

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR CAIB HEARING
September 4, 2003

I want to welcome everyone here for the first of what will be an extensive series of hearings on the future of the Shuttle program, and of the manned space flight programs, in general. This is a pivotal moment in NASA's history, and this Committee intends to lead the way in examining the issues that will enable Congress and the White House to chart NASA's future. Perhaps I should say in "confronting the issues" because moving forward will require asking tough questions and facing up to tough choices.

We will be better able to do that because of the extraordinary work that has been done by Admiral Gehman and the entire membership and staff of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB). The Board members have been inspiring models - independent, focused, inquiring, tough, candid and accessible. The CAIB report has to be the starting point for setting NASA's future.

If the Shuttle is to return to flight, then, at a minimum, every one of the CAIB's return-to-flight recommendations must be implemented. That includes the recommendation that NASA have a detailed plan for addressing the organizational and cultural deficiencies the CAIB has so convincingly described. Indeed, Mr. Hall and I wrote to Admiral Gehman back in July suggesting just that sort of recommendation to help ensure that NASA would act on the central recommendations concerning organization and culture.

I think all of us need to face up to the rather disheartening picture of NASA that has been so painstakingly drawn by the CAIB. If we fail to do so, it's readily apparent that we will just have to go through this same sad exercise again. NASA's experience may be the ultimate proof of Santayana's famous observation about those who fail to learn from the past being doomed to repeat it.

The sad fact is that the loss of the Columbia and her crew was preventable. This is not even close to being a case in which the problems could only be seen in hindsight. We need to clearly identify and root out each of the systemic and individual failures that led to this accident. The CAIB report is a blueprint for doing so. The memory of the Columbia crew compels us to do no less.

I have to say that I am concerned about some of the ways NASA has been approaching the return to flight thus far. I admire Administrator O'Keefe and I'm pleased he has embraced the CAIB report with his words. But deeds are what will count. And I'm concerned that NASA may already be rushing to meet unrealistic launch dates instead of examining this report closely and moving deliberately.

I'm also concerned that NASA has been trumpeting changes in its safety organization that do not appear to address any of the problems that have been persuasively identified in the CAIB report. Delay is not the goal, but if safety is to improve, NASA must not be judging itself by how quickly it can send the Shuttle back into orbit.

And undue haste is ill-advised for another reason, too. We, as a Committee, and as a nation, need some time to consider our overall space policy.

We need to make fundamental decisions about the future of the Shuttle program and of the manned space flight program. We need to get, perhaps for the first time, accurate cost estimates of what it

will cost to run the Space Shuttle and other manned programs safely and accurate descriptions of what they will be able to accomplish. I, for one, am not willing to write NASA a blank check for the Shuttle program.

We also need to have a better appraisal of what the risks are of operating the Space Shuttle - because even after implementing the CAIB recommendations, the Shuttle will continue to be a risky vehicle - and I am not willing to see the Shuttle fly without regard to the level of risk.

Finally, we need to better define NASA's overarching human space flight vision - something that has been lacking for more than a generation. That won't be easy, and it can only be done after hearings that will enable us to make a clear-eyed appraisal of the costs, benefits and risks of different options.

So I approach today's hearing soberly because of the tragedy that has brought us here and the daunting tasks that lie ahead. But I also approach today with eagerness because we have a rare chance to reshape our nation's space program, and we will be able to benefit from the outstanding work of Admiral Gehman and his team. I look forward to hearing from them.

Mr. Hall?