First Order of Business: Visa Reform

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As Congress returns to Washington this January, no business is more important than making our borders secure from potential terrorists. So much needs to be done, but a good start would be speedy passage of the Visa Entry Reform Act (H.R. 3229) sponsored by Rep. Elton Gallegly (R-CA).
Our visa system is in shambles. All of the 19 hijackers entered the United States legally with valid visas. This makes it clear that our biggest problem is legal rather than illegal immigration.

Our Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) is unable to cope with the extraordinary numbers. More than seven million non-immigrants entered our country last year, including 500,000 on student visas.

The INS has identified 315,000 aliens who should be deported but can't be found, and that includes three of the hijackers whose visas had expired. The Office of Inspector General reported to Attorney General John Ashcroft, "There is no evidence that the INS can locate illegal aliens who remain in the U.S."

On July 28, 2001, the French foiled a major suicide bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Paris by arresting Jamal Beghal for a forged visa extension. We might have avoided the World Trade Towers tragedy if U.S. officials had arrested the hijackers who had overstayed their visas.

H.R. 3229 would mandate the creation of a centralized, comprehensive, computerized "LookOut" database to screen visa applicants in order to identify those who are inadmissible or deportable. This LookOut database would be available instantly at all ports of entry, would include biometric data about all applicants, and would track visa holders and non-U.S. residents.

The LookOut database would include the alien's name, his ID and passport number, date of birth, nationality, place of residence in his home country and anticipated U.S. residence, purpose of visit, dates of prior entries and departures from the United States, biometric information, expiration date of visa, and visa violations.

The bill provides that, within six months, the Attorney General shall establish a plan for the INS to include biometric data, with fingerprints and photographs, on all aliens to whom visas are issued. The bill also provides that, within 30 days, the Secretary of State shall establish a Terrorist Lookout Committee within each U.S. Embassy.

H.R. 3229 would require the government to develop a biometric SmartVisa system that would include tamper-proof, machine-readable visas containing biometric identifiers, plus machines to electronically scan and read the visas at each port of entry. The SmartVisa, which would also include the height, weight, hair color, nationality, and country of origin, would be issued to each alien seeking entry and would be scanned by a machine-readable scanner upon entry or departure of the alien.

There should be no problem in paying for these procedures. Aliens would be charged a fee to cover the cost of the machine-readable visa service.

H.R. 3229 would also provide that, beginning immediately, every air, land, or sea carrier arriving in the United States from a foreign state would be required to provide advance information about each passenger, crew member and other occupants. This must include name, birth date, citizenship, gender, passport number, and country of residence.

The bill provides that the government establish procedures to ensure that newly issued identification documents, licenses and permits issued by the United States are designed to prevent fraudulent use or alteration. No visas may be approved without fingerprints or other biometric data.

H.R. 3229 would deny most foreign student visas to nationals of state sponsors of international terrorism. Over the last ten years, U.S. universities admitted 16,000 students from states that sponsor terrorism.

Applications for student visas would provide full information on the student's identity, address in country of origin, names and addresses of the student's parents and siblings, contacts in the student's country of residence who can verify information, previous work experience, date of enrolling in a U.S. institution, the course to be pursued and its date of termination.

A background check on each foreign student would be conducted prior to the issuance of a visa in order to ensure that the student is eligible for admission and not subject to a bar to reentry as a result of any previous violation of immigration law.

H.R. 3229 would require U.S. educational institutions to provide the following information about each foreign student enrolled: name, address in country of origin and in the United States, date of commencement and termination of studies, degree program and courses of study. Educational institutions would submit quarterly reports on each foreign student's status, and notify the Attorney General whenever a foreign student fails to enroll, withdraws, or violates the terms of the visa.

A Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll reports that 65 percent of Americans favor "temporarily sealing U.S. borders and stopping all immigration in the United States during the war on terrorism." Tell your Member of Congress to co-sponsor H.R. 3229 now and also to order a time-out on all immigration.