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Safety board head tough lady

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The woman behind the investigation into the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 is a tough but low-key Beltway bureaucrat who was virtually unknown. Until Monday.

National Transportation Safety Board chief Marion Clifton Blakey has served in five government departments and agencies and held five presidential appointments.

But she is so reticent about her personal life that Jeff Agnew, her close friend and business partner for six years, could not recall how old her teenage daughter Mona is or at what hospital Blakey's husband, Bill, a doctor, works.

He characterized her as "a talented person with strong professional credentials," adding, in what seemed an afterthought, "She is also a very warm person."

Blakey's calm public demeanor and the gentle Mississippi lilt of her voice — a regular feature of news broadcasts now as her agency probes the tragedy — mask a singleminded toughness, those who know her say.

That quality is no doubt required for the person who runs the NTSB, the independent federal agency that investigates every civil aviation accident in the United States.

Blakey's political résumé is long and impressive.

In 1989, after a stint in the Reagan White House, she became the Commerce Department's public affairs director. The following year, she was named chief spokeswoman for the Transportation Department.

Two years later, she took over as chief of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in the administration of former President George Bush, serving under then-Transportation Secretary Andrew Card. Card is now President Bush's chief of staff.

Ran private biz

During the Clinton years, Blakey ran Blakey & Associates, a Washington-based public-affairs consulting firm with transportation-related clients.

Reportedly among them was Lockheed Martin, which has many government grants and contracts.

Blakey is the third Bush administration transportation official with ties to the aerospace giant. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta was an official with the company, as was Deputy Transportation Secretary Michael Jackson.

The connection has raised concerns about possible conflicts of interest with industries whose safety Blakey now supervises.

"When you have government people who go into industry and then return to government, you can't expect them to be harsh critics of that industry or to be extremely demanding of those who regulate their safety," said Joan Claybrook, head of the good-government group Public Interest.

Claybrook served on the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration when Blakey ran it in 1992 and 1993.



KEN MURRAY DAILY NEWS

PROBER Marion Blakey, who heads National Transportation Safety Board, meets with press in Queens yesterday.

Blakey's partner said she is divesting herself from her interest in the firm.

Although she has taken controversial stances favorable to airport owners, her loyalty to the airline industry has not been tested. But so far, she has not ducked safety issues.

Blakey has been trying to get the Federal Aviation Administration to reform its rules on rest time for pilots since she took office Sept. 26.

She bases her case on a crash involving an American Airlines jetliner that run off the end of a runway in Little Rock, Ark., in 1999. The NTSB blamed the incident on "impaired performance from fatigue and situational stress."

She also has raised the ire of the trucking industry by saying that the eight-hour rest requirement for long-distance truckers is not long enough.

And she has called for requiring teenagers to have more training before getting driver's licenses and for strict criminal penalties for drunken drivers.

Blakey's Senate confirmation two weeks after the World Trade Center attack rated at most a paragraph or two in some of the nation's newspapers, and her name was virtually unknown to the public.

But now, to New Yorkers waiting for her agency to solve the mystery of Flight 587, Marion Blakey may well be the most important woman in Washington.

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