

NTSB findings: 2025 Potomac midair disaster was “entirely preventable”

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The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) held a hearing Tuesday into the midair collision over the Potomac River that killed 67 people in Washington D.C. one year ago. During her presentation, NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy stated that the disaster was “entirely preventable” and characterized the attempt by the US military to brush aside the agency’s findings as “shameful.”

At the hearing, the NTSB laid out a chain of failures involving the U.S. Army, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and air traffic control that culminated in the collision between American Airlines Flight 5342, a PSA Airlines CRJ700 operating as American Eagle and a U.S. Army UH?60 Black Hawk helicopter over the Potomac River near Washington D.C., on January 29, 2025.

Homendy and NTSB staff reiterated that they had already issued urgent recommendations in 2025 because the route structure and separation standards for Army helicopter training flights near Reagan National Airport posed “an intolerable risk to aviation safety.”

In later comments opposing legislative efforts to restore pre?crash Army operating patterns along the river, Homendy condemned the attempt to brush aside these findings, stating that returning to the old regime “represents an unacceptable risk to the flying public, to commercial and military aircraft, crews and to the residents in the region,” and that it amounted to “an unthinkable dismissal of our investigation and of 67 families ... who lost loved ones in a tragedy that was entirely preventable. This is shameful.”

The NTSB’s “probable cause” finding centers on three interconnected failures. First, the Black Hawk flew significantly higher than it should have on a helicopter route that already allowed dangerously small vertical separation from airliners descending to Runway 33, a situation worsened by erroneous Army altitude instrumentation. Second, the Army had deactivated a key location?indicating system that would have improved the helicopter’s visibility on radar and to other aircraft. Third, air traffic control failed to issue a safety alert even as a conflict developed between the two aircraft.

Contributing factors identified by investigators include chronic warnings from controllers and prior near?midair events that were ignored by the FAA, the combination of local and helicopter?control positions in the tower at a time of rising traffic, the use of night?vision goggles that impaired the helicopter crew’s situational awareness and systemic shortcomings in collision?avoidance protections at low altitude on approach to Reagan National.

The facts of the crash are now well established. On January 29, 2025, American Airlines Flight 5342, a Bombardier CRJ700 operated under the American Eagle brand, was flying a scheduled service from Wichita Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport in Kansas to

Washington Reagan National Airport. On board were 60 passengers and four crew members.

At the same time, a U.S. Army Sikorsky UH?60 Black Hawk, operating as Priority Air Transport 25, had departed Davison Army Airfield in Virginia to conduct an annual standardization evaluation using night?vision goggles under visual flight rules.

Both aircraft were in communication with air traffic control at Reagan National as the regional jet flew a nighttime approach to Runway 33 and the helicopter tracked a river route northbound along the Potomac. Around 8:47 p.m. Eastern Time the local controller instructed the Army helicopter, call sign PAT25, to pass behind Flight 5342 and issued a traffic advisory; the helicopter crew twice reported they had the traffic in sight and would maintain visual separation.

NTSB data show the Black Hawk descending through roughly 300 feet radio altitude toward 200 feet as it crossed the Tidal Basin and Washington Channel, while the CRJ700, on final approach about five miles south of the airport, was configured to land at low speed and low altitude. Radar, flight data recorder and video evidence reveal that neither aircraft executed an evasive maneuver before the collision.

At 8:47:59 p.m., with the CRJ700 pitched nose?up on final approach at an indicated speed of around 110–130 knots, the helicopter’s main rotor and fuselage barely contacted the airliner’s wing in what NTSB staff described as a grazing but catastrophic impact.

The Black Hawk exploded almost instantly and began to disintegrate; the jet lost critical control surfaces and systems and, moments later, both aircraft plunged into the dark waters of the Potomac River short of the runway, killing all 67 people aboard.

The hearing exposed a dense web of institutional failures, including data showing that the helicopter route along the Potomac, particularly “Route 4” used near Reagan National, had long been known to provide only scant vertical separation—on the order of tens of feet—between helicopter traffic and airliners descending to land on Runway 33.

FAA records show that controllers had raised alarms for years about the mounting risk of a midair collision, citing a rising number of near?midair incidents and close?proximity events around the airport. One NTSB analysis found dozens of near?misses involving helicopters and fixed?wing traffic in the three years leading up to the crash and tens of thousands of recorded close?proximity events in the same area.

Far from taking decisive action, the FAA left the route structure in place and allowed the Army to continue its night?vision evaluation flights directly in the path of heavily loaded commercial approaches to the nation’s capital.

NTSB specialists also documented the antiquated and faulty nature

of the Army's equipment. Testing of altimeters from other Black Hawks belonging to the same unit as the accident helicopter revealed significant inaccuracies, meaning that crews could be hundreds of feet off their prescribed altitude without realizing it.

Compounding this, the Army had deactivated a crucial system that would have provided a clearer radar and transponder picture of the helicopter's precise altitude and position, a step investigators concluded deprived controllers and other aircraft of vital information in a tightly constrained environment.

The hearing also revealed the intolerable stress placed on air traffic controllers in a chronically understaffed tower. At the time of the crash, local control and the position responsible for monitoring helicopter traffic had been combined, even as traffic levels were increasing in the minutes before impact.

The NTSB found that the local controller recognized that the courses of the helicopter and regional jet were converging, and that a conflict?alert function was active but did not issue the mandatory safety alert that should have warned both crews of the impending collision. FAA officials admitted under questioning that no safety alerts were issued, and an FAA manager conceded that the controller should have informed the PSA crew explicitly about nearby helicopter traffic—a failure the agency has tried to minimize.

Controllers had been warning since at least 2022 about the dangers of the helicopter routes and the lack of adequate separation or technological safeguards, yet the FAA not only failed to redesign the routes but continued to waive or erode protections in the name of “operational flexibility” and accommodating defense needs.

Behind the technical and procedural failures lies the central question: Why were known hazards allowed to persist? Budgetary constraints and decades of underfunding played a decisive role. The NTSB repeatedly testified to Congress that it lacks sufficient resources and staffing, even as it is tasked with overseeing investigations into increasingly complex aviation systems, while the FAA's air traffic organization has long operated under staffing crises and delayed modernization programs.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Army was allowed to conduct routine training and evaluation flights with defective or degraded equipment and manually disabled safety?enhancing systems in crowded civilian airspace because no one in authority was prepared to challenge the “needs” of the Pentagon.

Instead of spending the necessary funds to ensure that military aircraft operating over a major city had modern, fail?safe collision?avoidance and altitude?reporting technology fully enabled, Congress and the Pentagon funneled resources into overseas wars, weapons programs and the expansion of US militarism.

Regional jets like the CRJ700 are the workhorses of a hyper?competitive, low?margin industry that constantly pushes for higher utilization, reduced staffing and minimal investment in infrastructure not immediately tied to revenue. While the NTSB has identified the need for more robust traffic?alert and collision?avoidance functions at low altitude around airports, these systems have lagged or been inhibited to avoid nuisance alerts that might interfere with tight operational schedules, especially at constrained urban fields like Reagan National.

The families of the 67 victims have responded with growing anger to the drawn?out process and efforts by political and military authorities to downplay systemic responsibility. In public statements and congressional forums, relatives have emphasized both the entirely preventable nature of the crash and the intolerable delay in obtaining

an official, comprehensive account of what happened.

Reports ahead of Tuesday's hearing noted that family members were still, nearly a year later, fighting to force the military and FAA to release records, acknowledge the failures and accept binding safety reforms, even as lobbyists pushed to restore Army helicopter operations “just like before the crash.”

In its coverage immediately after the crash, the *World Socialist Web Site* identified the fundamental issues at stake that Tuesday's hearing only partially exposed. The WSWS stressed that the collision between a commercial airliner and a military helicopter over the Potomac, within sight of the Pentagon and the Washington Monument, was a stark expression of the intersection of US militarism, the rundown state of civilian infrastructure and the reactionary politics of the Trump administration.

President Trump used his initial remarks on the disaster to deliver a fascist tirade blaming “diversity, equity and inclusion” policies at the FAA and denouncing supposed attacks on “merit” in air traffic control staffing. As the WSWS noted, Trump claimed that DEI policies had lowered hiring standards and led to the crash, before launching into an explicitly racist rant about “competence” and “great brains,” echoed by Vice President JD Vance, who asserted that white controllers were being excluded based on skin color.

The administration followed these remarks with a White House memorandum falsely attributing the crash to “problematic and likely illegal decisions during the Obama and Biden administrations” to justify purging minority and immigrant workers and expanding the reactionary assault on DEI initiatives.

The WSWS warned that this racist scapegoating served two purposes: to divert attention from the real causes of the crash—decades of underfunding, militarization of the airspace and the drive for profit by airlines overseen by both Democrats and Republicans—and to advance the fascist project of building a far?right movement around the criminalization of immigrants, minorities and social opposition to Trump's policies.

Finally, the NTSB itself is dominated by the same economic and political imperatives that shape FAA oversight and Pentagon policy. Even when NTSB staff identify serious design flaws, inadequate testing regimes and unsafe maintenance practices, their findings are funneled into limited recommendations negotiated with the FAA and manufacturers such as Boeing, rather than demands for criminal prosecutions or public control over production.

This framework facilitates a de facto collaboration between the NTSB, FAA, airlines and the military in downplaying the systemic character of the crisis in airline infrastructure and aircraft safety and in preventing any challenge to the profit?driven, militarized organization of air transport under capitalism.



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