WASHINGTON -- Ladies and gentlemen on both sides of the nation's judicial wars: Charge your BlackBerries. The first Supreme Court confirmation of the instant messaging era is about to begin.

Ensconced behind the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee are three dozen staff aides and legal counsels, ready to do their bosses' bidding. In the hands of many are BlackBerries, and at the other end of those e-mail retrieving devices are the front-line combatants of the first Supreme Court confirmation hearing in 11 years -- interest groups of the left, interest groups of the right, congressional staff experts, political party strategists, press aides.

Assembled in rooms around the Capitol, they stand ready to shoot e-mail advice to senators, and political spin to reporters, at a moment's notice. Once upon a time, these same players in the confirmation hearing dramas passed handwritten notes to senators and typed press releases for the media. Anita Hill's written sexual harassment charges against Clarence Thomas in 1991 came via fax machine.

Now, Republican legal scholars say, they are primed to send e-mails to GOP staffers suggesting comeback questions if and when Judge John G. Roberts undergoes fierce questioning from tough Democrats such as senators Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts and Charles E. Schumer of New York.

"It's going to be very important that Republican [senators] go off their prepared questions," said BlackBerry aficionado Leonard A. Leo, on leave from the conservative Federalist Society to help lead the pro-Roberts forces. "They'll need to rehabilitate the witness after a Democratic tirade."

The question-and-answer session that begins today will, in the words of GOP Committee Chairman Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, be a "subtle minuet" in which senators ask questions, and Roberts tries...
not to answer, at least in specifics. Specter -- who witnessed firsthand the evisceration of the all-too-forthcoming Robert Bork in 1987 -- noted that "nominees answer about as many questions as they think they have to in order to be confirmed."

And judging by yesterday's performance, Roberts appears ready for the give-and-take. The youngest nominee for chief justice in 204 years surprised opponents by not distributing prepared remarks.

Everyone knows Roberts -- who spent many weeks training in mock hearings -- is as prepared as they come. But by relying on memory instead of a printed text -- as he did 39 times in arguments before nine justices of the Supreme Court -- he can adjust his words to appeal to each member of the committee, based on what he had already heard.

During his short opening remarks, he looked each senator in the eye as he compared the job of a judge to that of an umpire, "to call balls and strikes, and not to pitch or bat." His performance left opponents even more convinced that they will have a hard time exposing the "real John Roberts."

Roberts' operative words were "modesty" and "humility," terms he regularly invoked in his private meetings with senators. But Democrats, certain a more arrogant man lurks in the writings they've read from Roberts' days as a staff attorney in Ronald Reagan's Justice Department, want to leave a different impression.

Schumer accused Roberts of being "an overachiever" with a "first-class education" and "advantaged life." Schumer (Harvard Law graduate and a member of Congress for 24 years) fretted about Roberts' ability to "identify with an underdog who has nothing but the Constitution on his side."

One of the most eagerly anticipated statements was that of Specter. A maverick former prosecutor who likes to buck the Republican leadership, Specter had hinted that Roberts would face tough grilling from him over what he describes as the Supreme Court's relentless undermining of congressional authority.

Leaders of liberal interest groups still hold out hope that the Judiciary Committee chairman will pressure the White House to release more documents about Roberts' background.

"I have confidence in Senator Specter," said one.

The problem for foes is, so does the White House.

Republican strategists expect Specter to showcase his independence with tough questioning, but they're also confident his feet will remain firmly planted on the GOP reservation. All of which has Democratic foes whispering: Was this the price Specter had to pay to keep his committee chairmanship last year, after religious conservatives attacked him for supporting abortion rights?

Two leading Democratic prospects for the '08 presidential nomination had opposite takes on Roberts yesterday. Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr. of Delaware gave a spirited lecture to Roberts, saying that if he had to rely only on the nominee's written record, "I would have to vote no."

By contrast, Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana was one of the senators to introduce Roberts -- not as an ideological soul mate, but as a "fellow Hoosier."
Republican strategists don't expect Roberts to secure the votes of any of the committee's Democrats, all of whom are from blue states. But if they expected to wait until after this week's Q&A before hearing Democratic condemnations they're wrong -- at least in Kennedy's case.

The press packet his office handed out to reporters opens with this line: "For over four decades Senator Kennedy has been a champion of individual rights and liberties, while John Roberts has repeatedly sought to limit them throughout his career."

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