

'Downfall: The Case Against Boeing:' A hard-hitting documentary on corporate avarice



CHENNAI: Greed is often the cause of humanity's slide into disaster. It can be for territorial gains or higher profits and comes with immense human suffering, death and destruction. Rory Kennedy's latest foray into documentaries is "Downfall: The Case Against Boeing." Now streaming on Netflix, the film is a masterly work on how corporate greed led to hundreds of airline passengers dying in two separate crashes.



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Kennedy and writers Mark Bailey and Kevin McAlester have experience in producing damning exposes. In 2007, she and her husband Bailey came out with the Emmy-winning “Ghosts of Abu Ghraib,” and in 2014 all three created the Oscar nominee “Last Days in Vietnam.”

The film about Boeing, despite all the nitty-gritty details, engages us. We are made aware of corporate avarice at a macro level and how the insatiable thirst to be one up in the world market pushed the American aircraft manufacturer to blink at safety. It was insecure, and terribly so when France’s Airbus began producing planes that were far more fuel efficient than what came out of the Boeing factories. With the price of “liquid gold” going through the roof, the cost of operating an airline became a focal point in boardroom discussions.

Boeing then brought out its fuel-efficient 737 Max with the new Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System that helped stabilize aircraft in certain conditions. But pilots needed to be trained in this system with the help of a simulator. The training required two weeks, and this meant money that Boeing had to spend on pilots. It was loath to do this in a climate where balance sheets were of paramount importance.

Boeing then went on an aggressive publicity campaign to promote its 737 Max — until a point came when travelers felt so confident that they said: “If it ain’t Boeing I ain’t going.” Soon, Boeing was back in the race with its fuel-efficient jet. The company sold hundreds of 737 Max aircrafts, and buyers did not realize that they were in for a shock.

This all came to an ugly head on Oct. 29, 2018 when Indonesia’s Lion Air flight crashed shortly after taking off from Jakarta. All 189 people on board, including Captain Bhavye Suneja, died. There are moving accounts of her husband, an ace pilot, by Garima Sethi. She talks to the camera in a composed manner, a highlight of the documentary, which avoids dramatizing the events, instead relying on facts presented with great accuracy. This makes it a compelling watch, especially with Kennedy ensuring that her movie of 89 minutes does not seem like a dull factsheet.

Five months after the Lion Air disaster (after which Sethi had to live with not only the tragedy of her husband’s death but also accusations by Boeing that it was caused by pilot error), an Ethiopian Airlines Boeing Max jet crashed soon after takeoff from Adis

Ababa airport. All 157 passengers and crew perished.

There are heartbreaking interviews with the families of the dead, including Michael Stumo, whose 24-year-old daughter Samya Rose died in the Ethiopian Airlines crash, and his narration is an agonized crusade for justice. There were others who also lent their strong support, and damned the assertion by Boeing Chairman and CEO Dennis Muilenburo that the crashes resulted from pilot error.

The moviemakers call on a wide range of accusers, who were outraged at Boeing's disregard for human lives. They included Captain "Sully" Sullenberger and politicians such as US Representative Peter DeFazio, who led a congressional investigation into the Boeing 737 MAX disasters. The documentary also highlights other heroes, such as The Wall Street Journal journalist, Andy Pasztor, who wrote several hard-hitting pieces outlining how Boeing was responsible for the tragedies.

"Downfall: The Case Against Boeing" is a wonderfully laid out piece of investigation that underlines "corporate malfeasance" and concludes that ultimately the angry whistles had to be heard by a company whose toxic culture had killed hundreds.
