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A New Year's Resolution: Implement Visa Waiver Reform by End of 2008

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In December, nine member states of the European Union joined the “Schengen area,” a visa-free travel zone. The Schengen agreement comprises efforts to systematically reduce border restrictions across Europe. By finally permitting free travel between states formerly divided by the Iron Curtain, these states are seeking to put the last legacy of the Cold War behind them.

The United States is undergoing its own effort to put the Cold War in the past. Today, nations in Western Europe enjoy the privilege of visa-free vacation travel to the United States. In 2007, Congress passed legislation to reform and expand the Visa Waiver Program, which provides visitors from participating countries up to 90 days of visa-free travel for tourism or business. It is now up to the Departments of State and Homeland Security to implement the new program. If the job is done right, more tourists will be able to spend New Year's Eve 2009 just as easily in New York or Las Vegas as in Paris or London.

Freedom's Door. Facilitating travel is a vital part of building a community of free nations. Travel fuels economic, cultural, and social ties. It is also the best form of public diplomacy. The Schengen initiative does carry costs, however. New members of the EU now have more responsibility for policing Europe's outer border and for dealing with illegal activity from the East, such as drug and human trafficking. These states also must ensure that their citizens do not abuse the privilege of open travel by unlawfully migrating to other European states.

The United States bears similar responsibilities in implementing the expanded and reformed Visa Waiver Program. Wisely, Congress included provisions that increase security guarantees and immigration accountability. The reforms will ease travel for more people coming to the United States while simultaneously strengthening safety and security. When the reforms are fully implemented and former East European countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland join the Visa Waiver Program, it will mark the day when the United States and Europe truly put the Cold War in the past.

To-Do List. With the passage of fiscal 2008 appropriations bills, the Departments of Homeland Security and State now have the resources and authorities needed to fully implement the reforms. The departments must take the following steps in the months ahead:

- Negotiate and sign bilateral agreements for new countries to enter the program.
- Verify that participating countries can track the exits of their citizens to the U.S. to ensure that they do not overstay and reside unlawfully in

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the United States. By law, countries with excessive overstay rates must be dropped from the program.

- Establish an electronic travel authorization system to allow for pre-screening of international travelers. These systems are rapidly becoming an international norm. Australia, for example, has already successfully implemented travel pre-screening over the Internet.

If these steps are taken, by 2009, the United States will have an expanded and improved Visa Waiver Program in place. Europe and the world will be watching.

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