1	IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE	UNITED STATES
2		x
3	SAFECO INSURANCE	:
4	COMPANY OF AMERICA, ET	:
5	AL.,	:
6	Petitioners	:
7	v.	: No. 06-84
8	CHARLES BURR, ET AL.;	:
9	and	:
10	GEICO GENERAL INSURANCE	:
11	COMPANY, ET AL.,	:
12	Petitioners	:
13	v.	: No. 06-100
14	AJENE EDO.	:
15		x
16	Washing	gton, D.C.
17	Tuesday	, January 16, 2007
18		
19	The above-entitl	ed matter came on for oral
20	argument before the Supreme Co	ourt of the United States
21	at 10:04 a.m.	
22	APPEARANCES:	
23	MAUREEN E. MAHONEY, Washingtor	n, D.C.; on behalf of the
24	Petitioners.	
25		

1	PATRICIA A. MILLETT, Assistant to the Solicitor
2	General, Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.; on
3	behalf of the United States, as amicus curiae,
4	supporting the Petitioners.
5	SCOTT A. SHORR, Portland, Ore.; on behalf of the
6	Respondents.
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1	PROCEEDINGS
2	(10:04 a.m.)
3	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We'll hear argument
4	first this morning in 06-84, Safeco Insurance Company
5	versus Burr, and 06-100, GEICO General Insurance Company
6	versus Edo.
7	Ms. Mahoney.
8	ORAL ARGUMENT OF MAUREEN E. MAHONEY
9	ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONERS
10	MS. MAHONEY: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it
11	please the Court:
12	I'd like to turn first to the Ninth
13	Circuit's interpretation of the term "willfully" and its
14	determination that the case had to be remanded for
15	further proceedings to permit an opportunity to explore
16	Petitioners' communications with their counsel. We ask
17	this Court to find that there is no necessity for any
18	such inquiry for waivers of attorney-client privilege
19	because summary judgment should have been affirmed in
20	this case.
21	Petitioners and their counsel, if you think
22	about what communications you might find, they could not
23	have known anything more about these statutory issues of
24	first impression than the district court did. It's
25	questions of law. And if the district court's opinion

- 1 does not reflect reckless disregard for the law, for the
- 2 reading of the statute, then it would be inappropriate
- 3 to characterize Petitioners' adoption of the very same
- 4 views as either a knowing or reckless violation of the,
- 5 of the FCRA.
- The first -- the Ninth Circuit nevertheless
- 7 reached a contrary conclusion, and said it was time to
- 8 go ahead and look at privileged communications if the
- 9 Petitioners wanted to defend the case, because they made
- 10 several interpretive errors about the meaning of
- "willfully."
- 12 And the first is that they read "willfully" in
- this setting to mean recklessly, and relied on several
- 14 cases where this Court has read the term willfully in
- 15 civil statutes to mean recklessly.
- 16 But this Court has said repeatedly that the
- 17 word "willfully" is contextual, that you have to look at
- 18 all of the sections of the statute to see how it's used
- 19 to determine whether it means with knowledge that your
- 20 conduct violates the law, or whether reckless violations
- 21 are sufficient. And in this particular statute, unlike
- 22 the other three that were at issue, Congress has used
- 23 the term "willfully" in other sections of the law to mean,
- 24 as plaintiffs concede, that the defendant knows that
- 25 their conduct violates the Act.

1	JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, it's also used in the
2	phrase "knowing and willful." That appears in several
3	other parts of the statute, and that wouldn't make any
4	sense if the only meaning of "willful" is knowing.
5	MS. MAHONEY: Well, it actually says
6	"willfully and knowingly"
7	JUSTICE SCALIA: In one formulation or
8	another, but it combines the two words, "knowing" and
9	"willful."
10	MS. MAHONEY: Well, this Court, though, has
11	held that "willfully and knowingly," when that phrase is
12	used together, it's been discussed in a number of cases
13	including Dixon recently, that it means "willfully"
14	means knowledge that the conduct violates the law, and
15	"knowingly" means knowledge of the relevant facts. And
16	that would make perfect sense in this setting, and so
17	the term "willfully" when, again, used
18	JUSTICE SCALIA: You mean willfully alone?
19	MS. MAHONEY: It
20	JUSTICE SCALIA: Where where it where
21	it means what you think it means, which is knowingly,
22	that does not mean knowing the facts? If you mistake
23	the facts and are laboring under a misimpression of the
24	facts, you have nonetheless willfully violated the law?
25	MS. MAHONEY: Your Honor, in Ratzlaf, the

- 1 phrase was "willfully," not "willfully and knowingly,"
- 2 and the Court held that it meant that you knew that your
- 3 conduct violated the law. And that seems to be the most
- 4 reasonable reading here because if you look, there are
- 5 also sections of section 1681n that refer to knowing
- 6 conduct, and that would require the conclusion that
- 7 Congress used "willfully" in this section to mean a -- a
- 8 less -- a more -- a less culpable mens rea than
- 9 knowingly. And that's --
- 10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So that if you're
- 11 the CEO of your company, and the lawyer -- general counsel
- 12 comes in and says we've got a real issue under the Fair
- 13 Credit Reporting Act, I need to brief you on that, we
- 14 need to make an important decision about whether we are
- 15 complying. You say I don't want to hear about it, I
- 16 don't want to know about it. That would not be
- 17 willfully violating the statute?
- 18 MS. MAHONEY: Well, under -- some cases have
- 19 suggested that there could be a willful blindness
- 20 instruction that would govern whether you define that as
- 21 knowing or not. Certainly --
- 22 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So it doesn't have
- 23 to be actual knowledge?
- 24 MS. MAHONEY: I think that the best reading
- 25 of knowingly is actual knowledge or something that is,

- 1 that is everything but, you know, that really is --
- 2 JUSTICE SCALIA: How about reckless
- 3 disregard?
- 4 MS. MAHONEY: Well, conscious disregard is a
- 5 recklessness standard, and even if the Ninth Circuit
- 6 correctly determined that this should be interpreted as
- 7 a recklessness standard, this Court has defined
- 8 recklessness to mean that it has to be conscious
- 9 disregard, actual knowledge of a high risk of, of -- of
- 10 harm or in this case illegality. And in these
- 11 circumstances, you can't say that there was a high risk
- 12 of illegality because what the district court found is
- 13 that the Petitioners' interpretations of the statute
- 14 were actually not only reasonable, but correct, and
- 15 having --
- 16 JUSTICE ALITO: Since the term "knowingly" or
- 17 "knowing" appears in two places in 1681n, can't we infer
- 18 from that that "willfully" in that provision also means
- 19 something different?
- MS. MAHONEY: I think the way it's used, it
- 21 says knowing, knowingly that they did not have a
- 22 permissible purpose. Permissible purpose, that may not
- 23 be knowledge of the law, it just may be knowledge that
- 24 your purpose wasn't permissible. And even if they were
- 25 using it --

- 1 JUSTICE ALITO: I thought the statute says
- 2 what the permissible purposes are.
- 3 MS. MAHONEY: It does, but it doesn't
- 4 necessarily mean that the individual knew precisely what
- 5 the statute said. Because for instance, users are told
- 6 what the permissible purposes are when they get a credit
- 7 report from, from a credit agency. But more
- 8 importantly, Your Honor, I think that the use of the
- 9 term "knowingly" there can also be explained.
- 10 If you look at section 1681h, it actually
- 11 provides that certain tort actions cannot proceed unless
- 12 there is a willful intent to injure, except as provided
- in section 1681n, and they are the same kinds of actions
- 14 that are carved out in 1681n.
- 15 And so I think it was to make clear, I think
- 16 it was to make clear that you didn't have to have a
- 17 willful intent to injure. So even if they meant it to
- 18 be interchangeable with a knowing violation of the law
- 19 there, I think there was a reason for it, it wasn't just
- 20 surplusage. It was to clarify that they didn't have to
- 21 have a willful intent to violate.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Would you say it's all
- 23 right to use the model penal code definition of
- 24 reckless, which is basically what you -- taking it here,
- 25 you would have to consciously disregard a substantial

- 1 and unjustifiable risk that the action is unlawful?
- 2 MS. MAHONEY: That's correct, Your Honor.
- 3 JUSTICE BREYER: Have you come across
- 4 anything that would use that -- I mean "reckless" itself
- 5 is unclear. The model penal code tried to clarify it
- 6 based on this Court's opinions primarily.
- 7 MS. MAHONEY: But I think you can look to
- 8 the way this Court described recklessness in Farmer vs.
- 9 Brennan as well, though, as well as --
- 10 JUSTICE BREYER: What's the difference?
- 11 MS. MAHONEY: The difference is just, there
- 12 is two forms of recklessness. One which says that if
- 13 the risk is sufficiently high, if a person should have
- 14 known, you could be -- you could be liable. But that
- 15 the form of recklessness that Congress presumably used
- 16 here in this setting, where there is the potential for
- 17 very punitive sanctions, was what is referred to --
- 18 Farmer versus Brennan calls it "criminal," the criminal
- 19 recklessness standard.
- 20 And that means that not only do you have to
- 21 have an objectively high risk of illegality, but you
- 22 must be actually conscious of that risk. But in this
- 23 case, you don't even need to get to the issue of
- 24 consciousness.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Well, you said there is no

- 1 way they couldn't have been conscious of the risk here.
- 2 I mean, after all, that's why they went to lawyers.
- 3 They know there's a risk that this is unlawful.
- 4 MS. MAHONEY: The question is --
- 5 JUSTICE BREYER: But consciousness, I mean,
- 6 maybe it should come in in the standard, but I don't
- 7 know that that would help you.
- MS. MAHONEY: Well, I think that the issue
- 9 on conscious -- the issue of the risk, though, it has
- 10 to be a high risk. And if it is a reasonable
- 11 interpretation of the statute, or even if it is just an
- 12 interpretation of the statute that is fairly debatable,
- 13 that you have a fair chance of success, then how can
- 14 you say that is a high risk of illegality, so high that
- 15 we should say that Congress wanted to sanction you for
- 16 taking that position?
- 17 And for saying that, you know, you shouldn't
- 18 be permitted to adopt a compliance program if there was
- 19 a fair ground for believing that it was lawful. And
- 20 here what the Ninth Circuit did --
- 21 JUSTICE SCALIA: Suppose there is a fair
- 22 ground for believing it was lawful. Lawyers are in
- 23 disagreement, but in fact, I believe the lawyers who say
- 24 it is unlawful, and I nonetheless go ahead and do it.
- 25 Is that a willful violation?

- 1 MS. MAHONEY: I don't, I don't think so,
- 2 Your Honor, if, in fact, it was a fair ground for -- -
- JUSTICE SCALIA: But I think I'm violating.
- 4 MS. MAHONEY: I don't -- yes. But you
- 5 couldn't know you were violating it, and because if it
- 6 really is a fair ground for litigation --
- 7 JUSTICE SCALIA: I'm a better lawyer than my
- 8 advisors.
- 9 (Laughter.)
- 10 MS. MAHONEY: Your Honor, I think if it's an
- 11 area where the law is truly unsettled. And here an
- 12 issue of first impression, a lawyer's assessment that
- 13 you may lose is inherently predictive. These are not
- 14 true or false answers when there is almost nothing to go
- 15 on.
- 16 And so in that area, it's much like what
- 17 this Court did in Screws, where it said that this was a
- 18 case involving a willful violation of, or interference
- 19 with rights secured by -- by Federal law. And what the
- 20 Court says, well, it's not just any bad purpose that
- 21 Congress had in mind, it is a bad purpose to defy
- 22 announced rules of law. They have to be, there has to
- 23 be sufficient clarity in the law to say that there was a
- 24 high risk of illegality that you could disregard.
- 25 JUSTICE SCALIA: Would you look to the

- 1 subjective intent of the actor at all?
- 2 MS. MAHONEY: Only --
- 3 JUSTICE SCALIA: Or would you just look to
- 4 the outcome and say, well, you know, it was a close
- 5 question, so even if the actor indeed thought he was in
- 6 violation, it was a close question; it's okay?
- 7 MS. MAHONEY: I don't think you would look
- 8 at the intent until you found that there -- there was no
- 9 reasonable ground or at least no, no -- no fair ground
- 10 for debate about the question. And at that point, Your
- 11 Honor, if there was an objectively high risk of
- 12 illegality, then you do have to ask, what were they
- 13 consciously aware of; what did they do?
- JUSTICE SCALIA: I must say that -- that is
- 15 not the normal meaning of "willful," willfully violating
- 16 the law.
- MS. MAHONEY: Well, I think in Screws --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: You're changing it to mean
- 19 willfully -- willfully and blatantly violating the law.
- MS. MAHONEY: I don't think so.
- 21 JUSTICE SCALIA: I mean, if I know that what
- 22 I'm doing is in violation of the law, even if it's a
- 23 close question, it seems to me I am willfully violating
- 24 the law.
- 25 MS. MAHONEY: Your Honor, Screws says you

- 1 can't know the unknowable. And if the law, if it's
- 2 really, truly an issue of first impression, you may
- 3 think you're violating the law, but you -- you can't
- 4 know the unknowable. And that's why this setting is so
- 5 important, because you can't, you know, put -- impose
- 6 sanctions. Here we're talking about the potential for
- 7 an industry facing billions of dollars without any
- 8 actual harm to -- to individuals. And that --
- 9 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Is it really billions?
- 10 How many of these have been certified as class actions?
- 11 MS. MAHONEY: I believe that there are two
- 12 certified class actions. But many -- there are many
- 13 cases pending and it could be billions of dollars, Your
- 14 Honor. Certainly if the classes are certified, and --
- 15 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Would you, would you, as
- 16 a representative of the insurers, would you have a sound
- 17 objection to class action certification in these cases?
- 18 MS. MAHONEY: Your Honor, I'm sure there
- 19 would be some bases to resist. But classes have been
- 20 certified, so I --
- 21 JUSTICE GINSBURG: And gone to, gone to
- 22 judgment?
- MS. MAHONEY: I do not believe any have gone
- 24 to judgment, but I don't, I don't -- I think that the
- 25 point is that if you allow a thousand dollar penalty or

- 1 the potential for a thousand dollar penalty for every
- 2 consumer who didn't get a notice, simply because they
- 3 may have gotten a better price if they had even better
- 4 credit, across the country, if you interpret the statute
- 5 that way, and then say you can get this thousand
- 6 dollar, what is in essence a penalty, and you multiply
- 7 that by the number of consumers, then you certainly have
- 8 the potential for very, very substantial liability.
- JUSTICE GINSBURG: It's a question how many
- 10 will sue for a thousand dollars, given the litigation
- 11 costs.
- MS. MAHONEY: Well, given that these are
- 13 proceeding as class actions, the answer is there is
- 14 plenty on the line to incentivize plaintiffs' attorneys
- 15 to bring these class actions, and they have been
- 16 brought, and this is a class action. There are two
- 17 class actions.
- 18 JUSTICE GINSBURG: They haven't -- neither
- 19 has been certified, has it?
- MS. MAHONEY: No, it has not. They are
- 21 putative class actions, Your Honor. But I, but I think
- that whether it's a class action or not, we have to look
- 23 at what did, what did Congress presumably have in mind
- 24 when it authorized these kinds of penalties and punitive
- 25 damages based on a willful violation in a technical area

- 1 where there is no potential for harm? And certainly --
- JUSTICE KENNEDY: I have just two, two
- 3 questions on, on willful and then -- because you may
- 4 want to talk about the other issue in the case. First,
- 5 you began by saying that here a district judge has come
- 6 to the contrary conclusion; by definition, it can't be
- 7 reckless. Do you have any authority, where we -- for
- 8 that proposition, where we have said that?
- 9 MS. MAHONEY: Well --
- 10 JUSTICE KENNEDY: We find all the time that
- 11 a right is not clearly established under AEDPA, and so
- 12 forth -- and disregard what I just said. That's my
- 13 first question.
- And the second is "willfully," as Screws
- 15 itself makes very clear, is interpreted differently
- 16 in the criminal context than it is in the civil context.
- MS. MAHONEY: Except Screws, Your Honor,
- 18 actually says that it was adopting a criminal
- 19 recklessness standard, not a knowing standard, but a
- 20 reckless standard. And that is the same standard that
- 21 has been applied in the civil cases that use "willfully"
- in the punitive damage context.
- So I think it's exactly the same standard in
- 24 that Screws does say that the, you can't have, it can't
- 25 just be a bad purpose, that it has to have been a bad

- 1 purpose to violate clearly defined rules. And this
- 2 Court has said in various contexts in the, in the
- 3 qualified immunity area that picking the losing side
- 4 does not mean that your conduct was objectively, you
- 5 know, wrongful.
- 6 And that's really -- I think that there is
- 7 great significance to the district court's ruling. I'm
- 8 not saying that in every case, it would absolutely be
- 9 dispositive. I think you have to look at what was the,
- 10 you know, the clarity of the law, what was the reasoning
- 11 of the district court. But what the Ninth Circuit did,
- is it, in essence, said that you can't rely on
- 13 creative but unlikely answers to issues of first
- 14 impression.
- 15 Well, if an administration official goes to
- 16 a lawyer in the administration and asks about a course
- of conduct, and is told, well, it's completely an issue
- 18 of first impression, there is probably a 40 percent
- 19 chance of success, do you say that's reckless to
- 20 proceed on that basis?
- 21 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, just because
- 22 an issue is one of first impression doesn't mean there's
- 23 a high degree of uncertainty. The statute may be
- 24 clearly addressed to that issue. It hasn't come up
- 25 before.

1	MS. MAHONEY: Absolutely, Your Honor.	
2	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: First impression.	
3	MS. MAHONEY: It certainly this Court has	
4	made clear that if the language of the statute is very	
5	plain, then, of course, that can be noticed, that can be	
6	adequate warning. But certainly this statute doesn't	
7	satisfy that standard. Congress didn't provide the	
8	benchmarks that you have to use for comparison to	
9	determine whether there has been an increase in a charge	
10	or whether there has been an adverse action based on the	
11	consumer report. You need benchmarks to answer those	
12	questions, and there aren't any regulations and there	
13	were no cases.	
14	If I could save the balance of my time for	
15	rebuttal.	
16	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.	
17	Ms. Millett.	
18	ORAL ARGUMENT OF PATRICIA A. MILLETT,	
19	ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENTS	
20	MS. MILLETT: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it	
21	please the Court:	
22	The court of appeals correctly concluded	
23	that "willfulness" in the civil context, as used here,	
24	includes a reckless disregard component or a	
25	recklessness component. That is what this Court has	

- 1 held in a number of cases that have similar uses of
- 2 willfulness focused on a departure from the law, have
- 3 held. Thurston, Richland Shoe and Hazen Paper are the
- 4 three that have been most discussed in the case, in the
- 5 papers here.
- 6 But where the Ninth Circuit misstepped here
- 7 was in the application of that standard. And in
- 8 particular, we agree with Petitioners that when it
- 9 concluded that a creative but unlikely position
- 10 constitutes recklessness, it erred. Recklessness speaks
- 11 an extreme deviation from an ordinary standard of care.
- 12 It requires that the defendant act in the face of or
- 13 fail to act --
- JUSTICE STEVENS: Is it a subjective
- 15 standard or an objective standard?
- 16 MS. MILLETT: It has both in this context.
- 17 It is, I think, first and foremost, an objective
- 18 component, because there is -- this is a civil case.
- 19 It's not purely subjective. And that objective
- 20 component is very important because that is what makes
- 21 the act or inaction reckless, and that is the risk.
- 22 There has to be an objectively high and obvious risk.
- JUSTICE STEVENS: So if the potential
- 24 liability, as in these cases, is huge, then you have to
- 25 be even more careful because there is liability so

- 1 great. So is it the greater the liability -- the
- 2 greater chance of recklessness, the greater the
- 3 potential liability?
- 4 MS. MILLETT: No, to the extent you're
- 5 talking about dollar liability, I don't think that's
- 6 true. I do think it's fair to say that in recklessness
- 7 generally in the tort law, the more serious an injury
- 8 that could result, can -- we'll tolerate less risk. If
- 9 the risk is causing serious bodily injury or death to
- 10 somebody, we'll -- the law will tolerate a lesser degree
- of risk than it will if, if it's simply causing, you
- 12 know, a delay in something or a sort of paper injury or
- 13 maybe even a dollar injury.
- 14 And it's not set. It's a variable
- 15 calculation. So in that sense, it is. I don't think
- 16 that when we talk about a high and objective risk in
- 17 this context, we are talking about the dollars that a,
- 18 that a company would have to pay, although I'm sure they
- 19 are interested in hearing about that from their lawyers.
- 20 What we are talking about here -- and this
- 21 is a very unusual statute the way it's written -- that
- the liability itself, not just the damages, but the
- 23 liability itself turns upon the extent of departure from
- 24 law. You have to -- there is no recovery here like
- 25 there is in almost -- or commonly in Federal statutes

- 1 for just a violation. That isn't it.
- 2 You have to show either a willful violation
- 3 or a negligent violation, and that requires a
- 4 determination not only that the defendants violated the
- 5 law, but a determination as to how much, how far, how
- 6 many standard deviations from correct their position was
- 7 and that is an objective determination.
- 8 Once an objectively high risk has been found
- 9 by a court, then -- then the case can shift to looking
- 10 into subjective things. I think a plaintiff would be
- 11 entitled, once an objectively high and obvious risk has
- 12 been found by the court, to rely on that, and allow a
- 13 jury to, or a judge, whoever is deciding the case, to
- 14 infer the existence of willfulness from that. And
- 15 that's often when defendants -- I'm sorry.
- 16 JUSTICE STEVENS: May I also ask, do you
- 17 agree with the Petitioner on the meaning of adverse
- 18 action?
- MS. MILLETT: No, we agree with Respondents
- 20 on the meaning of adverse action.
- 21 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Correct me if I'm
- 22 wrong. You think if I have an insurance policy, I'm
- 23 paying a certain rate, they look at my credit report and
- 24 they say, you know, good news, we're going to lower your
- 25 rates, that's an adverse action because they might have

- 1 lowered the rates even further if they had notified me
- 2 about the credit report and there were some errors in
- 3 it?
- 4 MS. MILLETT: Right. It's a complicated
- 5 answer, in part because that assumes that you have an
- 6 existing account and you're not an initial account here.
- 7 And when you have an existing account, there's a
- 8 definition of adverse action for insurance provisions,
- 9 but in iv there is a separate, there's another
- 10 definition, and this is on, on page -- sorry. Excuse
- 11 me. On page 3a of the appendix to our brief, iv under
- 12 big I -- I'm sorry, there's a lot of provisions -- talks
- 13 about reviewing an existing account, and it
- 14 cross-referenced another provision which talks about
- 15 reviewing an account for purposes of termination. And
- 16 that would include, in our view, not only completely
- 17 canceling it, but terminating the existing thing and
- 18 charging you more for saying you now need to pay a new
- 19 rate. So which would govern in that particular context
- 20 is a little bit harder.
- 21 But it could, and here's logically why,
- 22 because I think the understanding of "increase" that's
- 23 at issue here is one that's very basic to the operation
- 24 of this statute, and that is, did the content of your
- 25 information in your credit report, if it had been

- 1 better, could you have had a better rate or a better
- 2 deal.
- 3 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Right.
- 4 MS. MILLETT: So have you been hit in the
- 5 pocketbook.
- 6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So if they lower, if
- 7 they lower the rates, you still say that that fits the
- 8 meaning of adverse action because they might have
- 9 lowered them further if the information hadn't been
- 10 erroneous?
- 11 MS. MILLETT: It could have, and here -- in
- 12 this sense, it could be adverse. In the same way that
- in my -- this is sort of the flip side, but in my office,
- 14 if everybody in the hallway gets a 5 percent salary
- 15 increase and I only get a 1 percent salary increase, I
- 16 am certainly better off, but if the reason I got a
- 17 lesser increase is because of my gender or because of my
- 18 credit report, it's an adverse action. So the fact that
- 19 you're doing somewhat better doesn't mean --
- JUSTICE BREYER: That isn't how the statute
- 21 defines it.
- MS. MILLETT: Excuse me?
- JUSTICE BREYER: The statute says an adverse
- 24 action is an increase in a charge for -- in connection
- 25 with underwriting.

- 1 MS. MILLETT: But it also --
- 2 JUSTICE BREYER: That's what it says. And
- 3 then it says an increase is -- and if you take an
- 4 adverse action, i.e., if you increase it, and your
- 5 increase is based in whole or in part on information
- 6 contained in a consumer report, you have to send the
- 7 thing. How did you get -- in your example, there was no
- 8 increase. I mean, in a charge. In your salary, it's a
- 9 decrease in the salary. Same thing.
- 10 MS. MILLETT: The definition -- again I'm on
- 11 3a -- includes not just increase, but includes an
- 12 unfavorable change in the terms. And so it's not
- 13 settled whether --
- 14 JUSTICE BREYER: You mean unfavorable change
- in terms, unfavorable change in terms.
- MS. MILLETT: Exactly.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Well, suppose you don't
- 18 have, you don't have any terms because you never did it
- 19 before. There's no change in terms.
- 20 MS. MILLETT: If you're a new customer --
- 21 and again, I want to reiterate that, how this adverse
- 22 action applies to existing accounts is complicated --
- JUSTICE BREYER: You mean those words
- 24 "change in terms" refer to rates, in other words?
- 25 That's a rather odd way to refer to it. In one place,

- 1 you refer to an "increase"; in the other place, you'd
- 2 refer to it as a "change in terms." That's sort of an
- 3 odd way to write a statute.
- 4 MS. MILLETT: Well, you can have a change in
- 5 terms that is not necessarily an increase. It could be
- 6 you will no longer be entitled to a free rental car when
- 7 your car is in for repair for some reason. That's not
- 8 an increase.
- 9 JUSTICE BREYER: No, no, I understand that.
- 10 But what we're after is this. Everybody has a credit
- 11 report, just about. You put it in and you give people
- 12 the best possible rate conceivable, and now, how do you
- 13 know that maybe there could have still been a better
- 14 rate? And it can't be that the statute intends you to
- 15 send out notices in such circumstances or you'd have to
- 16 send notices whenever you read a credit report. Now, I
- think that's, I've overstated slightly, but that's
- 18 basically the argument. So what's your response?
- 19 MS. MILLETT: And Justice Breyer, my
- 20 response is that if the content of the information in
- 21 your credit report would have made you -- had it been
- 22 better information you'd have gotten a better rate, a
- 23 better result, your pocketbook wouldn't have been hit as
- 24 hard, you had a dollars-and-cents injury because of the
- 25 content of your information, then you have had an

- 1 adverse action.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Okay, so your response is
- 3 just to repeat my question and say that's right?
- 4 MS. MILLETT: No. If I could continue on
- 5 that, if I could add on, if I could add on, the way
- 6 insurance companies work is they don't have 3 million
- 7 customers and 3 million rates. They have ranges and
- 8 most of them will have a top tier. They may have
- 9 specialized things for employees, but putting aside a
- 10 specialized category, there's a top range and they will
- 11 tell you, as they say in the briefs, that 10 to 15
- 12 percent of people fit in there. So they know what the
- 13 best rate is. They know what the next, above average
- 14 rate, the standard rate.
- 15 JUSTICE SCALIA: How do you fit, how do you
- 16 fit that within the language of the statute? Is it, I
- 17 fail -- you're a first-time customer and I fail to give
- 18 you a, you know, a break that maybe you could have had.
- 19 Is it a denial or cancellation of insurance? No. Is it
- 20 an increase in, an increase in any charge for insurance?
- 21 Is it a reduction or other adverse or unfavorable change
- in the terms of coverage or in the amount of any
- 23 insurance? I find it hard to shoehorn your case into
- 24 that language.
- MS. MILLETT: Well, to begin with, that may

- 1 be why Petitioners' position here certainly was not
- 2 reckless and the Ninth Circuit erred. But we do think
- 3 that the statutory language read as a whole supports
- 4 this. It could be a denial of a particular term in an
- 5 insurance contract. But you have to look at -- it's
- 6 important to understand you look --
- 7 JUSTICE SCALIA: I read the term as, as one
- 8 of the Justices here does, not referring to the rate.
- 9 The earlier part refers to the rate. An increase in any
- 10 charge for, that's the rate. And then it speaks of
- 11 change in the terms of coverage. I mean, that is, you
- 12 know, whether it covers hurricanes, or in the amount of
- 13 the insurance, whether you're insured for --
- MS. MILLETT: Or it could be a reduction in
- 15 the terms. I mean, these things are statutory
- 16 construction issues to be litigated, and the important
- 17 issue here -- and they are presented in this case.
- 18 They're to be litigated and the important issue is that
- 19 when there is fair debate about these issues, insurance
- 20 companies will not be held to be willfully violating the
- 21 statute if they got the answer wrong.
- 22 But I think on the, on the substantive
- 23 question, it's important to read "adverse action" in
- 24 light of, if I could just finish the sentence, in light
- 25 of the definition of when a notice is required to be

- 1 issued, which turns upon the content of the information
- 2 in the report.
- 3 Thank you.
- 4 JUSTICE SCALIA: Which is where?
- 5 MS. MILLETT: And that's on page 6a of our
- 6 appendix.
- 7 JUSTICE SCALIA: Thank you.
- 8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- 9 Mr. Shorr.
- 10 ORAL ARGUMENT OF SCOTT A. SHORR
- ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENTS
- 12 MR. SHORR: Mr. Chief Justice and may it
- 13 please the Court:
- When Congress intended to require a knowing
- 15 violation of the Fair Credit Reporting Act, it expressly
- 16 said so. It did not do so in connection with the claims
- here under section 1681n(a)(1)(A). In each instance
- 18 where Congress wanted to allow -- to require a higher
- 19 mens rea, it said so and did so in connection with
- 20 liability that was greater. They required knowing mens
- 21 rea for the criminal provision. They required knowing
- 22 mens rea to obtain the even higher statutory damages
- 23 that are available under the act.
- JUSTICE SOUTER: What do you say to the
- 25 argument from drafting history that looks at the history

- 1 both of little n and little o and it points out that as
- 2 originally, in the original bill, little o providing for
- 3 the actual damages required a finding of gross
- 4 negligence? Little n used the word "willful" just as it
- 5 does now, suggesting that "willful" would not include
- 6 gross negligence or something close to gross negligence
- 7 like recklessness. Then in, then in o, they changed the
- 8 standard from gross negligence to mere negligence, but
- 9 they made no change in n, which suggests that n stayed
- 10 whatever it always was, and if the argument from
- 11 contrast was that n probably meant knowing rather than
- 12 reckless, it stayed knowing even when the standard was
- 13 changed to negligence in o. What do you say to that
- 14 argument?
- 15 MR. SHORR: Justice Souter, I think the
- 16 only thing we can say about that is Congress reduced the
- 17 culpability for the actual damages from gross negligence
- 18 to negligence. I don't think that tells us much about
- 19 "willful" means, what willful means as a separate matter.
- JUSTICE SOUTER: But the fact that they had
- 21 originally drafted n as it is, in contrast to the
- 22 original o, does tell us, doesn't it, something about
- 23 what they had in mind in n. And they must have had
- 24 something in mind, probably had in mind, something in n
- 25 which was a standard higher than gross negligence.

- 1 MR. SHORR: No, Justice Souter, I suggest
- 2 that what you can infer from that is that, if anything,
- 3 is perhaps Congress wanted to move, make clear that
- 4 under o the actual damages aren't close to willful or
- 5 reckless, so they reduced gross negligence to negligence
- 6 in that circumstance. But that still doesn't tell us
- 7 separately what "willful" meant, and of course "willful"
- 8 had been interpreted by this Court in similar cases
- 9 involving similar statutes to mean a knowing or reckless
- 10 disregard. And I respectfully disagree with --
- 11 JUSTICE SOUTER: Well, I mean, there's no
- 12 question it has been and that is sort of the usual
- 13 reading in the civil context. But we also keep
- 14 repeating, you know, "willful" is a word of many
- 15 meanings and you always look to the context. And here
- 16 the argument is that if you look to the context of the,
- of the two statutory sections right up next to each
- 18 other, you can draw a, an inference about what "willful"
- 19 means.
- 20 MR. SHORR: I think if anything, Justice
- 21 Souter, here the context should be the actual statutory
- terms used, and in section 1681n(b) they expressly
- 23 required the knowing standard and that's a knowing
- 24 violation of the law, as Justice Alito's question seemed
- 25 to draw out, a knowing impermissible purpose. And the

- 1 statute directly defines what a permissible purpose is
- 2 under this law.
- 3 So that reference to "knowing" could not refer
- 4 to a knowing, knowing the facts. And of course,
- 5 "willful" in some sense always includes some knowledge
- 6 of the factual circumstances.
- 7 In addition, the logical structure of the
- 8 act -- as I mentioned, we had negligence and actual
- 9 damages. We have a reckless standard, a knowing or
- 10 reckless standard for certain statutory damages, but
- 11 then an even higher level for the criminal and higher
- 12 statutory penalty provisions. And as I started to say,
- 13 a willful, knowing, reckless standard is entirely
- 14 consistent with how this Court has interpreted the term
- 15 in similar civil statutes that were in fact passed about
- 16 the same time the Hazen Paper case and Thurston and
- 17 McLaughlin cases interpreting the ADA and the FLSA and
- 18 other similar cases.
- 19 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Counsel, even if
- 20 you're right about the standard, how can you suggest
- 21 that it's willful here when you have no judicial
- 22 construction, you have no administrative construction,
- 23 you have the statutory language that at least the
- 24 questions this morning have suggested is not perfectly
- 25 clear? How can you suggest that the action of the

- 1 companies on this case even under your standard was
- 2 willful?
- 3 MR. SHORR: Mr. Chief Justice, of course we
- 4 believe and the statute is in fact clear, you do not
- 5 need further interpretation by the Court.
- 6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So if we don't agree
- 7 with you on that, you would lose on the application of
- 8 the willfulness standard?
- 9 MR. SHORR: If you don't agree with us --
- 10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: In other words,
- 11 your, your conclusion that this was a willful
- 12 violation depends upon your assertion that the statute
- is perfectly clear?
- MR. SHORR: I think that there is a level of
- 15 objective component that the statute at least has to be
- 16 understood by a reasonable person at some level using
- 17 standard aides of statutory construction. But that
- isn't to suggest that the statute needs to be
- 19 interpreted by a higher court or even a district court
- 20 for counsel to get guidance. And of course, in this
- 21 case, there was no guidance supporting Respondents --
- 22 excuse me -- no guidance supporting Petitioners',
- 23 defendants', position. In fact, the only guidance
- 24 supported our position, including guidance from the FTC.
- 25 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: You're talking about

- 1 the Ball letter?
- 2 MR. SHORR: I am talking about the Ball
- 3 letter.
- 4 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: That wasn't even
- 5 binding on the commission, so why would that be regarded
- 6 as authoritative?
- 7 MR. SHORR: It was not, and we are not
- 8 suggesting it is, although it's entitled to Chevron
- 9 deference. But if you get past the minimum level of
- 10 objective standard, the question becomes what indicia
- 11 and markers were out there that would have guided this
- 12 company as to whether there was a high risk that they
- 13 were violating the act. And certainly the Ball letter,
- 14 which was sent by the staff specifically to address this
- 15 exact question and to guide insurance companies, gave
- 16 notice and it said charging anyone a higher amount than
- 17 the best available rate based on their credit score was
- 18 an adverse action. And in addition, there was --
- 19 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, how could that be? I
- 20 mean I agree that the statute is clear, but I think it's
- 21 clear the other way. That is, if you look at the
- language, as you've just heard, if you look at the
- 23 purpose it's very hard to reconcile with the purpose an
- 24 instance where a person has continuous accidents. He's
- 25 a reckless driver. His insurance company puts him in

- 1 just a category below the bottom and they read his
- 2 credit report and they discover, despite his faults, he
- 3 always pays his bills on time. So they increase it, not
- 4 to the top category, but they give him a much better
- 5 deal. And you're saying this statute means that what I
- 6 just described is an adverse action based on a credit
- 7 report?
- 8 MR. SHORR: Yes.
- 9 JUSTICE BREYER: Yes. Okay. And then if
- 10 you're going to say yes, I want to hear why yes, and
- 11 then in light of the following: The little boy who says
- 12 wolf. You're probably puzzled what I mean by that. I
- 13 mean that if you're right in that interpretation, there
- 14 will be tens of millions of notices going out and
- 15 they'll have the same effect on the public that these
- 16 privacy notices have today. We get them every day,
- 17 dozens of them, and they go right in the wastebasket,
- 18 because they will become meaningless because to an
- 19 average person that notice will not mean that he better
- 20 look at his credit report. It will mean throw it in the
- 21 wastebasket.
- 22 All right, now I've got the purpose, I've
- 23 got the language, and I have what I think of as common
- 24 sense. Now, you explain why it's obvious the opposite.
- 25 JUSTICE GINSBURG: This is a different

- 1 question. We've been talking about "willful" up to now.
- 2 MR. SHORR: Yes, and this is the adverse
- 3 action question.
- 4 JUSTICE GINSBURG: You haven't addressed
- 5 adverse action at all.
- 6 MR. SHORR: And I'm happy to do so now.
- 7 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Yes. But, was there
- 8 anything further on willful? You said that the statute
- 9 was clear enough and you had the FTC informal advice,
- 10 but now we know that courts have divided on this
- 11 question, right? On --
- MR. SHORR: Divided in the sense -- well,
- 13 the Ninth Circuit of course overturned the district
- 14 court's ruling so there's no current division, but if
- 15 that's what you mean, yes, Your Honor.
- 16 In a -- I guess I'll address quickly your
- 17 question. There's additional guidance provided by the
- 18 FTC that was subject to formal rulemaking and that was
- 19 16 CFR, I believe it's Part 601 Appendix C, and in that
- 20 instance the FTC, again subject to formal notice and
- 21 comment of rulemaking, said that the statute is defined
- 22 very broadly and it includes any action that can even be
- 23 considered to have a negative impact. And that plays in
- 24 the subjective aspect as well, but addressing your
- 25 question, Justice Breyer, first on the statutory

- 1 language --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: It's pretty sloppy
- 3 lawyering, don't you think, any action that can even be
- 4 considered to have -- wow. This is a standard?
- 5 MR. SHORR: That was --
- 6 JUSTICE SCALIA: Any action that can even be
- 7 considered to have a negative impact.
- 8 MR. SHORR: That was guidance, Your Honor.
- 9 JUSTICE SCALIA: This is guidance?
- 10 MR. SHORR: That was quidance. That was
- 11 guidance to provide that in the context of reading this
- 12 statute, it should be read broadly.
- JUSTICE SCALIA: But you know, I would tell
- 14 my CEO ignore to that, that it's meaningless.
- 15 MR. SHORR: In addition, the CEO would have
- 16 the guidance provided by the Ball letter.
- 17 But again addressing your question, Justice
- 18 Breyer, an increase based on credit. If we had let's
- 19 say an increase based on race, someone goes in and has
- 20 a product to buy and there's the best rate, and they
- 21 charge someone else based on their race a higher rate,
- 22 certainly that's an increase based on credit. There's
- 23 only one best rate.
- 24 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But this is not an
- 25 antidiscrimination provision. It doesn't say anyone who

- 1 discriminates in the setting of rates has to send out
- 2 letters. It requires an adverse action. It requires an
- 3 increase in the charge.
- 4 MR. SHORR: And Your Honor, I was only using
- 5 that example to try and explain the statutory language.
- 6 JUSTICE BREYER: It doesn't explain it
- 7 because if you have an increase in the charge based on
- 8 race, of course that's an increase based on race.
- 9 MR. SHORR: Well, here we have --
- 10 JUSTICE BREYER: And if you refuse to give a
- 11 person the best rate, and lower his rate but not the
- 12 best rate, based on race, that is not an increase based
- 13 on race. That is discrimination based on race.
- MR. SHORR: You're charging someone more
- 15 based on credit.
- 16 JUSTICE BREYER: That's true, and it's a
- 17 discrimination, but you didn't increase the rate. You
- 18 decreased it.
- MR. SHORR: I think a natural --
- 20 JUSTICE BREYER: It's still a
- 21 discrimination, it's still unlawful.
- MR. SHORR: Applying it to credit, a natural
- 23 definition that is charging someone more than you charge
- 24 others is an increase.
- 25 JUSTICE ALITO: When you say more, in order

- 1 for there to be an adverse action there has to be an
- 2 increase or an unfavorable change. And when you have an
- 3 initial application you have to figure out what is the
- 4 baseline in order to determine whether there has been an
- 5 increase or an adverse action. And you and the
- 6 Solicitor General just assert that the baseline in that
- 7 situation is the best possible rate that you can get,
- 8 but I don't understand where that comes from.
- 9 MR. SHORR: Because charging someone more
- 10 than someone else who qualifies for that better rate
- 11 based on their credit, is increasing them, charging them
- 12 more, but it's also evident from the statutory purpose,
- 13 which I think was a question you asked --
- 14 JUSTICE BREYER: Let me look at the
- 15 language. Go back to give me -- because in ordinary
- 16 English, which I hope I speak, it is not an increase,
- 17 but maybe there is a technical term in the technical
- 18 language of commercial law or in FTC law where the word
- 19 "increase" means decrease. And if you -- is there
- 20 anything you want -- no. It's a serious question, at
- 21 least if you want to cite me to some authority that uses
- this word "increase" in the way you just suggested.
- MR. SHORR: We believe that it's a standard
- 24 dictionary definition, to charge someone more for
- 25 insurance than they would otherwise qualify for is

- 1 increasing their charge.
- JUSTICE BREYER: Which dictionary shall I
- 3 look at?
- 4 MR. SHORR: I think we can look at any
- 5 dictionary. I don't have a cite, Your Honor, but --
- 6 JUSTICE SOUTER: Aren't you making this
- 7 argument, and I think you got close to it a minute ago
- 8 when you alluded to statutory purpose. I think this is
- 9 what's behind, and you tell me if I'm wrong. One
- 10 purpose of the statute is to alert a consumer that the
- 11 consumer's credit report may contain errors which are
- 12 doing the consumer some kind of damage.
- MR. SHORR: Yes, Your Honor.
- 14 JUSTICE SOUTER: And you want this consumer
- 15 alerted so the consumer can ask to see the report and
- 16 correct it if possible.
- 17 MR. SHORR: That's exactly right.
- 18 JUSTICE SOUTER: Reading the adverse action
- 19 the way you read it, it would give the consumer, or
- 20 consumers, a tip-off in the maximum number of cases.
- 21 In every case in which the consumer might have done
- 22 better if the credit report had assumed different
- 23 facts, on your reading theoretically, the consumer is
- 24 going to say I want to look at that report and correct
- 25 it if it's wrong. But isn't the fallacy of that

- 1 argument the fallacy of saying because that is one
- 2 object of the statute, every term within the statute
- 3 has got to be read in a way that maximizes the
- 4 effectuation of that object? And the trouble that
- 5 we're having on the bench is that "discrimination"
- 6 and "increase" are different terms. Increase says
- 7 the rate actually goes up from a baseline that the
- 8 consumer previously had, whereas discrimination does
- 9 not. And your reading in effect, "increase" to mean
- 10 discrimination in order to maximize the likelihood
- 11 that the consumer will look at the report, isn't that
- 12 the basis of your argument?
- MR. SHORR: I think it has to be an increase
- 14 based on some aspect, but the only way to give effect to
- 15 that statutory purpose is an increase above what you
- 16 would otherwise qualify for had you had better credit
- 17 and of course --
- 18 JUSTICE SOUTER: Well, that's a way to give
- 19 every conceivable effect to that policy. But the
- 20 statute in drafting adverse, or drafting the terms of
- 21 adverse action, may very well have said we don't want to
- 22 give every conceivable effect to this purpose because if
- 23 we do, we'll get into the situation that Justice Breyer
- 24 described. Everybody will be getting notices and the
- 25 notices will be meaningless.

- 1 MR. SHORR: I don't think the notice is
- 2 problematic because you're alerting the consumer to
- 3 check that the information that the insurance company
- 4 expressly relied on to increase your charge --
- JUSTICE SOUTER: To set the charge. I mean,
- 6 that's circular. To set the charge that it gives you.
- 7 MR. SHORR: I don't think you need a prior
- 8 charge to suffer an increase. If I walk into a candy
- 9 store and I've never purchased that candy before and the
- 10 best price that day is 5 cents but they say we're going
- 11 to charge you 10 cents, I've certainly suffered an
- 12 increase.
- JUSTICE BREYER: By that you're talking
- 14 linguistically, but I am interested in the purpose. So
- 15 I looked up on the Internet approximately what percent
- 16 of the people have the best credit score and that's
- 17 about 1 percent. So 99 percent of the public doesn't
- 18 have the best possible credit score. Now I take it that
- 19 means that you could in fact, if it's even roughly
- 20 right, have 99 percent or a little less or even perhaps
- 21 a little more when they look at that report that, since
- 22 it's not perfect in 99 percent of the cases, it's quite
- 23 possible that they won't get the best conceivable rate
- 24 which might be reserved for just perfect people. And if
- 25 that's so, in 99 percent of the cases they'll send out

- 1 notices. And that's why I asked my question about the
- 2 boy who calls wolf. What will happen if 99 percent of
- 3 the people who apply for insurance or any other thing
- 4 get notices? I suspect that this is only intuitive,
- 5 that the notices are more likely to go into the
- 6 wastebasket than they are if there was really a
- 7 decrease. Now, do you have any light you can shed on
- 8 that?
- 9 MR. SHORR: Sure. The -- as an initial
- 10 matter, it's not the perfect credit that is the
- 11 standard, it's whatever would qualify you for GEICO's
- 12 best rate. And that's a much broader standard. We
- don't know the exact amounts but if you look at GEICO
- 14 JA-67/68, they have fairly broad tiers, maybe five or six.
- 15 And of course not everyone is going to get the notice.
- 16 If your driving record totally eliminates -- if you have
- 17 great credit but your driving record eliminates the
- 18 possibility that you qualify for the better rate, you
- 19 wouldn't get notice in that circumstance either. But
- 20 the key to the notice is, if I have very good credit but
- 21 the information that the insurance company looks at is
- 22 incorrect, I will be charged more based on incorrect
- 23 information without ever having the opportunity to tell
- 24 the insurance company or whoever is collecting that
- 25 information for them, you've charged me the wrong amount

- 1 and I in fact qualify for that better rate.
- 2 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Don't you have that
- 3 right independently, though, every year to look at a
- 4 copy of your credit report?
- 5 MR. SHORR: Well, what's significant here --
- 6 that has been added to the statute in the last two
- 7 years. But since 1970, Congress's concern is giving
- 8 notice at a critical time, when the insurance company
- 9 tells you we are relying on it and we may have taken an
- 10 adverse action.
- I wanted to also mention, here it's not just
- 12 an increase. There's also been a denial, and that
- 13 Mr. Edo applied for insurance from GEICO, and was denied
- 14 insurance with the stand-alone company GEICO General, so
- 15 that is also an adverse action under the act.
- 16 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: When you say you
- 17 look at the increase with respect to the best credit
- 18 rate, why is that? Why wouldn't you look at it relative
- 19 to say the average insured who walks in the door?
- MR. SHORR: Because that -- GEICO's
- 21 argument, and I think that's what they want, presumes
- 22 they're looking at accurate credit information. And the
- 23 problem is, Congress was always told that there is
- 24 significant inaccuracies in the credit information. I
- 25 think it's cited in the National Consumer Law Center

- 1 brief. In 1996, Congress was told that the error rate
- 2 in consumer information was 50 percent and there was a
- 3 20 percent serious error in the rates. Under GEICO's
- 4 interpretation --
- 5 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I don't understand
- 6 what pertinence that has to my question which is, why do
- 7 you get to pick the best credit report as the baseline
- 8 from which you would measure your hypothetical increase?
- 9 MR. SHORR: Because under GEICO's theory of
- 10 the statute you may never get notice, even though you're
- 11 being charged more for insurance based on inaccurate
- 12 information, as long as you're not charge -- your charge
- doesn't move below average. So a lot of people who are
- 14 in fact intended to be protected under this act will not
- 15 be protected until their charge goes below average, even
- 16 though the insurance company is continuing to charge
- 17 them more based on inaccurate information.
- 18 JUSTICE SOUTER: Why do we -- how do we know
- 19 that they were intended to be protected in this way by
- 20 getting this notice? That's the issue in the case.
- 21 MR. SHORR: Because going through the
- 22 statute and the increase based on credit, and then the
- 23 notice will give them the opportunity to check. The
- 24 consumer here is the -- it's a system of checks and
- 25 balances, and unless you give this consumer the

- 1 opportunity to check that they are in fact using the
- 2 correct information, it wasn't mistaken, it wasn't
- 3 driven down by identity theft, you can continue to
- 4 charge people more --
- 5 JUSTICE SOUTER: Okay. So that's --
- 6 MR. SHORR: -- based on inaccurate
- 7 information.
- 8 JUSTICE SOUTER: Your basic argument is the
- 9 statute, the definitions of adverse action have got to
- 10 be read in a way that maximizes the occasion upon which
- 11 a consumer will get a notice that may lead that consumer
- 12 to ask to see his credit report. That's your basic
- 13 premise?
- MR. SHORR: Both based on the text and
- 15 purpose of statute, yes.
- 16 JUSTICE SOUTER: All right.
- 17 MR. SHORR: Briefly addressing the
- 18 application of the standard to the facts in this case,
- 19 we do think it's appropriate to remand for further
- 20 consideration in light of some new developments. GEICO
- 21 has just recently produced documents to us that
- 22 addressly -- directly address the question of scienter
- 23 here, so if there's -- if you go past a minimum
- 24 threshold --
- JUSTICE STEVENS: I've read your reference

- 1 to those documents. Explain why you think that's so
- 2 important.
- 3 MR. SHORR: Because those documents directly
- 4 address the subject of standard here, that GEICO was
- 5 reckless or understood their --
- 6 JUSTICE STEVENS: How do those documents
- 7 shed any light on recklessness? I didn't see that.
- 8 MR. SHORR: I'm sorry, Your Honor?
- 9 JUSTICE STEVENS: How do the documents that
- 10 you describe shed any light on the extent of their
- 11 recklessness, if any?
- MR. SHORR: I want to be careful, because I
- 13 had presented -- I asked to lodge them with the Court
- 14 and I can quote them if necessary, but within those
- 15 documents there is direct evidence that GEICO
- 16 interpreted the statute exactly how we do, that not
- 17 putting someone in the best tier based on credit --
- 18 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Who's GEICO? I
- 19 mean, you're talking about particular lawyers at a
- 20 particular level, an ongoing debate about what this law
- 21 means. If you get one lawyer who says, you know, I
- 22 think you could read it this way, does that mean that
- 23 GEICO reads it that way?
- 24 MR. SHORR: No, Your Honor. In this
- 25 instance, this document involves top level GEICO

- 1 executives. And with respect to the advice of counsel
- 2 issue, frankly it's a red herring. We have never asked
- 3 to compel the defendants in either of these cases or any
- 4 of the cases we're involved in, to waive their
- 5 privilege. They've got the right, of course, to offer
- 6 advice of counsel as an affirmative -- as a defense in
- 7 this case, but we don't believe it's necessary to prove
- 8 our case to even reach what the counsel said. We
- 9 believe we can prove our case based on the documents and
- 10 subjective intent alone.
- 11 JUSTICE STEVENS: I still don't really
- 12 understand this part of the case very much. Assume that
- 13 a lawyer writes a letter saying you read it two or three
- 14 different ways, read the statute, it's very ambiguous,
- 15 and we think the Government's reading is the better
- 16 reading. And the executives think about it and they say
- 17 no, we don't think that's right. Has that proved
- 18 reckless disregard?
- 19 MR. SHORR: If the statute was clear and the
- 20 guidance --
- 21 JUSTICE STEVENS: If the statute's clear.
- 22 And of course, Miss Mahoney says the district judge
- 23 thought it was clear, but the other way.
- 24 MR. SHORR: And with respect to the district
- 25 court, we believe the district court here clearly erred,

- 1 as the Ninth Circuit found. And the guidance -- that
- 2 opinion certainly didn't precede the conduct that's at
- 3 issue here. The only guidance, again, available at the
- 4 time supported our reading of the statute. There was no
- 5 guidance from any court or from the FTC, or from
- 6 anywhere that would have supported defendants'
- 7 interpretation at that time. So that's another aspect
- 8 of inquiry into the subjective intent of the defendants.
- 9 If there are no further questions?
- 10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- 11 Ms. Mahoney, you have four minutes remaining.
- 12 REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF MAUREEN E. MAHONEY
- 13 ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONERS
- MS. MAHONEY: If I could start by just
- 15 responding to the issue of the new document, I just want
- 16 to emphasize that this document was created by people
- 17 who weren't lawyers. It was done before GEICO even
- 18 started using credit to price insurance. They were --
- 19 said they were brainstorming about what the statute
- 20 might mean. And I would point the Court to the
- 21 supplemental excerpt of records at 504 where when GEICO
- implemented the policy that we're talking about here,
- 23 the -- they said that the intent was that we would send
- 24 to the people who were supposed to get the adverse
- 25 action notice. With the early systems development we

- 1 didn't have the ability to identify whether they were
- 2 supposed to receive the notice or not; that was because
- 3 they had not yet developed the way to do with what they
- 4 call the neutral, where they compare how the applicant
- 5 would have done if they hadn't taken credit, hadn't
- 6 taken credit into account at all. And this is a
- 7 procedure that's required actually in most States in
- 8 order to ensure that those who don't want to allow
- 9 access to credit reports or who don't have a sufficient
- 10 credit history are not treated adversely in the meaning
- 11 of those State laws, and that means worse than the
- 12 average loss ratio. So there's nothing in this record,
- even if you take into account the documents they're
- 14 talking about, to suggest that there was somehow a
- 15 knowing or deliberate intent to try to violate the law.
- 16 With respect to a few of the factual or --
- 17 issues that came up, Safeco estimates that approximately
- 18 80 percent of all consumers that they are selling new
- 19 insurance to now have to get notice under the standards
- 20 established by the Ninth Circuit.
- 21 With respect to who can qualify for the top
- 22 tier of credit, it's only, at least at GEICO,
- 23 approximately 10 percent. So 90 percent of the
- 24 consumers would not qualify for that.
- 25 And the statute very plainly does not

- 1 prohibit differential treatment based on persons with
- 2 better credit, nor do State laws. And so the analogies
- 3 to race discrimination simply don't hold water, because
- 4 there Congress has told you what the baseline is, you
- 5 can't treat any person of a different race in a
- 6 different way, and that's not true under this statute.
- 7 And instead, it's quite reasonable, as GEICO has
- 8 concluded, to simply say look, if we wouldn't -- if
- 9 we're treating you worse than we would have treated you
- 10 if we ever looked at your credit report, worse than if
- 11 you had an average loss ratio for this criteria, we'll
- 12 send you the notice.
- JUSTICE KENNEDY: Why did they use credit
- 14 reports? Is it just a hedge against late premiums and
- 15 the cost of late premiums, or does it bear on risk
- 16 factors generally?
- MS. MAHONEY: Well, generally there are
- 18 about 15 factors that they look at to try to come up
- 19 with a prediction of loss ratio, and someone who has a
- 20 good credit history is generally regarded as
- 21 responsible, and responsible people tend to make less
- 22 claims. And so, again, it's just one factor of 15
- 23 though.
- 24 JUSTICE STEVENS: Yes. May I ask this
- 25 question? The reading of the statute in subsection i

- 1 about, in the charges for insurance advice, seems to
- 2 favor your view. But subsection ii about denial of
- 3 employment really seems to read in favor of the
- 4 Government's reading.
- 5 MS. MAHONEY: Well actually, I think that
- 6 when you factor in employment, it has -- it has the
- 7 opposite effect. Because what happens here is if you're
- 8 using employment verification reports, consumer reports
- 9 about employment, there are all kinds of consumer
- 10 reports. How do you tell who had the optimal employment
- 11 history? How could the baseline be the best employment
- 12 history possible?
- JUSTICE STEVENS: No. But my point is, it
- 14 seems to me that getting a lesser salary, it just seems
- 15 like the first applicant would be an adverse employment
- 16 action under subparagraph ii, just -- do you see what
- 17 I'm trying to say?
- 18 MS. MAHONEY: That if you -- that in other
- 19 words, if you gave someone a lower salary --
- 20 JUSTICE STEVENS: It adversely affects any
- 21 current or prospective employee. Now the language in i
- isn't, it doesn't read that way. But the thing that's
- 23 troubling me is whether you should interpret i in the
- 24 light of what ii seems to say.
- 25 MS. MAHONEY: Your Honor, I think that if

Τ	GEICO in this example, if you actually pay them less
2	because you looked at their credit report, then GEICO
3	would concede that that is in fact an adverse action.
4	So I don't think it's inconsistent at all.
5	Thank you, Your Honor.
6	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,
7	Miss Mahoney. The case is submitted.
8	(Whereupon, at 10:59 a.m., the case in the
9	above-entitled matters was submitted.)
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