

FEATURE

A Nobel Laureate in the White House

Nobel Laureate Steven Chu is Named Energy Secretary

By Rex Feng

Physicist Steven Chu has a resume that's longer than most, and it's about to get a little bit longer.

The Nobel laureate, former chairman of the Stanford University Physics Department and director of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory was recently selected by President-elect Barack Obama to serve on his Cabinet as secretary of energy.

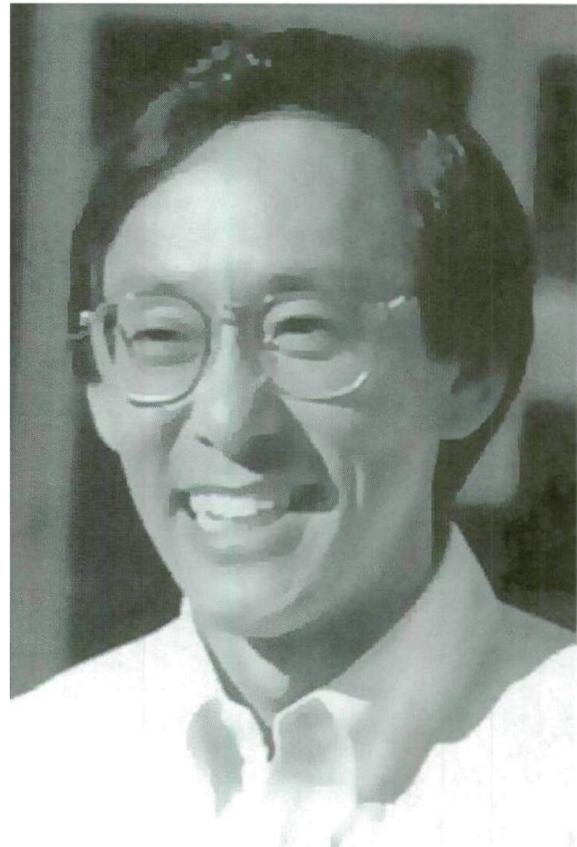
Chu was born in 1948 in St. Louis, Mo., the son of Chinese immigrants, and spent most of his formative years in the melting pot communities of Long Island, NY. As a second-generation Chinese American, Chu acclimated well to his environment despite his minority status.

"There were I believe only one or two other Asian families," said Chu, in a 1997 interview with *Asian Week*. "We essentially grew up and made friends with Americans. But my parents were active in the Asian community."

However, by the time Chu was wrapping up his undergraduate degree in the early 1970s, anti-Vietnam War sentiment in the United States was in full swing, and Chu was not immune to discrimination because of his Asian background. Ironically, it may have had a hand in Chu's pursuit of the sciences that would eventually lead him to international acclaim.

"That's why many Asians go into science and engineering," Chu said. "They're more race-blind."

Whatever the case, Chu racked up achievements quickly following graduation from his doctorate program at the University of California, Berkeley. After two years of post-



doctoral research, he joined Bell Labs where he would eventually garner his Nobel Prize in physics, thanks to his groundbreaking work developing laser cooling techniques for atomic research.

Following his work at Bell Labs, he would join Stanford University's Physics Department in 1987, where he remained for over a decade, eventually becoming chairman of the department.

He left his post at Stanford in 2004 to assume directorship at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, where he conducted critical research into renewable energy solutions. Chu was instrumental in convincing oil giant BP to commit \$500 million in funding over 10 years to support a solar energy project at the lab.

Chu's new role as the secretary of energy is lauded by many, and his background in academia is undoubtedly a huge contributing

factor toward his warm reception by clean energy advocates and environmental lobbyists.

His appointment by President-elect Obama is widely seen as an astute step forward for the burgeoning administration in placing knowledgeable leadership at the head of national energy policy. The fact that he is a Nobel laureate is not lost on many.

"The federal government has an opportunity to do something," Chu said, in an interview with *Wired* magazine. "We have an option to be a leader in energy technologies, but we are not because our support system for that is on again, off again. The future wealth of the United States will come from our ability to invent new technologies."

Chu supports the production of ethanol from nonfood crops instead of corn. He has said that corn is not the right crop for biofuels and opposes the current U.S. corn-based ethanol system. Instead, he supports next-generation biofuels such as cellulosic ethanol, which can be made from corn cobs, plants, timber waste and fast-growing trees rather than corn and soy beans.

In a 2007 report co-chaired by Chu and commissioned by the governments of China and Brazil, he called for intensive research into the production of cellulosic biofuels and for investments in the development of butanol "or other forms of biofuels that may be superior to ethanol."

Chu has expressed reservations about nuclear power over its waste disposal but believes more research should be conducted on recycling radioactive fuels and on waste reduction, according to Lazard Capital Markets analysts.

At the Asia Society of Northern California Dinner in April, Chu highlighted the importance of a well-integrated economy, focusing on scientific research and the successful development of powerful new batteries, superior storage systems and improved energy transmission to distances that would enable power to be efficiently transported over thousands of miles.

Notably, Chu's appointment fulfills two major promises made by President-elect Obama:

to take serious action on national energy policy and to bring diversity to his administration. As a second generation Chinese American selected for a Cabinet position, Chu is undoubtedly a success story and inspiration for many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Some will remember the striking similarities from exactly ten years ago, when Chang-Lin Tien, Princeton Ph.D. and chancellor of UC Berkeley, was poised to replace Hazel O'Leary as the secretary of energy during the Clinton administration. Unfortunately, Tien's prospects were marred by the Wen Ho Lee espionage case that came to light the same year.

Tien vigorously defended Lee, and although Lee was eventually exonerated of all charges, the Cabinet opportunity for Tien evaporated amid residual suspicions and negative press.

Thus, Steven Chu, the new secretary of energy, represents a welcome leap forward for the Obama administration, Asian Americans and the United States as a whole. As many academics have already extolled, science has returned to the White House.

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Wen Ho Lee and Chancellor Tien

The Wen Ho Lee case, taking place between 1999 and 2000, did not affect Chancellor Tien's chance of being appointed secretary of energy by Clinton ("A Nobel Laureate in the White House," January, 2009). Instead, it was John Huang and the 1996 campaign finance scandal that torpedoed Tien's chance. Bill Richardson was appointed secretary of energy in 1998 and he, among other officials, was the one responsible for the prosecution and persecution of Dr. Wen Ho Lee.

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