

SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT OF MAINE

State v. Cannell, 2007 ME 30

916 A.2d 231 (Me. 2007) · Decided February 20, 2007

SUMMARY

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court held that pointing a loaded firearm and threatening to fire it, without discharging it, constitutes nondeadly rather than deadly force under Maine law. Because the trial court evaluated the defendant's justification defense under the standards for deadly force instead of nondeadly force, the court vacated the convictions and remanded for further proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Judicial Court of Maine
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Clifford, J.; Saufley, C.J.; Dana, J.; Alexander, J.; Calkins, J.; Levy, J.; Silver, J.
JURISDICTION	Maine
DECIDED	February 20, 2007
DISPOSITION	vacated
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Cannell appealed from a jury-waived Superior Court conviction for threatening display of a weapon and criminal threatening with a dangerous weapon.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The statutory application of the justification provisions was reviewed de novo. Because Cannell failed to preserve his argument concerning the court's treatment of the force as deadly, the court reviewed for obvious error under M.R. Crim. P. 52(b).
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published opinion; precedential
PARTIES	Jeffrey A. Cannell v. State of Maine

TOPICS

- criminal procedure
- self defense
- appellate procedure
- harmless error
- preservation of error

PRACTICE AREAS

- criminal procedure
- criminal law
- justification defenses
- use of force

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether pointing a firearm and threatening to discharge it, without actually firing it, constitutes the use of deadly force under Maine's justification statutes.
2. Whether the trial court committed obvious, nonharmless error by evaluating Cannell's justification defense under the standards governing deadly force rather than nondeadly force.
3. Whether Cannell's evidence generated a justification defense based on the use of nondeadly force in defense of his person or property.

HOLDINGS

1. Using a gun in a threatening manner without discharging it constitutes nondeadly force, not deadly force, under Maine's justification statutes.
2. Cannell's testimony generated a justification defense based on the use of nondeadly force in defense of his person or property.
3. Once the nondeadly-force justification defense was generated, the State bore the burden of negating it beyond a reasonable doubt.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Obviously, the threat of firing a gun in the direction of another person without actually doing so cannot be equated with the actual discharge of that weapon. There exists a critical difference in the causative character of the actual discharge of a pistol and an act, such as loading the pistol or pointing it, in a threatening manner, which is merely preparatory to its discharge.” (916 A.2d at 233)

“Because such threats to use deadly force do not constitute deadly force, the court erred in evaluating Cannell's justification defense as if Cannell had actually used deadly force, rather than nondeadly force.” (916 A.2d at 234)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Cannell and Timothy Watters were neighbors, and Watters was hosting a birthday party attended by approximately twenty to twenty-five people. After an argument concerning Cannell's throwing a dead chipmunk into Watters's yard, Cannell retrieved a rifle, held it horizontally toward Watters's yard and the people there, and stated, “I will shoot.” The rifle was loaded, but Cannell did not discharge it. Cannell testified that he feared Watters and his family would enter his property and harm him.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Following a jury-waived trial in the Cumberland County Superior Court, the court convicted Cannell of both offenses and imposed concurrent incarceration for the weapon-display offense and a suspended term of incarceration with probation for criminal threatening. The court evaluated Cannell's justification defense under the standards governing deadly force. The Supreme Judicial Court of Maine vacated the judgment and remanded for application of the nondeadly-force justification defense to the existing facts.

DISPOSITION

vacated

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The Superior Court was instructed to apply the nondeadly-force justification defense to the facts already before it and conduct further proceedings consistent with the opinion.

CASES CITED

- State v. Bouchard, 2005 ME 106, ¶ 10, 881 A.2d 1130, 1134
- McGowan v. State, 2006 ME 16, ¶ 14, 894 A.2d 493, 497-98
- State v. Kirk, 2005 ME 60, ¶ 3, 873 A.2d 350, 351
- State v. Glassman, 2001 ME 91, ¶ 11, 772 A.2d 863, 866
- State v. Lord, 617 A.2d 536, 537 (Me. 1992)
- State v. Gilbert, 473 A.2d 1273, 1276 (Me. 1984)
- State v. Williams, 433 A.2d 765, 768-69 (Me. 1981)
- State v. Smith, 472 A.2d 948, 951 (Me. 1984)

OPINION

CLIFFORD, J.

916 A.2d 231 (2007) 2007 ME 30 STATE of Maine v. Jeffrey A. CANNELL. Supreme Judicial Court of Maine. Submitted on Briefs: November 16, 2006. Decided: February 20, 2007. *232 Stephanie Anderson, District Attorney, Julia A. Sheridan, Asst. Dist. Attorney, Portland, for State. Mary A. Davis, Tisdale & Davis, P.A., Portland, for defendant. Panel: SAUFLEY, C.J., and CLIFFORD, DANA, ALEXANDER, CALKINS, LEVY, and SILVER, JJ. CLIFFORD, J. [¶ 1] Jeffrey A. Cannell appeals from a judgment of conviction for the threatening display of a weapon (Class D), 25 M.R.S.A. § 2001 (1988),[1] and criminal threatening with a dangerous weapon (Class C), 17-A M.R.S. §§ 209(1), 1252(4) (2006), entered in the Superior Court (Cumberland County, Cole, J.) following a jury-waived trial.

Because we agree with Cannell's contention that the court failed to properly evaluate his asserted defense of justification for his use of physical force, we vacate the judgment. I. BACKGROUND [¶ 2] Viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to the State, see State v. Bouchard, 2005 ME 106, ¶ 10, 881 A.2d 1130, 1134, the following facts are supported in the record.

Cannell and Timothy Watters are neighbors in Standish. On the afternoon of June 13, 2004, Watters was hosting an outdoor birthday party for his young granddaughter. Twenty to twenty-five guests were at the party, including friends and family ranging in age from infants to adults. During the party, Watters discovered that Cannell had thrown a dead chipmunk over the fence into Watters's yard.

Watters approached Cannell and the two began arguing. Cannell then ran inside his house and came out moments later holding a rifle. Cannell stood approximately twenty feet from Watters, holding the gun in a horizontal position toward Watters's yard and the people in it, and stated, "I will shoot." One witness heard the gun make a clicking noise, and the gun was later discovered to be loaded.

Watters felt that his and his guests' lives were in danger. Although Watters's son-in-law did attempt to go onto Cannell's property, neither Watters nor any of his guests ever actually entered Cannell's property. [¶ 3] Cannell was charged with the threatening display of a weapon (Class D), 25 M.R.S.A. § 2001, and criminal threatening with a dangerous weapon (Class C), *233 17-A M.R.S. §§ 209(1), 1252(4).

During his jury-waived trial, Cannell testified that he felt he needed to display the gun because Watters and his family verbally threatened him on the day in question and in the past, because he believed Watters and Watters's "boys" would enter his property, and because he feared for his life. These beliefs, Cannell argued, sufficiently justified his actions in defense of both his person as well as his property.

The court evaluated Cannell's justification defense as if it were justification for the use of deadly force, and determined that the evidence did not generate the defense. The court found Cannell guilty of both counts, and sentenced him to eighteen months incarceration, with all but thirty days suspended, and two years probation for the criminal threatening offense, and thirty days incarceration to be served concurrently for the threatening display of a dangerous weapon offense.

Cannell filed this appeal. II. DISCUSSION [¶ 4] Among the statutory provisions detailing the various defenses to criminal acts are those justifying the use of both deadly and nondeadly physical force. 17-A M.R.S. §§ 101-110 (2006). Deadly force, defined as "physical force which a person uses with the intent of causing, or which he knows to create a substantial risk of causing, death or serious bodily injury," is justified in defense of a person when: (1) the actor "reasonably believes it necessary and reasonably believes [another] person is... [a]bout to use unlawful, deadly force against [him] or a 3rd person" or is about to commit or is committing a kidnapping or robbery; or (2) the actor "reasonably believes" that another person has, without authorization, entered or is attempting to enter or remain in a dwelling place, and that deadly force is necessary to protect himself or a third person present in the dwelling from bodily injury.

17-A M.R.S. §§ 2(8), 108(2) (2006). The use of deadly force is also justified by a person in possession or control of a premises in defense of that property when reasonably necessary to prevent or terminate a criminal trespass, if the actor reasonably believes someone "[h]as entered or is attempting to enter the dwelling place or has surreptitiously remained within the dwelling place without a license or privilege to do so," or "[i]s committing or is likely to commit some other crime within the dwelling place."

17-A M.R.S. § 104(3). [¶ 5] Nondeadly force is defined as "any physical force which is not deadly force," and can be used in defense of a person "in order to defend himself or a 3rd person from what he reasonably believes to be the imminent use of unlawful, nondeadly force by [another] person." 17-A M.R.S. §§ 2(18), 108(1) (2006).

The use of nondeadly force is also justified in defense of property when "necessary to prevent or terminate the commission of a criminal trespass." 17-A M.R.S. § 104(1). [¶ 6] Cannell contends that he did not use deadly force, and that the court therefore erred in evaluating his justification defense as if he had used deadly force. He asserts that the way he used the weapon does not constitute deadly force, but rather only nondeadly force.

The court's application of statutory justification provisions is an issue of law that we review de novo. *McGowan v. State*, 2006 ME 16, ¶ 14, 894 A.2d 493, 497-98. Cannell failed to raise the issue of the court's consideration of deadly rather than nondeadly force in evaluating Cannell's justification defense at his trial, however, and we therefore review Cannell's argument only for "obvious errors or defects affecting substantial rights."

See M.R.Crim. P. 52(b). Obvious error is error that is "so highly prejudicial and so taints the proceedings *234 as to virtually deprive the defendant of a fair trial." *State v. Kirk*, 2005 ME 60, ¶ 3, 873 A.2d 350, 351 (quotation marks omitted). [¶ 7] Since 1981, we have unequivocally held that using a gun in a threatening manner without discharging the weapon constitutes nondeadly force only, and does not amount to the use of deadly force.

State v. Glassman, 2001 ME 91, ¶ 11, 772 A.2d 863, 866; *State v. Lord*, 617 A.2d 536, 537 (Me.1992); *State v. Gilbert*, 473 A.2d 1273, 1276 (Me.1984); *State v. Williams*, 433 A.2d 765, 768-69 (Me.1981). In doing so, we have reasoned: Obviously, the threat of firing a gun in the direction of another person without actually doing so cannot be equated with the actual discharge of that weapon.

There exists a critical difference in the causative character of the actual discharge of a pistol and an act, such as loading the pistol or pointing it, in a threatening manner, which is merely preparatory to its discharge. *Williams*, 433 A.2d at 769. [¶ 8] In this case there is no evidence that Cannell ever discharged his weapon. All that Cannell did is threaten to discharge the weapon.

Because such threats to use deadly force do not constitute deadly force, the court erred in evaluating Cannell's justification defense as if Cannell had actually used deadly force, rather than nondeadly force. [¶ 9] Because there was no physical force used against Cannell creating a substantial risk of death or serious bodily injury, and there was no entry into, nor any threat of entry into Cannell's dwelling, as opposed to his property, the trial court did not err in concluding that there was no justification for Cannell to use deadly force in the circumstances.

See 17-A M.R.S. § 108(2). [¶ 10] Cannell, however, did not use deadly force, and he testified that he was fearful that Watters and his "boys" would trespass on his property and harm him. Accordingly, the defense of justification for his use of nondeadly force was generated. See 17-A M.R.S. §§ 104(3), 108(1).

Because the defense was generated, the State had the burden to negate the justification defense beyond a reasonable doubt. See *State v. Smith*, 472 A.2d 948, 951 (Me.1984). Cannell's testimony, if credited by the court, could lead to Cannell's acquittal.

The court's error in evaluating the evidence to determine if Cannell was justified in using deadly force, as opposed to nondeadly force, is therefore both obvious and not harmless. See M.R.Crim. P. 52(a), (b). We therefore vacate the conviction and remand the matter to the Superior Court for application of the nondeadly force defense to the facts already before the court.

The entry is: Judgment vacated. Remanded to the Superior Court for further proceedings consistent with this opinion. NOTES [1] Section 2001 has since been repealed and replaced by 25 M.R.S. § 2001-A (2006). P.L. 2003, ch. 452, § N-1 (effective July 1, 2004).