

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN McCAIN
CHAIRMAN, SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
FULL COMMITTEE HEARING
ON THE SPACE SHUTTLE COLUMBIA ACCIDENT
FEBRUARY 12, 2003

- I welcome my colleagues from the House Science Committee and Administrator O'Keefe. To keep this hearing to a reasonable length, I appreciate my colleagues indulgence in limiting opening statements to only those of the Chairman and Ranking Members of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, and the House Science Committee. Following Administrator O'Keefe's statement, all members will be recognized for four minutes to ask questions. We will alternate between Senators and House members for questions.
- On February 1st, the nation suffered a devastating loss. As the Space Shuttle Columbia descended from orbit, it broke apart. Debris from the accident is still being collected by government agencies and volunteers with the hope that this evidence will help determine the cause of the accident.
- The Space Shuttle crew was a remarkable team of professionals. They were, and will always be, role models for all Americans. Their dedicated service and sacrifice to promote scientific research -- not only for our country, but for the world -- will never be forgotten. They paid the ultimate price in pursuit of not only their dreams, but the dreams of nations. For that, we will be forever grateful.
- As we look to the future of the space program, we can pay tribute to our fallen heroes by diligently carrying out our responsibilities as legislators. In today's hearing, we hope to examine what went wrong on February 1st, the status of the investigation, and how we can ensure that an accident like this never happens again.
- This will be the first of a series of hearings on NASA and our space program. While today we are focusing on the Columbia, the accident also has forced our attention on the broader policy issues that perhaps we have neglected for too long. At subsequent hearings, we will address the role of manned and unmanned space exploration, the costs and benefits of continuing the shuttle program and our investment in the International Space Station, and the effectiveness of NASA management. More fundamentally, we must examine the goals of our space program. I firmly believe that manned space exploration should continue. Its nature, however, should be and will be examined.
- We also must examine the extent to which Congress and the Administration may have neglected the shuttle safety program. A comprehensive examination necessitates a review of our own actions and those of the Administration to determine if the Shuttle program was underfunded or managed in a manner that compromised safety.

- I applaud Administrator Sean O’Keefe and NASA for their openness and availability. This has been an extraordinarily trying time for everyone at the agency. The Administrator and other officials have conducted themselves in a manner worthy of an agency that is not only a national brain trust, but is entrusted with realizing the dreams of all humanity. Many have noted the vast improvement of the release of information as compared to the Challenger accident of 1986.
- I would like to assure the families of the brave men and women who died aboard the Columbia, and the dedicated employees of NASA, that we will do everything in our power to identify the cause of this tragedy and remedy it.
- I thank Administrator O’Keefe and his team for appearing before us today and I look forward to the testimony.