

Women of Valor

I was the first woman
to serve on the
U.S. Supreme Court!

Sandra Day
O'Connor

Meet Sandra Day O'Connor

Many have called Sandra Day O'Connor the "most important woman in American history." An Arizona cowgirl, mother, lawyer, and judge, she broke new ground when she was sworn in as the first woman on the U.S. Supreme Court in 1981.

Because the legal profession had traditionally been a male domain, Sandra's **ascension** to the nation's highest court shattered gender barriers, and she became an instant celebrity and inspiration to women across the country.

However, Sandra's rulings often surprised the women activists who assumed she would always side with them. Affirming her commitment to fairness, Sandra insisted, "My power on the Court depends on the strength of my arguments, not on my gender."

During her nearly 25 years on the Court, Sandra was regarded as an independent thinker and a leader. She played a pivotal role in many decisions and left a lasting impact on the United States.



At-a-Glance

- ★ Born Sandra Day on March 26, 1930 in El Paso, Texas
- ★ Served as Arizona state senator and as a judge on the Maricopa County Superior Court and Arizona Court of Appeals
- ★ First woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, as associate justice from 1981 to 2006
- ★ Known for her intelligence and grit, **meticulously** researched opinions, and moderate conservative views
- ★ Author of five books, including two children's books, based on her childhood experiences
- ★ Awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama in 2009

Humble Beginnings

The oldest of Harry and Ada Mae Day's three children, Sandra grew up on her family's cattle ranch, the Lazy B. The ranch straddled Arizona and New Mexico and was 35 miles from the nearest town, so Sandra had an **atypical** upbringing. She passed her days with the farm animals and the cowboys who worked on the ranch. From an early age, she participated in ranch chores and learned how to ride a horse, repair a fence, drive a truck, and shoot a rifle. Sandra also spent a lot of time reading books from her parents' library.

Because Sandra was eight years older than her next sibling, Ann, she received the attention of an only child. She remembers

fondly her father's genuine interest in her and appreciated their strong bond over the years. She recalls spending hours at the dinner table with him, discussing ranching, politics, and economics. Sandra looked up to her mother as a strong female role model who made the hard ranch life look easy. She taught Sandra how to read and play many card games.

To ensure that Sandra received the best possible education, her parents made the difficult decision to send her to a private school in El Paso, Texas. So, at age five, she went to live with her grandmother, Mamie Wilkey, returning to the ranch only during the summers.

"I don't know that there are any shortcuts to doing a good job."

Sandra Day O'Connor



GETTY IMAGES



Ranch Life

The Lazy B was isolated, rugged, and expansive at roughly 250 square miles, and Sandra's family had few luxuries. The ranch had no electricity or running water until she was seven. Meals consisted mostly of beef, beans, dried fruit, and biscuits. The Southwestern climate was unforgivingly hot and dry, and flies were a constant nuisance. Sandra recalls how her family would watch the skies, always hoping for rain.

Although there weren't other children around, Sandra and her siblings had the unique opportunity to grow up alongside their parents, and learned valuable life lessons, particularly about the significance of hard work and **self-reliance**.

They often rode horseback for hours in the heat and dust, and drove around in

their father's truck performing tedious tasks, such as examining the cattle, checking the grass, oiling the windmills, and repairing the water wells.

Sandra also learned from the cowboys who spent their entire lives on the ranch and babysat her as a child. From Rastus, she learned to do the best she could with what she had. From Jim, she learned to focus on results, not excuses. From Bug, she learned to see the humor in every situation, and from Claude, she learned to set high standards and precision in every job she set out to do.

Despite the challenging ranch conditions, Sandra always missed the Lazy B when she was away. Living on a cattle ranch was an unusual experience, one that she greatly appreciated throughout her life.

Education & Marriage

In El Paso, Sandra excelled at the Radford School for Girls, where she graduated at age twelve. She continued to be a stand-out student at Austin High School, while also participating in the student yearbook and various school clubs. Her loving grandmother impressed upon her that she could accomplish anything she set out to do.

At age 16, Sandra entered Stanford University in California to study economics and discovered her true calling when she took a class taught by law professor Dr. Harry J. Rathbun in her third year. Sandra was so inspired that she applied for early admission to Stanford Law School. She graduated third

in her law class, two places behind her friend William H. Rehnquist, who also went on to become a Supreme Court justice.

Sandra met fellow student John Jay O'Connor when they were assigned to edit a *Stanford Law Review* article together. They got along so well that they went out every night for six weeks. Eager to introduce John to her family, Sandra invited him to the Lazy B. Although John was more of a city boy, he endeared himself to everyone at the ranch with his great sense of humor. Soon after the visit, the couple announced their engagement and were married at the Lazy B in December of 1952.



Early Career & Family

When Sandra graduated from Stanford Law School in 1952, she was surprised to discover that law firms would not hire women lawyers. Her only job offer was to work as a legal

secretary, a position that did not match her qualifications. She later gained experience as a civilian attorney in Germany when John was stationed there as a lawyer for the United States Army.

Sandra later recalled that "in 1957, many women were not being hired in major law firms," so she opened up her neighborhood law office in Arizona. She also hoped for job flexibility while caring for her newborn son,

Scott. To help pay the law firm's rent, Sandra and her partner handled every case that came through the door, which provided her exposure to many different kinds of cases.

Sandra and John soon welcomed two more sons, Brian and Jay. To balance motherhood and work, Sandra initially worked part-time, but eventually took a few years off to take care of the boys while they were young. With her two older boys in school, Sandra returned to work as a lawyer in the Arizona attorney general's office, gradually extending her hours to full-time. During this time, she became more involved in politics and began volunteering for conservative political causes.

Accomplished Lawyer, Politician, and Judge

In 1969, the Arizona Republican party asked Sandra to fill a vacant seat in the Arizona Senate, making her one of only two women to serve in that role. She held the position until 1975, twice earning reelection. She was also selected by her colleagues to be the senate's majority leader, the first woman in the U.S. to earn that title.

Although she enjoyed political life, Sandra returned to the legal profession when she was elected as a trial court judge for the Maricopa County Superior Court. As judge, she listened to trials about crimes, contracts, and other legal matters. She quickly earned a reputation for being both fair and demanding.

Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt promoted Sandra to serve as a judge on the Arizona Court of Appeals. She found the work challenging and rewarding and imagined it would be her job for life, but another opportunity soon presented itself.



Sandra Day O'Connor is sworn in as Supreme Court Justice by Chief Justice Warren Burger. Her husband, John O'Connor, looks on.

Supreme Court Justice

In July 1981, Sandra received a call from the White House and an invitation to meet with President Ronald Reagan. He was considering candidates to fill Potter Stewart's seat on the U.S. Supreme Court. To her surprise, President Reagan called Sandra a few days after their meeting to offer her the nomination. She later learned that he had been so impressed with her that he had never interviewed any other candidate for the position.

Upon receiving a president's Supreme Court nomination, the U.S. Senate must hold public hearings to interview a candidate regarding his or her qualifications, political views, and legal experience. Sandra did her best to answer the senators' questions during three intense days of questioning. When the senators voted, she was confirmed unanimously. On September 25, 1981, Sandra was sworn in by Chief Justice Warren Burger as the first female associate justice and the 102nd member of the United States Supreme Court.

Notable Cases

During Sandra's **tenure** on the Court, the justices were mostly aligned along partisan lines and could be counted on to vote with their like-minded colleagues. Sandra often found herself in the middle, enabling her to cast the swing vote. She helped shape U.S. history in several landmark cases, including:

Bush v. Gore (2000): Sandra cast the deciding vote in the historic 5-4 decision to uphold the Florida secretary of state's original certification of Florida's electoral votes—effectively naming George W. Bush the 43rd president.

Grutter v. Bollinger (2003): In another 5-4 decision, the Court upheld an **affirmative action** program at the University of Michigan. "In order to cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry," Sandra said, "it is



necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity."

Hamdi v. Rumsfeld (2004): In a 6-3 decision, the Supreme Court declared that even citizens designated "enemy combatants" have the right to challenge their imprisonment. Sandra wrote the court's opinion, asserting that "a state of war is not a blank check ... when it comes to the rights of the Nation's citizens."



Retirement and Beyond

Sandra retired on January 31, 2006 and was succeeded by Justice Samuel Alito. As a measure of her influence, when Sandra attended Stanford Law School in the 1950s, only two percent of law students were women at the time. By the time she retired in 2006, that percentage had risen to 48 percent.

Following retirement, Sandra returned to Arizona to devote more time to her family. She later established the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy to advance civic learning and engagement.

In 2018, she announced that she had been diagnosed with the beginning stages of **dementia** and would be retiring from public life.

Fascinating Facts About Sandra



- Early in her career, Sandra volunteered to work for free at the San Mateo County Attorney's office. She was hired for a paid position as soon as one became available.
- Sandra was a self-described "compulsive volunteer," performing public service for many groups, including the Salvation Army, the Arizona State Hospital, and local schools.
- Sandra became a founder of both the Arizona Women Lawyers Association



and the National Association of Women Judges.

- Sandra was inducted into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame in Fort Worth, Texas in 2002.
- In 2005, Sandra wrote *Chico*, a book about her beloved childhood pet horse and other adventures on the Lazy B.
- In 2009, Sandra founded the Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy to advance civil discourse, civic engagement, and civics education.

You Be the Judge

In her work as a Supreme Court justice, Sandra Day O'Connor was required by the Constitution to fairly and impartially apply the law – not the law as she wanted it to be, but as it was written. Now that you've read about Sandra Day O'Connor, how would you decide on the following questions? Vote Yay or Nay.

1

Sandra Day O'Connor learned valuable life lessons growing up on her family's cattle ranch.

YAY

NAY

2

Sandra attended law school at Stanford University at a time when few women worked in the legal profession.

YAY

NAY

3

After they returned to Arizona, Sandra and her husband John opened a neighborhood law office.

YAY

NAY

4

Since she was a little girl, Sandra dreamed of serving on the U.S. Supreme Court.

YAY

NAY

5

As the first female Supreme Court justice, Sandra became an icon for millions of women.

YAY

NAY

6

Sandra cast the swing vote in several important Supreme Court cases.

YAY

NAY

Word Search

ARIZONA
COWGIRL
RANCH
STANFORD
SENATOR
REAGAN
JUSTICE
CHICO
CIVICS
WOMAN
HISTORY
REPUBLICAN

R	H	I	S	T	O	R	Y	T	W	B	R
S	E	Y	N	X	N	C	I	V	I	C	S
T	V	P	R	L	T	A	C	N	E	T	W
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R	L	R	N	U	M	Z	C	R	I	D	Q
D	L	Z	J	A	I	O	A	A	R	H	W
V	G	Y	R	R	T	N	W	D	N	J	C
K	M	V	A	P	C	O	R	Y	D	J	D
D	G	L	J	H	R	W	R	R	T	M	G

"The Roundup" Writing Exercise

Growing up on her family's cattle ranch, Sandra worked alongside quiet, busy adults who expected her to be independent and help with the chores. She later noted that her unusual background helped prepare her for a career in law.



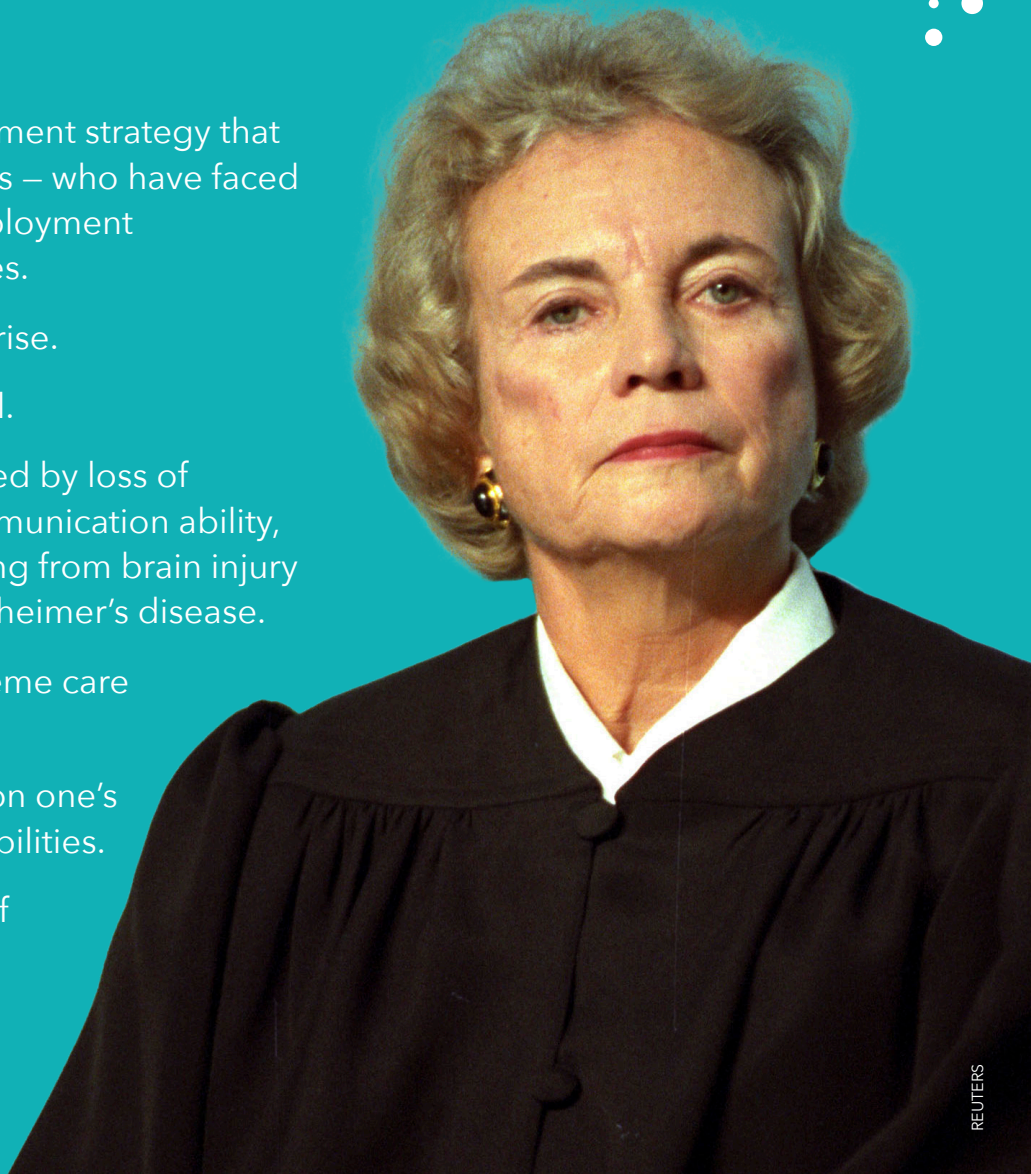
1. How do you think that Sandra's early experiences enabled her to succeed in the legal profession? In life?
2. What is the connection, if any, between ranching and working as a Supreme Court justice?
3. Does any part of your life resemble Sandra's childhood experiences? How is it the same? How is it different?

YOU BE THE JUDGE KEY: 1-Y, 2-Y, 3-N, 4-N, 5-Y, 6-Y.



Glossary

- **Affirmative Action:** A government strategy that favors certain minority groups – who have faced past discrimination – for employment and educational opportunities.
- **Ascension:** A move upward; rise.
- **Atypical:** Not usual or normal.
- **Dementia:** A condition marked by loss of memory, concentration, communication ability, and abstract thinking, resulting from brain injury or from a disease such as Alzheimer's disease.
- **Meticulous:** Acting with extreme care for details.
- **Self-Reliance:** Dependence on one's own efforts, judgment, and abilities.
- **Tenure:** The period or term of holding something in one's possession, such as an office or occupation.



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