

**CHAIRMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)**  
**Opening Statement at Joint Hearing on Space Shuttle Columbia**

We usually open hearings by talking about what a pleasure it is to be here. But of course today that is not the case. I'm reminded of what Lyndon Johnson said when he appeared before Congress after the Kennedy assassination: "All I have, I gladly would have given, not to be standing before you today." I'm sure that is the way we all feel, with the tragic loss of the Columbia crew so fresh in our minds and in our hearts.

But we owe it to those astronauts and their families, and to the American public, to work as hard as is humanly possible to determine the cause of the Shuttle's breakup and to rigorously pursue all the policy questions the accident brings to a head.

I view this hearing as the start of a very long conversation we will all be having about the Columbia incident and its ramifications. I think that it's very appropriate that we start that conversation on a bicameral basis, and I want to thank Senator McCain for being so willing to make this a joint hearing. The House and the Senate and NASA are going to have to cooperate as we each review the accident and the Human Space Flight program, and our joint work today should send a clear signal that we can and will do just that.

We will also all be coordinating with the Columbia Accident Investigation Board, headed by Admiral Gehman. I've spoken to Admiral Gehman, and I am impressed with the Admiral's determination to be independent and deliberate, vowing to be swayed neither by outside pressures or artificial deadlines. And I appreciate the swiftness with which Administrator O'Keefe activated the Board.

That said, the more I've read the Board's charter, the more I've become convinced that it must be rewritten. The words of the charter simply do not guarantee the independence and latitude that both the Administrator and the Admiral have sincerely promised. The charter's words need to match everyone's intent now to avoid any problems later. I also continue to believe that several more members should be added to the Board to ensure that it has the appropriate breadth of experience and expertise.

We will be working closely with the Board as the Science Committee proceeds with its own bipartisan investigation, which will focus on the many policy questions raised by the accident. We are going to have to raise some tough and basic questions that have gone unanswered for too long:

- What are the true risks of flying the Shuttle, especially if it is going to remain in service for another 10 to 15 years?
- What are the true costs of continuing the shuttle program at specific levels of risk? and
- What are the advantages of investing in the Shuttle as compared to investing in other NASA programs, other R&D programs, and indeed, other government programs, in general?

But we can't begin to deal with those overarching issues until we have a better sense of what happened to the Columbia and why, and it's obviously too soon to expect to know that. No one should expect any revelations at today's hearing. We are here today to get a status report.

We all ought to avoid pronouncements today that we may later come to regret. I'm reminded of an interview I once read with an executive of the utility that owned Three Mile Island at the time of the accident there. He was asked, "What was the worst thing you did in handling the accident?" He answered immediately. He said, "We just didn't have the presence of mind to say, 'I don't know.'" I would advise Administrator O'Keefe, who has responded magnificently in this time of crisis: don't hesitate to say, "I don't know." You're still in search of elusive answers.

Despite the best of intentions, NASA has, at times, already put out misleading information because it didn't check the facts. For example, information indicating that environmental rules could have contributed to the accident has so far turned out to be entirely spurious. But it's taken NASA a long time to clarify its statements. Today is a chance to put facts into the record - facts that will help chart NASA's future.

If we are to find the facts and honor the memory of the Columbia crew, we will have to approach our task in a true spirit of exploration - with open and probing minds, without preconceived notions or foregone conclusions. That should be our goal today. Thank you.