The Impact and Legacy of Progressive Leader Robert M. La Follette

Historian Nancy C. Unger, Professor and Chair of the History Department at Santa Clara University, explores the life of Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette and the digitization in History Vault of the Robert M. La Follette Papers held by the Wisconsin Historical Society.

With his fiery, inspirational speeches, tireless championing of workers, and strong support for grassroots organizations, Robert “Fighting Bob” La Follette (1855-1925) is an almost mythical figure in politics, the type of idealized leader that unfortunately appears more often in fiction than in real government. As a U.S. representative, governor, and U.S. Senator, La Follette left enduring political legacies: direct election of senators, child labor laws, environmental protections, women's suffrage, and workers’ compensation. Under his leadership, Wisconsin was the first state to enact many reforms that became centerpieces of the Progressive agenda. But Fighting Bob’s righteous fervor was not without consequence, and he suffered politically as well as financially, physically, and emotionally from the enormous pressure he exerted on himself.
Synopsis of Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer, by Nancy Unger
Winner of 2001 Book of Merit Award, Wisconsin Historical Society

The early years of a budding progressive activist

Born in the proverbial log cabin in Primrose, Wisconsin in 1855, La Follette was only ten months old when his father died. His mother impressed in his young mind that he must never do anything to dishonor his father’s name, but instead demonstrate integrity and do right without fail. As a youth his bent toward righteousness found its focus when he heard a commencement address delivered by Edward G. Ryan, soon to become Wisconsin’s chief justice.

Ryan presented a portrait of contemporary conditions featuring political, economic and moral issues. According to Ryan, “The question will arise and arise in your day…which shall rule—wealth or man; which shall lead – money or intellect; who shall fill public stations—educated and patriotic freemen, or the feudal serfs of corporate capital?”

La Follette prepared to answer those questions attending the University of Wisconsin for both undergrad and law, where he learned about the impacts of industrialization and urbanization and honed the superb speaking skills that would be crucial throughout his long political career. At the age of twenty-six he became district attorney, a stepping stone to his election to Congress four years later. Although he was not yet a firebrand for progressive reform, flashes of his dedication to protecting and enhancing the rights of the many were already evident.

In 1889, for example, supporting the enforcement of a free, unintimidated ballot to African Americans, La Follette lectured the white South from the floor of the U.S. Congress: “There is nothing threatening or portentous in the Negro problem today, excepting as you make it so. The difficulty does not lie with him, but with you instead, in the blind prejudice and stubborn antagonism, ever opposed to his development politically and socially as a citizen.”

A commitment to equality across gender, race, and class lines

La Follette believed that the acceptance of racial equality would benefit whites as well as non-whites, and he extended that logic to include issues of gender equality as well. He advocated not only women’s voting rights but recognition of their full equality: “It is so obvious as to hardly admit of argument…the interest[s] of men and women are not superior nor antagonistic one to the other but are mutual and inseparable…Woman suffrage is but the extension of the principle of democracy…[and] will result in a more enlightened better balanced citizenship.” For La Follette, feminism began at home with his wife, Belle La Follette, activist for civil rights, world peace, and women’s suffrage. Theirs was a remarkable partnership between two equals.

Turned out of Congress after three terms, La Follette spent the following decade practicing law and studying local and national conditions. The Gilded Age economy was unregulated and frequently rocked by recessions and depressions. Immigrants poured in, often taking dangerous industrial jobs and living in urban ghettos rife with poverty, crime, disease, and pollution. La Follette and his fellow progressives were dedicated to combatting the various problems of the new urban industrial age.
La Follette’s rally cry: “The supreme issue, involving all the others, is the encroachment of the powerful few upon the rights of the many.” More than anything else, he believed in the American people: “The sovereign are in the workshops, on the farms, in the factories, in the stores and counting rooms.” “The will of the people shall prevail,” he promised his fellow citizens, “The fight is on. It will continue to victory. There will be no halt and no compromise.”

A divisive – and efficient – reformer

Bob La Follette served as Governor of Wisconsin from 1901-1906. Under his leadership, Wisconsin led the nation to more equitably redistribute the nation’s wealth and power. By 1906, when La Follette left the governor’s chair for a U.S. Senate seat, many of the state’s reforms were eagerly adopted by progressive governors across the nation. Wisconsin boasted a thoroughgoing and efficient reform of railroads and other powerful utilities; civil service reform for state officials; a stringent anti-lobby law, requiring lobbyists to register and to publish details of contracts with legislators; stronger provisions against corrupt practices; environmental measures including the forest conservation program; tax reforms, and nominations by primary elections for all elected officials.

La Follette brought his Wisconsin agenda to the Senate, where his refusal to compromise won him many enemies— just as it had at the state level, ultimately pushing to the breaking point his relationship with President Theodore Roosevelt. His unwavering righteousness contributed to the failure of La Follette’s many presidential bids—but at the same time also earned him the loyalty of his faithful supporters. During his nineteen years in the senate he led some of the progressive movement’s successes on the national level, making important gains in industrial working conditions, workers’ compensation, electoral reform, education, public health, and women’s suffrage.

Opposition to World War I

Prior to US entry into World War I, La Follette had warned that “War and rumors of war are a dreadful diversion for peoples demanding juster distribution of wealth. War is the money changer’s opportunity, and the social reformer’s doom.” Moreover, this foreign war, he said, would be financed not by the industries who stood to profit the most, but by American taxpayers who could afford it the least. He noted the hypocrisy of Americans as self-proclaimed “custodians of peace and instructors in democratic ideals to less enlightened peoples” while their own nation continued to be plagued by serious problems of inequity, including racism, sexism, and political corruption.

The filibuster La Follette organized to prevent US entry into war electrified the nation. La Follette’s warning that the country was being railroaded into a war not in its best interests lasted four hours. When he finished, according to one witness, he “stood in silence, tears running down his face...the grief and anger of this despairing man like that of a person who had failed to keep his child from doing itself irreparable harm.” Said one senator to another, “That is the greatest speech we will either of us ever hear.” For his unflinching opposition to US entry into the war, La Follette was spat upon, hung in effigy, and made the subject of a congressional investigation.

After traveling to Europe in 1923, La Follette spoke of the necessity of following any war with an equitable, just, and therefore lasting peace. He believed that Americans should be concerned with saving the lives of suffering peoples rather than dictating others’ political systems, noting specifically, “Whether the Russian government is good or bad according to our standards, it is not up to us to overthrow it...we have enough to do here at home.” He denounced what he termed Wilson’s “autocratic view of executive power” and the debacle in post war Europe that Wilson had helped to negotiate, warning, “I went to Europe five years after the end of the ‘war to end all war’ and ‘to make the world safe for democracy’ – four years after the so called peace of Versailles. Instead of peace, I found new wars in the making.” He died in 1925, making plans for a new progressive coalition.
History Vault provides unparalleled access to information and insight

The Wisconsin Historical Society Press released a revised, paperback edition of *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* in 2008. The first edition, however, was published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2000, long before History Vault and other ProQuest Digital Projects were available. Without that access, the research took many years. From my home in Mountain View, California, I traveled to Washington, DC, where I consulted the vast La Follette Family Collection in the Library of Congress. Also crucial to that study were the Wisconsin Historical Society’s Papers of Robert M. La Follette now made available through History Vault.

During my research, I felt fortunate that this collection covering La Follette's early political reform career (1879-1910) had been transferred to 163 reels of microfilm and made available at a variety of repositories throughout the country, including what was then California State University, Hayward. Later I travelled to Madison, Wisconsin to study related collections, and to consult the Robert La Follette Papers in the original. The research was fruitful, but expensive and time-consuming, taking me away from home and my young family.

Now, I marvel at the convenience and ease of use of this digitized collection from History Vault. To be able to conduct an instant a search using specific terms, to download documents, and to do so from a laptop anywhere—this is modern research at its most convenient and efficient! It moves this research out of the realm of only the most dedicated scholar committed to extensive time and travel and into the hands of almost anyone. Professional academics, graduate students, and even undergraduates now have the opportunity to conduct primary research into this important progressive leader and the reforms he helped to bring to American society and politics.

Here is a sampling of the materials that I, and other recent scholars of La Follette and progressive reform, have found of value in the La Follette materials now available in History Vault:

**Correspondence:** Dating from 1879-1910, topics range from La Follette’s law practice, to letters he received from constituents after he was elected to the Senate, to materials related to his 1908 presidential bid and 1910 senate re-election campaign. I found some crucial information on La Follette's childhood, college years, and genealogy in this collection, and a few key insights into the La Follette marriage and his troublesome health history. The collection also includes letters La Follette received after accusing Philetus Sawyer of attempting to bribe him, a pivotal moment in La Follette's career.

**Governor's Letterbooks:** Although this collection is mainly of La Follette's outgoing correspondence during his five years as governor, it includes some messages to the legislature about specific bills along with a few personal letters. This series provides insight into the daily workings of La Follette's governorship. John Buenker made extensive use of this collection in his *The Progressive Era, 1893-1914*, volume four of the definitive *History of Wisconsin*.

**Speeches and Writings:** This collection includes speeches key to La Follette's character and values, including his commencement address to graduates of the law school of Howard University in 1886. Key political speeches include his 1884 Memorial Day speech, his remarks to the House of Representatives on Interstate Commerce in 1887, his “Peril in the Machine” oration of 1897, and his speech “Primary Elections for the Nomination of all Candidates by Australian Ballot” in 1898. Richard Drake made extensive use of this collection to produce *The Education of an Anti-Imperialist: Robert La Follette and U.S. Expansion*.

**Wisconsin Republican Party Records:** This underutilized collection offers an excellent opportunity for a digital/statistical historian to delve deeply into Wisconsin politics at the turn of the last century, as the extensive voter lists include occupation, national origin, and degree of party affiliation. These records also include correspondence concerning La Follette’s 1922 senatorial campaign plus the Wisconsin organization of La Follette’s 1924 independent presidential bid, including detailed information about supporters and contributors.
La Follette's enduring progressive legacy

Progressivism should be measured not only by what it achieved in very real terms, but also by what it prevented. Had the Gilded Age excesses and abuses been allowed to proliferate unheeded, a very different America would have been the result. Instead, much of the original progressive agenda, with its emphasis on federal regulation, found its way into the New Deal. Progressive notions of equality and the power of the people championed by La Follette were evident in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, and in a variety of subsequent protests and reform efforts.

It is undeniable, however, that many progressive remedies to the modern urban, industrial society did not last. Bob La Follette anticipated just such reversals of progressive gains and counseled hope rather than despair. Near the end of his life, as an independent in the presidential campaign of 1924, in which he garnered 17% of the vote, he proclaimed this reminder:

"America is not made but is in the making. There is an unending struggle to make and keep government representative. Mere passive citizenship is not enough. Men must be aggressive for what is right if government is to be saved from those who are aggressive for what is wrong. There is work for everyone. The field is large. It is a glorious service, this service for the country. Every American should count it a patriotic duty to build at least a part of his life into the life of his country, to do his share in the making of America."

About Nancy C. Unger

Nancy C. Unger is Professor and Chair of the History Department at Santa Clara University. She is the author of two award-winning biographies, Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer, and Belle La Follette: Progressive Era Reformer. Her book Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History was a California Book Award finalist. With Christopher McKnight Nichols she edited A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. She is the author of dozens of scholarly articles and essays on the history of progressive reform. Her op-eds applying lessons of the past to present-day problems have appeared on TIME.com, CNN.com, WashingtonPost.com, RealClearPolitics, and in newspapers nationwide, including the Chicago Sun-Times, Miami Herald, San Francisco Examiner, and the San Jose Mercury News. Her television and radio appearances include C-SPAN and National Public Radio.

More information on Dr. Unger is available at https://www.scu.edu/cas/history/faculty-and-staff/nancy-unger/

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Denver, Colo. Nov. 6, 1902.

Hon. Robt. M. LaFollette,
Madison, Wis.

Dear Governor,

Please accept my congratulations on the magnificent victory for yourself and the whole State ticket.

I felt all along that you could not fail and I trust that Douglas County did its full duty, although I was obliged to leave after voting on election day and have not yet learned what majority that County gave for the State ticket.

I observe by newspaper reports here that the majority on the State ticket has been

I trust that or at least will as ably advocated.

I am West on days.

Wishing you a is assured, I remain

[Signature]

December 3rd.

Dear Sam:-

I drop you this line, so that you will not worry about your future law partner’s health and happiness. We are both well. Fails is contented so far and managed to cause herself and the rest of us, on the train. We are settled so far as the packing is concerned, and shall soon begin work. Mrs. Meyer is with us, for which I am very thankful. Guin “marion” and Mr. Carr together with Mr. Waddington were on the train. We had two evenings at poker. Bob won enough to pay his debts. But I lost enough to make him poor again. Such is the fate of gamblers.

Do not be discouraged on the political outlook. Even the weak tariff republicans, say it was not the tariff that occasioned the defeat. Local causes, over confidence, etc. seem to be the occasion of defeat throughout the country. They will do differently in ’03. This is not said for effect, it is the actual facts.