

Sen. Cantwell on CNN International
July 31st, 2025

[VIDEO]

Jim Sciutto: Now, for a closer look, U.S. Senator from the State of Washington, Maria Cantwell, also ranking member on the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. Senator, thanks so much for taking the time.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Jim. There is an alternative, by the way, that is for the FAA to do its job, and we need this agency to be aggressive about safety, the data and information and the warning signs that were here that the NTSB has uncovered.

Jim Sciutto: The warning signs stood out to me, particularly this revelation that between 2021 and 2024 there were 15,000 near-miss events in the area, which, as someone who flies in and out of that airport all the time, I would have liked someone to do something about it prior to a deadly event such as this. What took so long?

Sen. Cantwell: Well, my guess is we're going to find out even tomorrow, more evidence that this flight path of allowing military helicopters to be so close [in] proximity to commercial flights was a bad idea in general. But, we have to ask very tough questions of the FAA. How is it with those warning signs and with this information, and even air traffic controllers suggesting that this flight path should be changed, no one changed it?

Jim Sciutto: Is there any worry about a broader problem? Because just in the last several weeks, we've reported on this broadcast about, well, there was that encounter with the B-52 bomber at another airport, or close encounter between the commercial aircraft that had to reverse, fighter jets and other places -- I mean, do you have any concern that there's a broader issue with the interaction of military aircraft and civilian aircraft?

Sen. Cantwell: Well, absolutely. We want the FAA, we want the Secretary of Transportation, to investigate in high volume cities where there is transportation interface between the military and commercial flights that we have acceptable routing. If there's something that exists in DCA, where just a calculation of being off by a few hundred feet could cause such a calamity -- my heart still breaks for these families. They had to sit there and listen to all of this yesterday and today. I can't even imagine. And so, we want to make sure that if the FAA didn't take the precautions in this particular...corridor, what other corridors they might also be missing?

Jim Sciutto: It's a fair question. The other issue, and this has been subject to focus since, really the moments after the crash, that there was one controller handling two roles at the time. And this seems to be part of a broader issue. There was this 2023 FAA safety review that found that staffing combined with outdated equipment and technology was, 'rendering the current level of safety unsustainable.' Folks have been talking about solving the staffing problem for a long time. Is that problem getting solved?

Sen. Cantwell: Well, we did pass an FAA bill that increased the staffing, and I can tell you we were advocates from the very beginning that the number one priority in the legislation should be increasing the amount of air traffic controllers. We can't ask people to work on six days [a] work[week]. We can't have staffing shortages. We can't have people under-skilled not ready to handle the job. We need to make sure that we have the best qualified people. The other thing is, Jim, I think we have to think about is that we are now back to above 2019 levels. For a while, transportation took a break, if you will, during Covid, post-Covid. But now, we are back into growth numbers above 2019, and I think we have to ask ourselves: What kind of stress is that putting on the system? I want the FAA to wake up every day. I want the new administrator to wake up and say, 'What kind of stress is that putting on the system that we may not be calculating and take account for it.'

Jim Sciutto: You may remember this, but in the immediate wake of this crash in January Trump -- President Trump and other officials implied that DEI might have been to blame. And just to remind folks, I'm going to play some of those comments now and get your thoughts on the other side."

Clip of Sec. Duffy: So if you look back to the Obama years, there were some DEI principles that were brought into air traffic control. They were new. We brought in more people into the academy, but less people passed through the academy and became trained.

Clip of White House Reporter: I'm trying to figure out how you can come to the conclusion right now that diversity had something to do with this crash?

Clip of President Trump: Because I have common sense, okay, and unfortunately, a lot of people don't.

Jim Sciutto: Has any part of this investigation by anyone turned up any evidence that DEI played any role in this air tragedy?

Sen. Cantwell: No. No, and I think you know shortly after that, after those original comments that the President made, he did walk those back, after we provided lots of data and evidence that showed that it didn't. Now, his administration did give an exemption for the Army to fly that helicopter without the proper out signaling that might have been...able to be picked up by somebody in the region. And we have questions of why did the FAA give an exemption? I had a whistleblower deliver a letter to my office basically saying the military never planned on turning this digital sound signal out. They never planned on it, even though when they asked for the FAA to give them the exemption, they said, 'Oh well, we'll only very rarely do that.' So look, it all boils down to we need a more aggressive FAA. That's their job to protect the flying public, to make these decisions, and if air traffic controllers are telling them, 'Look, this is too much,' then they need to listen.

Jim Sciutto: Senator Maria Cantwell, we appreciate the work you're doing on this, and thanks so much for joining the show.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you.

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