Harmless Error: The Need for a Uniform Standard

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NOTES AND COMMENTS

HARMLESS ERROR: THE NEED FOR A UNIFORM STANDARD

INTRODUCTION

The harmless error doctrine enables an appellate court to affirm a criminal conviction despite errors committed by the trial court, provided that the defendant was not prejudiced. Implicit in the doctrine is a recognition that “[a] defendant is entitled to a fair trial but not a perfect one.” Thus, when error is not of constitutional magnitude, it is usually deemed harmless if it does not “affect the substantial rights of the parties.” A more stringent standard has developed, however, for appellate review of criminal convictions tainted by violations of federal constitutional rights. In such circumstances, the Supreme Court has determined that constitutional errors may be deemed harmless only when an appellate court can declare a belief “beyond a reasonable doubt that the error complained of did not contribute to the verdict obtained.”


Although the Chapman opinion did not attempt to present the full range of errors which might require automatic reversal, several means have been suggested by which such errors may be identified. One proposal suggests that if an error affects the integrity of the guilt determination process, automatic reversal is warranted. Note, Harmless Constitutional
In attempting to fashion concrete and workable tests to implement these broad definitions of harmlessness, appellate courts have developed several methods of assessing error. First, an appellate court may evaluate the effect of the error without regard to the untainted evidence in the case. Thus, if the error in the abstract is prejudicial, reversal is required. A second way for determining harmlessness is to view the error in relation to the other evidence in the case. Under this approach, the error will be found harmless if there is no "reasonable possibility that [it] . . . contributed to the conviction." A third method deems an error harmless when it

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Error, 20 STAN. L. REV. 83, 89 (1967) [hereinafter cited as Harmless Constitutional Error]. In addition to the errors listed by the Chapman Court, it has been argued that violations of any rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, with the exception of evidence seized in violation of the fourth amendment, should require automatic reversal. Id. at 88-95. Another commentator has suggested that automatic reversal should occur where the error is inherently prejudicial, undermines deterrence of prosecutorial misconduct, or undermines respect for the judicial system. Mause, Harmless Constitutional Error: The Implications of Chapman v. California, 53 MINN. L. REV. 519, 538-57 (1969). Errors which are inherently prejudicial include those involving the impartiality of jury or judge. Id. at 540-43. When there is racial discrimination in the selection of jurors, for example, automatic reversal is desirable, since the prejudicial impact is not readily ascertainable. Mause, supra, at 542. Likewise, Professor Mause argues that admission into evidence of prior convictions is inherently prejudicial. Id. at 545-46. He also suggests that constitutional errors caused by prosecutorial misconduct should result in automatic reversal only when the prosecutor knowingly causes the error. Id. at 553; see, e.g., Brady v. Maryland, 373 U.S. 83 (1963) (suppression of evidence favorable to defense); Mooney v. Holohan, 294 U.S. 103 (1935) (per curiam) (knowing use of perjured testimony by prosecutor). The author concludes that, in the long run, an automatic reversal standard may be appropriate for all constitutional errors. Mause, supra, at 557.

A third proposal would create an automatic reversal rule when the constitutional right infringed is fundamental. See Harmless Error Standard, supra, at 620. Whether a right is fundamental depends upon the extent to which it is explicitly recognized by the Constitution, the importance accorded the right as indicated by statute and the judiciary's historical attitude toward the right. Id. at 621-25. The right-to-counsel provision of the sixth amendment provides an illustration of the author's "explicitness" requirement. In the author's view, since the right to the assistance of counsel at trial is expressly guaranteed by the Constitution, see Gideon v. Wainwright, 372 U.S. 335 (1963); Johnson v. Zerbst, 304 U.S. 458 (1938), a rule of automatic reversal should apply when this right is infringed. As the right to counsel has been extended to critical pretrial proceedings, see, e.g., United States v. Wade, 388 U.S. 218 (1967), the right has become "less explicit" and, therefore, should not fall within an automatic reversal rule. Harmless Error Standard, supra, at 622. A constitutional right is also fundamental to the extent that it is reflected in congressional statutory policy. Under this approach, reversal is required if the defendant establishes a violation of a right granted by federal legislation. Id. at 623. See also Miller v. North Caroline, 583 F.2d 701 (4th Cir. 1978). It also has been suggested that the automatic reversal rule should be applied to any error which "bias[es] the machinery for bringing evidence before the jury." Note, Harmless Constitutional Error: A Reappraisal, 83 HARV. L. REV. 814, 820 (1970) [hereinafter cited as Reappraisal]. See generally R. TRAYNOR, THE RIDDLE OF HARMLESS ERROR (1970); Cameron & Osborn, When Harmless Error Isn't Harmless, 1971 L. & Soc. Ord. 23.

2 See notes 113-115 and accompanying text infra.

is merely cumulative of other evidence in the case. Finally, if overwhelming evidence of a defendant’s guilt exists when the error is excised from the record, the error may be deemed harmless.

This Note will review and evaluate the rules regarding constitutional error as established by the Supreme Court and implemented by the appellate courts of New York. The separate rules which govern nonconstitutional error in the federal courts and New York’s state courts will be discussed in a similar manner. The Note will conclude by examining the desirability and feasibility of adopting one standard of review for all errors in criminal cases, whether constitutional or nonconstitutional in nature.

HARMLESS CONSTITUTIONAL ERROR

Development of Harmless Constitutional Error in the Supreme Court

At common law, the English “Exchequer Rule” mandated reversal for any trial error no matter how slight or insignificant. This rule, widely followed by American courts, was criticized because it encouraged counsel to inject error into trials and resulted in expense and delay for the parties and the courts. As criminal trials

[Notes and references omitted for brevity.]
became "a game for sowing reversible error in the record," resulting in a reform movement spurred by the legal profession, leading to the adoption of harmless error statutes at the federal and state levels. These statutes were designed to eliminate reversals based solely upon "technical errors or defects which [did] not affect the substantial rights of the parties." Despite the prevalence and popularity of harmless error statutes, most commentators believed that automatic reversal was required in any case involving the violation of a right guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. This view seemed to be shared by the Supreme Court which, with only one exception, reversed convictions without regard to whether the con-


13 See R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 14. The federal harmless error rule for nonconstitutional error is governed by 28 U.S.C. § 2111 (1976) and FED. R. CRIM. P. 52 (a). Section 2111 states: "On the hearing of any appeal or writ of certiorari in any case, the court shall give judgment after an examination of the record without regard to errors or defects which do not affect the substantial rights of the parties." 28 U.S.C. § 2111 (1976); see Saltzburg, supra note 9, at 1006 n.57 (1973). The first federal harmless error statute was enacted in 1919 and re-enacted in substantially the same form in 1949; the statute has remained in force since 1949.


15 N.Y. CRIM. PROC. LAW § 470.05(1) (McKinney 1971); see note 14 supra. New York's statutory treatment of harmless error is typical of the standard used in many jurisdictions. The state's first harmless error statute was applicable only to crimes which were punishable by death or life imprisonment. Ch. 337, § 3, [1855] N.Y. Laws 613. Under this statute, an appellate court was able to grant a new trial if the verdict "was against the weight of the evidence or against the law" or when "justice required a new trial." Id. When the Code of Criminal Procedure was enacted in 1881, it contained a harmless error section applicable to all cases without regard to the crime charged. The statute provided: "After hearing the appeal, the court must give judgment, without regard to technical errors or defects or to exceptions which do not affect the substantial rights of the parties." Ch. 4, § 542, [1881] N.Y. Laws 104 (vol. 2). See generally 1 J. Wigmore, supra note 9, § 21, at 387-88. This standard was re-enacted in slightly modified form with the adoption of the Criminal Procedure Law which went into effect on September 1, 1971. Ch. 996, § 1, [1970] N.Y. Laws 3117.


17 In Motes v. United States, 178 U.S. 458 (1900), the Court concluded that the erroneous admission of a statement in violation of the defendant's sixth amendment right to confront witnesses against him was harmless "when in effect [the defendant] stated under oath that he was guilty of the charge preferred against him." Id. at 476. Motes was the only case prior to Chapman v. California, 386 U.S. 18 (1967), in which the Supreme Court applied the harmless error doctrine to a constitutional violation.
stitional error prejudiced the defendant. Nevertheless, neither the courts nor the commentators advanced a satisfactory theory to explain why constitutional error could never be harmless.

The concept of harmless constitutional error was expressly recognized by the Supreme Court in Chapman v. California wherein

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19 The Supreme Court reversed convictions where counsel was denied at trial or at another critical stage, e.g., Gideon v. Wainwright, 372 U.S. 335 (1963); Uveges v. Pennsylvania, 335 U.S. 437 (1948); House v. Mayo, 324 U.S. 42 (1945) (per curiam); Williams v. Kaiser, 323 U.S. 471 (1945), where the trial judge was not impartial, Tumey v. Ohio, 273 U.S. 510 (1927), where a defendant's coerced confession was introduced at trial, e.g., Haynes v. Washington, 373 U.S. 503 (1963); Lynumn v. Illinois, 372 U.S. 528 (1963); Rogers v. Richmond, 365 U.S. 534 (1961); Payne v. Arkansas, 356 U.S. 560 (1958); Watts v. Indiana, 338 U.S. 49 (1949), where conviction was based on an unconstitutional statute, Stromberg v. California, 283 U.S. 359 (1931), where an unconstitutional presumption was included in jury instructions, Bollenbach v. United States, 326 U.S. 607, 614-15 (1946), where pretrial publicity saturated the community in which the trial was held, Rideau v. Louisiana, 373 U.S. 723 (1963); cf. Sheppard v. Maxwell, 384 U.S. 333 (1966) (pretrial publicity and disruptions by press at trial necessitate reversal), where the right to a speedy trial was denied, Klopfer v. North Carolina, 386 U.S. 213 (1967), where intentional discrimination occurred in selection of grand and petit jurors, Whitus v. Georgia, 385 U.S. 545 (1967); Coleman v. Alabama, 377 U.S. 129 (1964), and where the right to cross-examine the prosecution's witness was denied, Douglas v. Alabama, 380 U.S. 415 (1965); Pointer v. Texas, 380 U.S. 400 (1965). The Court, however, never unequivocally stated that automatic reversal is required in every case involving constitutional error. In Kotteakos v. United States, 328 U.S. 750 (1946), the Court noted in dictum that the harmless error rule is applicable to all errors "except perhaps where the departure is from a constitutional norm," id. at 764-65 (footnote omitted), and cited, as examples, cases where coerced confessions were introduced at trial or the defendant was denied the right to represent himself at trial, id. at 765 n.19. This dictum is not necessarily inconsistent with the harmless constitutional error doctrine enunciated in Chapman v. California, 386 U.S. 18 (1967), since forced confessions and denial of the right to counsel are constitutional errors which should be subject to automatic reversal. Id. at 23 & n.8.

20 In Bram v. United States, 168 U.S. 532 (1897), the Supreme Court proferred an explanation for automatic reversal when an admission made by the defendant was erroneously allowed into evidence:

If found to have been illegally admitted, reversible error will result, since the prosecution cannot on the one hand offer evidence to prove guilt, and which by the very offer is vouched for as tending to that end, and on the other hand for the purpose of avoiding the consequences of the error, caused by its wrongful admission, be heard to assert that the matter offered as a confession was not prejudicial because it did not tend to prove guilt.

Id. at 541.

21 386 U.S. 18 (1967). The defendants in Chapman were convicted following a trial in which both defendants refused to testify. At the time of the trial, the California Constitution allowed the prosecutor to comment upon a defendant's refusal to take the stand, and permitted the jury to infer guilt from his refusal. Id. at 19. Making use of this provision, the prosecutor in Chapman made numerous references in his summation to the defendants' silence, id. at 26-43 (app.), and the trial court informed the jurors that they were entitled to draw unfavorable inferences from the defendant's failure to testify. Id. at 19 & n.2. After the trial, the Supreme Court held in an unrelated case that the California practice violated a defendant's rights under the fifth amendment. Griffin v. California, 380 U.S. 609 (1965). Nevertheless, the California Supreme Court refused to overturn the Chapman defendants'
the Court stated that some constitutional errors may be so "unimportant and insignificant" within the context of a given case that they could be deemed harmless without offending constitutional principles. Holding that a state's harmless error rule is inapplicable to "infractions by the States of federally guaranteed rights," the Chapman Court enunciated a federal standard for reviewing the effect of trial errors of constitutional magnitude. The Court ruled that a constitutional violation may be deemed harmless only when the court is convinced that "it was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt." Attempting to formulate more precise guidelines, the Court rejected tests that place excessive emphasis on the quantum of untainted evidence presented at trial and stated that the proper inquiry is "whether there is a reasonable possibility that the [tainted] evidence complained of might have contributed to the conviction." The Chapman decision has been interpreted as indicating that, in evaluating constitutional error, an appellate court should focus solely on the tainted evidence. Under this inter-
interpretation, the tainted evidence is viewed in isolation and is not weighed against the untainted evidence in determining whether the error was harmless. Thus, if the error standing alone is highly prejudicial, it can never be viewed as harmless. This interpretation of Chapman, however, has not been borne out by later decisions.

Subsequently, in Harrington v. California, the Court considered the effect of a denial of a defendant’s sixth amendment right of confrontation under the rule established in Bruton v. United States. While expressly reaffirming Chapman, Justice Douglas, writing for the majority, concluded that the direct evidence of guilt presented at Harrington’s trial was so overwhelming that, unless the Court was to apply an automatic reversal rule to constitutional violations, the error must be considered harmless. Although it found that the erroneously admitted material was merely cumulative of other evidence, the Court expressly rejected a test which would result in a finding of harmlessness when the error is found simply to corroborate untainted evidence in the case. 

Harrington is susceptible to being interpreted as a sub silentio overruling of Chapman and an unqualified adoption of the less de-
manding "overwhelming evidence" test. Upon a closer reading, however, the decisions may be reconciled. In Chapman, the only evidence proving the defendant's guilt was circumstantial. On the other hand, in Harrington, there was direct untainted evidence, including the defendant's own statements, which established the same facts as did the erroneously admitted confessions. Thus, the Harrington Court was not required to speculate on the inferences drawn by the jury in reaching its verdict and could readily conclude that the error played an insignificant part in the prosecution's case.

As implied by Chapman and Harrington, the courts should distinguish between direct and circumstantial evidence, since the type of untainted evidence presented is relevant to a consideration of its probative value.

Like Chapman, Harrington suggests that overwhelming evidence should not be overemphasized in determining harmlessness. The presence of overwhelming evidence is significant, however,
since the greater the evidence of guilt, the less likely it is that the error influenced the jury's decision.\textsuperscript{37} Significantly, in Harrington, both the majority and the dissent believed that the quantum of untainted evidence should be a factor in determining whether constitutional error is harmless.\textsuperscript{38} The majority appeared to place great emphasis on overwhelming evidence of guilt, while the dissenters expressed concern that the amount of untainted evidence would become the decisive factor in determining harmlessness.\textsuperscript{39} Thus, their disagreement apparently was related to the degree of emphasis to be placed on the untainted evidence.

Unfortunately, the last major harmless constitutional error case decided by the Supreme Court, Milton v. Wainwright,\textsuperscript{40} did not serve to clarify the problems posed by Chapman and Harrington. The Milton Court was asked to decide whether statements elicited by a police officer who had been planted in the defendant's jail cell after his attorney had instructed him to remain silent were properly obtained.\textsuperscript{41} Avoiding the constitutional question,\textsuperscript{42} the Court examined the record, which included three untainted confessions and other, "highly damaging" evidence.\textsuperscript{43} On the basis of this

\textsuperscript{37} See notes 118-119 and accompanying text infra.

\textsuperscript{38} 395 U.S. at 254; id. at 256 (Brennan, J., dissenting). The Harrington majority noted that the "weight of the evidence" is significant, id. at 254, while the dissent observed that "[t]he focus of appellate inquiry should be on the character and quality of the tainted evidence as it relates to the untainted evidence and not just on the amount of untainted evidence." Id. at 256 (Brennan, J., dissenting).

\textsuperscript{39} Id. at 256 (Brennan, J., dissenting).

\textsuperscript{40} 407 U.S. 371 (1972).

\textsuperscript{41} Several days after the defendant in Milton was arrested he confessed to the crime. In the days that followed he clarified and added to his statement. In total, he made three complete confessions. Thereafter, he obtained the assistance of an attorney and was advised not to discuss his case with anyone. Id. at 373-75. While the defendant was in jail awaiting trial, the state planted a police officer in his cell. Posing as a fellow prisoner, the officer obtained additional incriminating statements from Milton. At trial, the officer testified to these statements. Id. at 375-76.

\textsuperscript{42} Id. at 372. The dissent in Milton strenuously objected to the majority's refusal to consider the right-to-counsel issue and argued that the manner in which the confession was procured was a clear violation of the defendant's rights under Powell v. Alabama, 287 U.S. 45 (1932), and Massiah v. United States, 377 U.S. 201 (1964). 395 U.S. at 380-82 (Stewart, J., dissenting). The dissent's position, it is submitted, is well taken. If the harmless error doctrine is routinely invoked to avoid constitutional issues, the development of the case law concerning substantive issues will be inhibited. The result could be inconsistency and increased error at the trial level, since trial judges would be left without guidance on important substantive questions. See Note, Application of the Harmless Error Doctrine to Violations of Miranda: The California Experience, 69 Mich. L. Rev. 941, 951 (1971).

\textsuperscript{43} 407 U.S. at 376. In addition to the confessions, there was a substantial amount of circumstantial evidence, including the fact that the defendant was the beneficiary of the victim's life insurance policies, testimony that the defendant told others he was interested
record, the Court held that even if the admission of the illegally obtained statement was error, it was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt. With such overwhelming evidence of guilt, there was "no reasonable doubt that the jury . . . would have reached the same verdict without hearing [the officer's] testimony."

Although Milton professed adherence to the harmless beyond a reasonable doubt standard, a conflict with earlier decisions arises from the Court's conclusion that the jury would have convicted the defendant without having heard the tainted evidence. This approach differs markedly from that suggested in Harrington where the majority stated that an appellate court should determine "the probable impact of the [error] on the minds of the average jury." Since the emphasis is on the impact of the tainted evidence, this approach is consistent with the reasonable possibility test. In contrast, the Milton Court focused on whether the jury would have convicted without the tainted evidence, which appears similar to an overwhelming evidence test.

only in the victim's money, and evidence that the doors of the car in which the victim drowned were locked and could not have been locked accidentally. Id.

The dissenters in Milton took a different view of the evidence. Finding the circumstances under which the defendant's other confessions were obtained somewhat questionable, the dissent challenged the majority's estimation of the weight given to these confessions by the jury. Since the jury rationally might have discounted the reliability of the "untainted" statements, the dissent concluded that there was at least a reasonable possibility that the "tainted" statement had a corroborative effect and contributed to the conviction. Id. at 383-84 (Stewart, J., dissenting).

The problem hinted at by the Milton dissent was illustrated in Schneble v. Florida, 405 U.S. 427 (1972), which was decided only a few months before Milton. The Schneble Court found a violation of Bruton, see note 30 supra, harmless beyond a reasonable doubt, although the evidence against Schneble, in addition to his codefendant's statement, consisted primarily of his confession. 405 U.S. at 428-31. The trial court determined in the first instance that the confession was voluntary, see Jackson v. Denno, 378 U.S. 368 (1964), and instructed the jury to disregard any part of the statement it believed to have been made involuntarily. 405 U.S. at 434 (Marshall, J., dissenting). While the majority viewed the inadmissible statements as largely corroborative of Schneble's confession, it noted that the jury must have viewed the confession as voluntary, since, aside from the confession, there was insufficient proof of guilt. Id. at 431.

407 U.S. at 377.

See id. at 377. Milton reached the Court on a petition of habeas corpus. The test adopted by the Court which, in contrast to other tests, is likely to result in a finding of harmlessness, may reflect a tendency to apply a more lenient standard when a harmless error question comes before the Court on a habeas corpus petition than when error is reviewed on direct appeal. Judge Friendly also favors an approach which utilizes different standards for assessing error depending upon whether the appeal is direct or collateral. See Friendly, Is Innocence Irrelevant?—Collateral Attack on Criminal Judgments, 38 U. Chi. L. Rev. 142, 157 n.81 (1970). See also Henderson v. Kibbe, 431 U.S. 145, 153-57 (1977); Stone v. Powell, 428 U.S. 465 (1976).

395 U.S. at 254.

See, e.g., United States v. Williams, 523 F.2d 407, 409-10 & n.2 (2d Cir. 1975); Null v.
Notwithstanding the uncertainty generated by the Chapman, Harrington and Milton decisions, it remains clear that the "harmlessness" of a trial error of constitutional magnitude must be demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt. The apparent contradictions in the Supreme Court's decisions may reflect the Court's attempt to find a standard for measuring harmlessness which would lead to consistent results. While it may be argued that the test for harmlessness has changed, it is also possible to conclude that the decisions are an indication of the Court's reluctance to establish a mechanical rule.


Chapman was criticized for not establishing a clear and practical standard. See, e.g., Mause, supra note 4, at 538-40; Thompson, Unconstitutional Search and Seizure and the Myth of Harmless Error, 42 Notre Dame Law. 457, 464 (1967); Reappraisal, supra note 4, at 815-17; Oral Argument in Harrington v. California, 395 U.S. 250 (1969), reprinted in 5 CRM. L. REP. 4033 (1969). Decisions in the lower federal courts support the contention that the Court's opinions on harmless constitutional error have not produced a test capable of yielding consistent results. Compare United States v. Hunt, 548 F.2d 268, 268 n.1 (9th Cir. 1977), and United States v. Shuey, 541 F.2d 845, 850 (9th Cir. 1976), cert. denied, 429 U.S. 1092 (1977), with United States v. Gonzalez, 555 F.2d 308, 316 (2d Cir. 1977), and United States v. Hunt, 548 F.2d 268, 268-71 (9th Cir. 1977) (Sneed, J., dissenting). See generally Field, supra note 26, at 15-38.

The inconsistencies in the Chapman, Harrington, and Milton decisions may be attributable to changes in the composition of the Court. In Chapman v. California, 386 U.S. 18 (1967), the majority consisted of Chief Justice Warren and Justices Black, Douglas, Clark, Brennan, White and Fortas with Justices Stewart concurring and Harlan dissenting. The majority in Harrington v. California, 395 U.S. 250 (1969), was comprised of Justices Black, Douglas, Harlan, Stewart and White. The Chief Justice and Justices Brennan and Marshall dissented. By the time Milton v. Wainwright, 407 U.S. 371 (1972), was decided, there were four new justices on the Court. Chief Justice Burger and Justices Blackmun, Powell and Rehnquist comprised the majority in Milton along with Justice White. The dissenters were Justices Douglas, Brennan, Stewart and Marshall. Thus, it is conceivable that this change of the Court's membership may have influenced the Milton Court's apparent preference for the "overwhelming evidence" test. The change in the Court's composition, however, does not explain the seemingly contradictory positions taken by Justices Black, Douglas and Stewart in Chapman and Harrington. Nor does it account for the apparent inconsistency in Justice White's position in all three major harmless constitutional error decisions.

The New York Experience Under the Harmless Constitutional Error Doctrine

Efforts by New York courts to implement the federal harmless constitutional error rule illustrate the varying interpretations to which the Supreme Court's decisions are subject. Although New York appellate courts have applied the harmless error rule to a variety of constitutional violations, prior to the 1975 decision of the New York Court of Appeals in People v. Crimmins, the standard used to measure harmlessness was unclear. In what remains perhaps the most significant statement of when trial error necessitates reversal in New York, the Crimmins court recognized that harmlessness must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Judge Jones, writing for the majority, stated that the threshold inquiry in any harmless error case is whether there is overwhelming evidence of the defendant's guilt. In making this determination, however, the court did not distinguish between direct and circumstantial evidence. Since, with the exception of a single-sentence confession by the defendant, the "overwhelming" evidence was completely circumstantial, it is suggested that the Crimmins majority may have

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56 36 N.Y.2d at 239, 326 N.E.2d at 792, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 219.

57 Id. at 240, 326 N.E.2d at 793, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 221. The Crimmins court stated that overwhelmingness is shown where the untainted evidence is so "compelling" and "forceful" that reasonable jurors "would almost certainly have convicted the defendant." Id. at 242, 326 N.E.2d at 794, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 222.

overlooked an important qualification on the use of the "overwhelming evidence" test implicitly recognized in *Chapman.*\(^9\) While excessive emphasis appears to have been placed on the finding that the evidence of guilt was overwhelming, the court explicitly stated that the critical inquiry under *Chapman* is whether a "reasonable possibility" exists that the error "contributed to the conviction."\(^60\)

The next case decided by the court of appeals was *People v. Almestica,*\(^61\) which involved the erroneous use of evidence seized in an illegal search.\(^62\) In finding that there was no reasonable possibility that this evidence contributed to the conviction, the court relied heavily on the uncontradicted testimony of the victim, which, it stressed, was entirely independent of and not derived from the tainted evidence.\(^63\) Finding that the other evidence introduced at trial was "compelling and convincing,"\(^64\) the court viewed the tainted evidence as "additional conclusive evidence" which was of "negligible significance."\(^65\)

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\(^9\) See notes 33-36 and accompanying text supra.

\(^60\) 36 N.Y.2d at 240-41, 326 N.E.2d at 795, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 221. While the *Crimmins* court indicated that the causal relationship between the error and the verdict is the critical factor, its own inquiry appears to have ended once overwhelming evidence of guilt was found. See *id.* at 237, 326 N.E.2d at 791, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 218.

When discussing nonconstitutional error, the *Crimmins* court declared that "an error is prejudicial in this context if the appellate court concludes that there is a significant probability, rather than only a rational possibility, in the particular case that the jury would have acquitted the defendant had it not been for the error or errors which occurred." *Id.* at 242, 326 N.E.2d at 794, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 222 (emphasis added). By juxtaposing the terms "significant probability" and "rational possibility," the court may have been indicating that the question whether "the jury would have acquitted" is an appropriate inquiry in the assessment of constitutional error. If this is the method for determining whether constitutional error "contributed to the conviction," then the difference between the two tests is reduced to the degree of certainty required of an appellate court before it can deem any error harmless. This analysis of *Crimmins* is supported by the court's subsequent decision in *People v. Almestica,* 42 N.Y.2d 222, 366 N.E.2d 799, 397 N.Y.S.2d 709 (1977); see notes 66-68 and accompanying text infra. Accordingly, the *Crimmins* court formulation may not require a determination of whether an error had an actual impact upon the jury's decision.


\(^62\) *Id.* at 224-26, 366 N.E.2d at 801, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 710-11. The defendants in *Almestica* were charged with robbery and burglary. At trial, the prosecution introduced the stolen goods and the weapons used in the robbery, all of which were seized when an auto the defendants were driving was illegally stopped in violation of *People v. Ingle,* 36 N.Y.2d 413, 330 N.E.2d 39, 369 N.Y.S.2d 67 (1975), and *People v. Simone,* 39 N.Y.2d 818, 351 N.E.2d 432, 385 N.Y.S.2d 765 (1976), both decided after the *Almestica* trial.

\(^63\) 42 N.Y.2d at 226-27, 366 N.E.2d at 802, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 712. According to the *Almestica* court, it was critical that the testimony of the victim did not derive from the illegal search and seizure. *Id.* But see notes 69-71 and accompanying text infra.

\(^64\) 42 N.Y.2d at 224, 366 N.E.2d at 800-01, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 710.

\(^65\) *Id.* at 224, 226, 366 N.E.2d at 800, 802, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 710, 712.
The Almestica decision appears to be a departure from the reasonable possibility test suggested in Chapman and echoed in Crimmins. Since the evidence submitted to the trial judge consisted primarily of the victim’s testimony and the illegally seized evidence, it is difficult to accept the conclusion that the inadmissible evidence had no effect upon the decision of the trial judge, especially when he made “extensive use of the improperly admitted testimony” in his oral decision. The more likely explanation for the Almestica ruling is that the court focused primarily on whether the trier of fact would have found the defendant guilty in the absence of the tainted evidence. Viewed in this light, Almestica seems to represent an application of the overwhelming evidence test, a test which approximates the New York nonconstitutional error standard.

The Almestica court may also be questioned for its reliance on the fact that the victim’s testimony was independent of the illegally obtained evidence. If the victim’s testimony was the fruit of the illegal seizure, it probably would have been inadmissible, leaving

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4 Id. at 226, 366 N.E.2d at 802, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 712. Moore v. United States, 429 U.S. 20 (1976) (per curiam), also involved review of error at a nonjury trial. In response to the government’s contention that the error was harmless, the Court stated that “whatever the merits of that argument as a general proposition it has a hollow ring in a case where the trial judge expressly relied upon the inadmissible evidence in finding the defendant guilty.” Id. at 22; see R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 24.

5 See 42 N.Y.2d at 229, 366 N.E.2d at 804, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 714 (Cooke, J., dissenting). For a criticism of the “correct result” test apparently used in Almestica, see R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 18-22.

6 See 42 N.Y.2d at 229, 366 N.E.2d at 804, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 714, (Cooke, J., dissenting); notes 82-87 infra. Reflecting the concerns expressed by the dissenters in Harrington and Milton, see notes 33, 42 infra, the Almestica dissent argued that the majority based its decision on “its own conclusion as to what verdict would have been reached by a jury or . . . Trial Justice” had only the untainted evidence been presented. 42 N.Y.2d at 229, 366 N.E.2d at 804, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 714 (Cooke, J., dissenting).

7 42 N.Y.2d at 226-27, 366 N.E.2d at 802, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 712. In support of its analysis, the Almestica majority cited Fahy v. Connecticut, 375 U.S. 85 (1963), noting that the case was distinguishable on the ground that the Fahy defendant confessed only after he was confronted with incriminating evidence obtained through an illegal search. Among its other findings, the Fahy Court concluded that the defendant should have been given the opportunity to show that his confession was tainted because it was induced when the police confronted him with the illegally seized goods. Id. at 90-91. In Almestica, however, it was clear that the crucial testimony was in no way related to the illegally seized evidence. Thus, it is difficult to understand why the court believed that it was necessary to distinguish Fahy.

no untainted evidence for the trial judge's consideration. It does not follow, however, that because the improperly admitted evidence was unrelated to the victim's testimony it was harmless. One piece of evidence, although independent of any other, may nevertheless have an extremely prejudicial effect. Thus, whether the untainted evidence is independent of the tainted evidence does not seem relevant to whether the tainted evidence is harmless.

The inconsistent approach taken by the New York Court of Appeals is reflected in subsequent cases decided by lower appellate courts. In one line of cases, the courts' inquiry focused not on whether the error actually influenced the verdict, but rather, on whether the defendants would have been convicted had the error not occurred. This standard differs significantly from the Crimmins

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71 The Almestica dissent noted that if the trier of fact had any doubts about the defendant's guilt from the untainted testimony alone, they were removed when the tainted evidence was presented. 42 N.Y.2d at 228, 366 N.E.2d at 803, 397 N.Y.S.2d at 713 (Cooke, J., dissenting).

72 The court of appeals appeared to return to the reasonable possibility standard in People v. Evans, 43 N.Y.2d 160, 371 N.E.2d 528, 400 N.Y.S.2d 810 (1977). The defendant in Evans was accused of selling narcotics to an undercover agent. After the agent bought the drugs, he immediately contacted his superior, who stopped the defendant a short time later and conducted a search. Although the defendant possessed no drugs, the officer testified that he found in the defendant's pocket three ten dollar bills which allegedly were used by the undercover agent to pay for the narcotics. The Evans court concluded that the search of the defendant was improper. Although there was probable cause to arrest the defendant at the time of the search, he was not arrested until a month later, because the police sought to protect the identity of the undercover agent. The court held that the search could not be sustained unless there was a contemporaneous arrest. Id. at 163-66, 371 N.E.2d at 530-31, 400 N.Y.S.2d at 811-13. Since the police officer's testimony corroborated important aspects of the prosecutor's case and was used by the prosecutor in his summation, the court concluded that the error was not harmless beyond a reasonable doubt. Id. at 167, 371 N.E.2d at 532, 400 N.Y.S.2d at 814.

In another recent case, People v. Von Werne, 41 N.Y.2d 584, 362 N.E.2d 982, 394 N.Y.S.2d 183 (1977), a police officer testified that the defendant had refused to answer some questions before he was arrested. The admission of this testimony represented a violation of the defendant's right to remain silent. Id. at 587-88, 362 N.E.2d at 985, 394 N.Y.S.2d at 186. The effect of the error was magnified when the trial court instructed the jury that it could not infer guilt from the defendant's refusal to testify at trial, but failed to instruct it that the same rule applied to the defendant's pre-arrest silence. Id., 362 N.E.2d at 985, 394 N.Y.S.2d at 187. Examining the record, the court found that there was less than overwhelming evidence of an essential element of the crime charged. Id. at 588, 362 N.E.2d at 985, 394 N.Y.S.2d at 187. Thus, it concluded, the error could not be harmless under the overwhelming evidence test. Additionally, since there was at least a reasonable possibility that the inadmissible statements of the police officer actually contributed to the conviction, the case also failed to meet the requirements of the reasonable possibility test.

73 In People v. Napolitano, 62 App. Div. 2d 955, 404 N.Y.S.2d 20 (1st Dep't 1978), the defendant made admissions following his indictment. These statements were erroneously admitted at trial, but "because of the overwhelming weight of the People's evidence, . . . the admission . . . was harmless beyond a reasonable doubt." Id. at 955-56, 404 N.Y.S.2d at 21. In People v. Goldston, 59 App. Div. 2d 704, 398 N.Y.S.2d 289 (2d Dep't 1977), the court
test in which a finding of overwhelming evidence is merely the threshold determination in the assessment of harmlessness. In a second line of cases, New York courts have applied the reasonable possibility test. While the same result may be reached in a particular case regardless of which test is applied, the tests are not identical and harmlessness may be found under one test but not under the other in a number of instances.

**NONCONSTITUTIONAL ERROR**

The seminal decision for review of nonconstitutional errors in

held that a showup identification was not reversible error, see Manson v. Braithwaite, 432 U.S. 98 (1977), but noted that even if the error were reversible, the conviction should nevertheless be affirmed due to the overwhelming amount of evidence indicating guilt. 59 App. Div. 2d at 704, 398 N.Y.S.2d at 290. Finally, in People v. Caplandies, 57 App. Div. 2d 971, 394 N.Y.S.2d 96 (3d Dep't 1977), a suppressed inculpatory statement obtained in violation of Miranda was used to help the victim refresh her recollection of the location of the crime. Without deciding whether the victim's testimony regarding the scene of the crime was "fruit of the poisonous tree," see note 70 supra, the court found that any error was harmless since it considered the evidence against the defendant "devastating" and the location of the crime an "incidental matter." 57 App. Div. 2d at 971, 394 N.Y.S.2d at 97.


In People v. Schlichter, 59 App. Div. 2d 545, 396 N.Y.S.2d 898 (2d Dep't 1977), the court apparently applied the reasonable possibility test to a Bruton violation, see note 30 supra, although no express reference was made to the test. In People v. Harding, 59 App. Div. 2d 897, 399 N.Y.S.2d 57 (2d Dep't 1977), a statement of the defendant was erroneously admitted into evidence and testimony was given regarding the defendant's silence. The court determined that the error "may have contributed to the conviction" and reversed. Id. at 897, 399 N.Y.S.2d at 58. In People v. Jones, 61 App. Div. 2d 264, 402 N.Y.S.2d 28 (2d Dep't 1978), the defendant signed a written confession without being advised of his Miranda rights. The court held that “[w]ith the possible exception of a confession from the stand, nothing could have damned the appellant more . . . .” Id. at 267-68, 402 N.Y.S.2d at 30. Thus, there was at least “a reasonable doubt that the error . . . contribute[d] to [the] conviction.” Id. In contrast, one of the dissenters argued that the overwhelming evidence alone rendered the error harmless. Id. at 268-69, 402 N.Y.S.2d at 31 (Suozzi, J., dissenting) (citing People v. Almestica, 42 N.Y.2d 222, 366 N.E.2d 789, 397 N.Y.S.2d 709 (1977)).

Compare People v. Bowen, 65 App. Div. 2d 364, 369, 411 N.Y.S.2d 573, 577 (1st Dep't 1978), with id. at 375, 411 N.Y.S.2d at 581 (Sandler, J., dissenting). While an error may be found prejudicial under the overwhelming evidence test but harmless under the reasonable possibility test, it is more likely that the converse would be true. For example, if a matchbook which placed the defendant's vehicle at the scene of the crime was illegally seized, a finding of harmlessness would depend on whether untainted overwhelming evidence of guilt existed. Under the reasonable possibility test, however, the amount of untainted evidence only is relevant to show the impact of error upon the jury. Thus, regardless of the quantity of other evidence, the illegal seizure of a matchbook would be harmless only if it played an insignificant part in the prosecution's case. This example is based on People v. DeGina, 39 N.Y.2d 96, 99, 346 N.E.2d 809, 810, 382 N.Y.S.2d 971, 972 (1976), wherein the court found the admission of the matchbook harmless "in view of all of the other evidence placing the vehicle at the scene of the crimes." Id.
federal criminal trials is *Kotteakos v. United States.*\(^7\) The *Kotteakos* Court held that unless "the judgment was not substantially swayed" or "influenced" by the error, "it is impossible to conclude that substantial rights were not affected."\(^8\) Under this test, which resembles the "reasonable possibility" standard, an appellate court must be convinced that the error was not a significant factor in producing the verdict.\(^9\) Thus, although the inquiries are similar, the federal test for harmless nonconstitutional error is somewhat less demanding than the standard for harmless constitutional error.\(^8\)

Courts at the state level are free to adopt their own standards for reviewing nonconstitutional error.\(^8\) In New York, the leading case on the question of harmless nonconstitutional error is *People v. Crimmins.*\(^2\) In clarifying New York's rule governing nonconstitutional error, the *Crimmins* court observed that there is a two-step process for determining whether the error is prejudicial.\(^8\) The threshold question is whether, excluding the errors, the "quantum and nature" of the evidence against the defendant is overwhelming.\(^4\) If overwhelming evidence does not exist, the inquiry ends and the error can never be deemed harmless.\(^5\) If the evidence of guilt is

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\(^8\) 328 U.S. at 765.

\(^9\) Id. The Court stated: "If . . . [an appellate court] is sure that the error did not influence the jury, or had but very slight effect, the verdict and judgment should stand . . . ." *Id.* at 764. Thus, the *Kotteakos* Court apparently rejected the overwhelming evidence test when it stated that "[t]he inquiry cannot be merely whether there was enough to support the result apart from the phase affected by the error." *Id.* at 765.


\(^4\) Id. at 240-41, 326 N.E.2d 787, 367 N.Y.S.2d 213 (1975).

\(^5\) Id. at 240-41, 326 N.E.2d 787, 367 N.Y.S.2d 213 (1975).
overwhelming, the appellate court still cannot find harmlessness if it “concludes that there is a significant probability ... that the jury would have acquitted the defendant had it not been for the error or errors which occurred.” Although New York requires a threshold finding of overwhelming evidence in both constitutional and nonconstitutional error cases, the difference in approach is evident in the second prong of the test. While “reasonable possibility” of impact on the jury is the key in determining the effect of constitutional error, the nonconstitutional error standard focuses on whether acquittal would have resulted had the error not occurred.\textsuperscript{67}

\textbf{A UNIFORM STANDARD IN CRIMINAL CASES}

\textit{The Case for a Uniform Standard}

While the tests for measuring the harmlessness of nonconstitutional error in both federal and New York State courts are less stringent than are the standards used in evaluating constitutional error,\textsuperscript{68} the basis for this distinction has not been satisfactorily ex-

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\textsuperscript{66} Id. at 242, 326 N.E.2d at 794, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 222 (emphasis added). Judge, now Chief Judge, Cook criticized the majority for establishing a “trifurcated standard” for reviewing questions of harmless error. \textit{Id.} at 244, 326 N.E.2d at 795, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 224 (Cooke, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part). Noting that there is now the “significant probability” test for nonconstitutional error, the “reasonable possibility” test for constitutional error and a test for error “of constitutional proportion, namely, the right to a fair trial,” without regard to whether the error was prejudicial, \textit{id.} at 243-45, 326 N.E.2d at 795, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 223-24 (Cooke, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part), Judge Cooke expressed concern that confusion would result when appellate courts attempt to employ the various standards. Accordingly, he contended that a single standard for assessing error should be adopted. \textit{Id.} at 246-47, 326 N.E.2d at 797, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 226 (Cooke, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{See} text accompanying notes 47-60 \textit{supra}.

\textsuperscript{68} Even when nonconstitutional error has a substantial impact upon the jury’s verdict, reversal is not required. \textit{See}, e.g., Hamling v. United States, 418 U.S. 87, 108 (1974); United States v. Valle-Valdez, 554 F.2d 911 (9th Cir. 1977). The federal nonconstitutional error test permits affirmance “if the evidence is so ‘strong’ that no sensible jury, had there been no error, would conceivably have acquitted . . . .” United States v. Antonelli Fireworks Co., 155 F.2d 631, 647 (2d Cir. 1946) (Frank, J., dissenting) (footnote omitted). Likewise, under the New York rule, nonconstitutional error is harmless unless “there is a significant probability . . . that the jury would have acquitted the defendant had it not been for the error or errors which occurred.” People v. Crimmins, 36 N.Y.2d 230, 242, 326 N.E.2d 787, 794, 367 N.Y.S.2d 213, 222 (1975). The burden of proving the harmlessness of error is on the party which benefited, whether the error was constitutional, Chapman v. California, 386 U.S. 18, 24 (1967); \textit{accord}, United States v. Lookretis, 398 F.2d 64 (7th Cir.), \textit{vacated}, 390 U.S. 338 (1968), or nonconstitutional, Kotteakos v. United States, 328 U.S. 750, 760 (1946); \textit{accord}, United States v. Caldwell, 543 F.2d 1333 (D.C. Cir. 1975), \textit{cert. denied}, 423 U.S. 1087 (1976). Prejudice arising from merely technical errors, however, is to be proved by the complaining party. Kotteakos v. United States, 328 U.S. 750, 760 (1946).
plained. Although, as a general rule, constitutional violations may be more egregious than other types of errors, the circumstances of a particular case may render the nonconstitutional error far more prejudicial. For example, improper jury instructions or irrelevant inflammatory evidence can be at least as prejudicial as constitutional errors. Since "the effect of the evidence in the context of [a] particular case" bears little relation to whether the error is constitutional or nonconstitutional, there seems to be little justification for a rule which makes the determination of harmlessness hinge on the label attached to the error.

As a practical matter, the application of a uniform standard in criminal cases would lead to clarity and consistency in appellate review of error. With one test for constitutional error, another for nonconstitutional error and, in some instances, a third to determine whether the defendant received a fair trial, it is not surprising that the appellate courts' attempts to apply the various standards have resulted in confusion. Resolving the subtle problems inherent in any harmless error test seems a difficult enough task for appellate courts without the additional burden of a trifurcated standard.

The Reasonable Possibility Standard

Although it is clear that constitutional error is nonprejudicial only if harmlessness is proved "beyond a reasonable doubt," the

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88 See People v. Crimmins, 36 N.Y.2d 230, 247, 326 N.E.2d 787, 797, 367 N.Y.S.2d 213, 226 (1975) (Cooke, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part); R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 48-49; Saltzburg, supra note 9, at 1025. See also Kyle v. United States, 297 F.2d 507, 513-14 (2d Cir. 1961).
90 See Fahy v. Connecticut, 375 U.S. 85, 94 (1963) (Harlan, J., dissenting); see People v. Crimmins, 36 N.Y.2d 230, 245-46, 326 N.E.2d 787, 796-97, 367 N.Y.S.2d 213, 225-26 (1975) (Cooke, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part); Saltzburg, supra note 9, at 989-99. Both Judge Cooke and Professor Saltzburg have expressed the view that the "harmless beyond a reasonable doubt" standard was adopted by the Supreme Court as a corollary to the guilt beyond a reasonable doubt standard in criminal trials. See 36 N.Y.2d at 245-46, 326 N.E.2d at 796-97, 367 N.Y.S.2d at 225-26 (Cooke, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part); Saltzburg, supra note 9, at 989-99.
91 See note 4 supra.

methods for determining whether this standard of proof is met remain uncertain. If a single test is to be adopted to assess both constitutional and nonconstitutional error, it would seem useful to evaluate the relative merits of the various approaches. One possibility is the overwhelming evidence test, under which an appellate court inquires whether, absent the erroneously admitted evidence, there was an overwhelming evidence of guilt. If the court finds that the jury almost certainly would have convicted the defendant without the untainted evidence, the beyond a reasonable doubt requirement is satisfied. In effect, the focus of the court is on whether the jury reached a correct result. When the court applies the overwhelming evidence test, the harmful effect of reading a "cold record" is magnified. An appellate court is unable to assess the weight that the jury may have assigned to a particular piece of evidence; even with apparent overwhelming evidence of guilt, the error may have been a substantial factor in the jury’s decision. In addition to the possibility that a defendant may have been convicted based on erroneously admitted evidence, the greater harm in using this test is usurpation of the jury’s function. When an appellate court assumes the jury’s function by substituting its judgment, it is, in essence, retrying the case. As a result, a criminal defendant may be


15 See United States v. Antonelli Fireworks Co., 155 F.2d 631, 650 (2d Cir. 1946) (Frank, J., dissenting); United States v. Rubenstein, 151 F.2d 915, 920-22 (2d Cir.) (Frank, J., dissenting), cert. denied, 326 U.S. 786 (1945). In Judge Frank’s opinion, “[i]t is seldom possible with even moderate competence to conjecture solely from perusal of a written or printed record whether or not a defendant is guilty.” Id. at 920 (Frank, J., dissenting) (footnote omitted). The danger of an appellate court erroneously affirming a conviction due to its inability to accurately perceive the truthfulness of the evidence has been noted by Justice Traynor:

Many factors may affect the probative value of testimony, such as age, sex, intelligence, experience, occupation, demeanor, or temperament of the witness. A trial court or jury before whom witnesses appear is at least in a position to take note of such factors. An appellate court has no way of doing so.

R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 20 (footnotes omitted).


17 See United States v. Antonelli Fireworks Co., 155 F.2d 631, 648 (2d Cir. 1946) (Frank, J., dissenting).
deprived of his constitutional right to a trial by jury.\textsuperscript{100} Thus, while the overwhelming evidence test may provide assurance to an appellate court that the defendant is guilty in fact, it does not assure that the defendant is guilty in law.\textsuperscript{101} Such a determination may only be made by a jury.\textsuperscript{102} Not only is there a significant risk that a defendant will be erroneously convicted under this test, but public confidence in the belief that every individual is entitled to a fair trial will be diminished.\textsuperscript{103}

Another unsatisfactory element of the overwhelming evidence test is its failure to deter prosecutorial misconduct. Knowing that an appellate court may find the untainted evidence overwhelming, a prosecutor may be less reluctant to insert error into the record as

\textsuperscript{100} See, e.g., id. at 650 (Frank, J., dissenting); United States v. Rubenstein, 151 F.2d 915, 922-23 (2d Cir.) (Frank, J., dissenting), cert. denied, 326 U.S. 766 (1945); People v. Crimmins, 36 N.Y.2d 230, 249, 326 N.E.2d 787, 789-99, 367 N.Y.S.2d 213, 228-29 (1975) (Cooke, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part); R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 18-22; Field, supra note 26, at 32-36. Justice Traynor maintains that the mere fact that the trial court reached the correct result on the question of guilt or innocence, does not necessarily render the result a just one. According to Justice Traynor, inquiring whether the correct result was reached or would have been reached without the error, deprives the defendant of his right to confront witnesses against him and his right to trial by jury in a criminal case. R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 21. Similarly, if the inquiry is whether overwhelming evidence supports the verdict, the conviction still might be based upon the error. \textit{Id.} at 22. Justice Traynor argues that the critical inquiry should be whether error may have affected the judgment, \textit{id.} at 13, and favors a standard which requires a high probability that the error not influence the verdict. \textit{Id.} at 35. "A less stringent test may fail to deter an appellate judge from focusing his inquiry on the correctness of the result and then holding the error harmless whenever he equated the result with his own predilections." \textit{Id.} See also note 101 infra.

\textsuperscript{101} See Kotteakos v. United States, 328 U.S. 750, 763-64 (1946). The Kotteakos Court noted that

\begin{quote}
\textit{[I]t is not the appellate court's function to determine guilt or innocence. Nor is it to speculate upon probable reconviction and decide according to how the speculation comes out. Appellate judges cannot escape such impressions. But they may not make them sole criteria for reversal or affirmation. Those judgments are exclusively for the jury, given always the necessary minimum evidence legally sufficient to sustain the conviction unaffected by the error. \ldots This is different, or may be, from guilt in fact. It is guilt in law, established by the judgment of laymen. And the question is, not were they right in their judgment, regardless of the error or its effect upon the verdict. It is rather what effect the error had or reasonably may be taken to have had upon the jury's decision. The crucial thing is the impact of the thing done wrong on the minds of other men, not on one's own, in the total setting.\textit{Id.}} (emphasis added) (citations and footnote omitted).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{102} U.S. Const. amend. VI; see note 101 supra.

\textsuperscript{103} See United States v. Antonelli Fireworks Co., 155 F.2d 631, 662-64 (2d Cir. 1946) (Frank, J., dissenting); R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 22, 80-81; Mause, supra note 4, at 554-56. An additional difficulty inherent in the overwhelming evidence test is its failure to account for the effect of the order in which the evidence was presented at trial, although the temporal sequence of admission of illegally obtained evidence may significantly affect the defense's trial tactics. \textit{See generally} Field, supra note 28, at 44-45, 54-55; Saltzburg, supra note 9, at 990.
an added assurance that the jury will find the defendant guilty.\textsuperscript{104} Assuming that the prosecutor makes a rational decision regarding his actions, only a more stringent standard of harmless error would minimize this possibility by increasing the risk of reversal.\textsuperscript{106}

A second possible test for determining whether error is harmless is the cumulative evidence test. Under this test, harmlessness is established when the erroneously admitted evidence is merely duplicative or cumulative of untainted evidence, since the error adds nothing material to the case.\textsuperscript{105} Different results may be attained,


Excessive reliance on the existence of other proof of guilt, in the face of clearly prejudicial error, could lead to harm for it would seem to encourage an overly zealous prosecutor with a strong case to gratuitously prejudice defendant's rights by unfair tactics in an attempt to insure conviction. It is important to the proper administration of justice that appellate sanctions remain an ever-present deterrent... Applying the "harmless error" doctrine with too broad a sweep would remove one of the chief deterrents to overreaching by a prosecutor.

\textsuperscript{105} An automatic reversal standard has been suggested for cases in which the prosecutor knowingly violates a defendant's constitutional rights. See Mause, supra note 4, at 553. For example, where perjured testimony is knowingly used, or evidence favorable to the defense is intentionally suppressed, automatic reversal would be warranted. Mause, supra note 4, at 553.

In cases where the defense learns after trial that the prosecution knowingly used false testimony or failed to disclose evidence favorable to the defense, the Supreme Court has developed a standard which differs from, but is analogous to, a harmless error rule. When the prosecutor's case included perjured testimony, and the prosecutor knew or should have known that the testimony was untrue, the conviction must be reversed "if there [was] any reasonable likelihood that the false testimony could have affected the judgment of the jury." United States v. Agurs, 427 U.S. 97, 103 (1976) (footnote omitted); see Mooney v. Holohan, 294 U.S. 103 (1935) (per curiam). See also Napue v. Illinois, 360 U.S. 264 (1959). The perjured testimony is deemed to have affected the jury's judgment if it is "material." 427 U.S. at 104.

\textsuperscript{106} For examples of cases where cumulative evidence has been a crucial factor, see Brown v. United States, 411 U.S. 223, 230-32 (1973); Osborne v. United States, 542 F.2d 1015, 1018 (8th Cir. 1976); United States v. Joseph, 533 F.2d 282, 286-87 (5th Cir. 1976), cert. denied, 431 U.S. 905 (1977); United States v. Burrell, 505 F.2d 904, 909 (5th Cir. 1974). Cf. Harrington
However, according to how "cumulativeness" is defined. Under the broadest definition, the untainted evidence need only establish the same ultimate fact as the tainted evidence — the defendant's guilt. This test, however, can be narrowly circumscribed by requiring that the untainted evidence be of the same type as the tainted evidence and that each have the same damaging effect, as, for example, when an inadmissible confession is corroborated by a properly admitted confession. As an added safeguard, it has been suggested that the courts require the untainted evidence to be uncontroverted.

The cumulative evidence test, rejected by the Supreme Court in Harrington, is subject to many of the same criticisms as the overwhelming evidence test. Since the tainted evidence, although cumulative, may very well have contributed to the jury's verdict, an appellate court, in effect, may still be deciding the guilt of the defendant. Moreover, since the appellate court's inquiry is complete upon a finding of cumulativeness, the test does not adequately consider the possibility that the jury may not have been persuaded of the defendant's guilt had it not been presented with the tainted evidence. Finally, where a narrow definition of cumulativeness is used, this test would find clearly harmless error to be prejudicial, merely because it is not corroborative.


Field, supra note 26, at 41. As an example of a broadly defined cumulative evidence test, Professor Field cites Brown v. United States, 411 U.S. 223 (1973). Field, supra note 26, at 41. In Brown, the codefendants' incriminating statements were introduced at trial in violation of Bruton v. United States, 391 U.S. 123 (1968). 411 U.S. at 230. Among other evidence, the police observed and photographed the defendants during the robbery. Id. at 228. The Court held the inadmissible Bruton statements were "merely cumulative" of other evidence in the case and therefore harmless. Id. at 231.

Under a broadly defined test, different types of evidence proving the same ultimate factor may be deemed cumulative although each may have a significantly different impact. See, e.g., People v. Jacobson, 63 Cal. 2d 319, 405 P.2d 555, 46 Cal. Rptr. 515 (1965); R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 69-71; Field, supra note 40, 41-42. For example, a tape recording of the defendant, played at the sentencing part of the trial in Jacobson, indicated that the defendant had no remorse after killing his child. This evidence may have been significantly more influential than witnesses providing the same evidence through testimony. 63 Cal. 2d at 330, 405 P.2d at 563-64, 46 Cal. Rptr. at 523-34. See also People v. Kitchen, 55 App. Div. 2d 575, 399 N.Y.S.2d 83 (1st Dep't 1976).

If a narrow definition of cumulativeness was used, the errors in Brown v. United States, 411 U.S. 223 (1973), Grieco v. Meachum, 533 F.2d 713, 716-17 (1st Cir.), cert. denied,
A third test for measuring harmlessness would require the court to assess the constitutional violation in isolation. Under this test, an appellate court disregards the untainted evidence and inquires whether the error is prejudicial.\textsuperscript{113} If the error is of a type that is likely to have influenced the jury, reversal is warranted. While this standard eliminates the problems inherent in the overwhelming evidence and cumulative evidence tests, it is objectionable because it requires the court to assess the effect of the error without regard to the facts and circumstances of a particular case.\textsuperscript{14} The per se rules which would result from the application of this test are undesirable, because the identical error committed in the context of two cases may have a significant impact upon the jury in one case and a trivial effect in another.\textsuperscript{115}

The preferable standard for assessing harmlessness is the reasonable possibility test,\textsuperscript{118} which requires reversal if there is a reasonable possibility that the error contributed to the conviction.\textsuperscript{117} The primary advantage offered by this test is that it permits the court to analyze the impact of the tainted evidence in the context of the other evidence in the record. Although overwhelming evidence should not be the basis of finding harmlessness, the quantum and nature of the untainted evidence is relevant to whether the error was a substantial factor at trial.\textsuperscript{118} Thus, as the quantum and proba-

\textsuperscript{113} Field, \textit{supra} note 26, at 16-19, 23-32; see notes 26-28 and accompanying text \textit{supra}.

\textsuperscript{114} See R. Traynor, \textit{supra} note 4, at 36; Field, \textit{supra} note 26, at 17.

\textsuperscript{115} The facts in United States v. Gramlich, 551 F.2d 1359 (5th Cir. 1977), \textit{cert. denied}, 434 U.S. 866 (1978), provide an illustration of the problems inherent in the application of this test. The defendant was convicted of importation of marijuana. He was arrested while unloading marijuana from a Colombian freighter to a beachhead. 551 F.2d at 1363-64. An illegally seized passport and airplane ticket to Colombia were admitted into evidence at trial and the defendant was convicted. Had the conviction been based solely on circumstantial evidence, the improper use of the passport and airplane ticket would have been highly prejudicial. Given the nature and quantum of the other evidence in the case, however, there was no reasonable possibility that the error had a prejudicial impact. On the other hand, if the appellate court had been confined to focusing solely on the tainted evidence it is suggested that it could not have adequately evaluated the possibility of prejudice. \textit{See also} United States v. Savell, 546 F.2d 43 (5th Cir. 1977).

\textsuperscript{116} The \textit{Chapman} Court noted that the reasonable possibility standard is equivalent to the beyond a reasonable doubt standard. 386 U.S. at 24; \textit{see} note 25 \textit{supra}.

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{See} Chapman v. California, 386 U.S. 18, 24 (1967); Fahy v. Connecticut, 375 U.S. 85, 86-87 (1963); \textit{notes} 22-25 and accompanying text \textit{supra}. \textit{See also} United States v. Bosch, 584 F.2d 1113, 1123 (1st Cir. 1978).

tive value of untainted evidence increases, it is more likely that the error did not contribute to the conviction.119 While it is not possible to learn what evidence actually swayed the jury,120 it may be assumed that an error contributed to the verdict if, upon a review of the entire record, “it appears that [the error] was a substantial part of the prosecution’s case . . . .”121 With the exception of an automatic reversal rule, this is perhaps the strictest standard for


121 People v. Ross, 67 Cal. 2d 64, 84, 429 P.2d 606, 621, 60 Cal. Rptr. 254, 269 (1967) (Traynor, C.J., dissenting), rev’d sub nom. Ross v. California, 391 U.S. 470 (1968) (per curiam). Finding harmless error, the state appellate court in Ross interpreted the reasonable possibility test articulated in Chapman to require that there be no “reasonable possibility that [the] jury could have reached any verdict other than one of guilt absent the prosecutor’s comments.” Id. at 77, 429 P.2d at 614, 60 Cal. Rptr. at 262. Chief Justice Traynor dissented, however, arguing that Chapman was “susceptible of two interpretations.” First, the majority’s interpretation focuses on whether the verdict would have been the same or whether there was overwhelming evidence of guilt. Id. at 84-86, 429 P.2d at 620-21, 60 Cal. Rptr. at 268-69 (Traynor, C.J., dissenting). The other and more likely interpretation, in his view, was whether “an error that constituted a substantial part of the prosecution’s case may have played a substantial part in the jury’s deliberation and thus contributed to the actual verdict reached . . . .” Id. at 88, 429 P.2d at 621, 60 Cal. Rptr. at 269 (Traynor, C.J., dissenting). See also United States v. D’Andrea, 585 F.2d 1351, 1357 (7th Cir. 1978). The Supreme Court’s subsequent reversal of the Ross conviction, see Ross v. California, 391 U.S. 470 (1968) (per curiam), seems to lend support to Chief Justice Traynor’s assessment of the Chapman standard. In Chapman, the Court stated that since the jurors may have acquitted had the unconstitutional comments not been made, it was “completely impossible” that the error did not, beyond a reasonable doubt, contribute to the conviction. 388 U.S. at 26. Accordingly, an error is not harmless merely because a jury may have convicted had the error not occurred.
appraising the harmlessness of error.122

A separate argument in favor of the reasonable possibility standard is that it does not infringe on the defendant's sixth amendment right to trial by jury.123 A defendant is afforded his full right to a jury trial only when an appellate court can state that any errors committed at trial were not substantial factors in the conviction.124 The requirement that the court must find it not reasonably possible that the error infected the verdict reduces the risk that the error contributed to the conviction, and ensures a defendant of his right to a trial by jury.

The aim of any test for harmlessness must be to prevent a conviction based in any way upon error. As stated by the New York Court of Appeals:

The worst criminal, the most culpable individual, is as much entitled to the benefit of a rule of law as the most blameless member of society. To disregard violation of the rule because there is proof in the record to persuade [the court] of a defendant's guilt would but lead to erosion of the rule and endanger the rights of even those who are innocent.125

It is submitted that only a test which requires a finding that the error had no effect upon the jury's determination, and which is equally applicable in cases involving constitutional and nonconstitutional error, adequately protects the rights of both the guilty and the innocent.

The Constitutional Basis for Applying a Uniform Standard

In holding that errors of constitutional significance are governed by federal law, the Chapman Court relied not on the due process clause or any other constitutional provision, but rather on the Court's inherent authority to formulate rules for enforcing fed-

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123 The rule established in Duncan v. Louisiana, 391 U.S. 145, 158 (1968), requires the states to provide a trial by jury for all crimes having a potential punishment of six months or more, and for crimes where the potential punishment is less than six months if the crime is not a petty offense. In some instances, a defendant may be tried by the court, provided he has the right to a de novo trial by jury at the appellate level. See Ludwig v. Massachusetts, 427 U.S. 618 (1976). But cf. Callan v. Wilson, 127 U.S. 540 (1888) (article three of the Constitution requires jury trial at trial level).
124 Even if a defendant waived his right to trial by jury, the other reasons for using the reasonable possibility test, see notes 116-122 and accompanying text supra, appear persuasive. See generally Saltzburg, supra note 9, at 1028 n.146.
eral constitutional guarantees. Under the Chapman reasoning, the power of the states to apply their own rules to nonconstitutional errors remains intact, even in criminal appeals. Since it appears unlikely that the state courts voluntarily will adopt the generally more demanding standard applicable to constitutional errors, the only practical method for ensuring a uniform harmless error standard in criminal cases would be for the Supreme Court to establish such a rule as a matter of constitutional necessity. The Court has never held that a criminal defendant has a constitutional right to appeal, probably because every state grants appellate review in criminal cases. Once a state establishes a legal structure, however,

128 386 U.S. at 21. The Chapman majority stated:
Whether a conviction for crime should stand when a State has failed to accord federal constitutionally guaranteed rights is every bit as much of a federal question as what particular federal constitutional provisions themselves mean, what they guarantee, and whether they have been denied. With faithfulness to the constitutional union of the States, we cannot leave to the States the formulation of authoritative laws, rules, and remedies designed to protect people from infractions by the States of federally guaranteed rights.

Id.; see note 23 supra.
129 386 U.S. at 21; see Cooper v. California, 386 U.S. 58, 62 (1967).
132 See ABA STANDARDS, CRIMINAL APPEALS § 1.1, commentary at 17 (1970). Since the Court has never been confronted with a statutory denial of appellate review, it has had no compelling reason to declare that a constitutional right to appeal exists. Nevertheless, an analogy may be made to the issue of the level of proof required to convict in criminal cases. Prior to its decision in In re Winship, 397 U.S. 358 (1970), there was never a need for the Supreme Court to adopt the position that a defendant may not be declared guilty unless the government proves every element of a criminal offense "beyond a reasonable doubt." Id. at 361-62. When confronted with a state statute lowering the burden of proof, however, the Court held that the traditional "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard is an element of due process. Id. at 364. While the Winship Court noted that "it has long been assumed that proof . . . beyond a reasonable doubt is constitutionally required," id. at 362, it based its holding primarily upon the conclusion that "the reasonable-doubt standard plays a vital role in the American scheme of criminal procedure." Id. at 363. Significantly, the Court observed:

The accused during a criminal prosecution has at stake interests of immense importance, both because of the possibility that he may lose his liberty . . . and because of the certainty that he would be stigmatized by the conviction. Accordingly, a society that values the good name and freedom of every individual should not condemn a man when there is a reasonable doubt about his guilt.

Id. at 363-64. Just as the reasonable doubt standard is "a prime instrument for reducing the risk of conviction resting on factual error," id. at 363, the right to appellate review might be viewed as essential in minimizing the risk of imprisonment resulting from errors of law.
its procedures must conform to the constraints of the fourteenth amendment.\textsuperscript{131} Therefore, it is suggested that when appellate review is provided, it must be conducted within the confines of due process.\textsuperscript{132} As a corollary to the reasonable doubt burden of proof standard at trial, due process may require an appellate court to declare a belief, beyond a reasonable doubt, that errors committed at trial did not contribute to the conviction.\textsuperscript{133} The reasonable doubt standard is grounded in the belief that it reduces the risk of convicting an innocent person.\textsuperscript{134} Likewise, the uniform use of the reasonable possibility test at the appellate level would reduce the risk that

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The American Bar Association has taken the position that "[t]he possibility of appellate review of trial court judgments should exist for every criminal conviction. It is undesirable to have any class of case in which such trial court determinations are unreviewable." ABA Standards, Criminal Appeals § 1.1 (1970). Similarly, one commentator has observed: "The possibilities of error, oversight, arbitrariness and even venality in any human institution are such that subjecting decisions to review of some kind answers a felt need: it would simply go against the grain, today, to make a matter as sensitive as a criminal conviction subject to unchecked determination by a single institution." Bator, Finality in Criminal Law and Federal Habeas Corpus for State Prisoners, 76 Harv. L. Rev. 441, 453 (1963); see Commonwealth ex rel. Neal v. Myers, 424 Pa. 576, 579 n.3, 227 A.2d 845, 846 n.3 (1967).

\textsuperscript{131} See Ham v. South Carolina, 409 U.S. 524, 527 (1973). Ham involved a statute empowering trial judges to conduct voir dire examinations of potential jurors. The Court held that once this procedure was established, due process mandated that the defendant be permitted to submit questions to the jurors regarding racial bias. \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{132} See id.; Saltzburg, supra note 9, at 1028-30. In Frank v. Magnum, 237 U.S. 309 (1915), the Court noted:

[While the 14th Amendment does not require that a State shall provide for an appellate review in criminal cases . . . it is perfectly obvious that where such an appeal is provided for, and the prisoner has had the benefit of it, the proceedings in the appellate tribunal are to be regarded as a part of the process of law under which he is held in custody by the State, and to be considered in determining any question of alleged deprivation of his life or liberty contrary to the 14th Amendment.

\textit{Id.} at 327 (citations omitted).


\textsuperscript{134} In re Winship, 397 U.S. 358, 364 (1970). In a concurring opinion, Justice Harlan stated that the fact-finding process is founded upon probabilities since the trier of fact cannot know with certainty what occurred at the time the crime was committed. \textit{Id.} at 370 (Harlan, J., concurring). The beyond a reasonable doubt standard, although not quantifiable, indicates to the factfinder the "degree of confidence he is expected to have in the correctness of his factual conclusions." \textit{Id.} (Harlan, J., concurring). A preponderance of the evidence is a satisfactory standard of proof in civil cases because society "view[s] it as no more serious in general for there to be an erroneous verdict in the defendant's favor than for there to be an erroneous verdict in the plaintiff's favor." \textit{Id.} at 371 (Harlan, J., concurring). On the other hand, the reasonable doubt standard in criminal cases is based on the belief that "the social disutility of convicting an innocent man [is not] equivalent to the disutility of acquitting someone who is guilty." \textit{Id.} at 372 (Harlan, J., concurring).
the jury may have entertained a reasonable doubt of the defendant's guilt had the error not been committed.\textsuperscript{135}

**CONCLUSION**

In New York and in the federal courts, there still exists a "wayward course of harmless error."\textsuperscript{138} While the courts recognize that constitutional error must be harmless beyond a reasonable doubt before a conviction can be affirmed, their analytical methods for determining harmlessness are not consistent.\textsuperscript{137} The inconsistencies may be the result of ambiguous language in the Supreme Court decisions, the failure on the part of appellate courts to discriminate carefully among harmless error tests, or even the temptation not to reverse convictions when a court believes guilt is clearly established.

Application of the reasonable possibility test to constitutional and nonconstitutional errors would enhance "the respect and confidence of the community in applications of the criminal law,"\textsuperscript{138} and provide defendants every reasonable doubt before they are deprived of life or liberty. The principle that a defendant must be tried by his peers requires that appellate courts refrain from retrying cases and judging the guilt or innocence of a defendant. As recognized in legislative enactments and judicially created tests, the concept of harmless error was intended only to prevent reversals based upon technical and trivial errors.\textsuperscript{139} Today, however, such reversals have been virtually eliminated,\textsuperscript{140} and a trend has developed in which errors are deemed harmless if the trial court reached the correct result.\textsuperscript{141} The direction of the harmless error doctrine, it is

\textsuperscript{135} Justice Traynor advocates a "high probability" standard for constitutional and nonconstitutional error in both civil and criminal cases. \textit{R. Traynor, supra} note 4, at 26-30, 35, 48. In Justice Traynor's view the reasonable possibility test is too strict; a test less exacting than the high probability standard, however, carries "too great a risk of affirming a judgment that was influenced by error." \textit{Id.} at 35-36.

\textsuperscript{136} Id. at 13.

\textsuperscript{137} See notes 96-103 \textit{supra}.

\textsuperscript{138} In \textit{re} Winship, 397 U.S. 358, 364 (1970).

\textsuperscript{139} See People v. Ross, 67 Cal. 2d 64, 76 & n.8, 429 P.2d 606, 618-20 & n.8, 60 Cal. Rptr. 254, 266-68 & n.8 (1967) (Traynor, C.J., dissenting), \textit{rev'd sub nom.} Ross v. California, 391 U.S. 470 (1968) (per curiam); note 9 \textit{supra}.

\textsuperscript{137} When the wisdom of harmless error statutes was debated, the reformers presented examples of the types of error they considered detrimental: One court had held that reversal was required when the word 'the' was mistakenly omitted from the indictment. State v. Campbell, 210 Mo. 202, 203, 109 S.W. 706, 707 (1908); \textit{see} People v. St. Clair, 56 Cal. 406, 406 (1880). Today, of course, such errors do not warrant reversal. \textit{See, e.g.,} People v. Cunningham, 64 App. Div. 2d 722, 406 N.Y.S.2d 899 (3d Dep't 1978); People v. Esteves, 95 Misc. 2d 70, 406 N.Y.S.2d 674 (N.Y.C. Crim. Ct. N.Y. County 1978).

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{See}, \textit{e.g.}, People v. Wander, 61 App. Div. 2d 1037, 403 N.Y.S.2d 111 (2d Dep't 1978).
submitted, should be shifted by the use of a precise and exacting standard. An increase in reversals seems a reasonable price to pay to ensure fair trials\(^{142}\) and to preserve the integrity of the Constitution and rules governing criminal trials.

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\(^{142}\) R. Traynor, supra note 4, at 22, 80-81; cf. In re Winship, 397 U.S. 358, 364 (1970) (reasonable doubt standard at trial level "indispensable to command the respect and confidence of the community"). It has been suggested that use of the reasonable doubt standard at the appellate level would serve to undermine respect for the criminal justice system because it is unduly stringent. See 42 Brooklyn L. Rev. 373, 388-89 (1975). The reasonable possibility test, however, is applicable only to errors which affect the substantial rights of the parties. Since it is not applicable to technical errors its use would not impair the original purpose of harmless error statutes — to avoid reversals in cases involving technical errors. See note 139 supra.