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*Robert M. La Follette senior (right) groomed both sons, Bob and Phil, to carry on his political work, but Young Bob (left) carried the heavier weight of his father's considerable political expectations.*

# The Crisis Years

An Excerpt from *Young Bob: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette, Jr.*

**By Patrick J. Maney**

Robert M. La Follette, Jr., whose career spanned the tumultuous years from Coolidge prosperity, through the Great Depression and World War II, to the Cold War and McCarthyism was the son of Wisconsin's legendary progressive leader, "Fighting Bob" La Follette. Young Bob entered the U.S. Senate upon his father's death in 1925. At the age of thirty, he was the youngest senator since Henry Clay. He made his mark on national life as a key architect of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, a leading champion of labor rights and civil liberties, and

author of legislation that endures to the present day. As the Wisconsin Historical Society Press's new edition of the only full-scale biography of La Follette, and the first to exploit La Follette's voluminous collection of personal papers, makes clear, Young Bob was one of the best senators in history but also one of the most tragic. As a young man Young Bob was shaped by the example and experience of his father, but, as this excerpt reveals, his nature and temperament would make him a much different kind of politician.

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When twenty-two-year-old Bob La Follette arrived in Washington late in February 1917, he found his father working frantically to keep the United States out of war. The elder La Follette was not a pacifist, but he did believe that the current war was strictly a European affair. To him it was just one more of the seemingly endless struggles between imperialistic nations of the Old World, and neither national security nor violations of international law required American intervention. He believed that if the United States did enter the war, the only victor would be the nation's already swollen business and financial elite; and he feared that, in addition to the countless thousands who would sacrifice their lives, the progressive movement and even democracy itself might be casualties. Never before had La Follette been so convinced of the rightness of his cause. Adding to his determination was his belief that the "people," especially the people of Wisconsin, nearly half of whom were of German ancestry, opposed intervention.

Bob shared his father's convictions, and during his first days in Washington he watched with dismay as the nation moved toward war. On February 20 the Senate debated the administration's request for an appropriation of one-half billion dollars to expand the army and navy. "In getting ready to suppress German militarism," Bob complained, "we are out germaning the Germans." The next day he reported that the Senate was considering a revenue bill "which intends to make the small businessman of the country pay for our military establishments; of course he will pass it all along to poor Mr. Consumer and as usual he will pay the price."

The preparedness drive reached a climax a week later when President Woodrow Wilson, seeking to defend American commercial vessels from German submarine attack, asked Congress for the power to arm merchant ships. Convinced that such an action made war certain, Senator La Follette leaped to the attack. He believed that if he could delay passage of the bill, he might still have time to arouse enough

public sentiment to avert war. Although a majority in Congress supported the armed-ship bill, La Follette had time on his side, for Congress was set to adjourn in just nine days.

Although the House passed the armed-ship bill, a week went by without the Senate taking any action. Then, on Saturday, March 3, twenty-four hours before adjournment, the supporters of the administration decided to hold the Senate in continuous session until they could force a vote. Just as determined to prevent a roll call, La Follette and a handful of like-

minded senators launched a filibuster. Throughout Saturday evening and early Sunday morning, opponents of the bill held the floor. La Follette, planning to speak last, stayed in his office and worked on his address. Bob, Jr., remained on the Senate floor to help manage the filibuster.

At eight-thirty on Sunday morning, Senator La Follette entered the chamber with the intention of holding the floor until adjournment. But the presiding officer of the Senate refused to recognize him. Enraged, the Wisconsin senator jumped out of his seat, moved into the center aisle, and shouted for recognition. In

reaction, a group of Democrats rushed into the aisle toward La Follette, trying to shout him down. Sen. Harry Lane of Oregon, a close friend of La Follette, believed that La Follette was in danger of physical attack, for he later claimed that one of the Democrats, Ollie James of Kentucky, had a pistol under his coat. To protect La Follette, Lane followed James up the aisle, ready to plunge a knife into his neck should he draw the gun. Although the shouting continued, no fight actually broke out.

Bob, standing just inside the door of the Senate chamber, watched all this with alarm. When things momentarily quieted down, he dashed off a short note to his father: "Please, Please, be calm—you know what the press will do—remember Mother." When the debate heated up again, and Senator La Follette angrily declared, "I will continue on this floor until somebody carries me off, and I should like to see the man who will do it," Bob again warned his father: "You are noticeably



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*Maple Bluff Farm, on the shores of Lake Mendota, was where the La Follettes lived between sessions of Congress after Fighting Bob was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1905. Parents Belle and Bob hoped the children, including Young Bob, would develop the agrarian virtues of self-reliance and responsibility through their exposure to country living.*

& extremely excited. For god's sake make your protest & prevent passage of the bill if you like but . . . do not try to fight senate physically. I am almost crazy with strain." The wrangling continued for hours, with La Follette constantly trying to secure the floor. Finally, at noon, the Senate adjourned without taking a vote on the armed-ship bill.

The successful filibuster brought a barrage of criticism. The next day, newspapers throughout the country carried Woodrow Wilson's denunciation of the "little group of willful men, representing no opinion but their own," who had "rendered the great government of the United States helpless and contemptible." Editorials followed suit: one called the willful men "Knaves who betrayed the nation in the interest of Germany," another referred to "La Follette and his little group of perverts." Cartoonist Rollin Kirby, in the *New York World*, pictured the hand of Germany pinning the Iron Cross on La Follette. The senator also suffered personal abuse. He and Bob were forced to stop riding the streetcar in order to avoid the hateful stares of fellow passengers, some of whom even spat upon the senator. Through it all, Bob echoed his father's determination. "Whatever the press or the people may say or do I am satisfied that the course taken was one that had delayed war . . . ; and delay is always possible of a turn which may help to bring us thru the madness."

Yet, however much Bob supported his father's opposition to war, he was somewhat skeptical of his means of expressing it. During the armed-ship debate, Bob had urged restraint and caution. Then, in the wake of the public outcry, he advised his father to draft a detailed public statement explaining his opposition to the bill. Bob felt that if people understood the senator's reasoning, they might be less inclined to criticize him. When the senator ignored his son's plea, Bob telegraphed his mother in Wisconsin and asked her to appeal to him. Thus, Bob revealed a difference between himself and his father, not one of principle, but one of personality and



WHi(L51)29, Album 25.136

*Young Bob with his mother, Belle Case La Follette, in La Jolla, California, 1919. La Follette spent nearly a year in a small rented cottage in La Jolla recovering from one of the many mysterious illnesses that plagued him throughout his life.*

temperament. Bob was more cautious than the senator, more sensitive to criticism, and more concerned about the political consequences of actions.

On April 2, 1917, Woodrow Wilson called for a declaration of war. On April 4, after a three-hour speech, which Bob described as "one of the greatest, if not the greatest he has done in the Senate," the elder La Follette joined five other senators and fifty representatives in voting against the declaration of war. "Henceforth," declared the *Boston Evening Transcript*, "he is the Man without a Country."

Undaunted, Senator La Follette kept up the attack. He opposed conscription, introduced legislation to ensure the rights of conscientious objectors, and worked for a tax system that would prevent any person or corporation from profiting from the war. . . .

"Things have been moving along here so rapidly," Bob wrote to [younger siblings] Phil and Mary, "that it just takes one's breath away. . . . It is indeed sad to be here and see all the cherished institutions of our beloved country thrown away on the scrap heap all in the name of democracy. Democracy, thy name is not war and alas most assuredly not the Democracy of Wilson." Forced conscription particularly

upset him. It was, he believed, an absolute “reversal of the history of this and every other democracy.”

Principle aside, Bob had a more compelling reason to be concerned about conscription. At age twenty-two, and with a lottery number of 2117, he expected to receive a draft notice by the end of the summer. Although he believed the war to be morally wrong, he, like his father, was not a pacifist. He therefore never gave serious consideration to declaring himself a conscientious objector. But he did, for a time, think of joining the National Guard; his father, after soliciting advice from legal experts, had concluded that the Guard could not lawfully leave the country to fight overseas. But Bob rejected these options and placed his hopes on a medical deferment. Early in June he filled out the registration form and applied for an exemption on the grounds of “poor physical condition caused by protracted illness.” Although his personal physician assured Bob that any examiner who passed him “would be a fit inmate for an insane asylum,” the family spent an anxious summer waiting for the time Bob would have to appear for his physical examination. But on 24 August, the examining doctor declared him unfit for military service. . . .

With the threat of the draft behind him, Bob avidly plunged into the work of his father’s office. His main duty was to handle the large volume of mail, on some days as many as five hundred letters. “Bobbie,” the senator proudly reported, “has the run of this old correspondence and can handle it more rapidly than anyone else—He writes or dictates a splendid letter terse—well phrased—and with the political point. . . .” In his spare time, he wrote a weekly column entitled “The Week in Washington,” which he sent out to forty-five small-town, labor, and socialist newspapers throughout the country. “In some way,” began a typical column, “the most significant news of the week is being completely ignored by the metropolitan press. Or perhaps they don’t know it. At any rate I am able to give you a piece of exclusive information. . . . My informant—who is distinctly on the inside—tells me. . . .” After such a big buildup, the actual news story was usually rather disappointing, but at least the column was interesting, well written, and humorous, demonstrating Bob’s characteristic blend of understatement and irony.

Bob’s performance, on the job and in the column, so

impressed his father that he considered making Bob business manager and editor of *La Follette’s Magazine*, a weekly publication that the senator had founded in 1909. The magazine was in serious trouble; sales were down, and the threat of government censorship posed a constant worry. Bob, his father believed, would get it back on its feet. But Belle had less confidence in her son’s abilities, and pointing to his inexperience, she vetoed the plan.



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*After winning a special election to fill his father’s seat, La Follette became, at age thirty, the youngest U.S. senator in over a century.*

Bob probably would have been happy to return to Madison and assume management of the magazine, since life in Washington was becoming more depressing by the day. The attacks on his father continued, and although Bob could take consolation in the numerous letters of support, the hate mail was also increasing. But all of this was minor in comparison to the outcry that followed his father’s famous speech, on September 20, 1917, to the Non-Partisan League in St. Paul, Minnesota. In the course of his extemporaneous remarks, the senator said that although the United States had had “serious grievances in Germany,” those grievances did not warrant a declaration of war. In its account of the speech, the Associated Press misquoted La Follette as having said that the United States had “no grievances against Germany.” The next day, newspapers throughout the nation carried the story under blazing headlines. But even an accurate account of the speech probably would have meant trouble for La Follette, since it was decidedly antiwar and questioned Wilson’s integrity. For many the misquotation provided concrete evidence that the senator from Wisconsin was serving the enemy. . . .

What most distressed Bob was the outcry against his father that arose in Wisconsin. Long-standing political enemies viewed the loyalty issue as a godsend that they might exploit to finally rid the state of La Follette’s influence. Because Wisconsin had the largest German population of any state, other people probably felt that the state had to prove its patriotism to the nation. In any event, former friends joined old enemies in denouncing the senator. The University of Wisconsin became a hotbed of anti-La Follette fervor. In December students and faculty gathered behind the library to burn La Follette in effigy. The president of the university, Charles Van Hise, who had gone to school with the senator and Belle and who had become president through La Follette’s influence, charged him with “aiding and abetting the enemy.” Professor



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*For much of the 1930s the La Follette brothers—one a prominent U.S. senator, the other an innovative, three-term governor of Wisconsin—looked like the wave of the future. Political setbacks and resentments, especially on the part of Phil (right), gradually took their toll, until in the end the brothers were barely on speaking terms.*

of Economics John R. Commons, of whom the senator had said only a year earlier, “Thank God for such good friend,” joined the chorus of denunciation. In January 1918, all but four members of the faculty signed a petition demanding La Follette’s expulsion from the Senate. “Damn that faculty to hell,” said Bob angrily. “I hope that I may live to see each one . . . get what is coming to him if there is any justice in this damn world.” . . .

The stress-filled months after the senator’s St. Paul speech were hard on all the La Follettes, especially on Bob. During the days, he struggled to keep up with his office chores. In the evenings, after a hurried dinner, he trudged back to the Capitol to help his father, his mother, and the staff prepare the legal defense that the senator planned to present to the committee investigating the possibility of expulsion. “I am so tired,” Bob complained, “that I could sleep” standing “on the toes of one foot.”

Then, late in January 1918, he became critically ill with what doctors diagnosed as streptococcal pneumonia. Among his symptoms were swelling of his face and limbs, a high tem-

perature, and the appearance of painful, inflamed nodules scattered over his body. . . . On February 7, the day after his twenty-third birthday, Bob underwent surgery to drain pus from the cavity behind his right lung. After the operation, doctors could offer little more in the way of treatment than rest and proper diet.

Only a few days after Bob came home from the hospital, he suffered a relapse. . . . At times, his condition was so bad that he feared he might die. Belle dropped her outside activities to care for her son. At night, after coming home from the Capitol, the senator would relieve her. “Papa,” said Belle, “has had almost as hard a time as Bobbie. He has been so wrought up over him he will not go to bed nights and hovers about his room.”

By July, although Bob remained bedridden, the worst was finally over. His doctors now recommended a full year of rest and recuperation. . . . In September, Bob, his mother, and Mary rented a cottage on the Pacific Ocean, near La Jolla, California, where they remained for almost a year.

Bob’s prolonged illness drained him emotionally as well as physically by reinforcing his latent sense of failure and inade-

quacy. . . . Late in November 1918, encouraging news from Europe temporarily lifted Bob's spirits. "God what a relief to once more dwell in a peaceful world," he said when he heard of the armistice. The political situation in Washington also improved. In the November elections, the Republicans gained a majority in both houses of Congress. Their majority in the Senate was slim, however, and to the dismay of both Democrats and Republicans it appeared that Senator La Follette held the balance of power. Not surprisingly, the committee considering his expulsion rapidly concluded its investigation without taking action.

The diplomatic events following the war, however, were not as encouraging. As President Wilson prepared to leave for the Paris peace conference, Bob predicted that the conference would turn into "tragic fiasco," a scramble for the spoils of war. Yet he characteristically cautioned his father to "lie low" and "let some one else point out the betrayal." After hearing of the proposed league of nations, he denounced Wilson: "I wish the long faced fraud would stay over there for good and all." In May 1919, he wrote that Wilson, "the past master of hypocrisy," had "sold us out so completely that a few rotten trades seem not to matter."

By the end of June, Bob had recovered and was ready to leave California. Except for a slight limp—the tendons in the backs of his legs had contracted during the long period of bed rest and inactivity—he showed no physical signs of the long ordeal. Yet, the events of the last two years, especially the war, had profoundly affected him, as he realized, perhaps for the first time, when he stopped off in Madison on the way back to Washington.

It had been over a year since his last visit, and things had changed. But nothing had changed more than his attitude. "I was surprised at how little attachment I have left for this town," he wrote his mother. "I have always felt a thrill on coming in on the train but not this time. I am glad of course



WHS Archives Name File

*After Phil launched the National Progressives of America (NPA) party in 1938, Bob reluctantly joined his brother in his national crusade; as shown here, he occasionally posed for publicity shots wearing an NPA button. Before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the NPA and the La Follette brothers warned the nation about the dangers of entering World War II and supported the America First movement.*

to see my old friends and they were all very cordial but the 'patriots' killed the home feeling for me and I do not think I will ever have it again." His father tried to talk him out of it: "I would not let a few cheap skates drive me from the most beautiful place in the world—where I had made my home, reared my family, buried my dead. . . . Eighty percent are our real friends—they have been bound hand and foot & gagged there as they have everywhere in this country & in the world." The elder La Follette could forget, but Bob could not. In the years to come, he would spend considerable time in Wisconsin. One day he would represent it in the United States Senate. Still, he would never be able to shake off the feeling that many people in the state, including some of the family's closest friends, had betrayed his father. ❧

The new edition of *Young Bob: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette, Jr.*, published by the Wisconsin Historical Society Press, is available to

members of the Wisconsin Historical Society at a 10 percent discount. To order call the Chicago distribution center at (800) 621-2736. Hardcover ISBN 0-87020-340-1; softcover ISBN 0-87020-341-X.

#### Resources

Belle Case La Follette and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette* (New York, 1953), two volumes  
La Follette Family Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

### *The Author*



A native of Wisconsin, **Patrick J. Maney** received a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point in 1969 and a doctorate from the University of Maryland in 1976. During the late 1970s, he worked in the Wisconsin State Senate. From 1980 to 1998 he taught American history at Tulane University. Currently the chair of the history department at the University of South Carolina, he is the author of *The Roosevelt Presence: The Life and Legacy of FDR* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).