Promoting Travel while Protecting National Security
By Rick “Ozzie” Nelson and Brianna Fitch
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Tourism and travel to the United States is a vital part of the nation’s economy. In 2011, the United States earned $153 billion from the 62 million international tourists who visited America; this tourism supports approximately 7.6 million jobs and makes tourism the top U.S. service export.¹ Despite this profit, a number of factors have stunted travel to the United States since 2000. The attacks of September 11, 2001, resulted in stringent U.S. government regulations that increased scrutiny of foreign nationals attempting to enter the country. In the years since 9/11, the U.S. market share of world international travel fell by 15.5 percent, costing the nation an estimated $606 billion.² Another blow to the tourism industry came in the form of the 2008 economic crisis, which significantly decreased the number of individuals with enough disposable income to travel. Though there were some upsides to the crisis—the devaluation of the dollar made it less expensive for foreigners to travel to the United States—the tourism industry suffered. While tourism levels have reached, and now surpassed, their pre-crisis levels, travel to the United States is still significantly less than a decade ago. The tourism and travel industry hold the potential to be a significant engine of economic growth for the nation, yet realizing this goal will require thoughtful effort on the parts of both the public and private sector.

Both the White House and Congress have introduced initiatives that aim to increase tourism to the United States by making it easier for foreign nationals to enter the country. In May 2012, the White House released the National Travel and Tourism Strategy. The goal of this strategy is to bring 100 million international visitors to the United States by 2021, generating an extra $250 billion annually.³ A precursor to the aforementioned strategy was Executive Order 13597, signed by President Obama in January 2012: Establishing Visa and Foreign Visitor Processing Goals and the Task Force on Travel and Competitiveness. Congress, meanwhile, is currently working on H.R. 3039: Welcoming Business Travelers and Tourists to America Act of 2011 and previously passed the Travel Promotion Act of 2010, signed into law by President Obama in March 2010.

These initiatives attempt to increase tourism by amending visa regulations and processes to make it easier for foreign nationals to travel to the United States. Prior to these initiatives, wait times for visas could take weeks or months. One of the ways the government attempts to shorten wait times is through the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). This program, run by the Department of Homeland Security, allows foreign nationals from 36 countries to visit the United States and stay up to 90 days without a visa. Current proposals recommend expanding the program to additional countries. To expedite travel for those who cannot currently utilize the VWP, the State Department has also started strategically processing visas: spending more time on first-time and higher-risk applicants, while waiving interviews for low-risk, qualified individuals. These measures are especially focused on fast-growing nations such as Brazil and China, in the hopes that a streamlined process will encourage more people from these countries to visit the United States. Another program designed to facilitate tourist entry is the Global Entry program. Both U.S. citizens and holders of certain visas can participate in this program, which accelerates the user through customs and border control. U.S. Customs and Border Protection is also attempting to expedite entry and departure by launching a website where foreign visitors can complete digitized I-94 arrival-departure forms before arriving.

³ Salazar, “National Travel and Tourism Strategy Sets Goal to Draw 100 Million International Visitors to U.S.”
While these initiatives will make it easier for tourists to enter the country, they also give rise to questions regarding adequate scrutiny of those seeking to enter the country. In some cases, terrorists have exploited visa processes to gain access to the United States. All 19 of the 9/11 hijackers entered the United States on valid visas, many of which were either for tourism or business. Furthermore, in 2007, the director of national intelligence testified that al Qaeda shifted recruitment to Europeans because they can enter the United States without a visa. In addition, many undocumented immigrants initially enter the United States on valid visas. The VWP relies on the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to ensure that enrolled foreign nationals exit after their authorized periods of admission. However, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has reported that there is no adequate system for DHS to track how many of these individuals overstay their visas. Current estimates are that between one-third and one-half of the undocumented immigrant population in the United States—between 4 million and 6 million people—are visa overstays. Given these challenges, any initiative to bring more tourists into the country must be balanced with the need to provide adequate security and scrutiny.

Additionally, promoting tourism to the United States and protecting homeland security require the collaboration of a number of U.S. agencies. Although travel and trade historically have been considered different industries, they converge on the issue of tourism. The interconnectedness of tourism, trade, and security requires inter- and intra-agency cooperation. Continued coordination of agencies across sectors through communication and partnerships will prevent duplication of efforts or gaps in policy.

The initiatives that are underway and being discussed represent an enormous opportunity to boost travel to the United States and capitalize on the revenue and jobs this travel creates. However, lawmakers also have a responsibility to ensure that none of these initiatives put Americans at risk. A vital component to protecting the American people, while encouraging travel to the United States, is the continued coordination between agencies and sectors. Through these efforts, the United States has an opportunity to promote continued economic growth without sacrificing security.

Rick “Ozzie” Nelson is director of the Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Brianna Fitch is a research intern with the CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program.

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