retained the control and management of them, and agreed to keep them in good repair and fit for the service in which they were engaged. In each case the loss sued for was occasioned by the perils of the sea, and in both the effort has been, notwithstanding the express terms of the contract that the owners were their own insurers against such risks, to shift the responsibility upon the United States.

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It was insisted in *Morgan's Case* that the owners were relieved and the government chargeable, because the master was compelled to proceed to sea by the peremptory order of the quartermaster, when, in his judgment, expressed to that officer, the state of the wind and tide rendered it hazardous to do so, but we held, as in several previous cases, [[Footnote 2](#)] that if this were so, it was

outside of the contract -- a tortious act of the officer -- and therefore not within the jurisdiction of the Court of Claims.

In the present case, the master made no objection to the order requiring him to proceed on his voyage, and this constitutes the only difference between the two cases. This difference, however, instead of helping the cause of the claimant, makes the justice of the defense still clearer. It was the business of the master to know whether the navigation of the river was dangerous or not, and naturally he would be better informed on such a subject than a quartermaster of the United States. How are we to know, in the absence of proof, that the order would have been given, or, if given, not withdrawn, had the master stated that in his opinion, in the state of the river, it was unsafe to attempt to make the voyage? Why not speak of the danger when he told the quartermaster, in reply to an inquiry on the subject, prior to the order being given, that his vessel was sheathed with iron and had capacity to take the men and horses to City Point? This was the time to have spoken, as the object of the inquiry was plainly to ascertain whether or not the boat, if she had the requisite capacity, was in a condition to withstand the masses of ice which were floating in the channel of the river. It is very clear that upon the information which was given, in the absence of any objection to the proposed voyage, the officer of the government had the right to suppose, in the judgment of the master, it could be safely undertaken. It is no excuse to say that the master at the time knew it was unsafe to leave the wharf, but said nothing

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because he considered the order a military one, and as such to be obeyed. It is true, by the terms of the contract of affreightment he was subject to the orders of the quartermaster, but this contract did not require him to sail out of port during such tempestuous weather as would necessarily jeopardize the safety of his boat.

If obedience to an order given under such circumstances had been demanded after proper objection, it would have been a tortious act on the part of an officer of the government.

In such a case, if relief is to be afforded, it must come from Congress, for the Court of Claims has no power to entertain a suit based on a consideration of this character.

If, however, the master chose to obey the order without objection, and in the course of the voyage the steamer commanded by him is lost or injured by a peril of the sea, her owners can have no just cause of complaint against the government, and must abide the consequences of their stipulation.

In every aspect of the case, the judgment of the Court of Claims should be

Affirmed.

[[Footnote 1](#)]

14 Wall. 531.

[[Footnote 2](#)]

[Reed v. United States](#), 11 Wall. 591; [United States v. Kimbal](#), 13 Wall. 636.