



Handout

Wagner-Rogers Debate Documents

Letter to the Editor of the Washington Post

To the Editor of The Post—Sir:

As an American Boy may I ask why Dorothy Thompson et al want to import 20,000 German children? Miss Thompson says that the children imported under the Wagner-Rogers bill will not become public charges but she is silent on the children of the American slums, the children of the sharecropper, or the Negro children. Are they to become public charges?

I am sure that the people of this country do not want the bill to pass because there are many times 20,000 children in this country with no future! Help the American child. He deserves our help more than the German child.

—AMERICAN BOY, April 24, 1939¹

¹ *Washington Post*, April 24, 1939.

Remarks from Senator Robert Reynolds

Appendix to the Congressional Record (p. 2424–2425)

Our Country, Our Citizens First — Extension of Remarks of Hon. Robert R. Reynolds

Wednesday, June 7, 1939

. . . I have introduced a bill in Congress which would prohibit the immigration of anyone to the United States for the next 10 years, or until such time as our unemployed have been provided with full employment. The bill ought to pass. It is in the interest of the American laboring man. It is in the interest of the unfortunate men and women who tonight are out of employment and who tomorrow will again be looking for employment. It is in the interest of the youth of America who tomorrow will be seeking employment. Why admit thousands upon thousands annually to this country who come to usurp the jobs of American citizens? Why not take care of our own first?

My colleague Senator Robert Wagner has introduced in the Senate, and Mrs. Edith Nourse Rogers, Congresswoman, has introduced in the House, a resolution which provides for the admission of 20,000 refugee children, boys and girls, from Germany into the United States in the next 2 years. The bill further provides that these children must each be under 14 years of age and that provision must be made to the effect that they will never become public charges. I am against the passage of this bill. I am against the passage of any bill that will provide more competition and more hardships for the sons and daughters of American mothers . . .

In conclusion, I want to say that I am thoroughly of the opinion that the time has come when we should think firstly of the people of America. Charity ought to begin at home. We ought to look after our own unfortunates whether they are orphans or whether they are just plain men and women of America, unemployed, before we attempt to take care of the refugee children of the world, or before we attempt to provide employment for the immigrants of the earth, who seek residence in America.

Now I'm going to ask you to do your part toward preserving that America for our own men and women—boys and girls. If you believe that America should be preserved for Americans then tonight write your Congressman and your two United States Senators and request them to vote against the Wagner-Rogers resolution . . .

Let's keep America for our boys and girls.

Let's give American jobs to American citizens.

Let's empty our prisons of alien criminals and send them back to their native lands.

Let's deport those alien agitators who are eternally advocating a change in our form of government.

Let's do our best to save our country from destruction by alien-enemy forces which are boring from within.

Let's save America for Americans.

Our country, our citizens first.¹

¹ Wagner-Rogers Bill (S. J. Resolution 64), Congressional Record 84: 13 (May 24, 1939), 2424–25.

Statement from Francis H. Kinnicutt

President, Allied Patriotic Societies, Inc., New York City (excerpted)

. . . The Allied Patriotic Societies is a group of about 30 societies, which I happen to be president of . . .

This society . . . was very active at the time of both the passage of the 1924 quota law and in putting into effect, that is, the National Origins Act, which gave every country of Europe a portion of our immigration proportioned exactly to the number of people in this country already of that nationality.

We have always thought that that was a very sound and fair principle. And one of the motives undoubtedly was not to prevent any tremendous change, racially or nationally, from foreign nationalities in our existing population.

I don't admit that there is anything wrong about that. I think it is wise. I think it is right for the Nation to decide to preserve a certain amount of homogeneity and not be swamped by a flood of immigration such as we were getting from year to year from races that had hitherto been very meagerly represented and that would have put an entirely different complexion on our political and social institutions if it had been allowed to go on . . .

. . . [T]he board of directors of the Allied Patriotic Societies, Inc., is opposed to the passage of the Senate Joint Resolution 64 (Senator Wagner) and House Joint Resolution 165 (Mr. Dingell) to admit into the United States 20,000 children . . . "in addition to those authorized by existing law . . . " on the following grounds:

1. On the humanitarian grounds on which all social agencies agree that children should not be separated from their parents and that foster parentage or institutional upbringing is prejudicial to children.
2. These children would soon compete with American youth for jobs in this country, one-third of our unemployed being under 25 years of age.
3. The passage of the joint resolution would inevitably lead to further breaking down of our immigration quotas by being used as a plea that the families of these 20,000 children should also later be admitted . . .
4. The bill by no means makes adequate provision that these 20,000 children will not become public charges, a ground of exclusion under existing law.
5. The bill violates a fundamental principle of our immigration law, namely, the apportionment of our immigration strictly in accordance with the national origins of our population. The resolution would give an unfair proportion to . . . Germany, to the prejudice of all others.

Our position is not that we are unsympathetic with the sufferings of people in foreign lands, due to racial and political persecution in a number of European countries, particularly Germany; but we believe that the problem dealing with the situation thus created cannot be solved by one nation alone, or beyond the limits imposed by the just needs of the people of these United States.¹

¹ Wagner-Rogers Bill (S. J. Resolution 64), Congressional Record 84: 13 (May 24, 1939), 134–37.

Statement from Mr. John B. Trevor

President of the American Coalition (excerpted)

...

Be it resolved, That the American Coalition advocates temporary suspension of immigration for 10 years, the reduction of permanent immigration quotas by 90 percent, and the prompt deportation of all foreigners in the United States whose presence is inimical to the public interest; registration of aliens in the United States; deportation of aliens whose presence in the United States constitutes a burden to the American taxpayer; restriction of employment on public projects and public relief to our own citizens; absolute prohibition of the admission of refugees entering the United States in the guise of visitors, and the rigid enforcement of all existing statutes relating to the deportation of illegal entrants; and be it further

Resolved, That the American Coalition commends Senator Robert B. Reynolds, Congressman Joe Starnes, and other members of the Senate and House of Representatives for their efforts to secure the enactment of more effective immigration and deportation laws by the Congress of the United States . . .

The bills now before this committee are a direct attack on the quota system.

In effect, they raise the German quota by 10,000 a year for 2 years . . . [T]he fundamental purpose of both quota acts was to check an influx of refugees from the deplorable consequences of war and revolution. Congress, in 1921 and 1924, put the interests of America first and I feel that this is also the desire of the present Congress.

While I do not wish to usurp any prerogative of the Members of our honorable legislative body, I do think that in my capacity as a private citizen and as a representative of other private citizens who are members of the American coalition, that we all have a right not only to comment unfavorably but to make protest in reference to these two bills, of which foreigners are the sole beneficiaries at the expense of our nationals.

May I further point out that, bearing in mind the distressing persecutions and tyranny of central Europe, that Congress should not, and should not be asked to, reverse its wise policy of primarily fostering the interests of our own people and our own country.

The beneficiaries of these resolutions will, in a few years, be seeking employment to which the children of our own citizens have first claim . . .

. . . It is our contention that an overwhelming majority of the American people are opposed to this legislation or any other legislation to admit refugees.¹

¹ Wagner-Rogers Bill (S. J. Resolution 64), Congressional Record 84: 13 (May 24, 1939), 213–15.

Statement from Clarence E. Pickett

Executive Director of the Nonsectarian Committee for German Refugee Children (excerpted)

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We have been connected with Germans and German life and had a center in Germany and Austria ever since the war, and have had a great deal of contact . . . so far as relief is concerned . . . Now there is a catastrophe created by religious and racial persecution. We cannot sit by and let that happen. We do not believe Americans want to sit by and see a great catastrophe like that happen not only to 800,000 but at the least at the present time 100,000 of those are children who come under the category defined in this bill, namely, children from 14 years and down.

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You will have others testifying who have been in Germany since I have. I was there during the month of September, and conditions then were I thought pretty bad. After the persecution, the pogrom, of November 10, conditions have become a great deal worse.

. . . [S]ince the 10th of November, German-Jewish children cannot go to the public schools. They cannot play in the public parks.

. . . They are reminded continually and being spat at and being treated in ways damaging to children when they go into the streets to play.

On the nights of the 11th, 12th, and 13th of November, 35,000 of these men were put in concentration camps. Some of them have been let out . . . They may stay there for weeks, and sometimes it extends to 3 months. They make the promise that they will leave the country but they have no way of fulfilling their promise . . .

The most common thing to happen is, since arrests come at night, they do not sleep two nights at the same place in succession. The influence of that you can see on the family life, which is extremely damaging to a child in the younger years . . .

So, I think you have here a unique problem of unsettling, breaking down the morale and the nervous energy of these children, which is not an ordinary situation.

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. . . They have burned down all the synagogues and they have no religious worship available. That is important in the lives of children because . . . they had religious and educational services . . . So that all of these things have conspired to make anybody at all closely in touch with the situation deeply concerned. You do not see that thing happen before your eyes if there is anything you can do in fairness to the total situation. I certainly want to do something about it.

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I feel the people who are closely related to the child-caring agencies in this country feel that this is a step that will not hinder the care of American children.

When you get concerned about children you do not look at their race or color so much, but you want the children taken care of, and if children in Germany are neglected then we are participants in that neglect, and that is a bad example for our children over here.

. . . As a matter of fact, many of them [child-caring agencies] have fewer children than they are set up to take care of . . .

We realize, of course, the great financial responsibility involved, but for the most part the people are able to pay for passage in German marks . . .

This is a matter that has been done without any kind of pressure. We have not done any circulating of appeals for homes, nothing of that kind. It is only in newspaper circulation, and there have come in something like 2,500 letters asking for children . . .¹

¹ Wagner-Rogers Bill (S. J. Resolution 64), Congressional Record 84: 13 (May 24, 1939), 15, 17–18, 19, 20.

Letter from an "American Girl"

New York Herald Tribune, Friday, May 5, 1939

Being only 18, not being too well-informed on some things, I should probably make some boners [mistakes] in this, but here goes:

It's about those people who are against the Wagner-Rogers bill. Quite an interesting idea that they have, "America for Americans." But isn't it rather a new idea? And isn't it rather a silly notion considering how we have built what we are pleased to call American civilization? We have used all the nations in the world and, in my opinion we owe the Germans, Czechs, and Austrians quite a lot.

But how do you expect American young people to believe this is the land of tolerance, opportunity, and a place to be proud of, when we won't let in even 20,000 youngsters? It doesn't make sense.

Seems to me it would be partly paying our debt to the Germans for all they have done for us, to take 20,000 of their children, their good, healthy, bright children, who picked the wrong grandmother or grandfather, or whose parents made the mistake of believing in freedom of speech.

I could join the D.A.R, the daughters of the Northern side, and the daughters of the Confederacy, too. Father is a Legion man, brother is a son of the Legion, and I am 100% Aryan, so I don't think this note is out of place as simply the opinion of an

AMERICAN GIRL.

New Haven, Conn., May 2, 1939.¹

¹ *New York Herald Tribune*, May 5, 1939, accessed from New York Public Library archives.

Statement from John Brophy

National Director of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (excerpted)

. . . My name is John Brophy, and I am national director of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. I appear in support of House Joint Resolution 165 and House Joint Resolution 168. This statement is made in the name of the 4,000,000 men and women who make up the C.I.O. . . .

The C.I.O. has repeatedly condemned the barbarities of the present regime in Germany. It has stated its opposition to any kind of minority persecution or discrimination, whether it takes place in Europe, here in the United States, or elsewhere in the world. Our constitution, like the Constitution of the United States, forbids any such discrimination.

As we condemn persecution of minority groups, so do we uphold the principle that America should remain a refuge for the victims of Nazi savagery. We know that the people of America are with us in this feeling, and that we represent them when we speak in support of the victims of Nazi terror.

There is something particularly revolting about cruelty when it is practiced on little children, as it is practiced by the cowardly thugs who are in power in Germany today. To my mind, it is incomprehensible that decent human beings in America should oppose this bill, which offers an American refuge to a small number of those defenseless ones who are subjected to the brutalities of Hitler's official sadists.

Organized labor does not fear the alleged "influx" of German children that opponents of this bill say will descend upon us. On the contrary, organized labor welcomes the opportunity this Nation has to do a simple act of human charity in passing this bill.

This bill is only a small token of our opposition to the present rulers of Germany. In supporting it, we know that we are not only giving expression to anti-Nazi feelings of our own people, but that we are also giving encouragement to the great mass of decent Germans who long for freedom from their Nazi tyrants.

And we know that we are fulfilling one of the greatest precepts of all religious beliefs—to love our neighbor and to protect little children.¹

¹ Wagner-Rogers Bill (S. J. Resolution 64), Congressional Record 84: 13 (May 24, 1939), 91–92.

Non-Sectarian Committee for Refugee Children

"Leading Representatives of All Faiths Head Organization to Give Sanctuary to German Refugee Children"
(March 3, 1939) (excerpted)

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Formation of a nation-wide organization to be known as the Non-Sectarian Committee for German Refugee Children was announced to-day by Clarence E. Pickett, Executive Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee. . . . Organization of the Non-Sectarian Committee marks the crystallization of a comprehensive plan developed by the country's leading child welfare experts who for the past two months have been working in collaboration with the American Friends Service Committee.

"The proposal to give sanctuary to the youngest, most pitiful victims of persecution," Mr. Pickett said, "has touched the hearts of thousands of Americans. Their sympathy has found concrete expression in the Wagner-Rogers bill which will admit to the United States up to 10,000 German children under the age of fourteen in 1939 and the same number in 1940, depending upon the number which can be adequately cared for."

The Wagner Rogers bill, Mr. Pickett pointed out, is endorsed by both the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Fifty eminent churchmen in an eloquent petition have urged that the United States give sanctuary to German children. Ex-President Herbert Hoover and other leading citizens of all faiths and all shades of political opinion have expressed their approval of the plan, which has received wide editorial support from press of the nation.

"The Non-Sectarian Committee," Mr. Pickett said, "has undertaken the task of implementing this humane measure with a practical workable plan which can be put into effect as soon as the bill is enacted. The Committee will assume responsibility for the placement of children in foster homes of their own faith throughout the country. We have guarantee of adequate financial backing from responsible organizations and substantial private sources to ensure that the children will not become public charges."

A major objective of the Committee, he said, is to prevent any concentration of children in large cities of on the eastern seaboard. Of the children seeking refuge at the present time, fifty percent are Jewish and the remainder Catholic and Protestant.

Since the introduction of the Wagner Rogers bill, Mr. Pickett said, inquiries have been received as to whether 20,000 children could be separated from their parents within the next two years.

"Dispatches just received from abroad," Mr. Pickett said, "indicate that thousands of parents are willing to part from their children who are suffering the most ghastly moral degradation and actual physical danger. How terrible conditions are for children may be gathered from the fact that many are found at the Dutch frontier without any protection. In many cases children are simply put on a train and sent to Holland in the hope that they would be looked after."

Holland, although a small and crowded country, Mr. Pickett said, has already taken 700 refugee children. England, as an immediate step, opened her doors to 500 and is admitting many more[,] as are Sweden, Belgium, and France.

"From England," he said, "we have word of children arriving mute with grief and fear, children who can scarcely believe that their new life is not a dream after the misery and bitter humiliation they have endured, children for whom such simple privileges as going to school, to the movies, playing in a park bring ecstatic joy. We have every indication that there are thousands of Americans who are ready and eager to give those children a free life in the United States by taking them into their homes."¹

¹ "Leading Representatives of All Faiths Head Organization to Give Sanctuary to German Refugee Children, March 3, 1939," Marion Kenworthy papers, Center for Jewish History.