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How Visa Reform Could Benefit Jobs and Homeland Security

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From the last century, America learned that growing the economy also promotes the free flow of goods, people, services, and ideas. From the last decade, America learned that “smart” security can prevent terrorists, transnational criminals, and other malicious actors from exploiting the networks that facilitate travel among nations. Initiatives such as consolidating watch lists and checking flight manifests have done much to make terrorist travel more difficult. It is time to fuse those two experiences together and adopt visa reforms that promote travel to the U.S. and promote better security.

Recently Representative Joe Heck (R–NV) introduced H.R. 3039, the Welcoming Business Travelers and Tourists to America Act of 2011, which aims to do just that. This bill contains several needed reforms that, in conjunction with other initiatives—such as expanding the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and ending the 100 percent visa application interview requirement—could do much to make America more open, secure, and prosperous.

An Engine That Could. Inbound travel to the U.S. already supports almost 2 million American jobs. The value of global travel is expected to double over the next 10 years to over \$2 trillion. Unfortunately, right now, the U.S. share of that business is shrinking. For example, the U.S. share of long-distance travel is down considerably over the past decade.

If the trend line continues, the U.S. could be shedding jobs in this sector of the economy rather than adding them. On the other hand, if America

recaptured its fair share of international travel, by some estimates over an additional 1 million jobs could be created over the next decade.

H.R. 3039 helps tackle the challenge of facilitating legitimate travel by reducing unnecessary barriers to issuing visas—authorizations that allow for non-immigrant travel to the United States. It addresses a particularly vexing problem: wait times for applicants to obtain an interview at an overseas consular office, a step mandated by Congress in the visa approval process.

In some countries these wait times have ballooned to unreasonable lengths. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, recently reported that, in Brazil, the wait times for these interviews run up to four months. H.R. 3039 lays a reasonable standard for countries like Brazil (12 days) and authorizes common-sense initiatives such as a visa video-conferencing pilot program for conducting visa interviews.

Heck’s bill would require the State Department to publish data on wait times for visa interview appointments and visa application processing and provide performance assessments of how the department is responding to increased demand for visas. This data could be crucial in understanding

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bottlenecks and visa application rates for countries like India, where the numbers of individuals denied visa or subsequently refused entry to the United States have been skyrocketing.

Next Steps for Visa Travel Reforms. It is clearly past time for reforms such as those suggest in H.R. 3039, but there is also much more that can and should be done.

For starters, mandatory interviews for every visa applicant should be eliminated. Instead, the State Department should be allowed to adopt a risk-based approach. Interview requirements should be focused on specific countries, classes of travelers, and suspect individuals that represent a terrorist or criminal threat or where there is likelihood of abusing or overstaying visa privileges.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should also ramp up overseas deployment of its Visa Security officers to work with consular staffs. Of course, the State Department would need to stop obstructing deployment of these officers and start treating DHS as an equal partner in managing visa programs.

Another counterproductive measure that needs to be reversed is cutting off the Administration's authority to add countries to the VWP. The program allows up to 90 days of visa-free travel for tourists and business travelers from qualified countries. The VWP actually facilitates both travel and security. Participating countries agree to share information that is far more useful for thwarting terrorist travel than what the U.S. obtains from countries where visas are required. Congress should restore the Administration's authority to expand VWP as rapidly as practicable.

Time for Action. In Washington's rush to create jobs and its resolve to not forget the lessons of 9/11, it can quickly satisfy both impulses by quickly turning to the issue of visa reform. Common-sense initiatives would facilitate more travel to the U.S. without compromising security.

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