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O'Connor recalls Senate questioning as 'just miserable'

Empathy, praise for the nominee

By Howard Fischer

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PHOENIX - Sandra Day O'Connor said Thursday that she knows what John Roberts is going through.

O'Connor, asked to compare her own 1981 confirmation hearings to what is happening this week in Washington, said her time before the Senate Judiciary Committee was "one of the worst experiences of my life."

"I just couldn't bear it," O'Connor told an audience at a luncheon organized by the department of women's studies at the University of Arizona. It was her first public appearance since the Senate panel took up the question of confirming Roberts.

"I was seated, as he was, at a table, with nobody with me," O'Connor recalled, with all the cameras focused on her. Then there were "all the senators trying to ask erudite questions endlessly, endlessly, and you're trying to respond in some fashion that made sense. But you can't tell them how you're going to vote in the next case."

She called it "just miserable," saying that while her testimony lasted only three days, "I kept thinking it would never end."

When asked what advice she would give Roberts if he becomes chief justice, O'Connor said he should take a cue from his predecessor, William H. Rehnquist. O'Connor said Rehnquist, who died earlier this month, understood that the best way to maintain control of the court was by being loose.

The Arizona native, using the lingo of the ranch on which she was raised, compared running the court - and dealing with the other justices - to riding a horse. She said the horse knows right away if the rider is in control or afraid.

"Once they've established that level of control, they can ride the horse and guide it with pretty loose reins, and with only seldom using the spurs," O'Connor said. She said Rehnquist had "pretty loose reins" and it was "very seldom that he tried to apply any spurs."

The first woman named to the nation's highest court, O'Connor seemed sad that her retirement, announced earlier this year, would not happen as quickly as she had hoped.

Roberts was originally chosen by President Bush to take her place. But the president opted to nominate him for chief justice after Rehnquist's death, leaving no nominee for her seat. And O'Connor has said she would stay until a replacement is confirmed.

"It's beginning to recede a little bit from the immediate horizon," she said, comparing it to when she was a little girl and would chase a rainbow in the distance that would never get any closer.

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