



## **Chao, Elaine: Files, 1983-1984**

### **Finding Aid Type**

White House Staff and Office File Collections

### **Subtitle/Office**

Office of Policy Development (White House Fellow)

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### **Record Type**

Textual

### **Biography**

## **Biography**

Elaine Lan Chao is a businesswoman and a former government official. Chao's government career began in 1983 in the Reagan Administration and ended in her serving as the first Asian-American woman cabinet member. Chao was the Secretary of Labor for the entire George W. Bush Administration and the Secretary of Transportation for most of the Trump Administration.

Chao was born in Taipei, Taiwan on March 26, 1953, the eldest of six daughters of Ruth Mulan Chu Chao, a historian, and James S. C. Chao. Her father was born in Jiading District, Shanghai, China and worked as a sea captain before moving to the United States in 1958. James Chao obtained a scholarship to St. John's University in Queens, New York City where he eventually earned a master's degree. In 1964, he founded the shipping company Foremost Maritime Corporation which developed into the Foremost Group. In 1961, at the age of 8, Chao came to the United States on a 37-day freight ship journey along with her mother and two younger sisters.

Chao attended Tsai Hsing Elementary School in Taiwan for two years. Growing up in Long Island, New York, Chao attended Syosset High School in Syosset, New York. After graduating from high school Chao was naturalized as a U.S. citizen at the age of 19.

Chao received a Bachelor of Arts degree in economics from Mount Holyoke College in 1975. In the second semester of her junior year, she studied money and banking at Dartmouth College. She earned an MBA degree from Harvard Business School in 1979.

Before entering public service, Chao was vice president for syndications at Bank of America Capital Markets Group in San Francisco, and she was an international banker at Citicorp in New York for four years from 1979 to 1983.

She was granted a coveted White House fellowship for the class of 1983-1984 during the Reagan Administration. Chao was assigned to the Office of Policy Development where she worked on a proposal for a comprehensive national maritime policy.

After her fellowship, Chao returned to banking as Vice President, Syndications at Bank of America from late 1984 to 1986.

Returning to government service in 1986, Chao became Deputy Administrator of the Maritime Administration in the U.S. Department of Transportation. From 1988 to 1989, she served as Chairwoman of the Federal Maritime Commission. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush nominated Chao to be Deputy Secretary of Transportation; she served from 1989 to 1991. From 1991 to 1992, she was the Director of the Peace Corps. She expanded the Peace Corps' presence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia by establishing the first Peace Corps programs in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union.

Following her service in President George H.W. Bush's administration, Chao worked for three years from 1993 to 1996 as president and CEO of United Way of America. She is credited with returning credibility and public trust to the organization after a financial mismanagement scandal. From 1996 until her appointment as Secretary of Labor, Chao was a Distinguished Fellow with The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington, DC. She was also a board member of the Independent Women's Forum.

Chao was the only cabinet member in the George W. Bush Administration to serve the entirety of his eight-year term. At the Labor Department, Chao was true to her conservative beliefs encouraging cutbacks in labor regulations and enforcements. Many media outlets and oversight agencies found a slow-down in regulations resulted in harmful outcomes for wage and hourly issues and workplace safety, particularly in mining.

Mining disasters in 2006 and 2007 included West Virginia's Sago Mine explosion, which killed 12 in January 2006; West Virginia's Alma Mine fire, which killed two in January 2006; the Darby Mine No. 1 Explosion in Kentucky, where five miners died in May 2006; and the Crandall Canyon Mine collapse in Utah, which killed six workers and three rescuers in August 2007.

The Department also updated labor union financial disclosure requirements as well as white-collar overtime regulations.

In 2009, Chao resumed her previous role as a Distinguished Fellow at The Heritage Foundation and she contributed to Fox News and other media outlets. Chao also served as a distinguished fellow at the Hudson Institute until she was sworn in as U.S. Secretary of Transportation on January 31, 2017.

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump announced on November 29, 2016, that he would nominate Chao to be Secretary of Transportation. The U.S. Senate confirmed Chao on January 31, 2017, by a vote of 93–6, with her husband, then-Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, abstaining.

In 2017, Secretary Chao established a pilot program to test and evaluate the integration of civil and public drone operations into the airspace system. In March 2019, Chao formed the Non-Traditional and Emerging Transportation Technology (NETT) Council, an internal Department of Transportation group for identifying "jurisdictional and regulatory gaps" when considering new transportation technologies. In April 2019, the FAA released proposed new regulations to modernize the rules for commercial space flight launches and reentries.

As Secretary of Transportation, Chao faced controversies primarily due to her close ties to her family's international shipping business (largely with China). This led to the appearance of some conflict-of-interest charges and possible promotion of her family's business. Several Department of Transportation Inspector General investigations resulted.

On March 4, 2021, the Inspector General released their report citing Chao for numerous ethics violations, including using department resources for personal errands and for promoting her father's biography. It also stated that it had referred its investigation to the Justice Department and the U.S. Attorney's Office in Washington D.C. for criminal prosecution in December 2020. Both declined to open criminal investigations into Chao.

The Inspector General for Transportation also became a controversy. In May 2020, the Trump administration removed the acting Inspector General of the Transportation Department, Mitch Behm. Trump appointed Howard "Skip" Elliott as interim Inspector General of the Transportation Department. However, at the same time, Elliott served in a dual role where Chao was his boss. The independence of the Inspector General then became an issue for Chao.

While the Department of Justice did not charge Chao with any wrong-doing, the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform began an investigation into whether she used political office to benefit her family's business interests. There have been no formal charges from this investigation also.

On January 7, 2021, the day after the January 6 United States Capitol attack, Chao submitted her resignation effective January 11, 2021.

Since leaving the Department of Transportation, Secretary Chao has returned to corporate board work, both profit and non-profit and her volunteer positions. Chao is an experienced board member having served as director of Fortune 500 companies while out of government. She currently serves on the boards of Kroger and several of new economy technology companies in the mobility sector. She is also a director on many nonprofit boards, including Harvard Business School Board of Dean's Advisors, Global Advisory Board, Los Angeles 2028 Organizing Committee of Olympic and Paralympic Games (LA28) and a trustee of Ford's Theater, the Ronald Reagan Foundation, the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

Chao holds thirty-seven honorary doctorates, including an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Georgetown McDonough School of Business in 2015. She was initiated into Omicron Delta Kappa at SUNY Plattsburgh as an *honoris causa* initiate in 1996.

In 1993, Chao married Senator Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky). Chao happily campaigns with her husband in his re-election bids for the U.S. Senate. Her extended family have been heavy contributors to McConnell's re-election campaigns and to the Republican party of Kentucky. Many have noted that Chao adds a "softer touch" to the McConnell campaigns.

The University of Louisville's Ekstrom Library opened the "McConnell-Chao Archives" in November 2009. It is a major component of the university's McConnell Center.

Chao is part of a close-knit Taiwanese American family. Chao often honors her 95-year-old father as her escort to State dinners and having him participate in her "swearing-in" ceremonies. The family business, The Foremost Group, is now run by Elaine Chao's sister Angela. In 2012, the Chao family donated \$40 million to Harvard Business School for scholarships to students of Chinese heritage and for the Ruth Mulan Chu Chao Center, an executive education building named for Chao's late mother. It is the first Harvard Business School building named after a woman and the first building named after an American of Asian ancestry Ruth Mulan Chu Chao returned to school at age 51 to earn a master's degree in Asian literature and history from St. John's University.

## Scope and Content Note

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This collection consists of material regarding national maritime policy. As a White House Fellow, Chao gathered information and proposals on maritime policy from ship builders, ship owners and maritime unions. She then created a summary of these views and proposals for the use of the Reagan Administration.

The Elaine Chao collection consists of two series: SERIES I: Subject Material and SERIES II: Meetings.

### Series List

#### **SERIES I: Subject Material**

#### **SERIES II: Meetings**

#### **Last Modified Date**

2024-02-26

#### **SERIES I: Subject Material**

##### **OA 10001**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	American Automar [Defense Reserve Fleet]
CLOSED	[American Waterways Operators, Inc. Statement to ICC in Opposition to CSX Acquisition of American Commercial Lines]
CLOSED	Bilateral Maritime Agreements
CLOSED	Blackwell, Robert [Maritime Advisor]
CLOSED	[Comparison of Fleet Projections - Militarily Useful Dry Cargo Ships]
CLOSED	CDS (Construction Differential Subsidy) Paybacks
CLOSED	[CDS (Construction Differential Subsidy) Repayment - Regulatory Impact Analysis]
CLOSED	Cove Shipping - [CDS (Construction Differential Subsidy) Payback]

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Cruise Vessels - Cunard Ships
CLOSED	Dr. Hank Marcus, M.I.T.[Publications Regarding National Maritime Policy]
CLOSED	Fuel Conservation Program Re-Engineering Project
CLOSED	International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Etc.
CLOSED	ILA (International Longshoremen Association) [Clippings re: New Contract]
CLOSED	Jumbo Barge International [Carrier Test] 01/27/1984
CLOSED	Life International [Retrofit of Donated Surplus Ships]
CLOSED	Marine Engineers Beneficial Association
CLOSED	Maritime Redevelopment Bank
CLOSED	Maritime Claims - Panama Canal
CLOSED	Ogden Marine
CLOSED	Overseas Shipholding Group [re: Petroleum Tankers]
CLOSED	Phoenix Bulkship - [Cargo Preference]
CLOSED	Seafaring Union International - [Cargo Preference Laws]
CLOSED	Sealand Industries, Inc. [Maritime Policy Proposals] (Binder)
CLOSED	Shipbuilders Council of America [Shipbuilding Industry & Defense Shipping Needs]
CLOSED	U.S. Coast Guard Marine Regulations
CLOSED	Virgin Island Exemption in Jones Act
CLOSED	Watermen Steamship [Bankruptcy Issues]

**SERIES II: Meetings**

**10001, cont.**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	[Ship Operators Meeting 11/22/1983]
CLOSED	Master, Mates, and Pilots [Meeting, 01/04/1984]
CLOSED	American Flagships, etc. 01/09/1984
CLOSED	Maritime Shipbuilders [Meeting] 01/17/1984
CLOSED	Lavino Shipping Company [Meeting] 01/18/1984
CLOSED	NMU (National Maritime Union) [Meeting] 01/31/1984

<b>Status</b>	<b>Title</b>
CLOSED	Inland Waterways 02/10/1984 [Tug and Barge Operators Meeting]
CLOSED	CENSA (Council of European and Japanese National Shipowners' Association) 04/22/1984 [Meeting]
CLOSED	Charles Willis Meeting 05/1/1984