

TRAVEL BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE



June 24, 2003

The Honorable Colin L. Powell
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Powell:

As Chairman of the **Travel Business Roundtable (TBR)**, I am writing to express our continuing concern regarding recent visa policy decisions taken by the State Department. We fear that these decisions will have a detrimental effect on the desire of international travelers to visit the United States, both for tourism and business purposes. TBR has appreciated the Department's stated willingness to engage with us on these issues since our last letter to you dated October 22, 2002, and we continue to support your efforts to ensure that those who wish to do our country harm are kept from crossing our borders. However, we remain extremely concerned that the Department is neither considering the possible consequences of these visa policies to our nation's economy nor realistically assessing the capabilities of those responsible for effectively implementing these policies within the deadlines that have been imposed.

TBR is particularly concerned about the fast-approaching implementation date of the **Machine Readable Passport (MRP)** requirement for citizens of Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries. Many of the countries that participate in this program are among our closest allies and are the home nations of the vast majority of international visitors to the U.S. It is our understanding that most of these countries have just recently begun issuing MRPs or are in the process of doing so. However, even in those nations where MRPs have been issued for some time, not all passport offices within these countries uniformly issue the new passports. Moreover, we believe that the Department's requirement that all family members (including infants who often travel on a parent's passport) have MRPs presents an additional obstacle that discourages travel. The Department has stated that VWP travelers who are unable to supply an MRP when traveling after October 1, 2003 will need to apply for visas at U.S. consulates in their home countries. However, given the Department's new requirement that all visa-seekers be subject to an in-person interview, these travelers are likely to face lengthy delays in their efforts to come to our country.

We recognize that the Department is responding to the statutory requirement in the USA Patriot Act that moved the MRP deadline ahead to 2003 from 2007. However, the law also gives the Department waiver authority that it is choosing not to exercise. TBR is particularly disappointed that the Department waited until June 13 to notify the industry that it would go forward with the October 1 effective date, and has made no effort up to this point to inform citizens of VWP countries that this change is coming and may affect their ability to enter our country. It is also our understanding that the decision to go forward with this deadline was taken without assurances that the technology will be in place to read the passports or

that the Department of Homeland Security will be prepared to take care of VWP travelers who arrive in the U.S. with non-machine readable passports.

Given these factors, it appears that this decision was made without considering all the relevant information and without a full appreciation of the potential consequences to the flow of commerce or to our nation's image. Overseas travelers who decide to come to the United States do not make these decisions at the spur of the moment. VWP travelers who are planning to attend conventions or tour the U.S. in October likely booked their passages months ago, when convention planners, travel agents, tour operators, airlines, etc. had no available information from the Department to disseminate to these travelers regarding the MRP requirement. We believe the potential havoc that this will create in the coming months will send yet one more signal to the world that the U.S. does not welcome visitors or those wishing to do business with us.

Please understand that TBR continues to support your Department's mission and the tireless efforts of the U.S. government as a whole to ensure that terrorists and other individuals who wish to do us harm are prevented from crossing our borders. Indeed, for all of us, the security of our nation is the highest priority. It is our hope, however, that the Department will implement this policy change in a manner that will minimize disruption to the travel and tourism industry, and therefore not be detrimental to the U.S. economy as a whole. In 2001, international visitors spent an estimated \$537 billion in the U.S., contributing to the \$99 billion in federal, state and local tax revenues that the industry generates and helping support more than 18 million jobs. As President Bush and Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge have stated, it is imperative that the U.S. seek solutions that will balance our security needs with our need to ensure that the flow of U.S. commerce continues.

With that in mind, TBR respectfully requests that the Department exercise its waiver authority to ensure that sufficient time is available to notify and educate VWP travelers about this significant change. Four months is simply not enough time to implement a program of this magnitude, and the prospect of turning away our long-time allies at our borders is frightening. International visitation to the U.S. has steadily declined in the past two years, and these types of policy decisions will only serve to further this negative trend.

TBR stands ready to work with you and other federal officials to ensure that those who wish to do harm to our nation are prevented from traveling to the U.S., while those who seek to visit our country for legitimate reasons are treated respectfully and are admitted in an efficient manner. We appreciate your consideration and hope that you will call on us if you have any questions or would like any further information on this matter.

Sincerely,



Jonathan M. Tisch
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Tom Ridge
The Honorable Donald Evans