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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**H.R. 3039: Reducing Unnecessary
Barriers to Visa Issuance**

**Testimony before the
Subcommittee on Immigration Policy
and Enforcement
Committee on the Judiciary
United States House of Representatives**

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My name is Jessica Zuckerman. I am a research associate for Homeland Security and Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee and address this vital subject. In my testimony today, I would like to concentrate on the policy changes proposed by H.R. 3039, the Welcoming Business Travelers and Tourists to America Act of 2011.

My responsibilities at The Heritage Foundation involve research and analysis for the foundation's public policy work concerning homeland security and Latin American affairs. Homeland security has been a particular Heritage research priority. The foundation produced the first major assessment of domestic security after 9/11.¹ Over the past decade, Heritage assembled a robust, talented, and dedicated research team of which I have the honor and privilege of being a part.

Heritage analysts have studied and written authoritatively on virtually every aspect of homeland security and homeland defense. The results of all our research are publicly available on the Heritage website at www.heritage.org. Heritage collaborates frequently with the homeland security research community, including the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Aspen Institute, the Center for National Policy, the Hudson Institute, the George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute, and the Strategic Studies Institute and Center for Strategic Leadership at the U.S. Army War College. Heritage analysts also serve on a variety of government advisory task forces, including the Homeland Security Advisory Council and the Advisory Panel on Department of Defense Capabilities for Support of Civil Authorities. Heritage research programs are nonpartisan, dedicated to developing policy proposals that will keep the nation safe, free, and prosperous.

Among its research, The Heritage Foundation has developed a long-standing record on the issues of visa management, security, and reform. This body of research reflects the foundation's commitment to public policies that promote legal immigration and travel, while also enhancing national security and encouraging economic growth.

U.S. Share of Global Travel

Inbound travel to the U.S. supports almost 2 million American jobs. The value of global travel is expected to double over the next 10 years to more than \$2 trillion. Right now, however the U.S. share of that business is shrinking. Reportedly, the U.S. share of long-distance travel has declined over the past decade—from 17 percent in 2000 to 12 percent in 2010.² According to the

¹L. Paul Bremer III and Edwin Meese III, *Defending the American Homeland: A Report of the Heritage Foundation Homeland Security Task Force* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2002).

²Roger J. Down, "America's Lost Decade of Tourism," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2011, http://www.ustravel.org/sites/default/files/WSJ_11.21.11_AmericasLostDecadeofTourism_4.pdf (accessed May 11, 2012).

U.S. Travel Association, this decline has resulted in the loss of approximately 78 million visitors and \$606 billion in lost spending.³

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

At the same time, regaining America's share of international visitors offers more than economic benefits alone. Visitors to the United States tend to come away with a much improved view of the country. These visitors return home bringing with them positive experiences and memories from the United States, serving to enhance U.S. public diplomacy. In fact, surveys of international visitors to the U.S. have shown that foreigners who travel to the U.S. are over 74 percent more likely to view it favorably and 61 percent more likely to support the U.S. and its policies than those who have never had first-hand experience of America and Americans.⁴

Reducing Unnecessary Barriers

Regaining the United States' share of long-distance travel requires the nation to tackle the challenges of facilitating legitimate travel by reducing unnecessary barriers to issuing visas. One key issue is the vexing problem of long wait times for applicants to be interviewed at overseas consular offices, a step mandated by Congress during the visa approval process in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act (IRTPA) of 2004.

The State Department currently has a stated goal of delivering visas in no more than 30 days from the time of application.⁵ In May 2011, however, visa wait times in high-volume countries, such as Brazil and China, were anywhere between one to five months.⁶ To meet this high demand, the Department of State has since deployed additional personnel, along with expanded visa sections and enhanced systems and technology in these nations.⁷ As of May 8, 2012, the average wait time had been reduced to one day in Rio de Janeiro and two days in Beijing. Overall, in Brazil, visa processing increased by 63 percent in the first quarter of FY 2012 compared to FY 2011, and 48 percent in China.⁸

H.R. 3039 seeks to codify these changes and combat extensive visa wait times in such high-volume nations by setting a reasonable visa processing standard of no more than 12 days for citizens of China, Brazil, and India. Recognizing that this standard cannot be met without a

³Ibid.

⁴Discover America Partnership/RT Strategies, "Survey of International Travelers," http://www.naider.com/upload/International_Travel_Survey_Summary.pdf (accessed May 11, 2012).

⁵U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Visa Policy," http://travel.state.gov/visa/questions/policy/policy_4433.html (accessed May 11, 2012).

⁶U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "Visa Interview Wait Time: Brazil," <http://trade.gov/travelindicators/visa-wait-brazil.asp> (May 11, 2010); and U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "Visa Interview Wait Time: China," <http://trade.gov/travelindicators/visa-wait-china.asp> (accessed May 11, 2010).

⁷U.S. Department of State, "Year-on-Year Visa Demand Up in China and Brazil: State Department Continues to Reduce Visa Interview Wait Times," January 12, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/01/180628.htm> (accessed May 11, 2012).

⁸Ibid.

concurrent increase in resources, H.R. 3039 also calls for using the fees collected from issuing machine-readable nonimmigrant visas to hire additional consular personnel to maintain visa processing standards year around. While care should be taken in considering any benefits that would aid China and Chinese travel, particularly given the refusal of the nation to accept their visa overstays, the visa processing standards contained within H.R. 3039 offer a strong first step in reducing overly burdensome visa wait times.

Additionally, the Welcoming Business Travelers and Tourists to America Act of 2011 calls on the Secretary of State to conduct a two-year pilot program for the processing of nonimmigrant visas via secure video-conferencing. In many large countries, such as Brazil and India, citizens may have to travel for hours or even days at great personal expense—travel costs, hotels, and lost salary—to a U.S. consulate to conduct their visa interview. These expenses and burdens only multiply if an individual is traveling with his spouse or family. The use of secure video-conferencing would not only allow individuals who live far from a U.S. consulate to meet the visa interview requirement with greater ease, but would also allow for the United States to more easily increase the volume of interviews conducted without the need to augment the number of personnel at any one consulate. Further, video-conferencing offers the potential to enhance and expand the Department of Homeland Security’s Visa Security Program—which places homeland security officers at U.S. consulate offices to assist in reviewing and vetting potential high-risk visa applicants—where consular facilities do not have the space or resources to house Visa Security officers.

H.R. 3039 would also 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 bottlenecks and visa application rates for countries like India, where the numbers of individuals denied a visa or subsequently refused entry to the United States have been skyrocketing. Such data could help reduce bottlenecks and wait times, by encouraging individuals to apply for visas at times of lower demand.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on this important issue. I encourage the Congress to seriously consider the need for visa reform and the policies changes contained in H.R. 3039, the Welcoming Business Travelers and Tourists to America Act of 2011.

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