



Senator Feinstein Expresses Deep Concerns About Bush Administration Plan to Loosen Visa Waiver Program Rules

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Washington, DC – The Bush Administration has announced that it will ask Congress for the authority to loosen rules for the visa waiver program as long as those nations meet new security requirements.

According to published reports, President Bush will ask for the power to waive a requirement that a country's visa-refusal rate be below 3 percent and could seek to expand the program beyond the current 27 nations.

Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), who is a member of the Senate Judiciary and Intelligence Committees, has serious concerns that loosening these rules could pose national security risks and allow potential terrorists into this nation. Following is a statement by Senator Feinstein:

“I spoke to Secretary Chertoff yesterday about the President’s proposal. I appreciate that the Secretary called me to talk about the proposal. But I must say I have deep concerns. I view the Visa Waiver program as the soft underbelly of immigration programs, and I believe that the legislation which the White House will be sending over should be closely scrutinized by the Judiciary Committee prior to any changes or modifications to the country eligibility requirements.”

Currently, the Visa Waiver Program allows visitors from 27 countries to enter the United States for up to 90 days without a visa. In a typical year, 13 million people utilize the program. We already know that there are those who want to exploit this program in order to do Americans grievous harm.

Convicted terrorist Zacarias Moussaoui and ‘shoe-bomber’ Richard Reid both boarded flights to the United States with passports issued by Visa Waiver Program countries. From January 2005 through June 2005, the Department of Homeland Security reported that it confiscated 298 fraudulent or altered passports issued by Visa Waiver Program countries that travelers were attempting to use to enter the United States. So the risks posed by this program are indeed serious.

For this reason, I believe we need to examine ways to strengthen the quality controls and security procedures, rather than weakening the eligibility requirements.

I am working with Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona on legislation that would strengthen the program and require that U.S. officials identify passengers who may pose a security threat before they enter the United States.

I'll also be very interested to look at the legislation sent over by the White House to see if it does provide adequate scrutiny of visa wavier documents, such as they may be, to better ensure that the nation's security is protected.

I look forward to the Committee's consideration of these issues and working in a bipartisan manner with the Administration to introduce and pass legislation next Congress."

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