Implied Private Right of Action under the Commodity Exchange Act: Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & (and) Smith, Inc. v. Curran

Yvonne S. Specht

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.smu.edu/smulr

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.smu.edu/smulr/vol36/iss4/5

This Case Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at SMU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in SMU Law Review by an authorized administrator of SMU Scholar. For more information, please visit http://digitalrepository.smu.edu.
IMPLIED PRIVATE RIGHT OF ACTION
UNDER THE COMMODITY EXCHANGE
ACT: MERRILL LYNCH, PIERCE,
FENNER & SMITH, INC.
V. CURRAN

JOHN J. Curran and Jacquelyn Curran opened several commodity accounts with Merrill Lynch in 1973. The Currans deposited $100,000 with a broker who made all trading decisions and exercised complete control over the accounts. Initially, the Currans realized profits from the accounts and made some withdrawals. Later, as the accounts sharply declined in value, they requested the accounts be closed. The broker at first refused, but assented in 1974 after the Currans' capital declined to $6,000. Alleging that the broker made false representations concerning the accounts, failed to observe safeguards and loss limits, and made trades with the sole intention of generating commissions, the Currans brought an action for damages against Merrill Lynch. They alleged violations of the Commodity Exchange Act, federal securities law, and state law.


2. This type of account is termed a discretionary account. The customer makes a deposit and gives the broker authority to buy and sell at the broker's discretion without consulting the customer. These accounts are more common in commodities trading than in the trading of securities because, unlike the securities market, prices in the commodities market may move sharply, requiring fast trading action. Bromberg, supra note 1, at 248. Merrill Lynch disputed this description of the Currans' accounts, but agreed to the classification of the accounts as discretionary for the purposes of this appeal on questions of law. Curran v. Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc., 622 F.2d 216, 220 (6th Cir. 1980), aff'd, 102 S. Ct. 1825, 72 L. Ed. 2d 182 (1982).

3. The record does not reveal the Currans' total investment in the accounts after the initial deposit of $100,000. At one point they did withdraw $101,000. The Currans alleged that by the time the accounts were closed, the accounts had declined in value $175,000 and only $6,000 in capital remained. 622 F.2d at 220.


6. The complaint alleged violations of § 410(a)(2) of the Michigan Uniform Securities
district court granted defendant's motion for partial summary judgment and dismissed the claims brought under federal securities law.\textsuperscript{7} The Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit affirmed the dismissal of the federal securities law claims.\textsuperscript{8} Although the issue was not raised on appeal, the Sixth Circuit also considered the question of whether an implied right of action exists under the Commodity Exchange Act. After finding that such a right does exist, the appellate court ruled that the action could properly be maintained on remand to the district court.\textsuperscript{9} The United States Supreme Court granted certiorari in this and three companion cases involving similar disputes.\textsuperscript{10} 

\textit{Held, affirmed:} A private party may maintain an action for damages incurred as a result of violation of the Commodity Exchange Act although the Act contains no express provision for such a remedy. \textit{Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc. v. Curran,} 102 S. Ct. 1825, 72 L. Ed. 2d 182 (1982).

I. Commodity Exchange Act: Development of the Statutory Scheme


\textsuperscript{7} 622 F.2d at 218-19. The district court ruled that a discretionary commodity account is not a security and is not subject to provisions of federal securities laws. \textit{Id.} at 219.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Id.} at 222. In determining whether a discretionary commodity account is an investment contract and thus subject to claims under securities laws, the Sixth Circuit used the standard set forth in \textit{SEC v. W.J. Howey Co.,} 328 U.S. 293 (1946). In \textit{Howey} the Court defined an investment contract as "a contract, transaction or scheme whereby a person invests his money in a common enterprise and is led to expect profits solely from the efforts of the promoter or a third party." \textit{Id.} at 298-99. After finding the \textit{Howey} common enterprise element missing, the Sixth Circuit in \textit{Curran} held that a discretionary commodity account is not a security. \textit{622 F.2d at 222.} The court adopted the reasoning of \textit{Milnarik v. M-S Commodities, Inc.}, 457 F.2d 274 (7th Cir.) (common enterprise only present in horizontal relationship between pool of investors and not in vertical arrangement between one investor and the broker), \textit{cert. denied}, 409 U.S. 887 (1972).

\textsuperscript{9} The court stated that remand to the district court for additional proceedings necessarily raised the question of whether the action could be maintained. \textit{622 F.2d at 230.} Recognizing that a court of appeals should ordinarily limit its review to the questions raised, \textit{id.} at 230 n.17, the court nevertheless decided the question in order to offer direction to the district court and avoid further delay, \textit{id.} at 230.

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Leist v. Simplot,} 638 F.2d 283 (2d Cir. 1980) (consolidating New York Mercantile Exch. v. Leist; Clayton Brokerage Co. v. Leist; Heinhold Commodities, Inc. v. Leist), \textit{aff'd sub nom. Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc. v. Curran,} 102 S. Ct. 1825, 72 L. Ed. 2d 182 (1982). These three cases arose from trading in futures contracts for Maine potatoes in May 1976. Plaintiffs, as speculators, alleged damages from two separate conspiracies to manipulate prices. In both alleged conspiracies, the traders amassed contracts in excess of the number allowed by Exchange rules. Plaintiffs sued the New York Exchange and its officials alleging that the violations were not reported to the Commission and that the Exchange did not use its power to avert the price manipulation. They also sued the brokers alleged to have participated in the conspiracy as well as other speculators. These cases pose the same general question of whether an implied private right of action exists under the Commodity Exchange Act.

Act of 1921, Congress's first effort to regulate commodity futures trading. Although limited to grain futures, this statute established the pattern of restricting trading to central exchanges designated by the Secretary of Agriculture and subject to government supervision. The 1921 statute charged these contract markets with policing themselves by adopting measures to prevent price manipulation. Violators were subject to a fine or imprisonment. After the Supreme Court declared this initial legislation unconstitutional, Congress enacted the virtually identical Grain Futures Act of 1922.

In 1936 Congress significantly expanded the coverage of the statute to other commodities and changed its name to the Commodity Exchange Act. The 1936 additions include section 4b, the antifraud provision, and section 4a, which empowers the Commission to set quantitative limits on speculative trading. Another added section requires registration of merchants and brokers. Congress extended the fines and imprisonment sanctions to cover anyone attempting to manipulate or manipulating the price of any commodity. In 1968 amendments to the Act extended regulation to additional commodities, and added a provision, section 5a(8), requiring an exchange to enforce its rules. Increased penalties made price manipulation a felony.

Prior to 1974 Congress enacted the major provisions upon which implied causes of action might be based. Although the Commodity Futures Trading Commission Act of 1974 significantly changed the Act, the amendments did not affect these provisions. In 1974, however, Congress broadened coverage of the Act to include not only agricultural goods, but all goods or services in which futures contracts are dealt. Congress trans-
ferred responsibility for enforcement from the Secretary of Agriculture to
a newly created Commodity Futures Trading Commission having broad
regulatory powers. The Commission's powers include the power to sue
in federal court for injunctive relief from conduct of markets or traders in
violation of the Act and to conduct disciplinary proceedings against ex-
change members who violate regulations. Congress increased civil fines
for individuals or exchanges who violate the Act. Additionally, the 1974
Act provides procedures for individuals injured by violation of the Act.
The Act requires each exchange to offer arbitration for settlement of cus-
tomer claims involving less than $15,000. The Act also provides for an
administrative procedure that allows complaints to be filed and eventually
ruled upon by an administrative law judge authorized to order payment of
damages.

II. CONFLICT AMONG THE CIRCUITS: HISTORY OF THE CASE LAW

When Congress enacts a statute, such as the Commodity Exchange Act,
making certain activities unlawful without incorporating a specific provi-
sion that allows private rights of action, the Supreme Court will provide a
remedy if it finds implicit intent by Congress to create that remedy. The
Court first recognized an implied private cause of action under a federal
statute in 1916 in Texas & Pacific Railway v. Rigsby. In Rigsby the Court
upheld the right of a railroad switchman to recover damages for injuries
that resulted from a violation of federal safety standards. The safety stat-
ute provided penal sanctions, but not a private remedy. Relying on com-
mon law principles, the Court emphasized that when a member of the
special class for whose benefit the statute was enacted is damaged, then a

(Supp. IV 1980)). Under this broader definition, the Commodity Exchange was extended to
cover trading in plywood, metals such as copper, gold, and silver, currency, and interest rate
futures. See Davis, supra note 11, at 317.

28. Id. § 13a-1 (1976).
30. Id. §§ 13a, 13b.
31. Id. § 7a(11) (Supp. IV 1980).
32. Id. § 18 (1976 & Supp. IV 1980).
33. Various commentators have traced the history of the development of implied causes
Historical Perspective, 37 WASH. & LEE L. REV. 783 (1980); McMahon & Rodos, Judicial
Implication of Private Causes of Action: Reappraisal and Retrenchment, 80 DICK. L. REV.
167 (1976); Note, Imposing Civil Remedies from Federal Regulatory Statutes, 77 HARV. L.
34. 241 U.S. 33 (1916). For cases attributing the origin of implied actions to Rigsby, see
Cannon v. University of Chicago, 441 U.S. 677, 689 n.10 (1979); Cort v. Ash, 422 U.S. 66, 78
(1975); Leist v. Simplot, 638 F.2d 283, 298 (2d Cir. 1980), aff'd sub nom. Merrill Lynch,
Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc. v. Curran, 102 S. Ct. 1825, 72 L. Ed. 2d 182 (1982). But see
Cannon, 441 U.S. at 732 (Powell, J., dissenting). Justice Powell argued that the use of “im-
plied private right of action” in Rigsby carried a different connotation and could not be
taken as authority for its present meaning. Id.
35. Implied rights have their origin in English common law. In Rigsby the Court
quoted the maxim, attributed to Blackstone, “where there is a right there is a remedy.” 241
U.S. at 39-40; see McMahon & Rodos, supra note 33, at 168.
private remedy is implicit.\textsuperscript{36} Applying the \textit{Rigsby} reasoning, the courts frequently implied private rights of action in the years that followed.\textsuperscript{37} The courts, however, could no longer find an implied private right of action based on common law principles after the Supreme Court in \textit{Erie Railroad v. Tompkins}\textsuperscript{38} declared that no federal general common law exists. Because federal jurisdiction after \textit{Erie} could only be based on the Constitution or federal statutes, the Court couched its subsequent opinions in terms of enforcing federal statutory rights. The Court, therefore, acted on the basis of its understanding of congressional intent to create private rights of action under a given statute.\textsuperscript{39}

Particularly in the area of securities regulation,\textsuperscript{40} a strong precedent developed for recognizing private rights of action.\textsuperscript{41} In \textit{J.I. Case Co. v.}}
a shareholder charged that proxy solicitation material for securing shareholder approval of a corporate merger was false and misleading in violation of SEC rules. The Court noted that although Congress made no specific reference to private rights under the section prohibiting false and misleading statements, Congress did grant jurisdiction to district courts over all suits brought to enforce any liability created under the Securities Exchange Act. The Court further noted that the purpose of the statute was to protect investors from deceptive practices by management or others seeking to secure proxy votes. Reasoning that the standards set by Congress evidenced the broad remedial purposes of the statute, the Court implied a private right of action on the theory that it had a duty to provide the remedies necessary to carry out the congressional purpose. Following the Borak ruling, courts routinely recognized private rights of action in securities cases.

In other types of cases, however, the Supreme Court refused to imply a cause of action. Thus the question of when an implied right would be recognized went unanswered. In resolving this question in specific cases, the Court focused on the remedies provided in the statute. In Securities Investor Protection Corp. v. Barbour and National Railroad Passenger

courts without explicit recognition by the Supreme Court that an implied right of action exists under rule 10b-5. Maher, supra note 33, at 795. In Superintendent of Ins. v. Bankers Life & Casualty Co., 404 U.S. 6 (1971), the Court first recognized an implied right of action under rule 10b-5 in a footnote. Id. at 13 n.9. The Court has continued to recognize private rights of action under rule 10b-5, but has in some cases restricted private suits on other grounds, such as standing. See Blue Chip Stamps v. Manor Drug Stores, 421 U.S. 723 (1975). This recognition of an implied right may, however, reflect the unique history of rule 10b-5 without articulating standards of general applicability. Cf. Touche Ross & Co. v. Redington, 442 U.S. 560, 577 n.19 (1979); Cannon v. University of Chicago, 441 U.S. 677, 690 n.13 (1979) (both stating that the Court simply acquiesced in the 25-year-old acceptance by lower courts of an implied action under rule 10b-5).

42. 377 U.S. 426 (1964).
43. Id. at 429, 429 n.4 (alleging violation of rule 14a-9, 17 C.F.R. § 240.14a-9 (1981)).
44. 377 U.S. at 431.
45. Id.
46. Id. at 433. In Allen v. State Bd. of Elections, 393 U.S. 544 (1969), the Court expanded this reasoning to imply a cause of action if the effectiveness of the statute would be severely hampered without an implied right of action. Id. at 556-57.
49. 421 U.S. 412 (1975). The Court held that no private right of action existed by which
Corp. v. National Association of Railroad Passengers (Amtrak)\textsuperscript{50} the Court concluded that if the language of a statute expressly provided for one method of enforcement, then other methods, including private actions, were necessarily excluded.\textsuperscript{51} According to the Court, in both of these instances, Congress established comprehensive enforcement procedures. Because enforcement was vested in the Securities Exchange Commission and the Attorney General, respectively, the Court refused to imply a private right of action.\textsuperscript{52}

In this same context, the Court, in 1975, handed down Cort v. Ash.\textsuperscript{53} In Cort the Court, incorporating elements of previous decisions, identified four factors to be considered in determining whether a private right of action should be recognized although it is not expressly provided in a statute.\textsuperscript{54} First, is the plaintiff a member of the class Congress intended to benefit by the statute?\textsuperscript{55} Second, is there evidence that Congress intended to create a remedy or to deny one?\textsuperscript{56} Third, is implying a remedy consistent with the underlying purpose of the act?\textsuperscript{57} Fourth, would allowing a private action invade an area traditionally covered by state law?\textsuperscript{58}

The plaintiff in Cort was a shareholder of a corporation that sponsored political advertisements during the 1972 presidential election. Alleging violation of the criminal provisions of the Federal Election Campaign Act,\textsuperscript{59} Ash brought an action against corporate directors for damages. Applying the four-pronged analysis, the Court refused to imply a right of action on the behalf of the stockholder.\textsuperscript{60} The Court first determined that the purpose of the legislation was to prevent the possible corrupting influence of customers of a failing brokerage firm could compel the Securities Investor Protection Corporation to initiate liquidation proceedings. Id. at 421.

\textsuperscript{50} 414 U.S. 453 (1974). The Court refused to entertain a suit brought by aggrieved rail passengers seeking to enjoin discontinuation of rail service. Id. at 464-65.

\textsuperscript{51} 414 U.S. at 458. This principle is based on the tenet \textit{expressio unius est exclusio alterius} (expression of one thing is the exclusion of the other). \textsc{Black's Law Dictionary} 521 (rev. 5th ed. 1979); see Botany Worsted Mills v. United States, 278 U.S. 282, 289 (1929).


\textsuperscript{53} 422 U.S. at 78.

\textsuperscript{54} Id. For this proposition the Court cited Texas & Pac. Ry. v. Rigsby, 241 U.S. 33 (1916). This factor essentially involves standing to sue.

\textsuperscript{55} 422 U.S. at 78 (citing Amtrak, 414 U.S. at 455).

\textsuperscript{56} 422 U.S. at 78 (citing Barbour, 421 U.S. at 412; Amtrak, 414 U.S. at 455; Calhoon v. Harvey, 379 U.S. 134 (1964); cf. Hewitt-Robins, Inc. v. Eastern Freight-Ways, Inc., 371 U.S. 84 (1962) (Court should only imply remedy after considering what effect remedy will have on regulatory scheme).

\textsuperscript{57} 422 U.S. at 78 (citing Wheeldin v. Wheeler, 373 U.S. 647, 652 (1963)).

\textsuperscript{58} 18 U.S.C. § 610 (repealed 1976) (prohibited corporations, banks, and labor organizations from making expenditures in connection with presidential elections and provided criminal penalties).

\textsuperscript{59} 422 U.S. at 80-85.
corporate wealth in elections. Given this purpose, the Court argued that stockholders were not the intended beneficiaries of the Act. Next, the Court found no indication of congressional intent to create a private right to damages. Finally, the Court concluded that implying a remedy would not further the purpose of the legislation and would intrude into an area traditionally committed to state law.

Despite the apparent clarity of the four-part analysis outlined by the Court in Cort, application of the criteria proved difficult. Several split decisions by the Supreme Court and confusion among the circuits resulted. In 1979 three decisions involving implied causes of action were handed down by the Supreme Court. In the first, Cannon v. University of Chicago, the plaintiff was refused admission to medical school, allegedly as a result of sex discrimination. She sought to bring an action under title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Title IX provides for administrative action to cut off federal funding to institutions engaged in discrimination, but does not provide private remedies. The Court found an implied cause of action under the Cort test, but the opinion spoke for only three Justices. The impact of the more restrictive Cort analysis was evident, however. The opinion emphasized that the Court will imply a private remedy only under certain limited circumstances in the absence of clear congressional intent to create private rights.

In the other two 1979 decisions that applied the Cort test, the Court refused to find an implied right of action. In Touche Ross & Co. v. Redington the Court held that the four factors of the Cort analysis were not entitled to equal weight. While reaffirming the Cort reasoning, the Court placed special emphasis upon the legislative intent factor. Redington involved an action against an accounting firm that had prepared reports on an insolvent brokerage firm's financial condition. Customers of the brokerage firm brought suit under section 17(a) of the Securities Exchange Act, the recordkeeping and reporting provision. Finding no affirmative evidence in the legislative history of intent to create private remedies

61. Id. at 80.
62. Id. at 82.
63. Id. at 82-83.
64. Id. at 84-85.
69. Id.
70. Three Justices concurred specially and three dissented. Justice Powell traced the history of implied causes of action in his lengthy dissent. 441 U.S. at 730.
71. Id. at 717.
73. Id. at 575-76.
under this section, the Court refused to imply a cause of action.\textsuperscript{75}

Continuing this more restrictive approach, the Court in \textit{Transamerica Mortgage Advisors, Inc. v. Lewis}\textsuperscript{76} held that no right to private actions for damages is implied under the Investment Advisors Act of 1940.\textsuperscript{77} Although the Investment Advisors Act was intended to benefit clients by establishing standards of conduct for their investment advisors, it does not expressly provide for private remedies; rather, it expressly provides for other means of enforcement. The Court emphasized that when Congress provides adequate means of enforcement in a statute, and alternate remedies exist, these remedies are exclusive in the absence of contrary legislative intent.\textsuperscript{78}

Prior to \textit{Curran} no Supreme Court decisions dealt with the validity of a private right of action under the Commodity Exchange Act.\textsuperscript{79} A number of district courts and circuit courts, however, addressed the question. Decisions prior to 1974 constituted the contemporary legal context in which Congress enacted the 1974 amendments.\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Goodman v. H. Hentz & Co.}\textsuperscript{81} was the first decision to address specifically the issue of implied rights of action under the Commodity Exchange Act. In this buyers' action for fraud against a broker-dealer, the district court held that an implied right exists under the Commodity Exchange Act.\textsuperscript{82} The \textit{Goodman} court based its ruling on state common law tort principles and the fact that the Act did not prohibit private actions.\textsuperscript{83} Subsequent cases decided before the 1974 amendments to the Commodity Exchange Act followed the \textit{Goodman} ruling, typically without comment.\textsuperscript{84}

\begin{thebibliography}{84}
\bibitem{76} 444 U.S. 11 (1979).
\bibitem{79} One case involving implied rights of action under the Commodity Exchange Act came before the Court. The case, however, was decided on primary jurisdiction grounds. Chicago Mercantile Exch. v. Deaktor, 414 U.S. 113 (1973), \textit{rev'd} Deaktor v. L.D. Schreiber & Co., 479 F.2d 329 (7th Cir. 1973). The Court decided that the Commodity Exchange Commission had primary jurisdiction and directed the plaintiffs to proceed before the Commission. The meaning of the \textit{Deaktor} decision was the subject of disagreement in \textit{Curran}. The \textit{Curran} majority said that \textit{Deaktor} did not question the availability of private rights of action under the Commodity Exchange Act. 102 S. Ct. at 1840 n.65, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 203 n.65. The dissent pointed out that \textit{Deaktor} could also mean that no private rights of action can arise in the courts because of the procedures for relief available through the Commission. \textit{Id.} at 1850 n.6, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 214 n.6.
\bibitem{80} \textit{Curran}, 102 S. Ct. at 1839, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 201.
\bibitem{81} 265 F. Supp. 440 (N.D. Ill. 1967).
\bibitem{82} \textit{Id.} at 447.
\bibitem{83} \textit{Id.}
Cases decided after 1974 were not in agreement, however, on the question of whether private rights of action survived the amendments of that year.\textsuperscript{85} The \textit{Cort} four-pronged analysis may also have contributed to the confusion.\textsuperscript{86} The Sixth and Second Circuits found an implied right of action,\textsuperscript{87} while the Fifth Circuit refused to imply such a right in a similar case.\textsuperscript{88} The United States Supreme Court granted certiorari in \textit{Curran} for the purpose of resolving the conflict among the circuits.

III. \textit{MERRILL LYNCH, PIERCE, FENNER \& SMITH, INC. V. CURRAN}

In \textit{Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner \& Smith, Inc. v. Curran} the Supreme Court held that a private party may maintain an action for damages as a result of violation of the Commodity Exchange Act.\textsuperscript{89} In so holding the Court narrowed its \textit{Cort} analysis to congressional intent\textsuperscript{90} as the dispositive question in deciding if a private right of action should be implied under the Commodity Exchange Act after the 1974 amendments. The Court elaborated a two-part analysis for determining congressional intent. First, the Court focused on the state of the law at the time of the legislation.\textsuperscript{91} Then, the Court examined the legislative history of the 1974 amendments.\textsuperscript{92}

The majority opinion, written by Justice Stevens,\textsuperscript{93} reaffirmed the Court's adherence in theory to the strict approach of \textit{Cort v. Ash},\textsuperscript{94} while at
the same time abandoning three of the four \textit{Cort} criteria in favor of the single criterion of congressional intent.\footnote{The Court in \textit{Redington} and \textit{Transamerica} had moved toward special emphasis on legislative intent, but had not eliminated consideration of the other three factors. \textit{See supra} notes 72-78 and accompanying text.} The Court concluded that once it resolved the dispositive question of legislative intent, no need to consider the other three factors remained.\footnote{102 S. Ct. at 1844, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 207 (citing California v. Sierra Club, 451 U.S. 287, 302 (1981) (Rehnquist, J., concurring)).}

Justice Stevens argued that in determining congressional intent the initial inquiry must be into the state of the law at the time Congress passed the legislation. Specifically, the Court must inquire into Congress's perception of the law it was reshaping.\footnote{102 S. Ct. at 1839, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 201.} If the courts already recognized an implied remedy, then the question was whether Congress intended to preserve the remedy.\footnote{\textit{Id}. at 1839-40, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 201-02, \textit{But see} cases cited \textit{supra} note 48.} Finding that cases prior to 1974 uniformly recognized an implied cause of action under the Commodity Exchange Act,\footnote{100 S. Ct. at 1844, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 207.} Justice Stevens concluded that such an implied right was clearly part of the contemporary legal context in which Congress had acted.\footnote{Id. at 1841 n.66, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 203 n.66. The Court cited Lorillard v. Pons, 434 U.S. 575, 580-81 (1978), for the proposition that when Congress adopts a new law incorporating an old law, Congress is presumed to be aware of the judicial interpretation. \textit{Id}. The dissent pointed out that Congress did not reenact the provisions in question in 1974, but rather failed to amend them. \textit{Id}. at 1852 n.11, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 216 n.11.}

In the second part of its congressional intent analysis the majority examined the legislative history of the 1974 amendments. Referring to statements made in committee hearings and in the \textit{Congressional Record}, the majority concluded that Congress generally understood that the amendments would not interfere with private rights of action.\footnote{Most of the litigation concerned violations of the antifraud provisions of the Commodity Exchange Act, §§ 4a, 4b, 6b, 7 U.S.C. §§ 6a, 6b, 8 (1976 & Supp. IV 1980): \textit{See cases cited \textit{supra} note 84.}} The majority also cited the addition of a savings clause\footnote{The savings clause provides that “nothing in this section shall supersede or limit the jurisdiction conferred on courts of the United States of any State.” 7 U.S.C. § 2 (Supp. IV 1980).} as a compelling inference that...
Congress intended to preserve preexisting remedies. The Court concluded that congressional intent to preserve a private cause of action was compelling and could only have been made clearer by an express provision that was considered unnecessary given the legal context in 1974.

Having determined that Congress intended to preserve an implied private right of action under the Commodity Exchange Act, the Court turned to the question of standing to sue. The three companion cases, involving the potato futures conspiracy, raised this question. Noting that the Cort test does not reach this question, the Court concluded that speculators, as the intended beneficiaries of commodities regulation, have standing to sue. The Court concluded further that the implied right, which survived the 1974 amendments, included the right to sue an exchange or anyone involved in violating exchange rules.

Justice Powell in dissent, joined by Chief Justice Burger and Justices Rehnquist and O'Connor, argued that a handful of district court decisions, which erroneously implied a cause of action based on common law principles not applicable in federal court, could not possibly have constituted the law in 1974. The dissent further argued that the Court could not presume that Congress approved those decisions by failing to amend certain sections of the Commodity Exchange Act. Thus the dissent charged that the majority, while asserting fidelity to the principles of recent Court decisions, actually failed to apply them.

In Curran the Court signalled a return to less stringent requirements for implying a cause of action. While voicing its adherence to recent decisions, the Court nevertheless demonstrated a willingness to infer congressional intent from less definitive indicators than those required in its other decisions since Cort. The strict approach of Cort gave way in Curran to an examination of evidence requiring judicial interpretation.

After Curran, Congress is charged with knowledge of how the courts, even lower federal courts, have interpreted statutes. In addition, Congress is presumed to have approved the interpretation if it leaves those parts of the statute intact at the time of amendment. Less clear after Curran is the question of whether the same analysis can be applied to situations in which the statute in question was passed after 1975 and the Cort decision.

106. 102 S. Ct. at 1843, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 206; cf. Middlesex County Sewerage Auth. v. National Sea Clammers Ass'n, 453 U.S. 1, 15-17 (1981) (no right of action implied from savings clause).
107. Id. at 1843-44, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 206-07.
108. Id. at 1846 n.92, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 209 n.92.
109. Id. at 1845, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 208.
110. Id. at 1847, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 211.
111. Id. at 1848, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 211-12. Justice Powell called this theory "incompatible with our constitutional separation of powers, and in my view it is without support in logic or in law." Id.
112. Id. at 1852, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 216.
113. Id. at 1849, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 213.
115. Because the Court presumed that Congress has knowledge of the Cort decision and
Curran the Court's finding that an implied cause of action was part of the contemporary legal context in 1974 was based partly on the absence of any dispute over that proposition prior to Cort.\textsuperscript{116}

Specifically, with regard to the Commodity Exchange Act, the Curran opinion opens the way once again for private litigation based on implied causes of action with assurance of consistency in results among the circuits.\textsuperscript{117} Extending this ruling to other federal regulatory statutes, the Curran opinion will clearly have wide ranging impact. In Curran the hallmark of the test of legislative intent was the state of the law at the time Congress passed the statute. Because most major federal regulatory statutes were passed during the time when private rights of action were generally implied by the courts, the practical effect of the ruling may be a reversal of the recent trend to deny private actions.

IV. Conclusion

In Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc. v. Curran the Court held that private parties may sue for damages resulting from violations of the Commodity Exchange Act. In finding an implied right under a statute that does not directly address private rights, the Court modified its recent trend toward strict statutory interpretation. In Curran the Court went beyond the statute to consider congressional intent in determining if a private right is implicit in a statute. The Court construed congressional intent in terms of the state of the law, including judicial interpretations, at the time the statute was passed. Moreover, under the Curran reasoning, congressional silence was construed as intent to maintain the preexisting state of the law. The Court's decision removes any doubt regarding the implied rights of investors to bring actions under the Commodity Exchange Act. If the principles elaborated by the Court in Curran are applied outside the commodities area, these less stringent standards for finding implied congressional intent would leave the courts free to recognize private rights in most cases.

Yvonne S. Specht

\textsuperscript{116} 102 S. Ct. at 1841, 72 L. Ed. 2d at 203.

\textsuperscript{117} The Supreme Court's opinion in Curran bears out Judge Friendly's observation that "the rumors about the death of the implied cause of action which have been circulating in the wake of these decisions [Cannon, Redington, and Transamerica] are exaggerated . . . ." Curran, 638 F.2d at 316.