

WebMemo



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New Evidence for a New Visa Waiver Policy

By James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.

The Government Accountability Office's (GAO) September 7 report, "Stronger Action Needed to Access and Mitigate Risks in the Visa Waiver Program," makes the case that the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) is essential to facilitating legitimate travel and commerce and combating terrorism, immigration violations, and other criminal activity. The Bush Administration should move quickly to implement the report's recommendations. In addition, the Administration and Congress should expand the program to bring more like-minded nations into a secure regime that makes traveling between free nations faster and easier and helps impede the travel of terrorists and criminals.

A Timely Report

The VWP allows most visitors from 27 partner nations participating in the program to enter the United States for up to 90 days without a visa if they have valid passports from their countries. The program can be an effective way of both facilitating travel and frustrating the efforts of terrorists seeking to enter the United States.

House Judiciary Committee Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr. (R-Wis.), who requested the GAO study, concluded in a press release, "While I'm generally pleased with the high standard the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has applied to VWP countries' compliance, this report highlights actions necessary to mitigate security risks for travelers entering the U.S. under the program." He also pointed out why the program is

essential. According to Sensenbrenner, "The VWP has numerous benefits, including allowing resources to be better utilized and saving U.S. taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars a year by avoiding the costs of visa processing for roughly 15 million people. The VWP also enhances our economy and U.S. jobs by encouraging travel and tourism to the U.S."

The GAO report argues for providing more resources to the office responsible for monitoring the VWP and strengthening reporting requirements of lost and stolen passports for other countries. DHS should prioritize these initiatives.

Expanding Visa Program

Congress and the Administration should also work to expand the VWP. Indeed, expansion could be an important tool for prompting security advances, such as the improvement of lost and stolen passport reporting. Countries wishing to join the VWP should have to agree to

- More stringent procedures for reporting lost and stolen passports;
- Robust agreements for the sharing of information on travelers, without restrictions on the

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use of shared information for legitimate anti-terrorism purposes;

- Cooperation in investigations and return of immigration law violators; and
- Acceptance of U.S. “safe harbor” privacy principles as the basis for sharing counterterrorism-related information with law enforcement and intelligence agencies.

If a country wishing to join the VWP agrees to these provisions, participating nations would have

to accept them or risk losing their VWP status. Expanding the program would encourage all nations in the program to adapt better security practices.

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