

STATEMENT OF CAPTAIN CHESLEY B. SULLENBERGER, III
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BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Chairman Costello, Chairman Oberstar, Ranking Members Mica and Petri, and other members of the committee, it is my great honor to appear before the Aviation Subcommittee today. I am proud of the fact that I have been involved in aviation for the last 42 years. During that time, I have served our country as a U. S. Air Force pilot, served as an Air Line Pilots Association Local Air Safety Committee Chairman, accident investigator and national technical committee member, amassed a total flying time of almost 20,000 hours and flown approximately one million passengers in my 29 years as a professional airline pilot. I have served as a Check Airman and a Crew Resource Management course developer and facilitator. I am also the founder of Safety Reliability Methods, Inc.

Before I begin, I must first say that my heart goes out to all those affected by the tragic loss of Continental Connection flight 3407. Words cannot express my sadness and grief at the loss of 50 lives. The families of those no longer with us are in my thoughts and in my heart.

The events of January 15, 2009 have been well-documented, and rather than recite them now in great detail, I want only to reiterate to the subcommittee that the successful outcome was achieved by the actions of many. Lives were saved due to the combination of a very experienced, well-trained crew: First Officer Jeff Skiles, and Flight Attendants Donna Dent, Doreen Welsh and Sheila Dail, all of whom acted in a remarkable display of teamwork, along with expert air traffic controllers, the orderly cooperation of our cool-headed passengers, and the quick and determined actions of the professional and volunteer first responders in New York City.

The events of January 15 serve as a reminder to us all of the daily devotion to duty of the many thousands of aviation professionals who keep air travel safe, and also as a reminder of what is really at stake. Like thousands of my fellow professional airline pilots, I know that flying a large commercial airliner is a tremendous responsibility. We understand that our passengers put their lives in our hands. We know that we must always be prepared. We must always anticipate. We must always be vigilant. Expecting the unexpected and having an effective plan for dealing with it must be in the very makeup of every professional airline pilot.

I am not only proud of my crew, I am proud of my profession. Flying has been my life-long passion. I count myself fortunate to have spent my life in the profession I love, with colleagues whom I respect and admire. But, honorable Representatives, while I love my

profession, I do not like what has happened to it. I would not be doing my duty if I did not report to you that I am deeply worried about its future.

Americans have been experiencing huge economic difficulties in recent months – but airline employees have been experiencing those challenges, and more, for the last 8 years! We have been hit by an economic tsunami. September 11, bankruptcies, fluctuating fuel prices, mergers, loss of pensions and revolving door management teams who have used airline employees as an ATM have left the people who work for airlines in the United States with extreme economic difficulties.

It is an incredible testament to the collective character, professionalism and dedication of my colleagues in the industry that they are still able to function at such a high level. It is my personal experience that my decision to remain in the profession I love has come at a great financial cost to me and my family. My pay has been cut 40%, my pension, like most airline pensions, has been terminated and replaced by a PBGC guarantee worth only pennies on the dollar.

While airline pilots are by no means alone in our financial struggles – and I want to acknowledge how difficult it is for everyone right now – it is important to underscore that the terms of our employment have changed dramatically from when I began my career, leading to an untenable financial situation for pilots and their families. When my company offered pilots who had been laid off the chance to return to work, 60% refused. Members, I attempt to speak accurately and plainly, so please do not think I exaggerate when I say that I do not know a single professional airline pilot who wants his or her children to follow in their footsteps.

I am worried that the airline piloting profession will not be able to continue to attract the best and the brightest. The current experience and skills of our country's professional airline pilots come from investments made years ago when we were able to attract the ambitious, talented people who now frequently seek lucrative professional careers. That past investment was an indispensable element in our commercial aviation infrastructure, vital to safe air travel and our country's economy and security. If we do not sufficiently value the airline piloting profession and future pilots are less experienced and less skilled, it logically follows that we will see negative consequences to the flying public – and to our country.

We face remarkable challenges in our industry. In order to ensure economic security and an uncompromising approach to passenger safety, management must work with labor to bargain in good faith. We must find collective solutions that address the huge economic issues we face in recruiting and retaining the experienced and highly skilled professionals that the industry requires and that passenger safety demands. But further, we must develop and sustain an environment in every airline and aviation organization – a culture that balances the competing needs of accountability and learning. We must create and maintain the trust that is the absolutely essential element of a successful and sustainable safety reporting system to detect and correct deficiencies before they lead to an accident. We must not let the economic and financial pressures detract from a focus on constantly

improving our safety measures and engaging in ongoing and comprehensive training. In aviation, the bottom line is that the single most important piece of safety equipment is an experienced, well-trained pilot.

Despite the bad economic news we've experienced in recent times – despite the many challenges we face as a country – I have faith in America, in our people, in our promise. I have briefly touched upon some major problems in my industry today – but I do not believe they are intractable, should we decide to work collectively to solve them.

We all have roles to play in this effort. Despite the economic turbulence hitting our industry, the airline companies must refocus their attention – and their resources – on the recruitment and retention of highly experienced and well-trained pilots, and make that a priority that is at least equal to their financial bottom line. Jeff and I, and our fellow pilots will fly planes and continue to upgrade our education and our training, while we attempt to provide for our families. Patrick and the other talented Air Traffic Controllers will continue to guide us safely through the skies, our passengers will spend their hard-earned money to pay for their travel, and our flight attendants, mechanics, ground crews, and administrative personnel will deal with the thousands of constant details and demands that keep our planes safely in the air.

You can help us, honorable Members of Congress, to work together across party lines, and can demand – or legislate – that labor, management, safety experts, educators, technical experts, and everyday Americans join together to find solutions to these problems. We all honor our responsibilities in good faith and with respect for one another. We must keep the American commercial aviation industry safe and affordable for passengers, and financially viable for those who work in the industry day to day. And for those talented young men and women considering what to do with their lives, we must restore the narrative of a compelling career path in aviation with sufficient economic resources to once again make this vision a reality.

Thank you for your kind attention, and for the opportunity to share my perspective with this Committee.