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S.C. SUPREME COURT

Chief Justice (Ret.) Jean Hofer Toal
2418 Wheat Street
Columbia, SC 29205

In re: State v. Richard Alexander Murdaugh

Dear Chief Justice Toal,

I write in response to the email from Ms. Diaz dated January 24, 2024, communicating your desire for responses from counsel to the Court's proposed questions for jurors and for suggested questions and topics for the examination for Rebecca Hill. I have attached Mr. Murdaugh's proposed juror questions as **Exhibit A** to this letter.

Mr. Murdaugh objects to the Court's first proposed question, "The verdict of guilty you rendered on March 2, 2023, is that currently your verdict in this case?" The issue under the legal standard adopted by the court is whether Ms. Hill made comments during trial that affected the vote of any juror on March 2, 2023. Mr. Murdaugh objected to that standard, but even under it what a juror would or would not do a year after the trial has no possible relevance to any issue before the Court. Judge Hocker did pose a similar question to the jurors in *Green*, but he did so when polling the jurors *immediately* after the verdict and before they were discharged. Here, a year has passed since the start of Mr. Murdaugh's trial. Asking jurors how they feel about the verdict today is both irrelevant and prejudicial in that it invites jurors to consider a full year of post-trial media coverage when answering questions about events during trial. Further, if a juror did answer "no," the Court would be compelled to ask "why," which could have only two possible answers: some irrelevant consideration arising after the verdict, or reflection on some perceived defect in jury deliberations as to which the juror could not testify under Rule 606(b) of the South Carolina Rules of Evidence.

Mr. Murdaugh objects to the Court's second proposed question, "Was and is your verdict based entirely on the testimony, evidence and law presented to you in this case?" This question violates Rule 606(b), which provides in part, "Upon an inquiry into the validity of a verdict or indictment, a juror may not testify as to . . . the effect of anything upon that or any other juror's mind or emotions as influencing the juror to assent to or dissent from the verdict or indictment or concerning the juror's mental processes in connection therewith . . ." This question violates the rule because it directly asks the juror what did or did not have an "effect" "upon that . . . juror's mind or emotions as influencing the juror to assent to or dissent from the verdict." Mr. Murdaugh understands the Court has decided to directly ask jurors about what affected their verdict because

it has held prejudice must be proven by evidence on that point rather than presumed based on the source and content of the illicit communications per federal authorities such as *Remmer v. United States*, 34 U.S. 227 (1958) and *Parker v. Gladden*, 385 U.S. 363 (1966), and state authorities like *State v. Cameron*, 311 S.C. 204, 428 S.E.2d 10 (Ct. App. 1993), and so he asserts this objection for preservation purposes.

Additionally, Mr. Murdaugh objects that the second proposed question is highly suggestive of an affirmative answer. It could (and likely would) cause a juror to reasonably believe the Court prefers he or she give an affirmative answer. Cf. § 2:21 *Questioning of witnesses by judge*, Trial Handbook for South Carolina Lawyers § 2:21 (5th ed.) (“The primary purpose of the trial judge’s questioning should be to clarify and promote a better understanding of the witness’s testimony, to elicit the truth, and to cover matters omitted by inadvertence or any other cause.” *State v. Stroman*, 281 S.C. 508, 316 S.E.2d 395 (1984); *Fowler v. Laney Tank Lines, Inc.*, 263 S.C. 422, 211 S.E.2d 231 (1975)). This question is an unnecessarily convoluted and indirect way of asking the question that needs to be asked. Reserving his objection to the Court’s rejection of the controlling legal standard and his Rule 606(b) objection, Mr. Murdaugh submits that under the Court’s prior ruling on the legal standard the proper inquiry is (1) did you hear Ms. Hill say anything about the merits during trial, and, if so, (2) did it in any way influence your verdict decision on March 2, 2023. The Court should ask those questions plainly and directly, without language mirroring the judge’s jury charge or otherwise suggesting a correct answer and without requiring additional inferences to get to the actual issue before the Court. Instead of asking a juror whether your verdict was entirely based on A to infer that it was therefore not influenced by B, the Court should just ask whether the verdict was influenced by B.

Mr. Murdaugh objects to the Court’s third proposed question, “Was your verdict influenced in any way with any communications by the Clerk of Court, Becky Hill, in this case?” This question directly violates Rule 606(b) for the same reason the Court’s second proposed question violates that rule. Mr. Murdaugh additionally objects that the language “your verdict” is unclear. It could be taken to mean the juror’s own vote, or it could be understood more literally to mean the collective decision of the jury of which the juror was a member. Mr. Murdaugh also objects to asking this question before asking the juror whether he or she heard any comments on the merits by Ms. Hill. If a juror heard no comments by Ms. Hill, there is no reason to ask what effect Ms. Hill’s comments had on the juror’s verdict. Reserving his Rule 606(b) objection, Mr. Murdaugh therefore proposes this question be asked after the juror is asked if Ms. Hill made any inappropriate comments, and that it be rephrased to as “Did Ms. Hill’s comments prejudice you against the Defendant Alex Murdaugh in any way?”

Mr. Murdaugh objects to the Court’s fourth proposed question, “Did you have any communication with Becky Hill about your verdict in this case?” and the follow up “If yes, what did Ms. Hill say?” because “have any communication with Becky Hill” is an unclear statement. Mr. Murdaugh suggests a more clear and direct question: “Did you hear Ms. Hill make any comments about the testimony, evidence, or arguments presented by the State or defense during Mr. Murdaugh’s trial?” If the answer is yes, in addition to asking what was said, Mr. Murdaugh believes the Court should ask when it was said, where it was said, and who else was present when it was said. And as explained above, Mr. Murdaugh believes what (if anything) was heard should be asked before the Court asks what effect it had.

Mr. Murdaugh again objects to including counsel for jurors participating in the merits of this proceeding, for the reasons previously briefed. He respectfully submits the Court should not have included Eric Bland in correspondence discussing what questions will be posed to his client. I am aware of no precedent for a court providing a witness's lawyer with an advance copy of the questions the witness will be asked during a criminal proceeding. Fortunately, there was no prejudice to Mr. Murdaugh because the Court granted Mr. Murdaugh's request to sequester the witnesses and Mr. Bland agreed to abide by the Court's decision.

However, if the examination of Juror 826 is held in public tomorrow, the attendant media coverage means the other witnesses will not be sequestered and will be given advance notice of the questions they will be asked and an opportunity to discuss their answers with others. Mr. Murdaugh therefore objects to holding tomorrow's hearing in public, and requests the courtroom be sealed, with the transcript and perhaps an audio recording released on Monday once the juror witnesses are assembled in the courthouse. The public interest in observing the examination of a single witness one business day in advance of the actual hearing is minimal and is outweighed by Mr. Murdaugh's interest in witness sequestration. For example, the juror witnesses are in communication with each other through a "chat group," for which Mr. Murdaugh can provide documentary evidence of such if the Court desires. Mr. Murdaugh should not lose the ability to seek sequestration of witnesses simply because he, the State, and the Court wished to accommodate an innocent juror's prepaid travel plans.

Mr. Murdaugh objects to the Court examining Ms. Hill at all. Rule 614(b) of the South Carolina Rules of Evidence provides, "*When required by the interests of justice only*, the court may interrogate witnesses" (emphasis added). This restriction is almost unique to South Carolina jurisprudence. It does not appear in the federal Rule 614 and Florida is the only other state with this restriction in its corresponding rule. Ms. Hill is an elected public official accused of wrongdoing, which she has denied by a sworn statement filed with this Court. She is the State's principal witness against Mr. Murdaugh. The prosecution and SLED agents just held a four-hour preparation session with her to coach her testimony even though they are supposedly investigating multiple criminal allegations against her. There is no reason the "interests of justice" would require her to be shielded from being asked questions in the same manner as almost every other witness in every other case in the history of this State. The Court has not stated any reasons for conducting the examination of Ms. Hill itself, and if the Court is determined to do so Mr. Murdaugh respectfully requests the Court state its reasons on the record prior to her examination.

Mr. Murdaugh has a right to present *any* evidence relevant to his claims which is not prohibited by "the Constitution of the United States, the Constitution of the State of South Carolina, statutes, [the South Carolina Rules of Evidence], or by other rules promulgated by the Supreme Court of South Carolina." Rule 402, SCRE. "Relevant evidence" means evidence having any tendency to make the existence of any fact that is of consequence to the determination of the action more probable or less probable than it would be without the evidence." Rule 401, SCRE. Witness credibility is always relevant. Rule 611(b), SCRE ("A witness may be cross-examined on any matter relevant to any issue in the case, including credibility."); *see Holmes v. South Carolina*, 547 U.S. 319, 331 (2006) ("The point is that, by evaluating the strength of only one party's evidence, no logical conclusion can be reached regarding the strength of contrary

evidence offered by the other side to rebut or cast doubt.”) (unanimous opinion overruling the South Carolina Supreme Court following the second trial of a capital case). Generally, “any matter is [a] proper subject of cross-examination which is responsive to testimony given on direct examination, or which is material or relevant thereto, and which tends to elucidate, modify, explain, contradict or rebut testimony given in chief by the witness.” *State v. Taylor*, 333 S.C. 159, 174, 508 S.E.2d 870, 878 (1998). For that reason, “Considerable latitude is allowed in cross-examination to test a witness’s credibility.” *State v. Johnson*, 338 S.C. 114, 124, 525 S.E.2d 519, 524 (2000).

Whether Ms. Hill lied to the Court during trial about a member of the jury is probative of whether she is now lying to the same Court about her contacts with jurors during trial. For that reason, inquiry (by counsel) should be made into the “Facebook” matter. Plagiarizing the book that she purportedly wrote about the trial is probative of her truthfulness about her conduct during the trial. Inquiry should therefore be made into that matter. Whether Ms. Hill stated during trial that she had a financial interest in a guilty verdict is probative of the truth of her denial of allegations that she acted to secure a guilty verdict. Inquiry should therefore be made into that matter. Abusing the power of her office to steal money is probative of whether she at about the same time abused the power of her office for financial gain in other ways. “Proof of bias is almost always relevant because the jury, as finder of fact and weigher of credibility, has historically been entitled to assess all evidence which might bear on the accuracy and truth of a witness’ testimony.” *State v. Pipkin*, 359 S.C. 322, 327, 597 S.E.2d 831, 833 (Ct. App. 2004) (Beatty, J.) (quoting *United States v. Abel*, 469 U.S. 45, 52 (1984)). An inquiry should therefore be made into the allegations that Ms. Hill sold access to the courthouse and otherwise misappropriated funds, to the point that during the trial she was not even allowed to have a county credit card.

The evidentiary rules prevent witness impeachment from turning into a trial-within-a-trial by prohibiting the introduction of extrinsic evidence regarding specific instances of conduct, instead generally limiting it to prior inconsistent statements and evidence of bias. See Rules 609(b), 609(c), 613(b), SCRE. Those rules are sufficient to contain the Defendant’s examination of Ms. Hill. There is no need for the Court go further and rob Mr. Murdaugh of his right to cross examine the State’s principal witness against him. Indeed, for most lines of questioning, the impeaching inquiry of Ms. Hill would be very quick. For example, she has already admitted publicly to plagiarism so that line of inquiry would be over in a minute. At a minimum, if she denies speaking with jurors about the merits of the case, Mr. Murdaugh should at least be allowed to call any percipient eyewitnesses who would contradict her. The testimony of those witnesses likely would take less than ten minutes. Whether those witnesses later deliberated with the jury is irrelevant. Ms. Hill, after all, did not deliberate with the jury either. She too is relevant only as an eyewitness to her actions.

When ruling that Mr. Murdaugh will be prohibited from calling percipient eyewitnesses to Ms. Hill’s alleged jury-tampering statements, whether to corroborate jurors who testify Ms. Hill made such statements or to rebut Ms. Hill’s sworn denial of making such statements, the Court stated, “The corroboration is something I don’t think I need at this time. I think I’m perfectly capable of evaluating what the jurors tell me and I’ll do that. I think I’m also perfectly capable of evaluating the credibility of Ms. Hill and the jurors, for that matter.” Hr’g Tr. 51:16–21. Mr. Murdaugh objects to those statements. He has a right to challenge the credibility of the State’s

principal witness against him through cross-examination, which is not contingent on how the Court perceives its own needs or capabilities. *See State v. Hester*, 137 S.C. 145, 134 S.E. 885, 899 (1926) (observing the “right to cross-examine is one which must remain inviolate,” “[t]he power of cross-examination . . . certainly is one of the most efficacious, tests which the law has devised for the discovery of truth,” and it is “[o]ne of the most inestimable rights by which a man may maintain his defense” (internal quotation marks omitted)). Respectfully, it is inappropriate for the Court to direct the parties’ factual presentations based on its own opinions, formed before receiving any evidence, about what it needs to assess witness credibility. The parties decide and present, within the limits set by the South Carolina Rules of Evidence, what they believe the Court needs to make findings of fact. *Cf. Wolff v. McDonnell*, 418 U.S. 539, 566 (1974) (“Ordinarily, the right to present evidence is basic to a fair hearing . . .”); *see also Ponte v. Real*, 471 U.S. 491, 495 (1985) (same); *Baxter v. Palmigiano*, 425 U.S. 308, 321 (1976) (same). It is Mr. Murdaugh’s burden to prove his allegations, not the Court’s. It is the State’s burden to rebut Mr. Murdaugh’s proof, not the Court’s. This is an American adversarial proceeding in a trial court, not a European inquisitorial proceeding conducted by an investigating magistrate.

With warm personal regards, I am

Sincerely,



Richard A. Harpootlian

COURTESY OF
LUNA SHARPE MEDICAL

Exhibit A

COURTESY OF
LUNA SHAIKH MEDIA

DEFENDANT MURDAUGH'S PROPOSED JUROR QUESTIONS

Q. Did you hear Ms. Hill make any comments about the testimony, evidence, or arguments presented by the State or defense, or the anticipated length of your deliberations during Mr. Murdaugh's trial?

If the answer is no, then no further questions.

If the answer is yes, then ask the following:

- Q. What comments did you hear Ms. Hill make?
- Q. Who else was present when Ms. Hill made those comments?
- Q. Did Ms. Hill's comments influence you in any way and if so, how?
- Q. Did Ms. Hill's comments prejudice you against Defendant Alex Murdaugh in any way, however slight?