

Statement of John Conyers Jr.
Judiciary Committee Hearing

“Should the Congress Extend the October, 2004,
Statutory Deadline for Requiring
Foreign Visitors to Present Biometric Passports?”

April 21, 2004

At the outset, I want to welcome Secretary Powell and Secretary Ridge today. It is a rare day when this Committee, or any other Committee, has two cabinet members testifying before it. I look forward to Secretary Powell and Ridge being the voice of reason today on this issue, as they have been on so many others.

The question posed by this hearing is whether we should extend the deadline for biometric passports past the current October 2004 deadline. I agree with both of the Cabinet Secretaries that the answer is clearly yes.

I agree with the Cabinet Secretaries that there are too many unanswered questions about this program:

- How will this affect our civil liberties? Have we considered the global privacy issues of creating government controlled and shared databases with biometric data on millions of travelers?
- If we hastily create a system based on untested, unreliable technology, are we more secure?
- How can we possibly demand that other nations move forward with this new technology when we aren't even ready yet?

- Most importantly, if we fail to extend the deadline what will be the consequences for our allies abroad and our tourist industry? Clearly, making millions of individuals in visa waiver nations wait in line for visas with the other 6 million people in the backlog does not seem to be an appropriate result.

But there is an even bigger question before us today. Why is it that we always find ourselves with our backs against the wall when it comes to immigration deadlines? In the Congress, we like to blame the State Department and blame the Department of Homeland security, anybody but ourselves. The fact is that when the House passed the bill setting this deadline in 2001 (Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Act), there was very little debate on the central issue of whether this deadline was reasonable.

Today, we should be guided by the words of Secretary Powell in today's Wall Street Journal: "Some argue that we should raise the drawbridge and not allow in any more foreign visitors. They are wrong. Such a move would hand a victory to the terrorists by having us betray our cherished principles....Openness is fundamental to our success as a nation, economically, culturally and politically."