

# Progressive Era Editorial Cartoons

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## Political Cartoons - Brief History

### Mr. La Follette's Strongest Card

This La Follette cartoon, created by John T. McCutcheon, appeared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* on December 29, 1911. Currently it is kept in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives.

La Follette was nearing the end of his first term as one of the U.S. Senators from Wisconsin by 1911 when this cartoon appeared. Prior to that he had served three terms as governor of Wisconsin. This cartoon reflects the work La Follette began as governor and continued to encourage as a senator. The images that La Follette refers to as "Exhibit A" demonstrate his work on railroad legislation.

In 1902 La Follette's message contained the need for state regulation of railroad freight rates. Even after the state legislature killed the rate commission and maximum freight bills that same year, La Follette continued to proclaim the need for railroad regulation across the state during his 1904 campaign. La Follette ensured that a railroad rate regulation bill was passed by the state legislature in 1905. He even postponed taking the office of U.S. Senator until its passage. Despite La Follette's reputation and boasting and Wisconsin's place in the Progressive spotlight because of this bill's passage, the railroad rate regulation bill was considerably weaker than initially proposed. The railroad commission's powers were limited to investigation and review; it could not actually set rates.

Additional insights from this cartoon can be gleaned from the figure of La Follette himself and the surrounding details. The table with the glass and pitcher of water allow us to conclude that this image portrays one of the many speeches La Follette gave. La Follette himself appears firm, frank, and maybe even a bit menacing in this cartoon. Right arm upraised and right foot forward, he is making a serious point. His eyes and smirk suggest a mesmerizing quality, trying to persuade you and all viewers to accept his point of view. The images found above the words "La Follette's Reforms" suggest the simple way he promoted national change with examples of his gubernatorial accomplishments. The octopus with the word railroads on his forehead strangles the average, innocent Wisconsin citizen in the "before" section. This octopus is not depicted in the after column because the good laws that La Follette encouraged have been passed to regulate railroads.

### Political Cartoon, Originally Suppressed by the Wisconsin State Journal, 1904

The *Wisconsin State Journal* originally suppressed this cartoon. The current location of the original cartoon is unknown. The copy that accompanies this section was part of the book *La Follette's Winning of Wisconsin (1894-1904)* by Albert Barton, 1922.

In 1904, La Follette's bid to run for a third term as governor was atypical. The campaign pushed the Stalwarts (conservative Republicans) to organize an elaborate, opposition campaign aimed at defeating the governor in each county. To accomplish their goals, they formed committees and subcommittees, opened headquarters in Madison, and hired Ralph B. Ellis, a university student, to create cartoons lampooning La Follette for syndicate publication. Ellis was successful. In fact, he was too successful at times: The cartoon in this section was blocked from appearing in the *Wisconsin State Journal* for fear the negative backlash would actually help La Follette.

In this cartoon, La Follette is pictured stabbing Forward in the ribs with a dirk, a long straight-bladed dagger formerly carried by Scottish highlanders. The ghosts of former Wisconsin governors Washburn (1872–1874), Fairchild (1866–1872), and Rusk (1882–1889) are seen in the background reaching out to help, shielding a grimace, and turning away. Jean Miner originally created the statue Forward as a symbol of the qualities Wisconsin embodied: devotion and progress. Forward was unveiled at the Wisconsin pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and after the exposition was installed at the east entrance of the Wisconsin State Capitol. The fact that La Follette is stabbing Forward with a dirk is symbolic. Scotch-Irish, La Follette uses a weapon common to his heritage. Labeling the dirk "calumny" (the act of uttering misrepresentations maliciously calculated to damage another's reputation) demonstrates clearly how La Follette is failing the people of Wisconsin and damaging their progressive reputation.

### **For Any Old Trust**

This political cartoon was drawn by McWhorter around 1906 and is stored in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin Visual Archives. It shows La Follette holding a big club with the words "For Any Old Trust." La Follette rallied against big business and trusts by bringing his message to the people. The message he delivered was the need to restore democracy and allow the average citizen an active say in the government's actions.

McWhorter depicts La Follette as a short, stout man with a large head; the club he wields is larger than he. This implied that La Follette's strength of mind and his power to manipulate all tools available to encourage reform and put trusts in their proper place were far greater than his body's physical strength.