

Progressive Era Editorial Cartoons

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Brief Biography - Robert M. La Follette

Few figures have had as profound an impact on the state as Robert La Follette. As governor and United States Senator, La Follette earned the nickname “Fighting Bob” by his continual and vigorous support for political reform.

As a young man just out of college, La Follette was a rising star in the Republican party in the 1880s—he was elected Dane County district attorney in 1880 and 1882, and in 1884, he was elected to the House of Representatives. During his tenure as Representative, La Follette, was a fairly conventional Republican: he supported a high tariff, denounced Democrats as the party of rebellion, and supported American intervention abroad. He was, however, something of a maverick; when he was convinced he was right, he challenged those in authority and stubbornly refused to give in. He was also an astonishing orator, captivating large audiences for hours full of vivid images.

In 1890, La Follette lost his reelection bid as the Democrats captured most of the state offices. Shortly after he returned to his law practice in Madison, former Senator Philetus Sawyer arranged a meeting with him in Milwaukee. At that meeting, Sawyer offered La Follette a bribe if he would influence a court case Sawyer was involved in that was being tried under Robert Siebecker, La Follette’s brother-in-law. Enraged, La Follette refused, and as rumors of the confrontation leaked out, La Follette became *persona-non-grata* in the Republican party. He began a crusade against corruption and boss rule in the party and drew around him like-minded young reformers—who became known as “progressives”—who resented the domination of Wisconsin by conservative politicians supported by large business interests.

La Follette’s battle with the bosses finally resulted in his nomination as governor in 1900. During his terms as governor, the progressives initiated many democratic reforms, including open primary elections, equitable taxation of railroads and other corporations, and a corrupt practices act. His close association with experts and professors of the University of Wisconsin became known as the “Wisconsin Idea.”

In 1905, the Legislature elected La Follette to the United States Senate, where he became the leader of a growing faction of liberal insurgents who prodded the federal government toward more progressive legislation. La Follette advocated a stronger Interstate Commerce Commission, a national corrupt practices act, a federal income tax, and the direct election of Senators. In 1909, he founded *La Follette’s Magazine* (now known as *The Progressive*) as a forum for his increasingly radical views. He fought for restrictions on child labor, for woman suffrage, and for civil rights for African-Americans.

La Follette had high ambitions and sought the presidency in 1908 and 1912, but a disastrous speaking engagement in Philadelphia, during which he appeared to suffer a nervous breakdown, ended his chances. His role as progressive leader in the Senate was further hindered by his denunciation of American participation in the First World War. Although he received death threats, he stuck to his position, and when the war ended and tempers cooled, he regained his popularity. In 1922, he again won election to the Senate getting eighty percent of the vote. In the 1920s, he continued to be the liberal voice of conscience and denounced the corruption of the Harding administration and the malevolent influence of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1924, he ran for president on an independent ticket and garnered 16 percent of the national vote. He died less than a year later, but his dedication to reform and democracy left a lasting impression on the state and on the country.

Written by: Jon Kasperek

See also: “Robert Marion La Follette: 1901-1906,” *Wisconsin Blue Book*, 1960, pages 148-150. *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, by Bernard Weisberger. *Fighting Bob: The Righteous Reformer*, by Nancy Unger.

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