

Marvin M. Brandt Revocable Trust v. United States (2014) is a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case that addressed what happens to a railroad right-of-way granted under the 1875 General Railroad Right-of-Way Act when it is later abandoned. In this case, the federal government had granted a railroad an easement across public land in 1908. In 1976, it issued a land patent to the Brandt family for that same land, subject to the railroad's right-of-way. Decades later, when the railroad abandoned the line, the federal government claimed that the right-of-way land reverted to the United States. The Brandts argued instead that the easement was extinguished upon abandonment, and full title reverted to them as the private landowners.

The Supreme Court agreed with the Brandts in an 8–1 decision. Chief Justice Roberts, writing for the majority, held that the 1875 Act granted only an easement, not a fee interest, and that under common law, easements terminate when abandoned. Therefore, once the railroad ceased operations and the easement was abandoned, the Brandts' land became unburdened, and the federal government had no reversionary interest. The Court criticized the federal government for reversing its earlier position (from *Great Northern Railway Co v United States* in 1942), where it had successfully argued that 1875 Act rights-of-way were mere easements. This case significantly impacted federal land policy and the use of former rail corridors, particularly with respect to the “rails-to-trails” program.