

NASA Facts

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Space Administration
Washington, DC 20546
(202) 358-1600



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Transcript of Administrator O'Keefe's Appearance
on "CNN Newsnight" with Aaron Brown
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Tease

Ahead of the shuttle report out tomorrow, Miles O'Brien sat down today with the head of NASA. So Miles, a headline. MILES O'BRIEN, CNN SPACE CORRESPONDENT: Aaron, NASA's boss admits the space agency just flat missed the signs of trouble which led to the demise of the space shuttle "Columbia." And that failing of NASA's safety culture will be the target of some very harsh criticism tomorrow as the shuttle accident board releases its report, Aaron.

Transcript

BROWN: Tomorrow, the commission looking into the space shuttle "Columbia" publishes its final report. Families of the astronauts who died got a briefing on it today. And we expect no surprises tomorrow.

In fact, the details have been known for weeks now. It's a stinging indictment of the machinery that failed, but also the culture that made NASA, in many respects, an accident waiting to happen. What we don't know tonight and won't know for some time is how NASA rises to yet another extraordinary challenge. A large part of the outcome rides on the man in charge. Here's CNN's Miles O'Brien.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

O'BRIEN (voice-over): Sean O'Keefe is a typical suburban family man, who happens to be facing the challenge of a lifetime. Seven months ago, NASA's

boss was sitting beside the shuttle runway in Florida with the "Columbia" families when that awful scar was etched in the Texas sky.

SEAN O'KEEFE, NASA ADMINISTRATOR HONORABLE: I was stunned, that they were that resolute, and yet the same time, you know, still, again, very concerned that we really get to the bottom of exactly what caused this.

O'BRIEN: To that end, O'Keefe turned to retired Navy admiral Hal Gehman, who has led a tough, independent investigation into what went so terribly wrong.

O'KEEFE: They've done a more thorough review and investigation that I've ever heard of anywhere. And when this report comes out, I think that will be pretty evident for everybody to see, the diligence they've put to this.

O'BRIEN: Gehman modeled his effort after the NTSB, assembling a diverse team of experts and issuing findings without delay before the investigation is complete.

The board is already on record with five recommendations. Better inspections between flights of the carbon panels that protect the leading edge of an orbiter's wing. Routine, frequent use of Pentagon satellites and telescopes to glimpse a shuttle in orbit. Train and equip astronauts to make emergency repairs in space. Improve and augment the cameras that track a shuttle during launch. And find a way to beam back images of the external fuel tank and leading edge and underside of the orbiter during a mission.

Sean O'Keefe offers no counterpoints.

O'KEEFE: They all are, in my judgment, must be complied with in order for us to do this right, because they've spent a lot of time preparing it, and we've all had a chance to participate in it. And they've made the final determination of what is necessary.

O'BRIEN (on camera): You're prepared to embrace it lock, stock, and barrel?

O'KEEFE: You bet you.

O'BRIEN (voice-over): The Gehman report will also shatter NASA's organizational culture. In July, a test conducted by the board proved beyond a doubt that insulating foam falling off a shuttle fuel tank, as it did during "Columbia"'s last launch, can cause a fatal breach in the panels designed to shield an orbiter's wing from the heat of reentry.

Falling foam had hit orbiters for years. And yet NASA managers assumed it was harmless.

(on camera): Why weren't tests like that, though, conducted the moment they

knew foam was falling off that thing?

O'KEEFE: Good question. That's a very good question. And I don't know.

O'BRIEN (voice-over): And there are no easy answers to why something so preventable was not, why the best and brightest could miss such clear signs of trouble, why concerns expressed during the mission did not rise to the top, or why mission managers accepted a glossed-over analysis of the fatal foam strike.

Clearly, the loss of "Columbia" and her crew is proof NASA needs to change the way it does business. And Sean O'Keefe knows it.

O'KEEFE: This was a case where we missed it. You know, just flat missed it. We have to then compensate for that human characteristic and be sure that we exercise an overabundance of diligence and never let something be explained away simply because we've seen it before.

It's got to have a reason, it's got to have an explanation.

O'BRIEN: There are many long days ahead for Sean O'Keefe and his family, but there is much that has to be done before he can sign the documents that will clear the next shuttle, "Atlantis," and her crew for launch.

(on camera): Do you feel good about signing that thing? Are you going to feel comfortable about it?

O'KEEFE: Well, I definitely won't sign anything until I'm comfortable we are there, you bet. That's going to be a pretty tall, you know, order to have to meet the requirements that are necessary in order for us to do that. When we are fit to fly, that's when we'll go.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

O'BRIEN: Sean O'Keefe might seem to be an unlikely boss for NASA during these trying times. He's not a longtime space enthusiast. He came from the Office of Management and Budget with a mandate to clean up NASA's financial mess. He has a long resume in public service, working as a congressional staffer, and, during the first Bush administration, the secretary of the Navy.

But he does not have a background in science or in engineering. O'Keefe is a public manager by profession, and that may be just the discipline that NASA needs in the months ahead, Aaron.

BROWN: Just to be clear, is he saying that the shuttle will not fly again until all of the recommendations are implemented?

O'BRIEN: Yes. That's exactly what he's saying.

BROWN: OK.

O'BRIEN: He's going to embrace this report. And I'm told this report might have as many as 29 recommendations. You've heard about the five that are out there already. The rest will deal with these cultural issues, these organizational issues. And to address every single one of these in the time allotted, and they'd like to try to launch in the spring, is a very tall order indeed.

BROWN: Yes, that was the next question. Is a spring launch realistic at this point?

O'BRIEN: I'm told by people who are kind of in the trenches that that spring date is more just a milestone-type date. More likely, it'd probably be another year.

BROWN: Miles, thank you. We look forward to the launch one day, hopefully one day soon. Miles O'Brien in Atlanta tonight.

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