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OP-ED

New York Harbor's Head Case

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IN May, the United States Senate passed the immigration reform bill with a last-minute rider requiring the National Park Service to reopen the Statue of Liberty's crown to visitors. On the surface, that sounds like a good idea. Why not allow tourists fuller access to perhaps the most recognized symbol of the United States? After all, the crown was open to the public for more than 100 years before being closed in reaction to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

But reopening the crown is not a good idea for a variety of reasons. And even talk of amendments proposing as much as \$2 million to pay for its reopening simply doesn't make sense.

The Statue of Liberty was erected in New York Harbor between 1883 and 1886. The statue was initially also a lighthouse, and the narrow internal stairway within Gustave Eiffel's iron structure was used by maintenance workers who inspected the torch daily. Originally, Lady Liberty was meant to be viewed only from the harbor. The sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi never expected that more than 2.5 million tourists would visit Liberty Island every year.

The statue was never designed to accommodate large numbers of people, and interior changes were made over time that decreased the number of exits. If an emergency required people in the upper reaches of the statue to be evacuated quickly, getting them to safety would be nearly impossible.

Before Sept. 11, on a typical day, more than 1,000 people at once would wait in one long, single-file line along

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the 354 steps to the crown. After 9/11, the reality that there were no safe exits above the first floor of what is essentially a 20-story building was sobering. The National Park Service was right to close the statue while it took time to assess evacuation plans.

So almost five years later, why should the crown stay closed? While the original staircase used by maintenance workers was removed during the 1986 restoration of the statue, the

Why Lady Liberty's crown shouldn't be reopened.

double-helix staircase that replaced it, rising more than 110 feet from the statue's toes to her crown, is narrow, cramped and unsafe. With just over five feet of head clearance and less than 20 inches of width, the stairs barely fit within the statue's iron structure. When the crown was open, many people complained of claustrophobia, vertigo and heat exhaustion during their ascent; a tiny elevator that was used often to rescue stranded tourists can accommodate only one person, standing, at a time.

What's more, once in the crown — and after waiting about three hours on the stairs in a hot, poorly ventilated space — visitors have only a limited view of Brooklyn's skyline. There's barely room in the crown, which is about the size of a small office cubicle, to have a friend take your photo. And then, of course, there's the climb back down. Unfortunately, there's no room for a larger or safer stairway from the top of the pedestal to the crown. And building an exterior elevator or staircase would destroy the historic character of the monument and its iconic form, which should be preserved at all cost.

What's interesting is that since the crown was closed, visitors' reactions to the statue have been much more positive. According to the National Park Service, a 2005 survey of tourists

at the Statue of Liberty resulted in the highest rating ever in terms of visitor satisfaction.

Of course, there are ways to enhance a tourist's visit to Lady Liberty. Since December 2001, when Liberty Island was reopened, the National Park Service has made significant safety and security improvements to the pedestal and the island. Starting in summer 2004, visitors with timed-entrance tickets could once again enter the pedestal to see the permanent museum exhibition that traces the history and meaning of the Statue of Liberty, and take an elevator to the pedestal's observation balcony just beneath the statue.

Park rangers also greet visitors at the top of the pedestal, where there is a beautiful, illuminated view of the statue's interior through a glass ceiling. This new experience, coupled with better and quicker access to panoramic views of New York City, New Jersey and the harbor from the pedestal's observation level is far superior and definitely safer than climbing the long, narrow stairway to the crown.

What's important is not access to the crown but rather improving the visit to the Statue of Liberty for all tourists. In that respect, more could be done, and Congress can help lead the way. Instead of calling for the crown to be reopened, our elected officials should put forward the money needed to remove the museum from its present position in the statue to a more accessible site on the island.

This would improve safety, allow more people to experience the exhibits and enable a much-needed expansion of interpretative and educational resources as well as an enlarged and improved gift shop and cafeteria. More boat tours that circle the island and connect to maritime sites throughout the harbor would provide yet another way for thousands of tourists to be inspired by this monument.

Public access to the crown is neither in the best interest of visitors nor of the statue itself. To ensure the long-term survival of the Statue of Liberty so she can benefit future generations, Congress should focus on enhancing the experience of visiting Liberty Island, not on opening the crown. □