**Primary Holding**

Military equipment that meets prior requirements set by the federal government cannot have a design defect sufficient to hold its manufacturer liable.

**Facts**

Boyle's son was a Marine helicopter co-pilot who died when his helicopter crashed into the ocean during a training exercise. Although his son survived the initial impact, he drowned because he was unable to escape the helicopter, which was a CH-53D model built by the Sikorsky Division of United Technologies for the armed forces. Boyle brought a product liability action against Sikorsky on the grounds that the helicopter's emergency escape system was defectively designed and that Sikorsky had failed to properly repair a component of the automatic flight control system. He prevailed in the trial court and received $725,000 in damages from the jury. However, the intermediate appellate court disallowed the defective design claim because it ruled that the military contractor defense applied to Sikorsky.

**Opinions**

**Majority**

* Antonin Scalia (Author)
* William Hubbs Rehnquist
* Byron Raymond White
* Sandra Day O'Connor
* Anthony M. Kennedy

In areas where there is a uniquely federal interest, federal common law prevails in any conflict with state law. When a government contract requires a certain design, it trumps any state duty of care that clashes with it. Government employees and agencies are free from liability under the Federal Tort Claims Act when they engage in their discretionary functions. The design of a helicopter is a discretionary function, so military contractors have immunity if their equipment conforms to the specifications provided by the federal government. The Navy approved the design of the helicopter before it was built. Any duty for the supplier would consist only of warning the government about any risks in the use of the equipment.

**Dissent**

* William Joseph Brennan, Jr. (Author)
* Thurgood Marshall
* Harry Andrew Blackmun

Federal laws should pre-empt state law only if Congress has explicitly provided that they should supersede state law, unless a few narrow exceptions apply. Congress has declined to grant immunity to military contractors, despite their efforts to obtain it. Uniquely federal interests do not arise in the context of non-government employees like military contractors.

**Dissent**

* John Paul Stevens (Author)

Congress should have the authority over creating an entirely new doctrine because it is better situated than the courts to balance the conflicting interests that are at stake.

**Case Commentary**

The Federal Tort Claims Act now covers this area of law more broadly, providing immunity when federal officials are acting within the scope of their employment, even if their actions are not discretionary. Therefore, this lawsuit probably would not have survived as long as it did if it were brought now.