

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR ORGANIZATION HEARING
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I want to welcome everyone to today's hearing, which concerns one of the most critical recommendations of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB).

The CAIB was clear and on-target in citing organizational deficiencies as a leading cause of the Columbia accident. It was also clear and on-target in calling for the establishment of a new Independent Technical Engineering Authority and of a truly independent safety organization.

In both its conclusions and its recommendations on organization, the CAIB was, unfortunately, able to follow a well-worn path. The Rogers Commission and the Shuttle Independent Assessment Team, among others, had made similar recommendations. They all apparently fell on deaf ears. That must not be allowed to happen again.

NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe is to be applauded for deciding that the reorganization of NASA should occur before return-to-flight, setting a more ambitious schedule than that called for by the CAIB. He should also be congratulated for recognizing NASA's organizational deficiencies before the Columbia accident, which led him to initiate the so-called "benchmarking studies" comparing NASA with the Navy.

But, of course, undertaking the right studies and setting the right schedule is not enough. NASA must actually come up with the right reorganization plan and make sure that it is taken to heart.

The CAIB did not dictate exactly how NASA should carry out its recommendations, so NASA is now in the process of drawing up its plans, and this Committee will have to review those plans with a fine-tooth comb. The purpose of today's hearing is to help give us the background to do just that. We will hear from organizations that the CAIB cited as possible models for NASA to follow and from an industrial leader in safety. Obviously, there are differences among these models, and any one of them would have to be adapted to apply to NASA. But they all highlight characteristics of high-reliability organizations that NASA has been lacking. We will learn from Admiral Gehman precisely why and how the Navy and Air Force safety programs can be seen as models for NASA.

I have no doubt that this Committee will have ample opportunity over the next year or so to put to use the information we gather today. As I noted earlier, NASA is just in the initial stages of putting together an organization plan, and I have complete confidence that Administrator O'Keefe has taken the CAIB recommendations to heart.

But that said, I must note that I believe the initial organization ideas being circulated by NASA fall significantly short of the mark. We look forward to working with NASA as it continues to rework its plans.

Today's hearing, though, is not on any specific proposal. Rather, our goal today is to learn what has worked elsewhere and why, and to start thinking how the experience of others could be put to work to help NASA. This is one of the most important tasks facing this Committee, and I am eager to hear from our witnesses today.