



**American Immigration Law Foundation  
Immigration Curriculum Center Lesson Plan**

**The Wagner-Rogers Bill: Debate**  
**A Lesson Plan For Middle And High School Students**  
**Learning About U.S. Immigration and/or the Holocaust**

**Grade Level:** 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>

**Goal:** This lesson allows students to develop and hear the arguments for and against the Wagner-Rogers bill, by taking part in a mock Congressional debate on the bill. Students are encouraged to develop and listen to persuasive testimony and speeches, and to come up with creative strategies to change the legislation in ways in which it might be more acceptable.

**Materials:** Nametags, paper

**Timeline:**  
2-3 Class Periods

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

In November 1938, the brutality of the Nazi regime toward the Jews of Germany reached a fevered pitch with "Kristallnacht," or "The Night of Broken Glass." On that night, gangs of Nazi thugs terrorized Jewish communities all over Germany, setting fires to synagogues, Jewish-owned businesses, breaking in windows of Jewish-owned shops, beating and killing Jews and committing other acts of brutality. While America had been generally unwilling to create any special programs to welcome refugees from the Nazi regime during the 1930's, Kristallnacht gained international attention and created a wave of American sympathy towards the victims of Nazi terror. Groups supporting refugee aid saw this as their moment to act on possible relief.

At the suggestion of an interdenominational group concerned with refugee aid, Senator Robert F. Wagner, a Democrat from New York, and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers, a Republican from Massachusetts, introduced identical bills to offer refuge to 20,000 German children, a great majority of them Jewish children. At the time, the immigration laws contained limits, called "quotas" on the number of immigrants that could come to

the U.S. from each country. These children were to be admitted "outside" the quota from Germany. They would be temporarily adopted by American families, with costs assumed by individuals and private organizations. The migration of the children would be supervised by the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization that had been active in refugee assistance in Europe.

The bill was supported by the Nonsectarian Committee for German Refugee Children, a large group of prominent individuals and organizations including religious figures, deans of major academic institutions, political figures and Hollywood actors and actresses. The bill was also supported by many labor unions and by the ALF and CIO.

Opposed to the bill were many "patriotic" organizations that opposed any increase to the immigration quotas. These groups included the American Legion, the American Coalition of Patriotic Societies, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic. The arguments against the bill included the following:

- "Charity begins at home"
- Coming out of the depression, America should be helping thousands of its own poor children.
- We should not break up German families.  
America should not respond to external pressure to increase immigration to the U.S.
- If we help those from abroad, we should not limit our aid to one ethnicity or nationality
- The immigration of these children might bring unwanted foreign elements into the U.S., such as spies or Communists.
- If we single out the Jewish people for assistance, it will backfire and create more anti-Semitism in the U.S.

The bill was actively opposed by the State Department, as many State Department officials were anti-Semitic, opposed opening the immigration quotas, or were concerned that in assisting refugees, we would unwittingly assist spies and other enemies to enter the U.S.

President Franklin Roosevelt did not take a position on the Wagner-Rogers bill. In the end, the bill died in Congress. No special bills were ever passed, and no special programs were created to assist those trying to flee the Nazi regime. In 1941, it became impossible to leave Nazi-occupied lands, and the fate of the Jews in those regions was sealed.

This lesson allows students to develop and hear the arguments for and against the Wagner-Rogers bill, by taking part in a mock Congressional debate on the bill. Students are encouraged to develop and listen to persuasive testimony and speeches, and to come up with creative strategies to change the legislation in ways in which it might be more acceptable.

## **WAGNER-ROGERS BILL – STUDENT ROLE-PLAY/DEBATE**

### **GROUP 1:**

You are Francis H. Kinnicutt and his staff. Mr. Kinnicutt is the president of the Allied Patriotic Societies (APS) APS represents more than 30 patriotic organizations opposed to the Wagner-Rogers bill. These include: The New York County organization of the American Legion, American Women Against Communism, Dames of the Loyal Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Daughters of the Defenders of the Republic, Society of Mayflower Descendants, Sons of the American Revolution, Daughters of the American Revolution, Lord's Day Alliance of the United States and other groups.

These groups oppose Wagner Rogers for a number of reasons. Some of these groups have very strong nativist tendencies. They believe keeping foreign elements out of the U.S. can best preserve American ideals. They are concerned about the admission of immigrants outside the immigration quotas, loss of jobs to immigrants, and the precedent that would be set if the U.S. responded to pressure from outside forces to increase immigration.

Mr. Kinnicutt must make a 3-minute statement in opposition to the Wagner-Rogers bill at the congressional hearing on the bill. A joint subcommittee of the House and the Senate committees on immigration will hold the hearing. The chair of the House subcommittee is Samuel Dickstein, a Jewish Congressman. Senator Wagner has just made an impassioned plea in favor of the legislation, ending with the words from the Bible, "Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not; for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." Notwithstanding this speech, there are several congressmen and senators on the committee who are undecided about the bill. They are concerned about the following issues:

- The poor economy in various regions of the U.S.
- Showing favoritism to one particular ethnic group
- Allowing into the U.S. people who disagree with our political system
- Showing an appropriate American response o the brutality of Kristallnacht
- Finding ways to help refugees without necessarily increasing the immigration quotas

Your job is to assist Mr. Kinnicutt in preparing the most persuasive statement he can make in opposition to the bill. The goal is to win as many congresspersons to his side, without offending others.

## WAGNER-ROGERS BILL – STUDENT ROLE-PLAY/DEBATE

### GROUP 2:

You are Clarence Pickett and his staff. Mr. Pickett is a Quaker who is the head of the Non-Sectarian Committee for German Refugee Children. This committee, which is interdenominational, consists of very prominent people all over the country who support the Wagner-Rogers bill. The American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization, has agreed to oversee the emigration of the 20,000 children and their placement with families in the U.S.

The Quakers have already been working for many years trying to help refugees flee from Germany and Austria. They have seen and made reports on conditions in Germany, including children whose parents had been deported to concentration camps and children whose parents had committed suicide. Since the advent of the Nuremberg laws, Jewish children in Germany have suffered greatly because their parents have lost their jobs, property and homes. The children have not been permitted to attend German schools or participate in the same kind of social life including culture and sports that they did prior to the Nazi regime. In your trips to Germany you have personally witnessed children banned from parks and spat upon in the streets.

You are tasked with helping Mr. Pickett make a 3-minute speech in support of the Wagner-Rogers bill at a congressional hearing. A joint subcommittee of the house and Senate committees on immigration will hold the hearing. The chair of the House subcommittee is Samuel Dickstein, a Jewish congressman. Senator Wagner has just made an impassioned plea in favor of the legislation, ending with the words from the Bible, “Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not; for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Notwithstanding this speech, there are several congressmen and senators on the committee who are undecided about the bill. They are concerned about the following issues:

- The poor economy in various regions of the U.S., which is just creeping out of a depression
- Showing favoritism to one particular ethnic group
- Allowing into the U.S. people who disagree with our political system
- Showing an appropriate American response to the brutality of Kristallnacht
- Finding ways to help refugees without necessarily increasing the immigration quotas

Although those opposing the bill might not mention it directly at the hearing, you are also aware that much of the opposition to the bill stems from anti-Semitism.

You have to create the most persuasive statement possible for Mr. Pickett, arguing that the admission of these 20,000 children will not be a threat to the American economy or a danger to our democratic ideals. Somehow, you are also going to have to address, directly or indirectly, the anti-Semitic strain in the opposition.

## **WAGNER-ROGERS BILL – STUDENT ROLE-PLAY/DEBATE**

### **GROUP 3:**

You are Congressman William Poage, a Democrat from Texas, and his staff. You have very mixed feelings about the Wagner-Rogers bill. You have heard, and believe, reports of brutality towards Jews in Nazi Germany. On the other hand, you have in your own district in Texas a high number of unemployed Americans who are having trouble feeding and caring for their own children. While you do not seriously believe that the immigration of 20,000 children will negatively impact the U.S. economy, coming from a high unemployment district, you have concerns about the admission of foreigners in the U.S. outside the immigration quotas. You are also a devout Christian who believes that America has a moral obligation to assist, to the best of its ability, those fleeing persecution in other countries.

Today, a joint subcommittee of the House and Senate committees on immigration is holding a hearing on Wagner-Rogers. The chair of the House subcommittee is Samuel Dickstein, a Jewish congressman. Senator Wagner has just made an impassioned plea in favor of the legislation, ending with the words from the Bible, “Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not; for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Notwithstanding this speech, several of your congressional colleagues, like you, are undecided about the bill. They are concerned about the following issues:

- The poor economy in various regions of the U.S.
- Showing favoritism to one particular ethnic group
- Allowing into the U.S. people who disagree with our political system
- Showing an appropriate American response to the brutality of Kristallnacht
- Finding ways to help refugees without necessarily increasing the immigration quotas

You have asked your staff to pay close attention to the speeches during the debates. Perhaps you can come up with an amendment to the bill that will help the children without threatening the current immigration system, and address the issues of those who feel that the bill might allow the “wrong element” into the U.S. After the speeches pro and con, you will rise to offer your ideas. You have 3 minutes to present an alternative to the bill as it stands, or to otherwise express your views.

## **WAGNER-ROGERS BILL – STUDENT ROLE-PLAY/DEBATE**

### **GROUP 4:**

You are Representative Edith Nourse Rogers of Massachusetts and her staff. You have been listening to the testimony on the bill that you introduced to rescue 20,000 German children from Nazi Germany. The testimony was presented at a hearing on the bill, held by a joint subcommittee of the House and Senate committees on immigration. Senator Wagner, the Senate sponsor of the bill, opened the hearing with an impassioned plea in favor of the legislation, ending with the words from the Bible, “Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not; for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Notwithstanding this speech, there are several congressmen and senators on the committee who are undecided about the bill. They are concerned about the following issues:

- The poor economy in various regions of the U.S., which is just creeping out of a depression
- Showing favoritism to one particular ethnic group
- Allowing into the U.S. people who disagree with our political system
- Showing an appropriate American response to the brutality of Kristallnacht
- Finding ways to help refugees without necessarily increasing the immigration quotas

Although those opposing the bill might not mention it directly at the hearing, you also are aware that much of the opposition to the bill stems from anti-Semitism.

You will rise to speak in favor of the bill at the end of the hearing, addressing some of the testimony you have heard in favor and against the bill. You have 3 minutes and your goal is to win over as many hearts and minds of your colleagues as you can. You will have to address some or all of the following issues:

- The thousands of American children who need help
- The argument that we should be helping all ethnic groups from Europe and perhaps Asia, not just one group
- If we admit one group outside the immigration quotas, we will “open the floodgates” of immigration

You can support the bill as is, or you can suggest amendments that might garner the support of your congressional colleagues.