

Examining Boeing's Broken Safety Culture: Firsthand Accounts

April 17, 2024

Opening Statement

Chair Richard Blumenthal

We welcome everyone here. Our purpose today is to hear from whistleblowers who have personal, eyewitness, factual stories to tell about Boeing putting profits ahead of safety, putting stock price ahead of quality, production speed ahead of responsibility.

This story is serious, even shocking. The kinds of evidence that we will hear today is fact-based, science-based testimony that the public deserves to hear, and it is part of a continuing series of hearings that we will have based on what these whistleblowers will tell us and evidence that we obtain from documents from a variety of sources.

There are mounting serious allegations that Boeing has a broken safety culture and a set of practices that are unacceptable. These whistleblowers have come forward at great personal risk. In fact, a number of them and others have suffered harassment, isolation, transfers, and even threats of physical violence. Just as an example, this tire was in a car that belonged to Mr. Salehpour. He will testify about the circumstances that led to, in effect, a bolt being driven into a tire on his car, which posed not only a symbolic message to him but also a personal risk to his safety. It is simply one example of retaliation and reprisals and threats that he endured.

Boeing is at a moment of reckoning. It's a moment many years in the making. It is a moment that results not from one incident or one flight or one plane or one plan. It reached the public consciousness after the death of 346 people. 346 innocent travelers in 2018 and 2019, that led Boeing to promise that it would overhaul its safety practices and culture. That promise proved empty. We know it was empty because of incidents that have occurred since then, most recently the Alaska Airlines panel blowout. And we know it was empty because the FAA itself audited Boeing's production and manufacturing, and in March, concluded, "noncompliance issue in Boeing's manufacturing process, control, parts handling, and storage, and product control," were prevalent.

I want to welcome particularly Sam Salehpour, who came to us because of the gravity of his concerns and because of what happened to him when he tried to raise these concerns to Boeing's management. Not once, twice, but consistently and constantly over a period of years. And as a result, he was isolated, transferred, even threatened, for refusing to stay silent. What Boeing did was, in effect, try to silence him, conceal and cover up the facts that he was trying to bring to their attention about basic defects

in manufacturing, the failure to properly fuse fuselage parts, the kind of concerns that led to the blow out of that panel on the Alaska Airlines flight.

In the wake of the 737 MAX crashes, many current and former Boeing and FAA officials, like Ed Pierson and Joe Jacobsen, both of whom are with us today, came forward to raise those kinds of concerns about safety culture at Boeing. And tragically, last month, John Barnett, a former Boeing quality control manager in South Carolina who became a whistleblower, committed suicide after alleging that managers had been pressuring workers not to document defects and properly address safety risks.

Since this hearing was announced, our Subcommittee has received outreach from other individuals affiliated with Boeing who have contacted us to voice their concerns. For example, a former Boeing South Carolina manager wrote to us with examples of what he described as, "culture of shortcuts, pressure, and hostility," that he experienced while working at Boeing between 2009 and 2020. Another Boeing mechanic, who asked to remain anonymous, wrote to us and said, "The Boeing South Carolina plant was run by a good old boy network that played by their own rules. When we raised concerns that the work was not in accordance with the process and procedures, we were ordered to just do it and told there were hundreds of others waiting in line outside the gate wanting our jobs."

I am going to ask without objection that these two letters be entered into the record. The outreach that we have received, important and serious contacts with substantive information, in just the last few days, suggests there may be others out there who live in fear, like Mr. Salehpour, like John Barnett. And they have witnessed the shortcuts or defects that could lead to the next tragedy. And their coming forward may help prevent it.

To Mr. Salehpour, to Mr. Pierson, to Mr. Jacobson, and others who have come forward and will come forward in the future, I just want to say thank you. Thank you for your courage. Thank you for speaking truth to power, in the best sense of that word. Thank you for facing down one of the most powerful companies in the world.

We intend to uncover what has enabled the culture of safety disregard to exist, so that we can change it for good. To create a genuine and comprehensive culture of safety, Boeing must create workplace conditions where everyone feels comfortable reporting quality and safety concerns, even in situations where concerns turn out to be unfounded. Even where the complaints are mistaken. Boeing's culture must be one where employees are encouraged to speak up.

Boeing is fortunate to have one of the most skilled, competent, honest, dedicated workforces in the world. The United States is fortunate to have them working at Boeing. They deserve to be rewarded, not punished, for doing their job properly and speaking up when it is appropriate.

Fortunately for Boeing and for passengers around the world, this moment of reckoning and the changes that must follow can still happen before any more lives are lost.

Our Subcommittee has initiated a bipartisan inquiry. We expect both Boeing and the FAA to fully cooperate and appear before our Subcommittee. Today's hearing, as I mentioned earlier, is the first of several we intend to hold to get to the bottom of Boeing's broken safety culture. We expect Boeing's CEO to appear before us to tell the American people why the promises made five years ago by this company have not been fulfilled.

I do not want anyone to mistake our objectives here. Our goal is not to drive Boeing to fail. In fact, just the opposite. We want and need Boeing to succeed. It is a company that once was preeminent in engineering and safety. We want to restore the luster of that reputation and its business, which have been so sadly battered.

Boeing's workers remain as skilled and talented as ever, and I would be remiss if I did not recognize that many of these workers are represented by unions, like the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and The Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace, and they have helped to protect a number of their employees against retaliation and reprisal.

We want Boeing to learn from its mistakes and be accountable. We want the Department of Justice to take this evidence and other facts that it has obtained to examine the deferred prosecution agreement, whether conditions of that agreement have been violated, whether criminal prosecution is appropriate. I am not jumping to conclusions. I am a former prosecutor. I know that investigations have to proceed carefully and methodically. But these investigations are important to accountability.

Again, thank you to the witnesses for being here today, and I turn now to the Ranking Member.