

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE TENTH CIRCUIT

United States v. Molina-Varela

No. No. 17-8068, United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit (June 12, 2018)

SUMMARY

****Ineffective assistance of counsel – Failure to move for severance – Strickland standard – Presumption of joint trial in conspiracy cases.**** The Tenth Circuit affirmed the denial of a § 2255 motion, holding that trial counsel was not ineffective for failing to move for severance. The court applied Strickland's deferential standard, noting a strong presumption favoring joint trials in conspiracy cases and that the defendant's own confession made a severance motion appear futile. The opinion also discusses forfeiture of arguments first raised in a reply brief.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Robert E. Bacharach; Michael R. Murphy; Nancy L. Moritz
JURISDICTION	Federal
DECIDED	June 12, 2018
DOCKET	No. 17-8068
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from the denial of a motion to vacate conviction under 28 U.S.C. § 2255.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished
PARTIES	Sigifredo Molina-Varela v. United States of America

TOPICS

ineffective assistance

criminal procedure

habeas corpus

sixth amendment

right to counsel

PRACTICE AREAS

Criminal Law

Appellate Procedure

Ineffective Assistance of Counsel

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Mr. Molina-Varela's trial counsel was ineffective for failing to move for severance.

HOLDINGS

1. Mr. Molina-Varela's trial counsel was not ineffective because the attorney could reasonably have concluded that a motion for severance would be futile, given the presumption in favor of joint trials in conspiracy cases and the confession that linked him to the conspiracy within three months of arrest.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“below an objective standard of reasonableness” (2)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Mr. Molina-Varela went to trial with his wife as co-defendant on charges of conspiracy and possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug felony. He was convicted. He confessed to receiving shipments as part of the conspiracy about three months prior to arrest. He unsuccessfully moved to suppress the confession on grounds of being under the influence of drugs. The district court denied suppression.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Mr. Molina-Varela was convicted of conspiracy and possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug felony. He filed a motion to vacate his conviction based on ineffective assistance of counsel, which the district court denied. He appeals.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Strickland v. Washington, 466 U.S. 668 (1984)
- Grant v. Royal, Grant v. Royal, 886 F.3d 874 (10th Cir. 2018)
- Byrd v. Workman, 645 F.3d 1159 (10th Cir. 2011)
- United States v. Clark, 717 F.3d 790 (10th Cir. 2013)
- United States v. Pursley, 577 F.3d 1204 (10th Cir. 2009)
- United States v. Pam, 867 F.3d 1191 (10th Cir. 2017)

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

FILED United States Court of Appeals UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS Tenth Circuit
FOR THE TENTH CIRCUIT June 12, 2018 _____ Elisabeth A.
Shumaker Clerk of Court UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, Plaintiff–Appellee, v. No. 17-8068
(D.C. Nos. 2:15-CV-00223-SWS and SIGIFREDO MOLINA-VARELA, 2:13-CR-00004-ABJ-2)
(D. Wyo.) Defendant-Appellant. _____ ORDER AND
JUDGMENT * _____ Before BACHARACH, MURPHY, and

MORITZ, Circuit Judges. _____ Mr. Sigifredo Molina-Varela went to trial with his wife as a codefendant on criminal charges of conspiracy and possession of a firearm in furtherance of a drug felony.

21 U.S.C. §§ 841(a)(1), (b)(1)(A), 846; 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1)(A). Mr. Molina-Varela was convicted on these charges and unsuccessfully moved to vacate his conviction based on ineffective * The parties have consented to submission on the briefs, and oral argument would not help us decide the appeal. See Fed. R. App. P. 34(a)(2)(C); 10th Cir. R. 34.1(G).

Thus, we have decided the appeal based on the briefs. Our order and judgment does not constitute binding precedent except under the doctrines of law of the case, *res judicata*, and collateral estoppel. But the order and judgment may be cited for its persuasive value under Fed. R. App. P. 32.1(a) and 10th Cir. R. 32.1(A). assistance of counsel. He appeals, arguing that his trial attorney was ineffective by failing to move for severance.

We reject this argument. In his motion to vacate, Mr. Molina-Varela alleged that his trial attorney had failed to file any substantive pretrial motions. There, however, Mr. Molina-Varela did not identify any motions that he thought should have been filed. He waited to do so until his reply brief, where he identified eight types of motions that he thought should have been filed.

One of these was a motion for severance. But even in his reply brief, Mr. Molina-Varela did not explain to the district court why his attorney should have filed a motion for severance. Thus, a threshold issue is whether Mr. Molina-Varela forfeited the argument in district court.

For the sake of argument, we may assume that the issue was preserved. If the issue had been preserved, we would consider whether Mr. Molina-Varela had shown ineffective assistance of trial counsel. To prevail, Mr. Molina-Varela had to prove that his attorney's representation was deficient and prejudicial. *Strickland v. Washington*, 466 U.S. 668, 687 (1984). Representation is deficient if it falls "below an objective standard of reasonableness." *Id.* at 688.

Objective reasonableness is a "highly deferential" standard. *Grant v. Royal*, 886 F.3d 874, 903 (10th Cir. 2018) (quoting *Byrd v. Workman*, 645 F.3d 1159, 1168 (10th Cir. 2011)), *applic. for reh'g* filed (May 23, 2018) (No. 14-6131).

Under this standard, we engage in two presumptions. 2 First, we presume that Mr. Molina-Varela's trial counsel provided adequate assistance and acted reasonably in exercising professional judgment. *Id.* Second, we presume that in a conspiracy trial, the alleged co-conspirators should be tried together. *United States v. Clark*, 717 F.3d 790, 817 (10th Cir. 2013); *United States v. Pursley*, 577 F.3d 1204, 1215 (10th Cir.

2009). These dual presumptions preclude relief on the ineffective-assistance claim. 1 If Mr. Molina-Varela's attorneys had moved for a severance, they would have had to overcome the

presumption favoring a joint trial on the conspiracy charges.

In the face of this presumption, Mr. Molina-Varela does not tell us how his trial attorney could have overcome this presumption or identify any prejudice from a joint trial with his wife. Mr. Molina-Varela contends that severance was appropriate because he had left the conspiracy more than a year prior to his arrest and events post-dating his withdrawal from the conspiracy should not have been used against him.

1 The district court did not reject Mr. Molina-Varela's claim on this ground. Instead, the court rejected the claim on the basis of Mr. Molina-Varela's failure to allege prejudice. But we may affirm the district court's decision on any basis supported by the record. *United States v. Pam*, 867 F.3d 1191, 1195 n.1 (10th Cir. 2017). 3 But Mr. Molina-Varela confessed that he had received shipments as part of the conspiracy only about three months prior to arrest.

In light of this confession, Mr. Molina-Varela's trial counsel could reasonably have viewed a motion for severance as futile. Mr. Molina-Varela argues that he was under the influence of drugs while confessing. But his attorney had already argued unsuccessfully for suppression of the confession on this basis.

In light of the district court's decision not to suppress the confession, the trial attorney could reasonably have decided not to move for a severance. As a result, we conclude that Mr. Molina-Varela has not shown that his attorney's representation was deficient. Affirmed. Entered for the Court Robert E. Bacharach Circuit Judge 4