

STATEMENT BY

**ELAINE LAN CHAO
Secretary Designate
U.S. Department of Labor
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**Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor and Pensions**

Good morning, Chairman Jeffords, ranking member Kennedy, and members of the Committee. And thank you for inviting me to appear before you today.

I am honored to be accompanied today by the two Senators from my home state of Kentucky: Senator Mitch McConnell, with whom I am moderately acquainted, and Senator Jim Bunning. Much can be said about both of these men – their intellect, their stature and their achievements. But the most important thing about them is that they have the two most wonderful wives you can imagine.

I also want to thank Senator Leahy of Vermont for coming to introduce me today. Senator Leahy and I have had an opportunity to work together in the past, and I truly appreciate his support as I prepare for this position today.

I am also blessed to have with me a group of people who are the reason I am able to come before you today in this capacity: my family. My father and mother, James and Ruth Chao; my sister May Chao and her husband, Jeff Hwang, all from New York; and my youngest sister Angela Chao, from Boston.

Also present in the audience are many members of the Asian-American community who share pride in my nomination, as I am only the second Asian-American – and the first Asian-American woman – to be nominated to the Cabinet. And there are many other friends, co-workers and former associates who are here. I thank them for their support as well.

Surrounded by so many special people like this, who have played such significant roles in my life, I am reminded that though I am *personally* honored to have been nominated for this position by President Bush, I know this is not just for me.

This is also for *all* those immigrant families who come to this country, with nothing but the bare essentials and an unswerving faith – in themselves, in the promise of America, and in God.

This is for those struggling families where one or more parents holds down several jobs just to make ends meet – and has little bargaining power with an employer over issues of pay, benefits and safety.

This is for those who have encountered barriers to getting good jobs, whether that barrier is a physical disability, or some form of prejudice, or – as in the case of many immigrant families like my own – barriers of language and culture.

This is for the many thousands of Americans I encountered as President and CEO of United Way of America, those who are served by the charities it supports...who want to leave behind a destructive lifestyle and need a hand to lift them up into productive, healthy, dignified lives. These are the people who have been helped by Welfare-to-Work, who are counting on it being reauthorized.

And this is for all those women in the workplace, who were once told not too many years ago, that the highest position to which they could aspire was to become...a secretary. And with your guidance and support, that's exactly what I hope to become.

Through the diverse experiences I've had, from struggling to learn English as a child to serving as Deputy Secretary of Transportation, Director of the Peace Corps and President and CEO of United Way of America, I've seen that all work is worthy of respect, and virtually all workers need appropriate protections.

As I see it, the Department of Labor represents all workers, both those who choose to join unions, and those who do not.

It represents those who have been denied equal access to good jobs or advancement because of residual prejudice against their race, gender, ethnicity, national origin or religion.

It represents veterans and those returning from temporary military service, who want to start or renew careers in the private sector.

And it represents those who have not been allowed to reach their full and rightful potential because of a physical disability.

In the last decade, we've made tremendous advances in opening the workplace to disabled Americans, starting with the *Americans with Disabilities Act* signed by former President Bush a decade ago. Today, through the work of Senator Harkin and others on this Committee, we have a new Office of Disability Policy, as well as a new Assistant Secretary to oversee its mission.

Now President Bush wants to go further, proposing a *New Freedom Initiative* that will harness the latest technologies to give disabled Americans even greater access to work opportunities. These changes are a reflection of what work truly means to most of us: not just a means of paying the bills, but also a pathway to gaining respect.

In that same light, I commend the Department of Labor for taking steps to recognize and value the kind of work that most of our mothers did – running a household and raising a family. If we think that's not work, then we don't really know what work is!

As I've been preparing for the awesome responsibility of serving as Secretary of Labor – should you extend me that honor – I have been struck by the rich heritage this Department has.

I have also grown to appreciate that so many of the workforce protections we now take for granted in this country were born out of the labor movement. The labor struggles of the early part of the last century, and the laws that grew out of them, are a crucial part of this nation's historic commitment to justice for all.

The balances that those laws struck between the forces of labor and the forces of management are a crucial source of stability in our economy, as well as a guarantee of fairness in the workplace. In recent years, we have seen how these two forces must come together and work cooperatively in order to compete successfully in the world economy.

For all these reasons, I believe a crucial part of my responsibility, should I be confirmed as Secretary of Labor, is to fully, fairly and evenly enforce the labor laws of this country. And further, I believe that any change in our labor laws or in their interpretation must be carefully and solemnly considered, giving respectful attention to the views of every participant in the labor-management equation.

At the same time, it will be my goal as Secretary of Labor to make sure the Department, its programs and its mission, are in step with the dramatically new economy that continues to evolve right before our eyes.

If the ongoing activities of the Department of Labor do not reflect the emerging realities of the new economy, then sooner or later, the Department will be unable to fulfill its responsibilities to the workforce it is supposed to serve.

To me, perhaps the greatest challenge faced by the Department of Labor, and one that demands immediate attention, is represented by what I am holding in my hand here. This is a recently-published listing of unfilled high-tech positions all across America.

This publication, and others like it, advertise thousands upon thousands of well-paying jobs. Most of them with unlimited future earning potential and opportunities for advancement. Employers so hungry for applicants that they offer to pay all travel expenses for prospective employees. And a demand for qualified labor that is so great that all historical barriers of race and gender and disability are almost irrelevant.

So you might ask, what's the problem? It sounds like a utopia.

But unfortunately, as of this moment, it is only a promise that we must work to fulfill. For in America today, there are tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of high-tech jobs that cannot be filled...while at the same time, there are millions of Americans who cannot currently fill them.

That, I believe, is one of the supreme challenges this Labor Department faces on the threshold of a new millennium. That's why President Bush has expressed a strong commitment to build upon and improve our national job training efforts. We need to ensure that job training funds are targeted to bridge the gap between these high-skilled positions that need qualified workers, and the millions of Americans who need additional training to be able to fill them.

We also need to recognize how broadly the new economy is revolutionizing the workplace. We now live in a world where workers are being empowered to be managers, as well as profit-sharers and even owners.

Younger workers are increasingly taking their retirement into their own hands, rather than relying on the government or an employer or a union to provide it for them.

In one sense, the new economy is “deconstructing” work, with jobs that can’t be pigeonholed into a traditional workday or workweek, and corporate structures that, in some cases, are eliminating the need for a workplace altogether. Workers themselves are demanding more autonomy, more freedom, more customization of the terms and conditions of their employment. As we invest in critical job training, we are giving workers the bargaining power they need to custom-design their jobs around their lives – instead of the other way around.

In order to remain relevant and responsive to workers’ needs, even the Department of Labor will need to adapt to the realities of the changing economy. It’s not just that there’s a new Administration. There’s a whole new world that we need to respond to.

What changes need to take place, and how and when they need to be implemented, should be the subject of a continuing dialogue between the Department and Congress and all those who play a role in labor-management relations.

It’s been said many times in the last few years that we need to “build a bridge to the 21st century.” I believe the best way to build a bridge – figuratively speaking – is for people on both sides to get working, and find an appropriate meeting place somewhere in the middle.

I look forward to that process, which has started even today, as you have been sharing your concerns and ideas with me in this hearing. I may not be able to fully answer all your questions today, but I pledge to maintain an open line of communication so that together, we can best serve the working men and women of this nation.

Thank you.