

BACKGROUND: For decades, foreign journalists have been required to obtain a media visa, or “I” visa, to travel to the United States to engage in work as a representative of the foreign media. Yet, for many years foreign media on short-term assignments and entering the U.S. from a Visa Waiver Program (VWP) country were routinely permitted to enter the country without an “I” visa. Following the events 9/11, the U.S. government resumed much stricter enforcement of the “I” visa requirement and in 2003 and 2004 several foreign journalists lacking the requisite “I” visa were detained, questioned and deported. This created a media firestorm in several countries and resulted in widespread criticism of the U.S. government by journalist groups and the general public. Then-Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Robert Bonner took swift action to end these heavy-handed actions and quell the flow of negative press.

The controversy led to the 2004 introduction of legislation (H.R. 4823) by Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA16) to repeal the “I” visa requirement for foreign media from VWP countries. This legislation, which was referred to the Judiciary Committee’s Immigration subcommittee (now chaired by Rep. Lofgren) and saw no further action in the House, would have provided foreign media representatives the same visa-free travel privileges enjoyed by all other business professionals coming to the U.S. from VWP countries for less than 90 days.

ISSUES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

1. **Eliminate the “I” Visa Requirement for Journalists from Visa Waiver Countries:** The requirement for the foreign media to obtain an “I” visa is largely an anachronistic holdover from the Cold War era, and according to senior officials at the Departments of State and Homeland Security, it does not serve any useful security purpose. Having to issue thousands of these media visas is also an inefficient use of limited U.S. consular resources abroad, where there are often backlogs for other visa interview appointments.

Professional journalists should be treated the same as other business professionals who are permitted to enter the U.S. from VWP countries for less than 90 days without the need for a visa. This minor change in law would send a positive signal to thousands of journalists around the world, signal a change in how the U.S. views its global partners and be another step toward enhancing U.S. public diplomacy efforts.

Action Item:

- The new Administration should support efforts in Congress to introduce and pass legislation to eliminate the “I” visa requirement for journalists from VWP countries seeking to work as media representatives in the U.S. for less than 90 days.