

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 2, 2008

Mr. Gene L. Dodaro
Acting Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We are writing to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct an immediate 90 day review of the physical security features of the new U.S. Passport Card and the Mexican Border Crossing Card. Concerns about the reliability and physical and electronic security of the cards, and the identification information they contain, have come to our attention and we believe an immediate study is necessary to determine the security of these cards or the national security risk posed by the continued issuance of the cards. In particular, we request that GAO ascertain the threat of counterfeit, alteration, and compromise of these cards and compare them to other federal government identification cards, such as the Permanent Resident Card.

In August of this year, the Department of State began issuing the U.S. passport card in conformity with the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), mandated by Congress as part of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004. These cards facilitate the travel of U.S. citizens to Mexico, Canada and the Caribbean and have the same adjudication standards and proof of citizenship as a U.S. passport. Mexican Border Crossing Cards, issued by the State Department to Mexicans who regularly travel to the U.S., have, in recent years, been revised and upgraded with new security features.

The 9/11 Commission's final report makes clear that "for terrorists, travel documents are as important as weapons." Proper implementation of secure identification documents in the WHTI implementation is critical to the security of our borders and the facilitation of legitimate travel. We are concerned that the physical and electronic security of the U.S. Passport Card and the new Mexican Border Crossing Card may be inadequate.

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In conducting the review, we expect GAO to utilize the expertise and resources of other government entities. The review of the WHTI identification cards should include, but not be limited to:

- (1) an assessment of the relative physical security of the cards for “face-value” inspection in the event of an absence of machine-readers or a loss of database connectivity;
- (2) the optical variable device kinegram;
- (3) the quality of the gray-scale laser-engraved photograph and biographical information;
- (4) the complexity and quality of security printing and security links;
- (5) the physical durability and vulnerability to cloning of the embedded RFID chip and antenna;
- (6) the physical security of the optical stripe, including the embedded micro-imagery and the personalized digital image and biographical information engraved;
- (7) an assessment of the strength for identity verification of the biometric identifier; and
- (8) an examination of any other security features necessary for your thorough review.

In addition to the assessment of the WHTI identification cards, we would like additional information about the forensic and adversarial testing conducted by the Departments of State and Homeland Security in the procurement and evaluation process for the Passport Card. GAO should also conduct a review of these processes to determine if the cards and vendors selected are adequately meeting the security needs of the United States in issuing these cards.

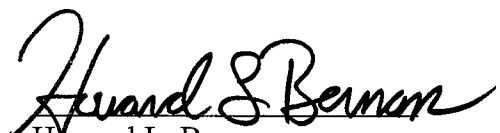
We ask that in submitting the report, GAO also include recommendations or suggestions to better improve the security and durability of the WHTI cards, particularly the Passport Card and the next generation Mexican Border Crossing Card.

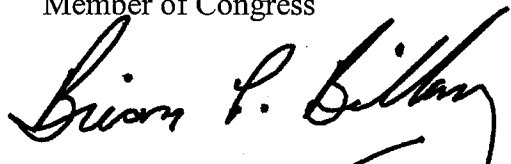
We thank you for your cooperation with this request, and look forward to continuing to work with you on this very important matter.

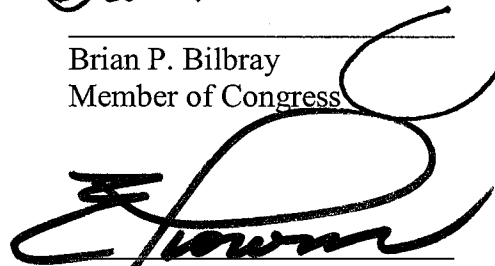
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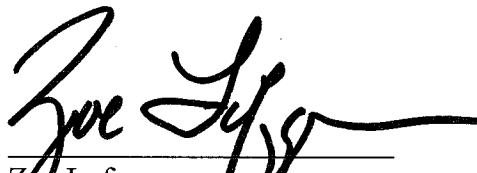
If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Kristin Wells, Deputy Chief Counsel for the Committee on Foreign Affairs at 202-225-5021.

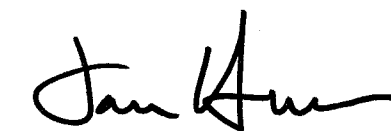
Sincerely,


Howard L. Berman
Member of Congress


Brian P. Bilbray
Member of Congress


Edolphus Towns
Member of Congress


Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress


Jane Harman
Member of Congress


Christopher P. Carney
Member of Congress