

**ORAL TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
BORDER, MARITIME AND GLOBAL COUNTERTERRORISM
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY**

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Madam Chairwoman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to testify on US-VISIT program.

As you know, Congress' mandate for the federal government to collect information on visitors departing from the United States is not new. In 1996, Congress first directed the government, via the Illegal Immigration Reform Act of 1996, to develop an automated entry and exit control system to collect biographical information on visitors arriving in and departing from the United States. As you may not know, today is not ATA's first appearance before Congress regarding that system. In January 28, 2004, following another congressional mandate for the federal government to collect information, including biometrics, on arriving and departing visitors, I complimented the DHS and the US-VISIT program office on the US-VISIT Entry program.

Those compliments were well deserved. As they have in many other contexts, the DHS and the airlines worked together to implement the Entry program in a collaborative, systemic process. Without a doubt, the government's successful operation of Entry at 115 airports is due to collaboration and careful planning on the front end to address equipment, staffing and other logistical concerns. In 2004, having limited involvement with the Exit pilot programs, I urged the continuation of this government/industry partnership. Airlines were looking forward to working with DHS.

DHS, however, chose not to consult further with ATA or the airlines and not to share the results of the Exit pilot programs. Despite DHS' assurances, there was no government/industry partnership from the conclusion of the Exit pilots in December 2005 through December 2006. Then in a January 2007 meeting, DHS reiterated that DHS, ATA, the airlines and other industry groups would be partners in implementing the Exit program.

Unfortunately, this March we learned that DHS had made a unilateral decision that airlines – not government – would collect biometrics at check-in counters. They explained the decision as fitting the DHS "business plan." It is an unfortunate decision for many reasons.

Today, in addition to noting DHS' unexplained failure to consult with us, I lodge two fundamental objections to this unilateral and, frankly quite unexpected, decision.

First, Congress has made it abundantly clear – six legislative mandates since 1996 – that it wants the federal government to implement entry and exit control programs and collect data from visitors. The 9/11 Commission, by the way, also agreed. DHS and its counterparts **are** responsible for this country’s national security and immigration programs, and should not unload this responsibility on private corporations because it fits their so-called “business plan.” Further, the “Exit” process should mirror the existing “Entry” process.

Our second objection relates to our business plan. Years ago the airline industry adopted a business model that focuses on moving passengers away from ticket counter check in and unnecessary procedures. The goal was, and is, to facilitate passenger processing, making the check-in process as efficient and seamless as possible. Today, due to considerable investments by the airlines and obvious time savings, over 30 percent of all passengers check in electronically, and that number is growing every day. Kiosks are just an interim step in the process and will soon disappear from airports as passengers check in via cell phones, PDAs and home computers. We’re exploring new technologies that allow passengers like you – before you drive across the 14th Street Bridge on your way to Reagan National Airport – to check in via cell phone technology like this that will be read at the TSA checkpoint.

If, as DHS proposes, passengers are required to check in at ticket counters and airlines are required to collect biometrics during the check-in process, then efficient, seamless off-airport passenger check in will disappear, to be replaced by long lines and confused, frustrated passengers. Quite frankly, the simplest solution is to collect biometrics at the TSA checkpoint.

In closing, I would like to raise one additional and, perhaps the most salient, point. Carriers have invested millions of dollars reconfiguring their systems to comply with APIS and passport reconciliation requirements to collect biographical data on passengers to track their status. We are committed to spend millions more working with DHS in implementing AQQ and Secure Flight, which will further improve the process. Finally, we are preparing to invest even more on wireless technologies to facilitate passenger check in. Clearly, the challenge, however, is the supplemental collection of biometric data on travelers departing from this country. Acknowledging this challenge, let me reiterate that airlines do not oppose the US-VISIT program and remain willing to collaborate with DHS as appropriate.

Thank you.