Virginia Should Abolish the Archaic Tort Defense of Contributory Negligence and Adopt a Comparative Negligence Defense in Its Place

Peter Nash Swisher

University of Richmond School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.richmond.edu/lawreview

Part of the State and Local Government Law Commons, and the Torts Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarship.richmond.edu/lawreview/vol46/iss1/14

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School Journals at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Richmond Law Review by an authorized editor of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.
VIRGINIA SHOULD ABOLISH THE ARCHAIC TORT DEFENSE OF CONTRIBUTORY NEGLIGENCE AND ADOPT A COMPARATIVE NEGLIGENCE DEFENSE IN ITS PLACE

Peter Nash Swisher *

I. INTRODUCTION

Contributory negligence is conduct on the part of the plaintiff, contributing as a proximate cause to the tortuous harm the plaintiff has suffered, which falls below the standard of care to which the plaintiff is required to conform for his or her own protection.¹ When contributory negligence is found, it constitutes a *complete defense* to the plaintiff's negligence cause of action, even though the defendant's negligence may have greatly exceeded the plaintiff's negligence.²

This rather severe legal doctrine that the plaintiff's contributory negligence would constitute a *complete defense* to the plaintiff's negligence cause of action—even though the defendant's conduct may be far more negligent than the plaintiff's conduct—was first enunciated in the 1809 English case of *Butterfield v. Forrester.*³ In *Butterfield,* Lord Ellenborough, a controversial and tempestuous Tory judge in his own day, cited no supporting authority, nor gave

---


any satisfactory explanation for this draconic legal doctrine. As Professor Dan Dobbs has observed:

[This] rule was extreme. The plaintiff who was guilty of only slight or trivial negligence was barred completely, even if the defendant was guilty of quite serious negligence, as contemporary courts have had occasion to observe in criticizing the rule. The traditional contributory negligence rule was extreme not merely in results but in principle. No satisfactory reasoning has ever explained the rule. It departed seriously from ideals of accountability and deterrence [in tort law] because it completely relieved the defendant from liability even if he was by far the most negligent actor. A regime of accountability would, in contrast, hold the defendant liable for a proportionate share of the harm [under the doctrine of comparative negligence].

Accordingly, forty-six states to date have abolished this archaic doctrine of contributory negligence, by judicial or legislative action, and in its place have adopted the doctrine of comparative negligence. In contrast to contributory negligence, comparative negligence acts not as a complete bar to the plaintiff’s recovery in tort, but only as a partial bar, resulting in a percentage reduction from otherwise recoverable damages awarded to the plaintiff. Virginia and four other jurisdictions, however, still recognize the traditional tort defense of contributory negligence.

The purpose of this essay is to argue that the time has now come for Virginia, by judicial or legislative action, to abolish its archaic common law tort defense of contributory negligence and replace it with a comparative negligence defense. Adopting a comparative negligence defense would more equitably and more fairly recognize and apportion damages according to the bedrock

4. See id.
7. SCHWARTZ, supra note 6, § 2.01, at 31; WOODS & DEERE, supra note 6, § 22:2, at 502, 504.
underlying tort legal principles of accountability, deterrence, and distribution of loss.  

II. HISTORY AND RATIONALE FOR THE LEGAL DOCTRINE OF CONTRIBUTORY NEGLIGENCE

The doctrine of contributory negligence had its origin in the English case of Butterfield v. Forrester. In that case, the plaintiff was injured by a fall from his horse when, riding at a fast pace, he ran into an obstruction in the road left by the defendant. Lord Ellenborough held that, under these particular circumstances, the plaintiff was absolutely barred from any recovery based on his contributory negligence, even though the defendant's negligent conduct also was a significant cause of the plaintiff's injuries.

Contributory negligence entered American jurisprudence sixteen years later in the Massachusetts case of Smith v. Smith, and in the Vermont case of Washburn v. Tracy. In the space of a few decades, the doctrine of contributory negligence gained almost unanimous acceptance within the United States, "rapidly spread[ing], 'not unlike an unchecked conflagration in a wind-storm' throughout the country," thus becoming "a [well-]recognized part of American common law." Indeed, its complete acceptance in the nineteenth century is illustrated by a Pennsylvania judge in 1854 who stated that the defense of contributory negligence was "a rule of law from time immemorial" which was "not likely to be changed in all time to come." But like many
other nineteenth century economic philosophies and common law doctrines, the doctrine of contributory negligence was not destined to last permanently in the vast majority of American states.\(^1\)

What were the reasons and underlying justifications for adopting the defense of contributory negligence in nineteenth century America? A number of reasons for the adoption of the contributory negligence doctrine have been given over the years. "All of [these purported reasons] have been the subject of [severe] criticism," and "[n]one of them appear convincing."\(^1\)

The wide acceptance of this "all or nothing" defense of contributory negligence is perhaps best explained by the fact that this legal doctrine emerged just as the Industrial Revolution was getting underway. It may well have been that as a matter of legal and social policy, the doctrine of contributory negligence was welcomed to protect infant American industries from overly sympathetic juries involved in workplace-related accidents.\(^1\) As Judge D. Arthur Kelsey observes:

In theory, but hardly in practice, employees in [nineteenth] century factories were protected by their employer’s duty “to provide employees with a reasonably safe place in which to work.” Whatever succor this duty provided to employees, it soon surrendered to the “unholy trinity” of employer defenses: contributory negligence, assumption of risk, and the fellow servant rule. They became the “wicked sisters” of the common law because, working together, they effectively nullified any realistic possibility of holding an employer liable for the great majority of on-the-job injuries.\(^2\)

\(^{17}\) SCHWARTZ, supra note 6, § 1.02, at 6.

\(^{18}\) SPEISER ET AL., supra note 15, § 12.4, at 254.


However, since the adoption of workers’ compensation statutes in all fifty states, including Virginia, in the early twentieth century, this legal and social rationale for contributory negligence as applied to workplace-related accidents ceased to have any viable justification. In 1918, the Virginia General Assembly enacted Virginia’s first workers’ compensation legislation, largely modeled on Indiana’s workers’ compensation statutes.\footnote{Virginia Ry. Co., 114 Va. 558, 561, 77 S.E. 501, 502 (1913); see also PROSSER AND KEETON ON TORTS, supra note 9, § 80, at 568–72; Lawrence M. Friedman & Jack Ladinsky, Social Change and the Law of Industrial Accidents, 67 COLUM. L. REV. 50, 52–53 (1967).}

Basically, under applicable Virginia workers’ compensation statutes, in exchange for giving up the right to file a lawsuit against an employer for a job-related injury, the claimant employee has the advantage of not having to prove any negligence against the employer to recover workers’ compensation benefits.\footnote{See, e.g., Richmond Cedar Works v. Harper, 129 Va. 481, 488, 106 S.E. 516, 519 (1921) ("The Virginia [workers’ compensation] act . . . has for its humane purpose the providing for all workmen coming within its provisions who are injured during the course of their employment of compensation therefor which is certain in amount without deduction.") (emphasis added).} "Furthermore, the employer generally does not have available to it the defenses of contributory negligence [or] assumption of . . . risk by the claimant employee, except for a few" statutory areas involving willful negligence or intentional misconduct.\footnote{SWISHER ET AL., supra note 22, § 18.1, at 488–89 (emphasis added); accord Fauver v. Bell, 192 Va. 518, 522, 65 S.E.2d 575, 577 (1951); Feitig v. Chalkley, 185 Va. 96, 98, 38 S.E.2d 73, 73 (1946); Farmers’ Mfg. Co. v. Warfel, 144 Va. 98, 103–04, 131 S.E. 240, 241–42 (1926).}

Another nineteenth century justification of the application of a contributory negligence defense involved personal injury suits brought by railroad employees against the railroads. Various courts feared that railroads would be “perceived by many jurors to be impersonal and potentially harmful entities with deep pockets.”\footnote{Woods & Deere, supra note 6, § 1:4, at 6; accord Wex S. Malone, The Formative Era of Contributory Negligence, 41 ILL. L. REV. 151, 155–57 (1946).} This nineteenth century social and legal concern has been subsequently addressed by remedial statutory law. Today, a comparative negligence defense, and \textit{not} contributory negligence, applies in Virginia under the Federal Employers’ Liability Act,\footnote{45 U.S.C. § 51–60 (2006).}
which governs suits brought by railroad employees against their employers.  

Therefore, lacking any modern justification or rationale, in law or social policy, the archaic nineteenth century defense of contributory negligence should now be abolished in Virginia, either by legislative or judicial action, like it has been abolished in forty-six other states, in favor of a modern comparative negligence defense in tort.

III. THE EMERGENCE AND ADOPTION OF COMPARATIVE NEGLIGENCE IN THE VAST MAJORITY OF AMERICAN STATES TODAY

Comparative negligence is a relatively recent legal concept, having been first enunciated by Professors A. Chambers Mole and Lyman Wilson in a scholarly 1932 law review article. By the time Professor Ernest Turk wrote his 1950 law review article entitled Comparative Negligence on the March, and Professor William Prosser wrote his 1953 law review article on Comparative


27. There still appears to be a misguided, and unsubstantiated, opinion in some quarters that if Virginia, as a pro-business state, retains its traditional common law defense of contributory negligence, this will—in some way— influence a number of new businesses to relocate to Virginia. The truth is that other pro-business states, such as Texas, North Carolina, and Nevada, that are listed higher than Virginia in “best states to do business” have all adopted a comparative negligence regime, without any apparent harm to their pro-business competitiveness. See, e.g., Gregory J. Gilligan, State Wins High Business Ranking, RICH. TIMES-DISPATCH, Jan. 23, 2008 at B9.

Virginia stood out in this year’s rankings [listed at number four among the best states to do business] because the state has maintained low jobless levels and has had a good pace of growth. . . “CEOs consider Virginia to be a nice place to live and hire people, evidenced by their A-rating for work-force quality and living environment.”

Id. Governor Bob McDonnell stated “[w]e don’t have public sector unions in Virginia, we have a right-to-work state, we have very few unions overall, and it’s one of the great selling points that I’ve got to be able to attract business [to Virginia].” Olympia Meola, Wisconsin’s Unrest Unlikely in Virginia, RICH. TIMES-DISPATCH, Feb. 23, 2011, at A1.


Negligence, only five states had recognized comparative negligence in one form or another. By 1992, however, most states had abolished the archaic legal doctrine of contributory negligence, and had adopted the doctrine of comparative negligence in its place, by legislative or judicial action. Modern comparative negligence law, rather than barring all recovery by the plaintiff, reduces the plaintiff’s recovery in proportion to the plaintiff’s fault. This concept largely evolved from admiralty law, and from the Federal Employers’ Liability Act, which governed lawsuits brought by railroad employees against their employers. Today, forty-six states recognize some form of comparative negligence, either through a pure or a modified comparative negligence regime.

Pure comparative negligence applies comparative fault to all plaintiffs in negligence cases. Under this system, no plaintiff is completely barred from recovery based on his or her contributory negligence. Twelve states, and many federal statutes, have adopted a pure comparative negligence regime. Modified comparative negligence continues to utilize a traditional “complete bar” rule when the plaintiff’s negligence reaches a specific break-point. In twenty-one states, the plaintiff is completely barred from any recovery if his or her negligence exceeds or is greater than the negligence of the defendant, under a so-called “greater than 50%” approach.

30. Prosser, supra note 19.
31. SCHWARTZ, supra note 6, § 1.01, at 2 (Georgia, Mississippi, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Arkansas adopted the comparative negligence principle in 1955, with Puerto Rico following in 1956, and Maine in 1965.).
32. Id. § 1.04, at 13–17, § 1.05, at 17–29.
33. Id. § 2.01, at 32.
34. See generally THOMAS J. SCHÖNBAUM, ADMIRALTY AND MARITIME LAW § 12-4, at 730–31 (2d ed. 1994) (“[L]iability for such [maritime] damage is to be allocated among the parties proportionally to the comparative degree of their fault.”).
35. See supra notes 25–26 and accompanying text.
36. SCHWARTZ, supra note 6, § 1.01, at 3–4.
37. Id. § 2.01, at 32–33, § 3.02, at 62–64.
38. WOODS & DEERE, supra note 6, § 1.11, at 19–23. Alaska, California, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, and Washington follow a system of pure comparative negligence. Id.
39. See SCHWARTZ, supra note 6, § 2.01, at 33–34.
40. WOODS & DEERE, supra note 6, § 1.11, at 23–24. Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Vermont,
Twelve other states apply an “alternate ‘modified’ system of comparative negligence,” holding that the plaintiff is completely barred from any tort recovery “if his or her negligence is equal to or greater than defendant’s negligence under a so-called ‘50% or greater approach.’” 41

Adoption of this better-reasoned comparative negligence rule means that the doctrine of contributory negligence no longer applies as a complete bar to any tort recovery. “In effect, contributory negligence remains a partial bar to the extent that plaintiff’s negligence shall proportionately reduce the amount of damages attributable to the entire injury to which a nonnegligent plaintiff would be entitled.” 42 Accordingly, there are still elements of contributory negligence found “in both of the ‘modified’ comparative negligence systems, and as the Michigan Supreme Court observed, these ‘modified’ comparative negligence rules do not completely eliminate the traditional bar of contributory negligence—they only ‘lower the barrier’.” 43

Comparative negligence clearly is the better-reasoned solution to an archaic and obsolete nineteenth century doctrine of contributory negligence in fostering and furthering bedrock tort law principles of proportionate compensation to the plaintiff for his or her injuries, legal accountability of both parties, equitable distribution of loss, and deterrence of similar misconduct by the defendant. 44 As one commentator persuasively states the case for comparative negligence:

The predominant argument for abandonment of contributory negligence rests, of course, upon the undeniable inequity and injustice in casting an entire accidental loss upon a plaintiff whose negligence combined with another’s negligence in causing the loss suffered, no matter how trifling plaintiff’s negligence might be. Liability based on fault is the cornerstone of tort law, and a system such as contributo-

---

41. SWISHER ET AL., supra note 22, § 3:49, at 138. Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Maine, Nebraska, North Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, and West Virginia follow this approach. WOODS & DEERE, supra note 6, § 1.11, at 24-25.

42. SPEISER ET AL., supra note 15, § 13:1, at 483.

43. SWISHER ET AL., supra note 22, § 3:49, at 143 (quoting Placek v. City of Sterling Heights, 275 N.W.2d 511, 519 (Mich. 1979)).

44. See, e.g., DOBBS, supra note 5, § 1, at 1-2, § 10, at 17-18, § 11, at 19; PROSSER AND KEETON ON THE LAW OF TORTS, supra note 9, § 1, at 4, 6, § 4, at 21-26; Prosser, supra note 19, at 468-69; Turk, supra note 29, at 195-97. See generally SCHWARTZ, supra note 6, § 1.01, at 2-5; WOODS & DEERE, supra note 6, at 19-20.
ry negligence—which permits one of the contributing wrongdoers to avoid all liability—simply does not serve any principle of fault liability.\(^{45}\)

Therefore, it is respectfully submitted that now is an appropriate time for the Virginia General Assembly, or the Supreme Court Virginia, or both, to re-assess the archaic and obsolete nineteenth century judge-made law of contributory negligence in light of the needs of contemporary Virginia society, and seriously “consider whether . . . adopting the doctrine of comparative negligence would be in the best interests of all the citizens of Virginia.”\(^{46}\)

**IV. SHOULD COMPARATIVE NEGLIGENCE BE ADOPTED BY THE VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY, OR THE SUPREME COURT OF VIRGINIA?**

Assuming that Virginia should abolish its obsolete nineteenth century doctrine of contributory negligence in favor of a comparative negligence regime, a final question remains: Who should make this decision to abolish contributory negligence and adopt comparative negligence—the Virginia General Assembly, or the Supreme Court of Virginia?

A number of states have adopted comparative negligence by statutory enactment through their state legislatures.\(^{47}\) “In 1969 and 1970 [for example], Minnesota, New Hampshire, Hawaii, Vermont, and Massachusetts adopted modified comparative negligence [statutes].”\(^{48}\) Subsequently, in 1971, Colorado, Idaho, and

---

45. SPEISER ET AL., *supra* note 15, § 13:5, at 522–23. There are no serious commentators today who would argue that the archaic contributory negligence defense is superior in any way to comparative negligence in contemporary American tort law. See, e.g., *Restatement (Third) of Torts, Apportionment of Liab.*, *supra* note 9, § 3, at 29–30 (abolishing the doctrine of contributory negligence in favor of comparative negligence, where a plaintiff’s negligence only reduces his or her recovery, rather than totally barring plaintiff’s recovery).


47. See generally SCHWARTZ, *supra* note 6, § 1.04, at 13–17 (discussing state legislative adoption of comparative negligence).


In 1984, the Virginia General Assembly debated a comparative negligence bill, House Bill 107, which originally was a pure com-


parative negligence statute. This bill was defeated on the house floor by a vote of 51 to 48.\textsuperscript{52} House Bill 107 was then redrafted into a modified comparative negligence statute, and subsequently passed the house by a vote of 56 to 44.\textsuperscript{53} This bill was subsequently killed in a senate committee, without reaching a floor vote in the senate. It may arguably be time to reassess comparative negligence in Virginia in the General Assembly, by reintroducing former House Bill 107, and allowing a floor vote in the house and the senate regarding comparative negligence for the benefit of all Virginia citizens.

Alternately, the Supreme Court of Virginia also has the legal right and power to reassess the common law doctrine of contributory negligence.

Although a large number of states have adopted comparative negligence by statutory enactment, a number of other states also have implemented comparative negligence through judge-made law.\textsuperscript{54} In each of these states that have judicially adopted comparative negligence, the courts have forthrightly addressed the propriety of judicial versus legislative adoption. In each case, the courts have found that contributory negligence is a judicially created common law doctrine which can be altered, abolished, or replaced by the court which created it, based upon the contemporary needs of modern society.\textsuperscript{55}

For example, the Supreme Court of Illinois, in \textit{Alvis v. Ribar}, held that the failure to enact six comparative negligence bills in five years indicated that the Illinois legislature was waiting for court action.\textsuperscript{56} Since the Illinois legislature had failed to pass comparative negligence legislation, it was the "imperative duty of [this] court to repair that injustice and reform the law to be re-

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{See generally} SPEISER ET AL., supra note 15, § 13:5, at 516.
\textsuperscript{56} 421 N.E.2d at 895.
\end{footnotesize}
sponsive to the demands of society." Likewise, in *Gustafson v. Benda*, the Supreme Court of Missouri judicially abolished the doctrine of contributory negligence in Missouri, and judicially adopted comparative negligence, after remaining “quiescent more than five years while waiting for the legislature to act.” And the Supreme Court of Tennessee, in *McIntyre v. Balentine*, in judicially adopting a modified form of comparative negligence, stated:

We recognize that this action could be taken by our General Assembly. However, legislative inaction has never prevented judicial abolition of obsolete common law doctrines, especially those, such as contributory negligence, conceived in the judicial womb. . . . Indeed, our abstinence would sanction “a mutual state of inaction in which the court awaits action by the legislature and the legislature awaits guidance from the court,” . . . thereby prejudicing the equitable resolution of legal conflicts.

It is respectfully submitted that *McIntyre v. Balentine* is an excellent illustrative case for the judicial adoption of a modified form of comparative negligence that the Supreme Court of Virginia might find very persuasive, especially since the supreme court has rejected other obsolete common law precedents in the past.

Alternately, the Supreme Court of Virginia might act in tandem with the Virginia General Assembly in rejecting contributory negligence and establishing comparative negligence in its place. For example, after the Supreme Court of Illinois judicially adopted comparative negligence in the case of *Alvis v. Ribar*, the Illinois legislature also subsequently passed legislation regarding comparative negligence. Likewise, after the Supreme Court of Iowa in 1981 judicially adopted comparative negligence in

---

57. Id. at 896.
58. 661 S.W.2d at 14–15.
59. 833 S.W.2d at 56 (quoting *Alvis*, 421 N.E.2d at 896).
60. See *Weishaupt v. Commonwealth*, 227 Va. 389, 400, 315 S.E.2d 847, 852 (1984) (refusing to recognize the archaic and obsolete common law rule that a husband who forcibly rapes his wife could not be prosecuted for that crime). “Thus, by statute and case law, we are free, in essence, to adopt from English common law those principles that fit our way of life and to reject those which do not.” Id.
61. 421 N.E.2d at 898 (adopting a pure form of comparative negligence).
62. 735 ILL. COMP. STAT. ANN. § 5/2-1116 (West 2011) (adopting a modified form of comparative negligence).
Goetzman v. Wichern,63 the Iowa legislature subsequently passed comparative negligence legislation in 1984.64

But whatever approach ultimately prevails—whether this legal process comes through the Virginia General Assembly, the Supreme Court of Virginia, or both—it is now time to abolish the obsolete and archaic tort defense of contributory negligence in Virginia and replace it with a comparative negligence defense, based upon important contemporary legal, social, and public policy reasons.65

The time has now come, by statute or case law, that “we are free, in essence, to adopt from [the] common law those principles that fit our way of life and to reject those which do not.”66

---

63. 327 N.W.2d 742, 754 (Iowa 1982) (adopting a pure form of comparative negligence).
64. 1984 Iowa Acts 524 (codified as amended at IOWA CODE ANN. § 668.3).
65. See supra notes 42–45 and accompanying text. The Supreme Court of Virginia, or the General Assembly, or both, might also determine whether implied assumption of risk would continue to constitute an absolute defense, or whether it too should be merged into a comparative negligence defense. Both the Supreme Court of Montana and the Supreme Court of Florida merged assumption of risk into comparative negligence. Kopischke v. First Cont'l Corp., 610 P.2d 668, 687 (Mont. 1980); Blackburn v. Dorta, 348 So. 2d 287, 293 (Fla. 1977).