

# WebMemo



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## Rethinking VISA Policy for the 21st Century

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On July 24, 2006, The Heritage Foundation hosted an event, “Rethinking Visa Policy for the 21st Century,” which examined the strengths, weaknesses, and needed policy changes in U.S. visa policy.

Stewart Baker, Assistant Secretary for Policy at the Department of Homeland Security, outlined how an applicant obtains a regular visa for entry into the United States. One must complete an application, undergo an interview at a U.S. embassy, be fingerprinted and photographed, and pay a \$100 processing fee. These requirements often discourage people from traveling to the United States. The process is much simpler for a citizen of a country in the visa waiver program, Baker explained. Citizens from countries participating in the program can travel to the United States with a passport and without a required fee or visit to an embassy. In turn, U.S. citizens can travel to countries that participate in the program without a visa.

The visa waiver program serves several functions: it spurs tourism and economic investment, rewards U.S. allies, ensures reciprocal trade benefits, and mitigates national security and immigration risks. The program began in 1988 when the United Kingdom and Japan became beneficiaries of visa waivers. Since 1999, no new countries have been admitted to the program due to the elevated security standards post-9/11. Some government officials have lobbied to end the program completely. Nonetheless, a number of Eastern Euro-

pean and Southeast Asian countries are among the “aspiring nations” that hope to be admitted to the program in the near future.

Dan Griswold, Director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, made the case for expansion of the visa waiver program. Visa waivers promote economic and diplomatic ties with our friends and allies, according to Griswold. He cited a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report which stated that elimination of the program would cost the government \$28 billion over five years in lost economic activity from the drop in tourism. Moreover, the GAO found that eliminating the program would not enhance national security. Griswold sees no reason why the program should not be extended to other countries—such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and South Korea—that closely resemble other nations in the program in terms of population and per capita income.

Michael McCarry, Executive Director of the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange, discussed the public diplomacy impact of visa waivers. According to McCarry, the State Department needs to regulate exchange programs

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/wm1191.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/wm1191.cfm)

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in a way that makes the U.S. accessible and welcoming. He cited the success of the Exchange Visitor Program, which issues Department of State J1 visas at no cost to the federal government to 275,000 students annually to study or participate in work exchange programs. These students, many from countries on the “aspiring nations” list, spend time in the U.S. and then leave with a positive impression of the country. These programs can have a great impact on how other nations view the United States, he explained. A United States that is hospitable and welcoming to people from other nations would greatly improve the conduct of public diplomacy.

Any successful visa policy must help win the long war the United States is currently fighting. Visa policy must provide security, facilitate economic growth and competition, strengthen civil society, and create the right image of America throughout the world. Expansion of the visa waiver program accomplishes all four of these tasks.

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