

Boeing's 737 Max 8: Lobbies and Belated Groundings

The Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS)

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Lobbies, powerful interests and financial matters are usually the first things that come to mind when the aircraft industry is considered. Safety, while deemed of foremost importance, is a superficial formality, sometimes observed in the breach. To see the camera footage of the wreckage from the Ethiopian Airlines Boeing 737 Max 8 was to be shocked by a certain irony: cameras was found lingering over an inflight safety cards on what to do in the event of an emergency. For those on board that doomed flight, it was irrelevant.

The deaths of all 157 individuals on board the flight en route to Nairobi from Addis Ababa on Sunday might have caused a flurry of panicked responses. There had been a similar disaster in Indonesia last year when Lion Air's flight JT610 crashed killing 189 people. Two is too many, but the response to the disasters was initially lethargic.

Concern seemed to centre on the **Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS)**, deemed vital to prevent the aircraft from stalling. Sensors within the MCAS might, [according](#) to accident investigator Geoffrey Dell, have sent "spurious signals to the flight management computers and resulting in the autopilot automatically pushing the nose of the aircraft down". If so, then the ability to manually counter those actions, a safety design feature of previous aircraft autopilots, would have to be questioned. Troubling Dell was another question: why did the pilots fail to disconnect the autopilot when it played up? Ditto the auto throttle system itself.

When it comes to safety in the aviation industry, powerful players tend to monetise rather than humanise their passengers. A company like Boeing is seen as much as a patriot of the US defence industry as a producer of passenger aircraft. The company's [presence](#) in Washington is multiple and vast, characterised by the buzzing activity of some two dozen in-house lobbyists and twenty lobbying firms. Lobbyists such as **John Keast**, a former principal at Cornerstone Government Affairs, have links with lawmakers such as **Sen. Roger Wicker** of Mississippi nurtured since the days he was chief of staff. Wicker spokeswoman **Brianna Manzelli** was, however, keen to narrow that influence supposedly wielded by Keast in a [statement](#) made to CNN.

"While at Cornerstone Government Affairs, John Keast lobbied for a variety of clients including Boeing on defence issues only."

Such combined lobbying efforts [cost](#) \$15 million last year alone, which makes Boeing's contribution relatively small to trade groups, but significant in terms of outdoing such

competitors as Lockheed Martin. Added to the fact that CEO **Dennis Muilenburg** has an open channel to the White House, the campaign favouring the Max 8's continued, and unmolested operation, was hitting gear. A Tuesday call made by the executive to Trump after the president's [tweet](#) on the dangers posed by complex systems suggested some serious pull.

For a time, it seemed that the lobby was doing its customary black magic, and winning, attempting to douse fires being made by the likes of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA Union calling for a temporary grounding of the Max 8. Certain pilots had noticed control issues while operating the Max 8 over US airspace.

Boeing initially convinced the Federal Aviation Administration, which failed to note in a [surly statement](#) from Acting FAA administrator Daniel K. Elwell any "systematic performance issues" worthy of grounding the model.

"Nor have other civil aviation authorities provided data to us that would warrant action. In the course of our urgent review of data on the Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 crash, if any issues affecting the continued airworthiness of the aircraft are identified, the FAA will take immediate and appropriate action."

This statement stood in stark contrast to [that](#) of the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand.

"Currently, there is no clear indication for the actual cause of accidents in Indonesia & Ethiopia, and no evident risk management measures or any mechanism to ensure the safety of 737 Max 9 aircraft from the aircraft manufacturer."

The lobby's traction has gradually slowed on the Hill, and its tittering has, at least for the moment, started to lose conviction. Calls started to come from lawmakers that the 737 model needed to be looked at. **Sen. Ted Cruz** (R-Texas) [suggested](#) grounding the aircraft as a "prudent" measure. "Further investigation may reveal that mechanical issues were not the cause, but until that time, our first priority must be the safety of the flying public." Democratic senators **Edward Markey** (D-MA) and **Richard Blumenthal** (D-CT) were also itching to convince the FAA to ground the Max 8 "until the agency can conclusively determine that the aircraft be operated safely."

Other lawmakers, ever mindful of Boeing's influence in their states, preferred to leave the regulators to their task. Till then, the planes would be permitted to continue taking to the skies. "Right now," cautioned **Rep. Rick Larsen** (D-Wash.), chair of the subcommittee overseeing aviation and a political voice for a state [hosting](#) an important Boeing facility, "the important thing is that relevant agencies are allowed to conduct a thorough and careful investigation."

It was President Donald Trump who ultimately decided to reverse the earlier decision by regulators permitting the aircraft to continue flying. The emergency order put the US in step with safety regulators in 42 other countries.

"I didn't want to take any chances," [explained](#) Trump. But ever mindful of

Boeing's shadowy hold, the president added a qualifying note. "We could have delayed it. We maybe didn't have to make it at all. But I felt it was important both psychologically and in a lot of other ways."

The FAA's [continued](#) "data gathering", previously deemed insufficient to warrant a grounding despite the quick response in other countries, had led to the opposite conclusion. This included "newly refined satellite data available to the FAA". But Elwell was [unwilling](#) to eat anything resembling humble pie. "Since this accident occurred we were resolute that we would not take action until we had data. That data coalesced today." A coalescence demonstrating, in more concrete terms, how safety, while important, tends to lag in the broader considerations of profit and operation in the aviation industry.

Watch the video below, preview of the investigation where Al Jazeera interviewed the manager of the Boeing 787 programme, Larry Loftis.

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