

Lesson 2: The Child Refugee Debate

Unit Essential Question:

- In times of crisis, what does it take to move from knowledge to action?

Lesson Title: The Child Refugee Debate

Guiding Questions:

- How did competing ideas about national identity, priorities, and values surface during the debate over the 1939 Wagner-Rogers Bill?
- To what extent did these ideas reflect a gap between Americans' willingness to sympathize with refugees and willingness to act on their behalf?

Learning Objectives:

- Through an analysis of the radio play "Miss American" and sources covering the range of positions on the 1939 Wagner-Rogers Bill, students will be able to explain how the debate reflected competing ideas about national identity, priorities, and values.
- Students will reflect on how the history of the Wagner-Rogers debate can inform our understanding of contemporary debates concerning multiple refugee crises.

Overview:

The previous lesson provided an introduction to the wider social and historical context that informed Americans' responses to Nazism and the Jewish refugee crisis it provoked. In this lesson, students explore one flashpoint in the debate over how to respond to that crisis: the 1939 Wagner-Rogers Bill, which proposed admitting 20,000 German refugee children over two years to the United States outside of the existing immigration quotas. The bill ultimately died without ever coming to a vote, but the congressional hearings and public debate surrounding it provide excellent opportunities for students to understand Americans' various responses to the refugee crisis. On Day 1 of the lesson, students will investigate a radio play, "Miss American," that was produced in support for the Wagner-Rogers legislation, considering how the play explores deeper questions about national identity, priorities, and values. On both days, students will reflect on the political, economic, and social pressures Americans faced as they considered how to respond to the refugee crisis. The next lesson will shift focus from policy debates to individual stories—specifically those of Jewish refugees attempting to immigrate to the United States and the Americans who helped them.

Context:

During the 1920s, the US Congress passed laws that severely limited the number of immigrants who could enter the country each year. A series of restrictive legislative measures culminated in 1924 with the Johnson-Reed Act, which set quotas, or limits, on the number of immigrants from particular countries who could be admitted to the United States each year. Anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, and antisemitism remained pervasive in the 1930s, influencing the

political, economic, and social climate as Americans responded to the refugee crisis caused by the Nazi regime.

This crisis for European Jews and others seeking to escape the Nazi regime's persecution intensified considerably in 1938, after Germany annexed Austria (the *Anschluss*) in March and the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia in September, bringing approximately 200,000 additional Jews under Nazi rule. President Roosevelt called for an international conference on the refugee crisis. Delegates from 32 countries gathered in Evian, France, in July 1938, but most countries refused to change their laws to assist Jewish refugees.

The American press criticized the 32 nations attending the Evian conference, including the United States, for their inaction. Most of the participants expressed sympathy for the refugees but offered little assistance, claiming that increased immigration might hurt their own nations' economies. Some spoke bluntly about not wanting to admit Jews. *Time* magazine concluded: "All nations present expressed sympathy for the refugees but few offered to allow them within their boundaries."

On November 9 and 10, 1938, the Nazi regime unleashed a wave of violent anti-Jewish pogroms throughout Germany. This nationwide attack on Jews, known as Kristallnacht, saw the arrest of 30,000 Jewish men and boys who were released from concentration camps only after agreeing to leave Germany as soon as possible.

In December 1938, prominent child psychologist Marion Kenworthy asked Clarence Pickett, the director of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker relief organization, to help lead an interfaith, non-sectarian effort to support legislation allowing refugee children from Europe to immigrate into the United States. Pickett immediately began to lobby members of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration to support a child immigration bill, and he succeeded in convincing Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

In February 1939, Democratic senator Robert Wagner of New York and Republican congresswoman Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts introduced legislation in Congress to admit 20,000 German refugee children under the age of 14 over a two-year period. The bill specified that the 10,000 children per year would enter the United States outside the existing restrictive immigration quota laws.

The authors of the Wagner-Rogers Bill tried to anticipate and address criticism by enlisting powerful allies. The American Federation of Labor supported the bill, claiming that the children would not add to the nation's existing unemployment problem. The Children's Bureau, an agency within the US Department of Labor, agreed to supervise the placement and care of the children. The Non-Sectarian Committee for German Refugee Children, headed by Pickett, promised that the children would be supported with private donations.

For the first time in her six years as First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt allowed reporters to directly quote her in support of pending legislation. Referring to the ongoing Kindertransports, which

brought German refugee children to Great Britain and western Europe, the First Lady said: “England, France, and the Scandinavian countries are taking their share of these children, and I think we should.” She also referred to the bill as a “wise way to do a humanitarian act.” Despite Mrs. Roosevelt’s urging, President Roosevelt never publicly commented on the Wagner-Rogers Bill.

The leaders of American Jewish organizations rarely lobbied for the bill publicly, perhaps because they were concerned that any attempt to prioritize aid for Jewish refugee children might spark increased antisemitism in the United States. Senator Wagner and Congresswoman Rogers, neither of whom were Jewish, emphasized that their bill would admit both German Jewish and Christian children, but opponents quickly branded the legislation as an effort to help Jewish refugee children primarily.

The House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization and the Senate Committee on Immigration held joint hearings on the Wagner-Rogers Bill in late April 1939. These initial hearings seemed to go well for the bill’s supporters, but opponents soon grew more vocal.

Democratic senator Robert Reynolds of North Carolina actively opposed the Wagner-Rogers Bill, giving multiple speeches against it on the Senate floor and asking constituents to voice their opposition. Reynolds warned that admitting refugees—even children—would increase unemployment. By the time he spoke out against the Wagner-Rogers Bill, Reynolds had already introduced five separate proposals in Congress to limit immigration, including one that would have banned all immigration either for ten years or until the unemployment rate dropped to historically low levels.

Senator Reynolds garnered support from the American Legion and the American Coalition of Patriotic Societies, which included members of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. These groups officially supported a decrease in immigration to the United States overall and advocated that charitable efforts should be directed to impoverished American children instead of refugee children.

The American people agreed with Reynolds: 66 percent of Americans polled in January 1939 opposed expanding immigration to aid the refugee children. The Wagner-Rogers Bill never made it to a vote in Congress.

Notes to Teacher:

1. Teaching This Lesson as a Standalone Lesson

- If you choose to teach this two-day lesson by itself, make sure that you’ve read the context section for [Lesson 1: The Refugee Crisis and 1930s America](#) beforehand. Lesson 1 provides critical historical context to frame the debate over the Wagner-Rogers Bill. Based on students’ prior historical knowledge, you may

want to provide that information before they begin this lesson, or simply use it to answer questions that may arise.

- In addition, the following question from Activity 3 on Day 1 may be difficult for students to answer without having been exposed to the material in Lesson 1:
 - By the end of the play, Ronnie comes around to the children's point of view. Imagine Americans who might be listening to this radio play in the 1930s. Who might have agreed with that vision? Who might have disagreed? Who might have been skeptical that that vision could be a reality?

You may wish to skip this question or tailor it to your students' particular needs or prior knowledge.

2. Reviewing Plot and Storytelling Elements of “Miss American” (Day 1)

- Before students begin this lesson, they should read and annotate the radio play “Miss American.” Share with them the transcript provided with the [“Miss American”](#) audio recording. They should also write responses to the following questions, which you should review with them before they hear the play in class:
 - Who are the characters/people involved?
 - What is going on? What is the basic storyline?
 - What is the setting? Time period? Physical location?
 - What is the point of view? Whose story is this?
 - What is the theme/mood?

3. Preparing for the Essential Quote Activity (Day 2)

- For the “essential quote” activity (Activity 2 on Day 2), make sure that you've taken time to prepare students before the activity so that they know what they are being asked to do at all times.
- The sources are divided between documents in favor of and opposed to the Wagner-Rogers legislation. When students receive their initial documents, they should spend 10 to 15 minutes reading, marking, and responding to the first three boxes on the [Essential Quote Worksheet](#).
- When students move to work with their first partner, try to ensure that they work with someone who has an opposing viewpoint. With their partner, the students should discuss and respond to questions 4, 5, and 6 on the worksheet. This should take approximately ten minutes.

3. A Note about the “Letter from an ‘American Girl’” Document

- Students may need help decoding the outdated language and interpreting the arguments offered in this document from the stations activity handout on Day 2, a letter to the editor from a young girl in favor of the Wagner-Rogers Bill. The following notes can help you guide your students' analysis of the document:
 - The letter writer states that we shouldn't punish refugee children because their ancestors chose the “wrong” (read: Jewish) partner. In this instance, she is criticizing the Nazi government's stance on who was a “wrong”

partner. (Through the passage of a set of laws known as the Nuremberg Laws, the Nazis defined who was Jewish according to pseudoscientific ideas and outlawed intermarriage between so-called “Aryan” Germans and Jews. See [The Nuremberg Race Laws](#) article from USHMM’s Holocaust Encyclopedia for more information.) She continues by noting that the Germans also consider it to be a mistake to believe in free speech.

- Additionally, she describes herself as an “Aryan.” This term, adopted by the Nazis to refer to a so-called “master race” composed mostly of fair-skinned Northern Europeans, was also commonly used in the United States when a person wanted to indicate that he or she was not Jewish. Opponents of refugee admission often claimed that only Jews wanted to admit refugees, and by listing her family’s deep roots in the country and stating that she is “100% Aryan,” “American Girl” wants to emphasize that this is not true.

4. Essential Vocabulary

The following are key vocabulary terms used in this lesson:

1. Corroborate
2. Complement
3. Contradict
4. Resolution
5. Ostracized

Add these words to your [Word Wall](#), if you are using one for this unit, and provide necessary support to help students learn these words as you teach the lesson.

Materials:

- **Audio and Transcript:** [“Miss American”](#)
- **Handout:** [“Miss American” Close Reading](#)
- **Image:** [Please Ring the Bell for Us](#)
- **Handout:** [Essential Quote Worksheet](#)
- **Handout:** [Joint Resolution 64 \(the Wagner-Rogers Bill\)](#)
- **Handout:** [Wagner-Rogers Debate Documents](#)

Teaching Strategies:

- [See, Think, Wonder](#)
- [Think, Pair, Share](#)
- [Read Aloud](#)

Activities:

Day 1

1. Provide Context for the “Miss American” Radio Play and Its Creator

- Before reviewing students’ answers to the basic recall questions they answered for homework as they read the transcript provided with the [“Miss American”](#) audio (see the Notes to Teacher section for more detail), give students some background on the radio play. Tell them that this play coincided with a debate over a proposed bill to admit 20,000 German refugee children under the age of 14 over a two-year period, and the play was used to advocate for the bill. Some students may be unfamiliar with what a radio play is. Tell them that it is a play written to be broadcast on the radio, a form of entertainment that was popular from the 1920s through the 1950s, before the advent of television. Tell them that this particular radio play was produced in 1938, that it was written by the playwright Arch Oboler, and that it starred Katharine Hepburn, who was a major film star of the time. Time permitting, you might share the following information with students, or use this information to answer questions that may arise:

Oboler was born to Latvian Jewish immigrants and spent his early career writing pulp fiction, including for NBC’s wildly popular midnight horror radio program *Lights Out*. In the 1930s, as fascism began to take hold across the world, Oboler shifted his focus to anti-fascist writing. “Miss American,” which aired alongside another radio play, “Suffer Little Children,” pleaded with American audiences to offer more aid to Jewish refugee children. The plays originally aired on the NBC Red network on June 26, 1939, which coincided with congressional debate over the Wagner-Rogers legislation. Oboler continued to write anti-fascist plays during World War II, most famously the wartime propaganda series *Plays for Americans*. When asked about his transition from writing for horror programs to writing about the threat of fascism, he said that he wanted audiences to “take in the actual horror of a world facing, with half-shut eyes, the fascistic Frankenstein’s monster moving over Europe.”

2. Listen to “Miss American”

- Tell students that they will now be listening to the radio play [“Miss American”](#) (14:54) as a class and taking notes on the following focus questions:
 - What artistic choices from the radio play (acting, dialogue, sound, etc.) stand out to you?
 - How does hearing the voices and sound from the radio play complement, influence, or change your understanding of the play?
- Ask volunteers to share their answers with the class.

3. Discuss Larger Themes

- Tell students that they will now be conducting a close read of the radio play. Divide the class into small groups of three to five students. Using the handout [“Miss American” Close Reading](#), students will [read aloud](#) the text in chunks and answer a set of text-dependent questions.

- Regroup as a class and ask volunteers to share their answers to the questions on the handout. Then transition into a larger whole-class discussion using one or more of the following prompts:
 - a. This play highlights two ideas about who America is for and who is entitled to its privileges that have been in tension throughout the entire history of the country. What are they?
 - b. By the end of the play, Ronnie comes around to the children's point of view. Imagine Americans who might be listening to this radio play in the 1930s. Who might have agreed with that vision? Who might have disagreed? Who might have been skeptical that that vision could be a reality?
 - c. Based on your knowledge of American history and current events, where else do you see the debate taking place over who America is for today?

Day 2

1. Spark Student Interest through a Political Cartoon

- To open the lesson, project or distribute copies of the cartoon [Please Ring the Bell for Us](#). To give students the opportunity to draw their own conclusions about the image, do not provide any context at this time other than the title.
- Lead students through a [See, Think, Wonder](#) activity, pausing after each prompt to give them time to record their thoughts. Consider asking students to add one or two more ideas to each response before moving to the next question. This step can push students to examine the image more closely, perhaps making a new observation or inference or posing a new question.
- Ask students to debrief with a partner using the [Think, Pair, Share](#) strategy. Alternatively, if you projected the image, you might invite students one at a time to the board to share their “sees” and “thinks,” having them point to details in the image as they present. You might also list some of their “wonders” on the board or chart paper to refer to later in the lesson. Once students have shared, tell them that they will be returning to the cartoon once they have learned more about the period.

2. Explore the Wagner-Rogers Legislation Debate

- Tell students that in the next activity, they will be exploring both sides of the debate surrounding the Wagner-Rogers Bill, a bill to admit 20,000 German refugee children under the age of 14 over a two-year period. The bill specified that 10,000 children each fiscal year (1939 and 1940) would enter the United States and not be counted against the existing immigration quota laws. The bill also specified that when the refugee children reached the age of 18, they would either be counted against that year's German immigration quota or would return to Europe.
- Write on the board or project the following guiding question:

How did the Wagner-Rogers debate reveal competing ideas about American identity, priorities, and values?

- Pass out documents to students. Everyone should receive the document “Joint Resolution 64 (the Wagner-Rogers Bill)” for reference and to understand the wording of the bill that sparked such debate. Each student should also receive one of the following sources from the [Wagner-Rogers Debate Documents](#) handout:
 - Con:
 - Letter to the Editor of the *Washington Post*
 - Remarks from Senator Robert Reynolds
 - Statement from Frances H. Kinnicutt
 - Statement from Mr. John B. Trevor
 - Pro:
 - Statement from Clarence E. Pickett
 - Letter from an “American Girl”
 - Statement from John Brophy
 - Non-Sectarian Committee for Refugee Children
- Distribute the handout [Essential Quote Worksheet](#). Prompt students to read their assigned documents. You might choose to have students read together with others who have the same handout. After reading, each student will independently choose one “essential quote” from his or her document that helps to answer the guiding question: How did the Wagner-Rogers debate reveal competing ideas about American identity, priorities, and values?
- After choosing quotations, students can complete boxes 1 to 3 on the worksheet.
- Next, students will find a partner who has a different handout, share their quotations, and discuss how their quotations are related to each other. Do their ideas corroborate, complement, or contradict each other? After their partner discussions, students can complete boxes 4 to 6 on their worksheets. End the activity by asking students to share some of their findings with the class.
- Connect students’ study of the Wagner-Rogers Bill with larger themes by returning to the cartoon (“Please Ring the Bell for Us”) that students first examined at the beginning of class. Share with students the cartoon’s caption:

This cartoon, by Francis Knott for the *Dallas Morning News*, was published on July 7, 1939. It accompanied an editorial that described admitting refugee children to the United States as an “act of simple humanity.”

- Ask students to respond to the following questions, first in their journals and then in the [Think, Pair, Share](#) format:
 - After studying the debate over the Wagner-Rogers Bill, what new insights do you have about the cartoonist’s message? How does the cartoonist convey that message?
- Once students have shared their answers with a partner, take some time to debrief the questions as a class. Make sure that students note how the cartoon

uses an emotional appeal to stir viewers. Then ask students to discuss the following questions as a class:

- Why do you think the Wagner-Rogers Bill was aimed at rescuing children and excluded adults? How did the focus on children play into the arguments on both sides of the debate?
- Why do you think the Wagner-Rogers Bill failed?

3. Reflect on Connections to the Present

- Close the lesson by giving students an opportunity to reflect on connections to the present. Ask students to journal independently in response to the following prompt:
 - Support for the admittance of refugees has been a topic of debate throughout American history. What did you learn from studying the Wagner-Rogers Bill debate about the tension between American values and ideals and American priorities and realities?
 - How does looking at this debate from the past help you better understand Americans' responses to current refugee crises?

Extensions:

1. Public Opinion Gallery Walk

- After students have completed the lesson activities, they may be curious as to how average Americans responded to the debate over the Wagner-Rogers Bill and Senator Reynolds's position. Teachers may wish to create a gallery walk from the shorter quotes included in the handout [Wagner-Rogers Bill Letters to the Editor](#). These letters to the editor represent a wide range of opinion from a cross-section of American society.
- It may surprise students that even children were familiar with the Wagner-Rogers debate and wrote editorials to their local papers in response. Once students have completed the gallery walk, ask them to consider how familiar they are with political debates and how they get that information (e.g., through social media, word of mouth, internet searches). How do students connect what happens in their daily lives to the seemingly distant world of politics? What impact can governmental debates have on students, who are seemingly disengaged from developments in the halls of government?

2. Lifted Line Poem for "Miss American"

- To close Day 1, you might consider using the [Lifted Line Poem](#) teaching strategy. Instruct students to review the transcript of "Miss American" again and select one line that is most meaningful, important, or revealing to them, marking it with a star or underlining it. If you have time, you might ask students to write an explanation in their journals for why they lifted the line they chose.
- When everyone has selected a line, ask the students to stand and form a circle. Next, pick one student to begin and a direction (clockwise or counter-clockwise).

Each student should read his or her line in succession in the direction you've picked. Tell students that it doesn't matter if more than one person shares the same line.

- Discuss with students any patterns they noticed in the lines they chose:
 - Were any lines repeated by multiple students? Why did those repeated lines resonate with multiple students? What ideas seemed most meaningful and important to the class? What ideas were not represented in the lifted line poem? How does the class's lifted line poem extend or challenge students' individual thinking about the text?