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High court ushers in Roberts era

REUTERS

WASHINGTON - At 10:35 a.m. Monday, new Chief Justice John Roberts opened the 2005-2006 Supreme Court session and launched the highest U.S. judicial body into the Roberts era, which could last for decades.

"On behalf of all the members of the court, it is a pleasure to extend to you a warm welcome," Justice John Paul Stevens told Roberts before the official opening in a brief ceremony attended by President Bush.

Stevens wished Roberts "a long and happy career in our common calling" as the country's 17th chief justice. Roberts succeeds his mentor, William Rehnquist, who died a month ago after 33 years as the court's foremost conservative voice.

Roberts, at 50, is the youngest chief justice in more than two centuries. He takes over a court in which every other member has at least 11 years seniority and one, Stevens, has 30. In a lifetime post, Roberts could have a major impact on the legal system.

Roberts, who spoke of the need of judges to be modest before his confirmation, entered the courtroom with his eight fellow justices dressed in a plain black robe like them.

Gone were the four gold stripes Rehnquist added to each sleeve before presiding over the Senate impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton in 1999 - an adornment inspired by a Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera.

Roberts said he was happy to announce the opening of the session that will run until June, then immediately went into the first arguments of the term.

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