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Visa Waiver Reform: Time for Action

The Honorable George V. Voinovich

The Heritage Foundation has been an important partner in helping to raise awareness about the need for Visa Waiver Program reform. I appreciate the continuous support Heritage has provided as we have worked to advance my legislation, the Secure Travel and Counterterrorism Partnership Act of 2007.

I know we were all very excited to see this legislation pass the Senate as part of the Improving America's Security Act of 2007 (S. 4) back in March. Now we need to redouble our efforts to move this bill out of conference.

The fact is that, in this new, post-9/11 world, our country faces many foreign policy challenges. The Visa Waiver Program is an important tool that we can use to modernize and improve homeland security, public diplomacy, and economic competitiveness. At this critical juncture in American foreign policy, when our public diplomacy is perhaps at its lowest level in history, it is important that we continue working together to bring this program up-to-date.

History of the Visa Waiver Program

The Visa Waiver Program was established in 1986 to strengthen relationships with our allies by permitting nationals from selected countries to travel to the U.S. for tourism or business "visa-free" for up to 90 days. It is a policy that the Government Accountability Office estimates brings in somewhere between \$75 billion and \$100 billion from travel, tourism, and business each year. Currently, 27 countries participate in the program. But the problem today arises from the

Talking Points

- The Visa Waiver Program is an important tool that we can use to modernize and improve homeland security, public diplomacy, and economic competitiveness.
- Expanding the Visa Waiver Program will improve common travel security standards and enhance America's homeland security.
- It will enhance U.S. public diplomacy efforts to strengthen America's public image and increase goodwill toward the United States.
- Expanding visa-free travel to the United States would significantly boost tourism and business. It has the potential to generate substantial long-term economic benefits for the country.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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fact that no new countries have been admitted to the program since 1999.

Closing Security Gaps

In the aftermath of September 11, there have been increasing concerns over opening our borders to visitors. But we can facilitate legitimate travel without sacrificing security.

Expanding the program and improving our homeland security go hand in hand. My legislation would provide the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Secretary of State increased flexibility so that they may expand the program to new countries who meet the specified security, law enforcement, and immigration criteria.

The legislation would require security enhancements for both new and participating countries, which will greatly improve the integrity of the overall program and will close existing security gaps that need to be better addressed in the post-9/11 environment.

Some of these security measures include biometric passports, strict screening of individual passengers through an e-travel authorization system, passenger information exchanges, strict reporting of lost or stolen passports, airport and baggage security, and agreements for home-country repatriation of any visitors who violate U.S. laws. By adopting these new standards, participants will help to limit illegal entry and unlawful presence in their countries and prevent travel by terrorists or transnational criminals. If at any time a participating country is not in compliance with the standards, their visa waiver status can be revoked.

The legislation will also require the Department of Homeland Security to monitor when Visa Waiver Program travelers exit the country. Until recently, the U.S. did not monitor the departures of international travelers visiting our country. But capturing travelers' information upon exit, not just entry, is an important aspect of our border management system. That's why the legislation calls upon the Department to improve the procedures for monitoring exits.

I know Jim Carafano at Heritage agrees with me on the security benefits of visa waiver reform. He had a piece in the *Washington Examiner* late last

month making this point: "The U.S. should want more—not fewer—countries in the program because they will be agreeing to abide by more stringent security standards for passport control and international cooperation."

And that's exactly the point. Ultimately, expanding the program is only going to improve common travel security standards and enhance our homeland security.

Public Diplomacy

As I mentioned earlier, our country's public diplomacy may be at its lowest point in history. But, as many of you here agree, this program could be a successful means of strengthening our public image and increasing goodwill toward the country.

Let me take a minute to put a human face on the situation. I recently learned of a story involving a young Czech officer who served in Iraq alongside our American soldiers. This officer wanted to come to America to visit some of his friends that he made during combat operations. However, the United States refused his application for a visa. Why? Because his passport included a visit to Iraq—the very place he served with American soldiers.

This kind of story is not unique. There are countless examples of students, tourists, and business entrepreneurs who want to visit the United States. But, in our efforts to secure our borders, we have strained our international relationships.

Heritage's own Helle Dale just wrote about this problem of America's public image in the spring issue of *European Affairs*. As she rightly emphasizes, the current state of the Visa Waiver Program fuels "anti-U.S. antagonisms and a perception of the capricious discrimination by U.S. bureaucrats—and dampening the visits to the U.S. of people from countries with whom Washington would like to improve commercial and intellectual ties."

Economic Competitiveness

Coincidentally, this raises another issue that is affected by the current program: our economic competitiveness. As I think about my legacy and the kind of world I want to leave to my children and grandchildren, I'm deeply concerned about our nation's competitiveness.

The bottom line is that expanding visa-free travel to the United States would significantly boost tourism and business. It has the potential to generate substantial long-term economic benefits for the country.

A Win-Win for America and America's Allies

As a member of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, as well as the Foreign Relations Committee, I have studied this issue from every angle. As I see it, it's a win-win situation for both the United States and our allies, and I'm not alone in this sentiment. Our legislation has the support of the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department, and they have worked closely with me on this important modernization effort.

President Bush called upon Congress to act on this issue during a NATO conference last fall. During his current trip to the Czech Republic, President Bush has raised the issue again, speaking about the importance of expanding the program and building goodwill with our friends who have helped us in the global war on terrorism.

That's exactly what I've been doing. I've been working closely with Senators Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), Ted Stevens (R-AK), Daniel Akaka (D-HI), Richard Lugar (R-IN), and Susan Collins (R-ME) to pass legislation. As we approach the House-Senate conference on the 9/11 bill, I am hopeful that my colleagues in the House will advance the companion legislation (H.R. 1543) introduced by Representatives Rahm Emanuel (D-IL) and John Shimkus (R-IL).

We have an opportunity to modernize the Visa Waiver Program to help solidify key relationships and increase goodwill toward the United States for years to come while simultaneously enhancing our homeland security through a more comprehensive, security-based system.

—*The Honorable George V. Voinovich (R) is a former governor of the state of Ohio who since 1999 has represented Ohio in the United States Senate, where he serves as a member of the Committee on Environment and Public Works, the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, and the Committee on Foreign Relations.*