

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the U.S. enforced strict quotas or limits on immigration. Xenophobia and antisemitism were common during this time. Following increased violence against Jews in Europe, a group of interfaith leaders pushed for legislation that would ease quotas to allow refugee children to immigrate to the U.S. The Wagner-Rogers Bill of 1939 proposed admitting 20,000 German refugee children under the age of fourteen over a two-year period. Public sentiment was against the bill – many feared it would worsen the problem of unemployment and favored limits on all immigration. Though hearings were held on the bill, it didn't receive enough Congressional support and was withdrawn before being brought to a vote. The following letter to the editor is one perspective that represents the feelings of many Americans in 1939.

Alien Children
Phoenix

Editor,
Arizona Republic,
Sir:

This is one time that I cannot agree with one of your editorials, as appeared in the Republic this date (April 27) relative to admitting 20,000 German refugee children into this country.

You say this bill is a humanitarian act. No doubt that is true. But, why should the United States, when millions of workers are unemployed and hundreds of thousands of American children are hungry, bring in 20,000 foreigners and feed them?

The people who are sponsoring this bill should furnish the money to take care of these refugees—not the United States taxpayers.

I have read many editorials in your paper lamenting the great burden being placed on the taxpayers through relief programs of American citizens, but you failed to state in this editorial that bringing these children to America would impose any kind of a burden. But you did state that other nations are taking numbers of these refugee children, and it seems only fair that the United States should take its quota. What would be the quota of the United States—who has authority to say?

After we have amply provided employment for our unemployed and there are no hungry American children in this country and there is a labor shortage, then, and not until then, should we admit more aliens, children or grown-ups.

If the United States should join other nations in forming a colony in some other country and send these refugees there, I don't believe that the many millions of 100 per cent Americans would object. But, why should we take bread out of our own children's mouths to take care of 20,000 foreign children? We have too many aliens in this country today.

BILL WILLIAMSON,
P. O. Box 3891.

THINK IT THROUGH...

- What were the writer's main concerns about admitting refugee children to the U.S.?
- What is the tone of the letter? How would you describe the writer's feelings about refugee children and immigrants?
- What specific words or language most reflect the writer's viewpoints?
- How do the arguments in this letter compare to opinions in the U.S. today on immigration?

Source: Bill Williamson, "Alien Children," *Arizona Republic*, 1939, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/287878601161465219>.