Travelers turned off by official obstacles

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Unfortunately, a recent study of South Florida business executives by Florida International University’s College of Business Administration and the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce suggests that a number of international visitors are bypassing the U.S. because they perceive that they are not welcome here.

This perception has been nurtured by a host of post-9-11 changes, such as the rule handed down last May by the U.S. State Department that requires virtually all prospective visitors from visa-mandated countries—which include all of our Latin American and Caribbean neighbors—to undergo in-person interviews at overseas consular offices for stays of up to 90 days.

This rule sounds sensible and could augment national security, were it not to be implemented as an unfunded mandate. However, it has been imposed without additional resources for the already overburdened U.S. consular offices, thereby leading to serious processing delays and backlogs.

Indeed, prospective visitors from some countries in our hemisphere may have to wait six months or more just for an interview.

The problem is particularly acute in Brazil, Miami-Dade’s largest overseas visitor market, where a mere three consulates and one embassy process visas for a continent-sized country with 170 million people. According to the Travel Industry of America, Brazilians spend roughly $600 more per visit to the U.S. than the average international tourist, making them particularly valuable customers.

Unfortunately, Brazilian travel to the U.S. is down by nearly 60 percent since 2000. While some of this decline is attributable to economic malaise in that country, neither the recession nor the strong euro have discouraged Brazilians from flocking in record numbers to the European Union, where a visa is not required.

To make matters worse, the U.S. State Department in 2002 raised the non-refundable visa application fee from $85 to $100 and is considering another increase. Given that roughly one-third of Brazilian visa applications are rejected, is it any wonder that Disney closed its São Paulo marketing office last September?

Other obstacles to international travel abound. American Airlines’ top executive for Latin America and the Caribbean recently explained the loss of at least 10 percent of his company’s business in the region since 9-11 with the following: “People don’t like getting frisked.” And if they don’t like getting frisked, one can only imagine how they feel about getting fingerprinted and photographed as part of the US-VISIT program.

No sensible person will dispute the notion that the United States must be more vigilant about protecting our borders in the aftermath of the 9-11 tragedies. But we must be wise to design policies that avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and provide adequate funding for implementation.

A good start would be for Congress to allocate emergency funds for staff increases in our consulates. Another would be to expedite treatment for international visitors seeking visas for medical treatment or to study and do research at educational institutions. Furthermore, the State Department could refund visa fees for those individuals whose applications are rejected. These concrete steps would send a clear message: America welcomes legitimate tourists and remains open for business.

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