

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ELAINE CHAO, TRUMP'S SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION

Elaine Chao, the Secretary of Transportation, is married to Kentucky Senator and Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. She previously served as the Secretary of Labor under President George W. Bush.

FAMILY BUSINESS:

Elaine Chao's father James is the founder of the major shipping company Foremost Group. The Chinese government is responsible for three-fourths of their business, and they build their ships in Chinese shipyards. In at least two cases, Foremost entered into long-term contracts to ship ore for a Chinese steel company, contributing to the problem of Chinese cheap steel driving American steel companies out of business.¹

Chao has used her government position to help her family business. Chao has appeared at Chinese promotional events and TV interviews alongside her father while in office.² In 2017, Chao attended the signing ceremony for a new Foremost contract, when the other party to the contract was a Japanese company **currently under oversight by her own department.**³ Two months later, she planned a trip to China, and attempted to invite family involved in Foremost to participate in diplomatic dinners. When the embassy staff started asking questions, Chao abruptly canceled the trip.⁴

PRELATIONSHIP WITH MCCONNELL:

Mitch McConnell started receiving hefty campaign contributions from Chao's family business even before they were married. The first \$10,000 check from Foremost arrived in June 1989. Since then, the Chao family has contributed well over \$1 million to McConnell's campaigns and PACs.⁵ In 2008, Chao's father gave the couple **a private gift of somewhere between \$5 million to \$25 million**, making McConnell one of the richest Senators.⁶

As Secretary of Labor, Chao appeared to intervene to assist Republican donors. One example is Bob Murray, a wealthy coal operator, who donated \$648,000 through his political action committee from 2000-2003, with 96 percent going to Republican candidates, and donated another \$75,000 personally. Murray met with Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) officials from the Department of Labor in 2002 to rage that they needed to loosen safety restrictions at his mines. "Mitch McConnell calls me one of the five finest men in America, and the last time I checked, he was sleeping with your boss," he told them. Within months, the MSHA district manager was transferred out of the district. Two weeks after the transfer, in January 2003, an explosion at one of Murray's mines killed three miners.⁷

As Secretary of Transportation, Chao also directs federal money to her husband's state, with a staffer serving as "intermediary for Kentucky." Owensboro, Kentucky, whose wealthiest residents regularly donate to McConnell's re-election campaigns, got an \$11 million grant from the Transportation department to upgrade its roads. When asked about the grant, McConnell replied, **"I was complaining to her [Chao] just last night, 169 projects and Kentucky got only five. I hope we'll do a lot better next year."**⁸ Meanwhile, the "intermediary for Kentucky," Todd Inman, was just promoted to be Chao's Chief of Staff.⁹

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² Michael Forsythe, Eric Lipton, Keith Bradsher and Sui-Lee Wee, "A 'Bridge' to China, and Her Family's Business, in the Trump Cabinet," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/us/politics/elaine-chao-china.html>; Tanya Snyder, "Did Elaine Chao's DOT interviews help her family's business?" *Politico*, May 6, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/06/elaine-chao-father-james-transportation-department-569686>

³ Forsythe, Lipton, Bradsher, and Wee, "A 'Bridge' to China," *The New York Times*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Erik Reece, "Who Killed the Miners?" *The Nation*, February 9, 2006. <https://www.thenation.com/article/who-killed-miners>

⁸ Felicia Somnez, "McConnell dismisses report that his wife, Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, steered funds to Kentucky," *The Washington Post*, June 11, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mcconnell-dismisses-report-that-his-wife-transportation-secretary-elaine-chao-steered-funds-to-kentucky/2019/06/11/79bba63e-8c78-11e9-adf3-f70f78c156e8_story.html

⁹ "Meet the Office of the Secretary Officials," *transportation.gov*. <https://www.transportation.gov/mission/meet-office-secretary-officials>

