



**Email this article**  
**Print this article**  
**Most popular pages**

**Click to send**  
**Choose File Print or Ctrl P or Apple P**  
**Today | This Week**

# Roberts writes of threats to judicial independence

*Supreme Court hurt by soaring rent, wage gap*

**Charles Lane**

Washington Post

Jan. 1, 2006 12:00 AM

WASHINGTON - The annual report from the chief justice of the United States had its first new author in 19 years, but its basic theme of potential financial threats to the federal courts' independence was familiar.

John Roberts Jr., who succeeded the late William Rehnquist as titular leader of the Supreme Court and the rest of the federal bench in October, bemoaned the lagging salaries earned by federal judges and blasted the General Services Administration for what he said were excessive rents on federal courthouses.

According to Roberts, the judiciary must spend more than five times as much of its budget on rent as the Justice Department does. The total bill in fiscal 2005, Roberts wrote, was \$926 million, "even though the GSA's actual cost for providing the space to the judiciary was \$426 million."

"The federal judiciary cannot continue to serve as a profit center for GSA," Roberts wrote. The agency designs, builds and manages courthouses for the federal district courts and appeals courts nationwide.

Roberts blamed "escalating rents" for the loss of 1,500 jobs in the judicial branch between October 2003 and mid-December 2005.

Roberts expressed gratitude for a 5.4 percent increase in the judiciary's budget for fiscal 2006. But he said that would still not address the "direct threat" to judicial independence posed by the gap between what judges earn today and what they could earn as lawyers in the private sector.

The salary of a federal district judge is \$165,200. An appeals judge makes \$175,100 a year. Roberts receives \$212,100; other members of the Supreme Court get \$203,000 each. These figures have risen by a few thousand dollars per year each year since 1999, but Roberts said the inflation-adjusted pay of judges is still 24 percent lower than it was in 1969.

Roberts noted that 92 judges have left the bench since 1990 and that the exodus appears to be accelerating, with nine judges stepping down in the past year.

The report was not all gloom. "New Year's Day in America means football, parades, and, of course, the 'Year-End Report on the Federal Judiciary,'" Roberts quipped, showing some of the understated humor for which he was known during his career as a Supreme Court litigator and federal appeals judge.

Noting that he has been in office barely three months, he said that it was a "bit presumptuous" to be issuing a report so soon, and that "it remains for me very

much a time for listening rather than speaking." But, Roberts added, "I do not intend to start the New Year by breaking with a 30-year-old tradition."

**Email this article**  
**Print this article**  
**Most popular pages**

**Click to send**  
**Choose File Print or Ctrl P or Apple P**  
**Today | This Week**