

SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR, FIRST FEMALE JUSTICE AND MODERATE SWING VOTE, RETIRES

In a move likely to spark a major political fight over the future of the nation's highest court, Associate Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor announced Friday she was retiring after some 24 years of service.

"This is to inform you of my decision to retire from my position as an associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, effective upon the nomination and confirmation of my successor," a statement released by O'Connor read.

"It has been a great privilege indeed to have served as a member of the court for 24 terms. I will leave it with enormous respect for the integrity of the court and its role under our constitutional structure."

The upcoming battle

Appointed by Ronald Reagan in 1981, O'Connor, who is now 75, was the first woman to serve on the Supreme Court and is considered to be a critical voice because of her moderate stance on key issues ranging from abortion to the death penalty.

Her decision to leave creates the first opening on the court in 11 years and launches what will likely be a bitter political battle between conservatives and liberals over who should replace her.

Already, special interest groups have begun planning major campaigns. One lobbying group already is running a TV ad encouraging Americans to support the president's choice.

"It's going to look like a presidential campaign," Richard Davis, political science professor at Brigham Young University and author of *Electing Justice, Fixing the Supreme Court Nomination Process* told USA Today.

Choosing a successor

Because recent speculation had focused on whether Chief Justice William Rehnquist, who is sick with cancer, would be the one to retire, O'Connor's announcement took many by surprise.

President Bush hailed her as a "patriot" and a jurist of "great intellect, wisdom and personal decency."

"America is proud of Justice O'Connor's distinguished service," Mr. Bush said. "She has been a discerning and conscientious judge and a public servant of complete integrity."

The president also said he had ordered his staff to prepare a list of possible candidates to replace O'Connor.

He pledged that his choice would be one who will "faithfully interpret the Constitution and the laws of our country" and urged the Senate to approve his choice before the court begins the next session in October.

"The nation deserves and I will select a Supreme Court justice that Americans can be proud of. The nation also deserves a dignified process of confirmation in the United States Senate, characterized by fair treatment, a fair hearing and a fair vote," he said.

Senate Democrats urged the president to consult with Democratic leaders before making a decision.

The first woman justice

When President Reagan tapped O'Connor, then an Arizona Appeals Court justice, to the nation's highest court in 1981, he was fulfilling a promise he had made during his presidential campaign to appoint a woman to the court.

O'Connor recognized the pressure of the role she had been handed.

"My concern was whether I could do the job of a justice well enough to convince the nation that my appointment was the right move," the Associated Press quoted her as saying at a law school in 2000.

"If I stumbled badly in doing the job, I think it would have made life more difficult for women, and that was a great concern of mine and still is."

Her role evolved over the years, from one of the court's more conservative voices to one of moderation.

She often became the deciding justice in some of the court's most polarized decisions.

In 2000, she joined the majority of the more conservative justices who decided to end the recount that handed the election to George W. Bush, but backed the majority of liberal justices in allowing abortions when a woman's health is endangered.

O'Connor saw herself and her eight fellow justices as something akin to nine firefighters.

"When (someone) lights a fire, we invariably are asked to attend to the blaze. We may arrive at the scene a few years later," she said.

-- Compiled from wire reports and other media sources

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