

United States Court of Appeals
for the Fifth Circuit

United States Court of Appeals
Fifth Circuit

FILED

October 1, 2026

Thomas B. Plunkett, III
Clerk

No. 25-10526

DESIRAE MONIQUE MATA,

Petitioner—Appellant,

versus

ERIC GUERRERO, *Director, Texas Department of Criminal Justice,*
Correctional Institutions Division,

Respondent—Appellee.

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Northern District of Texas
USDC No. 5:20-CV-86

Before ELROD, *Chief Judge*, and WILLETT and WILSON, *Circuit Judges*.

PER CURIAM:*

Desirae Mata, a Texas state prisoner, was convicted of two counts of capital murder, for which she received two life sentences without the possibility of parole. Her trial featured the testimony of a jailhouse informant, Angie Brown, regarding statements Mata made to Brown about her involvement in the murders. Mata appeals the denial of federal habeas

* This opinion is not designated for publication. See 5TH CIR. R. 47.5.

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relief under 28 U.S.C. § 2254 on claims arising under *Napue v. Illinois*, 360 U.S. 264 (1959), and *Brady v. Maryland*, 373 U.S. 83 (1963). Her *Napue* theory is that the state prosecutor unconstitutionally used Brown’s testimony about a possible deal that he was aware was false. Her *Brady* theory is that the same prosecutor failed to disclose impeachment evidence in the form of letters between Brown, Brown’s attorney, a Texas Ranger, and the federal prosecutor responsible for Brown’s federal case. Because the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals’ rejection of both claims was not contrary to, or an unreasonable application of, clearly established federal law, we AFFIRM.

I

The murders arose out of a dispute over three diamond rings. Roland “Rollie” Cantu, the father of Mata’s child, had received the rings in exchange for drugs and asked John Allen to fence them. After Allen did so, Mata lived with him for a time before moving out. Sometime later, Mata and three associates went to Allen’s home—to rob him or to kill him, depending on the account—and Allen and a second man, Jay Doyal, were shot and killed. *Mata v. State*, No. 11-15-00081-CR, 2017 WL 2986845, at *1 (Tex. App.—Eastland July 13, 2017, pet. ref’d). One of Mata’s associates, Juan “Smokey” Castillo, confessed and identified his companions as Nicodemus “Dan Dan” Sosa, Bobby Ruiz, and a woman he called “Rollie’s Desirae.” Shown a photo lineup, Castillo identified a different woman, Desirae Reyna, who had an alibi—she was in custody at the time of the murders.

Mata was arrested in Alabama after the murders and held in custody with Angie Brown, a fellow inmate. Brown, with her attorney Rita Briles, gave Texas Rangers a statement describing incriminating statements Mata purportedly had made to her, and went on to testify to that effect at Mata’s trial.

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At trial, the prosecutor asked Brown directly whether “[his] office” had promised her “any kind of favorable deal . . . or anything like that”; Brown answered, “No.” On cross-examination, defense counsel introduced a November 15, 2013, letter in which Brown had asked a Texas Ranger to “keep his promise,” and Brown confirmed that her earlier denial referred specifically to the prosecutor, not the Ranger. In closing argument, the prosecutor told the jury that he had made Brown no deal and that, in any event, whether the Rangers had suggested one made no difference to the case against Mata.

The prosecutor separately asked Briles whether anyone had communicated to Brown that she would gain an advantage or lose something if she didn’t give her statement; Briles said no, and confirmed she was not aware of any offer of leniency to Brown “to this date.” On cross-examination, defense counsel pressed Briles about correspondence suggesting Brown was working to reduce her own federal sentence, including a letter Briles had sent the prosecutor and a letter Brown had sent independently. Briles acknowledged that her representation of Brown had ended around 2012, that inmates “do things independently,” and that she could not speak to any contact between Brown and others after that point.

The jury convicted Mata.

In 2018, five letters were disclosed for the first time in the trial of Mata’s codefendant, Bobby Ruiz, that had not been turned over to Mata’s own defense.¹ An April 18, 2013, letter from Briles to Brown discussed Briles’s plan to ask a Texas Ranger to prepare a statement summarizing Brown’s assistance. A May 9, 2013, letter from Briles to Brown reported that

¹ Like Mata, Ruiz was convicted of two counts of capital murder and sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

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Briles had passed information from the Texas Ranger and about a Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 35 motion to the federal prosecutor then handling Brown's case. An October 28, 2013, letter from Brown to that prosecutor enclosed supporting letters from the Ranger and Briles in aid of a Rule 35 motion, and a letter of the same date from Brown to the Ranger references "the assistance [she] gave" and her pursuit of a Rule 35 reduction. Finally, a November 12, 2013, letter from a federal prosecutor to Brown informed her that she had not yet provided sufficient information to support a Rule 35 reduction and that more detailed information from a reputable source would be required.

After losing a direct appeal and undertaking unsuccessful state habeas efforts, Mata turned to federal court. The district court denied the instant 28 U.S.C. § 2254 application but granted a certificate of appealability on Mata's *Napue* and *Brady* claims.

II

We review the district court's legal conclusions *de novo* and its factual findings for clear error. *Miller v. Thaler*, 714 F.3d 897, 901 (5th Cir. 2013). Because the state habeas court adjudicated both claims on the merits, we may not grant relief unless that adjudication "resulted in a decision that was contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established Federal law" or "was based on an unreasonable determination of the facts." 28 U.S.C. § 2254(d). The Supreme Court has explained that, "in order to obtain federal habeas relief, a state prisoner must . . . establish that the state court 'blunder[ed] so badly that every fairminded jurist would disagree' with the decision." *Klein v. Martin*, 607 U.S. 213, 220–21 (2026) (per curiam) (quoting *Mays v. Hines*, 592 U.S. 385, 392 (2021) (per curiam)). A state court's unexplained denial of relief is entitled to the same deference as a reasoned one. *Harrington v. Richter*, 562 U.S. 86, 98 (2011).

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III

A

A *Napue* violation requires that a witness testified falsely, that the government knew the testimony was false, and that the testimony was material. *United States v. Brumfield*, 89 F.4th 506, 519 (5th Cir. 2023). We affirm on the first element alone and do not reach knowledge or materiality.

Testimony is false for these purposes if, for example, it is “specific misleading evidence important to the prosecution’s case in chief.” *Nobles v. Johnson*, 127 F.3d 409, 415 (5th Cir. 1997) (quoting *Donnelly v. DeChristoforo*, 416 U.S. 637, 647 (1974)). Mata’s claim rests on the prosecutor’s question to informant Angie Brown—whether “[his] office” had promised her “any kind of favorable deal in Florida or anything like that.” Brown answered truthfully to the question posed. She denied a deal with the prosecutor’s office specifically, and on cross-examination confirmed that her denial referred to the prosecutor, not to others: “Not him.” The prosecutor’s closing argument likewise disclaimed only his own involvement in any deal.

A jury hearing this testimony, together with the defense’s cross-examination eliciting Brown’s letter asking a Texas Ranger to “keep his promise,” could reasonably have understood that no promise had come from the prosecutor’s office specifically, even if Brown believed she had received one from state investigators. On this record, a fairminded jurist could conclude that the testimony was not false or misleading. That is enough. Because AEDPA² requires only that *some* reasonable jurist could agree with the state, *Klein*, 607 U.S. at 220–21 (quoting *Mays*, 592 U.S. at 392), we need not decide how we would resolve falsity in the first instance. The state court

² AEDPA refers to the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996.

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could have rejected the *Napue* claim on this ground without unreasonably applying clearly established federal law.

B

A *Brady* violation requires favorable evidence, suppression, and materiality. *Grace v. Hooper*, 123 F.4th 800, 805 (5th Cir. 2024) (quoting *United States v. Glenn*, 935 F.3d 313, 319 (5th Cir. 2019)). We assume without deciding that the letters Mata identifies were favorable and suppressed, and we affirm on materiality alone.

Suppressed “evidence is material only if there is a reasonable probability that, had the evidence been disclosed to the defense, the result of the proceeding would have been different.” *United States v. Bagley*, 473 U.S. 667, 682 (1985). “A ‘reasonable probability’ is a probability sufficient to undermine confidence in the outcome.” *Id.* That inquiry accounts for the cumulative effect of the withheld evidence against everything the jury already had. *Kyles v. Whitley*, 514 U.S. 419, 434–37 (1995).

The jury that convicted Mata already had substantial reason to doubt Brown’s credibility on the very point the undisclosed letters would have reinforced: that she hoped, and was actively working, to translate her cooperation into a reduced federal sentence. The defense discussed before the jury a letter in which Brown asked a Texas Ranger to “keep his promise,” and it cross-examined Briles at length about the timing of her representation and about correspondence touching on a possible sentence reduction. The five letters Mata identifies as suppressed largely document the mechanics of that same effort. *See Felder v. Johnson*, 180 F.3d 206, 213 (5th Cir. 1999) (“Suppressed evidence is not material when it merely furnishes an additional basis on which to impeach a witness whose credibility has already been shown to be questionable.” (quoting *United States v. Amiel*, 95 F.3d 135, 145 (2d Cir. 1996))). Notably, one of the letters cuts the other way: a November 12, 2013,

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letter from the federal prosecutor informed Brown that she had *not* yet provided sufficient information to support a Rule 35 reduction and that more detailed information from a reputable source would be required. That letter shows the arrangement Mata’s brief treats as an established inducement was, shortly before trial, an unresolved and partially rebuffed request—not the settled *quid pro quo* the jury might otherwise have imagined from the trial testimony alone.

For these reasons, a fairminded jurist could conclude that the additional letters did not create a reasonable probability of a different outcome, even accounting for their cumulative effect alongside the impeachment evidence the jury already had. We accordingly hold that the state court’s rejection of the *Brady* claim on materiality was not an unreasonable application of clearly established federal law.

IV

For the foregoing reasons, we AFFIRM the district court’s denial of Mata’s habeas petition.