

SPACE SHUTTLE PROGRAM DON NELSON BEGGED PRESIDENT BUSH TO GROUND ALL SHUTTLE FLIGHTS FOR SAFETY BACK IN AUGUST

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Body

DIANE SAWYER, ABC NEWS

Well, all morning long we've been talking about questions about the shuttle and safety. For instance, were some of the tiles damaged? And this is one of the insulating tiles from a shuttle structure you see here. It's surprisingly light. It's just like Styrofoam it's that light. Well, some of these questions this morning have been addressed to a man who says he tried to warn about shuttle safety. He is Don Nelson, a 36-year engineer with NASA who is now retired. And in August he says he begged President Bush to ground all shuttle flights for safety.

DIANE SAWYER (CONTINUED)

(Off Camera) Mr. Nelson, what was your first thought? And how did you hear about what happened to the Columbia?

DON NELSON, FORMER NASA AEROSPACE ENGINEER

I was driving home, just pulling in my driveway and my wife called me on my cell phone and told me about it. and I sit there and cried to, for a long period of time.

DIANE SAWYER

(Voice Over) And did you say to yourself, "This is what I was talking about"?

DON NELSON,

WARNED SHUTTLE TOO DANGEROUS TO FLY

Well, it certainly felt like I had failed. I worked at NASA for 37 years, and my last 12 years here I tried to make some changes here at NASA to change the NASA culture, and one of the things that with the space shuttle it's a fantastic vehicle. It just has two problems, two flaws with it. One of which it costs too much to operate, and the second one, there's no crew escape system on it.

DIANE SAWYER

(Off Camera) You say you were specifically concerned about the fact that there was no escape capsule.

DIANE SAWYER (CONTINUED)

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(Voice Over) And a number of people, including those at NASA, have said, at 38 miles up traveling 12,000 miles per hour there is no escape, capsule that would keep those astronauts alive.

DON NELSON

Well, it would certainly be marginal at that time, at least there would have been an opportunity to, to get those people out. But the launch environment just, definitely during the launch environment the escape capsule would work. And that's the major place we expected to have a failure, not during entry.

DIANE SAWYER

(Off Camera) And, and so, you think that some kind of escape capsule, nonetheless, would give a shot to the astronauts? Is that what you are saying?

DON NELSON

They've got, they would've had a shot at, like I say, it would've been very marginal, but at least they would have had a shot of trying to re-enter. We actually had tanks coming in off this, disaster that actually survived and hit the ground. And if a tank could come in, you'd, there's a possibility a, a, a module would also survive and come in.

DIANE SAWYER

(Off Camera) I'm holding up one of the tiles. This is what it looks like. This is its thickness. The kind of tile that is supposed to insulate the shuttle on re-entry.

DIANE SAWYER (CONTINUED)

(Voice Over) I want to ask you about what we heard at the press conference yesterday, namely that after they saw the debris and how it had hit during the takeoff, that they sent word to the astronauts that it was a superficial and inconsequential problem if anything had happened. In your view, is that a determination they could have made from what they knew?

DON NELSON

They made the right determination. That's all they knew with the information that they had. And if I'd have been on the console, I would be, be saying the same thing. There's no sense worrying about, the crew about something that they have no control over. And, and I believe that that, that was the right call.

DIANE SAWYER

(Voice Over) You think they, do you think they were more worried privately by that?

DIANE SAWYER (CONTINUED)

(Voice Over) Because they have said there's no way to check, there's no way to know, which surprised a lot of people that you couldn't check to see if there was damage to the shuttle.

DON NELSON

We're, we're worried on every launch. Every launch is a concern to us, and we're worried about everything that, that goes on during that launch. And, and, these, these engineers do a bang-up job trying to make it as safe as possible.

DIANE SAWYER

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(Off Camera) You have said for every 100 flights we had at least one catastrophic failure. We were up to 88 since the Challenger.

DIANE SAWYER (CONTINUED)

(Voice Over) So, we were pushing the envelope for a long time. Do you think it's time to ground the shuttle program?

DON NELSON

No. We shouldn't ground the shuttle program. We should go in there and we should upgrade it, we should automate the system and put that crew escape system in there. That's a, that's a cultural problem. To automate it you've got to take piloting out of the vehicle. And when you try to talk about taking piloting out of, out of the vehicle here at NASA you run into the culture that, that you've got to have a manual control. But that's not the case. Modern technology is available to make that a completely automated vehicle.

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