



**For Immediate Release**

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## **Former U.S. Secretary Elaine L. Chao to Receive the 2026 Donald D. Engen Trophy for Aviation Excellence**

Washington, DC – The Board of Governors of the Aero Club of Washington is pleased to announce that the 18<sup>th</sup> U.S. Secretary of Transportation and 24<sup>th</sup> U. S. Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao has been selected as the recipient of the 2026 Donald D. Engen Aero Club Trophy for Aviation Excellence.

“Secretary Chao’s distinguished career in public service and her lasting impact on the aviation sector make her exceptionally deserving of this honor,” said Kali Hague, President of the Aero Club of Washington. “From advancing aviation safety and innovation to expanding workforce opportunities and strengthening our nation’s transportation systems during critical moments for the industry, her leadership has left a profound and enduring mark on aviation. We are proud to recognize her with the Engen Trophy.”

Established in 1993, the Engen Trophy is awarded for “a record of lifetime achievement; or a single event; or a series of acts by an individual; a team; or by a corporation or organization that reaffirms the Wright Brothers’ standard of excellence in aviation.” Previous recipients include Herb Kelleher, the STS-114 Discovery Shuttle Crew, Scott Crossfield, the Tuskegee Airmen, Ambassador Carol Hallett, and the 2025 recipients, Mary Miller and Pete Bunce. The trophy resides in the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum, Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center.

Secretary Chao is one of the longest-serving Cabinet members in U.S. history and the first Asian American woman to serve in a presidential cabinet. Over the course of her career, she has served four U.S. Presidents and held numerous senior leadership roles, including Secretary of Transportation, Secretary of Labor, Deputy Secretary of Transportation, Director of the Peace Corps, and Chair of the Federal Maritime Administration.

During her tenure as Secretary of Transportation, Chao led the department through some of the most significant challenges and advancements in modern aviation. Following the tragic Boeing 737 MAX accidents, she oversaw a comprehensive review process involving the Federal Aviation Administration, international authorities, and independent experts, ultimately supporting the aircraft’s safe return to service after an extensive recertification effort.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Secretary Chao played a central role in securing and rapidly deploying more than \$70 billion in emergency relief funding to support airlines, airports, and aviation workers, helping stabilize the industry during an unprecedented crisis.

Her leadership also advanced innovation across the aviation ecosystem. Under her direction, the Department of Transportation launched the Unmanned Aircraft Systems Integration Pilot Program, enabling the safe expansion of drone operations, and supported the development of key regulatory frameworks such as Remote ID and Operations Over People.

Secretary Chao also championed workforce development and access to aviation careers, establishing initiatives such as the Women in Aviation Advisory Board and the Youth Access to American Jobs in Aviation Task Force. Through the “Forces to Flyers” initiative, she helped create pathways for military veterans to transition into commercial aviation careers.

Beyond aviation, Secretary Chao has demonstrated a lifelong commitment to public service, philanthropy, and leadership in the nonprofit and private sectors, including serving as President & CEO of United Way and on numerous corporate and nonprofit boards.

“I am deeply honored by this recognition,” said Secretary Chao. “Public service has defined my career, and in aviation that begins with an uncompromising commitment to safety above all else. Progress has always come from putting people first—travelers, workers, and communities—while steadily strengthening the systems that protect them. As U.S. aviation continues to grow, our nation has got to modernize an increasingly dated infrastructure with the same discipline and care that have long defined its safety culture, ensuring the system remains resilient, innovative, and worthy of the public’s trust for generations to come.”

The Aero Club of Washington will present the Engen Trophy to Secretary Chao at an upcoming Aero Club luncheon in Washington, DC this summer. Additional details will be announced in the coming weeks. For more information, please visit [www.aeroclub.org](http://www.aeroclub.org).

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#### **Background on the Aero Club of Washington**

*As an industry cornerstone, the Aero Club of Washington is dedicated to providing a forum for discussion of aviation and aerospace issues and achievements. Hosting hundreds of national and international aerospace leaders at its monthly luncheon meetings over the years, the Aero Club has fostered and promoted interest in the principles and development of aeronautics since 1909.*