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Sandra Day O'Connor: How the First Woman on the Supreme Court Became Its Most Influential Justice

Joan Biskupic

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Sandra Day O'Connor, America's first woman justice, became the axis on which the Supreme Court turned. She was called the most powerful woman in America, and it was often said that to gauge the direction of American law, one need look only to O'Connor's vote. Then, just one year short of a quarter century on the bench, she surprised her colleagues and the nation by announcing her retirement.

Drawing on information from once-private papers of the justices, hundreds of interviews with legal and political insiders, and the insight gained from nearly two decades of covering the Supreme Court, Joan Biskupic examines O'Connor's remarkable career, providing an in-depth account of her transformation from tentative jurist to confident architect of American law. The portrait that emerges is of a complex and multifaceted woman: lawyer, politician, legislator, and justice, as well as wife, mother, A-list society hostess, and competitive athlete. To all appearances, she was the polite lady in pearls, handbag on her arm. But in the back rooms of politics and the law, she was a determined, focused strategist. O'Connor was the feminist who, rather than rebel against the male-dominated system, worked from within -- and succeeded.

As Biskupic demonstrates, Justice O'Connor became much more than a "first." During her twenty-four-year tenure, she wrote the decisions on some of the most controversial social battles of our time. O'Connor's tie-breaking opinions on issues such as abortion rights, affirmative action, the death penalty, and religious freedom will have a lasting effect far into the future. O'Connor also cast one of the five votes that cut off the Florida recounts and allowed George W. Bush to take the White House in the 2000 contested presidential election. With an eye to the American people and a keen sense of public attitudes, she worked behind the scenes to shape the law and transform the legal standards by which future cases will be decided.

From O'Connor's isolated upbringing on the Lazy B ranch in Arizona through her time as a state legislator to her rise as a justice -- along the way confronting her own personal challenges and crises, including breast cancer -- Biskupic presents a vivid, astute depiction of the justice -- and of the woman beneath the black robe. In so doing, Sandra Day O'Connor also provides an unprecedented look inside the exclusive, famously secretive High Court.

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