

SUPREME COURT OF WASHINGTON

State v. Watson

159 Wash. 2d 162 (2006) · Decided December 14, 2006

SUMMARY

The Washington Supreme Court affirmed Eric Watson’s convictions after concluding that his guilty plea was sufficiently removed from a judge’s inappropriate recommendation to accept the State’s offer to remain voluntary. The court emphasized that trial judges must refrain from advising defendants, directly or indirectly, about the wisdom of pleading guilty.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Washington
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Per Curiam
JURISDICTION	Washington
DECIDED	December 14, 2006
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Watson pleaded guilty to 10 counts of possession of depictions of a minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct. The Court of Appeals affirmed his convictions, and the Washington Supreme Court granted review and affirmed.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Washington Supreme Court opinion; precedential.
PARTIES	Eric Watson v. State of Washington

TOPICS

- plea bargaining
- criminal procedure
- appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

- criminal law
- criminal procedure
- appellate practice

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

- Whether the criminal presiding judge's comments advising Watson to accept the State's offer and referring to the possibility of double the jail time rendered his later guilty plea involuntary.
- Whether trial judges may offer defendants direct or implied advice about the wisdom of pleading guilty.

HOLDINGS

1. Watson's guilty plea was not involuntary because it was sufficiently removed from the presiding judge's remarks to attenuate any coercive effect; Watson obtained new counsel, consulted with counsel, and later affirmed orally and in writing that he was pleading freely and voluntarily.
2. Trial judges must refrain from offering defendants any advice, direct or implied, about the wisdom of pleading guilty.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“And, I really think you should take their offer. It’s a calculated risk going to trial. I did defense work and I had clients that wouldn’t take the offer and went to trial and ended up with double the jail time and I would come back and tell them, don’t blame me, you’re the one that wanted to go to trial. So, I think you need to seriously think about the next trial date and whether you want to take the risk of going to trial.” (159 Wash. 2d at 164)

“Trial judges are to refrain from offering defendants any advice, direct or implied, about the wisdom of pleading guilty.” (159 Wash. 2d at 165)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The criminal presiding judge told Watson that he should seriously consider accepting the State's offer and warned that clients who rejected offers and went to trial had ended up with double the jail time. After a personality conflict with his original attorney, Watson obtained substitute counsel and, more than a month later, decided to plead guilty. At the plea hearing, Watson confirmed both orally and in writing that he understood the charges and waived rights freely and voluntarily.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The trial court accepted Watson's guilty plea after finding it knowing, intelligent, and voluntary. Watson argued on appeal that comments by the criminal presiding judge had coerced the plea. The Court of Appeals affirmed, and the Washington Supreme Court granted review to address the coercion claim and to emphasize the impropriety of the trial judge's remarks.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Brady v. United States, 397 U.S. 742, 757, 90 S. Ct. 1463, 25 L. Ed. 2d 747 (1970)
- State v. Williams, 117 Wn. App. 390, 398, 71 P.3d 686 (2003)
- State v. Watson, noted at 131 Wn. App. 1027 (2006)

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