La Follette and His Legacy

by

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Robert M. La Follette

Dane County Beginnings

In 1858, when Robert La Follette was just three years old, he recited a two-line poem at the newly built schoolhouse a mile from his home. Someone lifted him up to stand on the teacher's desk so that he could say:

You'd not expect one of my age
To speak in public on the stage.

Those words also predicted the nature of a great statesman's future career. Not only did La Follette always seem to do the unexpected, he also was often the youngest to do so and was a most gifted and agile public speaker on a variety of stages.

His father, Josiah, died when La Follette was only eight months old. Although he had no memory of his father's physical presence, his wife, Belle, later recalled that he felt an "almost morbid" reverence for the man's integrity. Mary, his mother, married again when Bob was six years old. Her husband, John Saxton, was 26 years her senior, a man very different and much more severe than La Follette's father, but a man whom he respected. Saxton saw his stepson's potential and observed once that the child would "either turn out to be a very wonderful man or a very bad one." When La Follette at one time expressed his desire to be a statesman, his stepfather suggested that he study law.

Toward the end of his stepfather's life and after his death, La Follette became the family's sole financial supporter. At 18 he ran the family farm and marketed its produce in much the same manner as many of his Scandinavian neighbors. Like them, he espoused Republicanism, partly because of his belief in Republican ideals and partly because of his family's historical association with the party. Family legend had it, for example, that La Follette's children of his father's generation were Abraham Lincoln's playmates when the families lived on adjacent land in Kentucky prior to their emigration northward. That tradition, his primary school education during the Civil War, and the concerns and beliefs of the surrounding agricultural community ensured his early adherence to the Republican Party.

In addition to continuing to support his mother, La Follette enrolled at the University of Wisconsin where he excelled in social activities and oratory. A gifted dramatist, he entertained campus gatherings with acting performances in which he pit-
The Campaign Trail

Desirous of public office, La Follette had launched his campaign for District Attorney in 1880, in spite of opposition from the local Republican Party machine. He had begun practicing law a few months earlier and had spoken eloquently and performed successfully as a trial attorney. La Follette was well liked in the community, was respected as a hardworking attorney, and was supported by his Scandinavian farmer-neighbors for being a fair and honest man.

Elected and reelected as Dane County District Attorney, he enhanced his reputation by doggedly prosecuting all types of offenders, especially drunks and vagrants. Espousing the Republican belief in hard work to achieve self-sufficiency, La Follette had no sympathy for the lawbreakers.

But he also didn’t advocate any stiffer laws regarding alcohol use. Throughout his political career he avoided the divisive prohibition issue and instead concentrated on what he felt to be more weighty problems—oppression of individuals by powerful corporations, undemocratic decisionmaking and corruption in government, and foreign military actions by the national government.

In 1884 La Follette defied the party machine that was led by U.S. Senators Phileus Sawyer and John Spooner. He campaigned instead with a personal organization and at age 29 won the Republican nomination and election to the U.S. House of Representatives. He was the youngest member of the 49th Congress.
tion and showed their displeasure in the voting booth. La Follette had not been involved in the issue but was voted out with the rest of the Republicans.

After taking control in 1890, the Democrats moved immediately both to repeal the Bennett Law and to prosecute Republican state treasurers who had misused state funds while in office. The story of Philetus Sawyer, a bondsman who stood to lose $300,000 in the treasury case, stands out in Wisconsin history and in La Follette family memoirs. According to La Follette, Sawyer offered him a bribe to influence the judge, La Follette's brother-in-law, to "decide the case right." The judge ultimately withdrew from the case, but La Follette, largely as a result of the experience, resolved to expose corruption in the Republican Party and win the governorship.

**Wisconsin's Chief Executive**

After several unsuccessful attempts at thwarting the Republican machine at nominating caucuses and conventions, La Follette finally won the nomination for governor in 1900. Sawyer had died, other machine leaders were aging, and the spirit of reform was growing. During the campaign, La Follette gave 208 speeches in 61 counties—sometimes 10 or 15 in one day. He concentrated on promoting the direct primary as a means of democratizing the policymaking process but he also tirelessly assailed the railroads, machine politics, and any other noticeably powerful interest.

The direct primary, said La Follette, was the means by which citizens could wrest control from the hands of large corporations. It was this change from the caucus system, he felt, that could lead to more accountability of officeholders and eventual regulation of corporations, especially the railroads.

Running as much on human energy as on funds, La Follette drew large attentive crowds wherever he went. *The Milwaukee Journal*, a Democratic paper, seldom supported his political candidacies but nonetheless respected his enthusiasm. In a story about one of the early county fair speeches, a reporter for the paper observed:

Disgust, hope, honor, avarice, despair, love, anger, all the passions of man, he paints in strong words and still stronger gestures. This may sound like exaggeration—but into the most commonplace of his word paintings he throws the energy of a man apparently fully impressed with the whole force and truth of his statements. He never wavers and he will not allow audiences to weary. He carries his subject and his hearers both, and compels the latter to listen, if he cannot compel them to endorse what he may say. Near the conclusion of his speech, as he folds his arms across his chest with the air of a man who has done all that can be done, and in a quiet and impressive way delivers his peroration, there is a wonderful change. It is a change that does not detract from your opinion of the orator, but rather aids it. You realize then that he has been speaking a long time. He has tired you out, but you did not know it before. However, he does not seem to have become weary himself. As he bows for the last time and withdraws he seems as fresh as ever. You are impressed with the belief that the man is a sort of steam engine. He is iron in the sense that iron conveys the idea of endurance.

La Follette often spoke for two to three hours using his written notes more as a weapon than as a crutch, gesticulating wildly and keeping his audience entranced for the duration.

As effective as he was in appealing to the public for votes, as governor he was not able to convince the Republican legislature to accept his reforms. When he won the office again in 1902, he carried along enough progressive Republicans to control the state Assembly but he still lacked a majority in the Senate. This imbalance once again prevented passage of most of the reform legislation he envisioned, although public pressure did finally enable passage of a railroad tax measure.

Thinking that the public would agree that a direct primary was too radical a change in election procedure, and convinced of their own ability to defeat the proposal, the regular Republicans, known as Stalwarts, did eventually agree to allow a referendum on the issue. It was during the 1904 campaign that La Follette unleashed his famous "roll call" tactic. Everywhere he stumped he recited the voting record of Stalwart legislators to crowds of their constituents hoping to embarrass them and bring about the election of their progressive Republican opponents. The direct primary referendum passed and La Follette was also handily reelected, along with enough progressives to comprise a long-awaited majority in both houses of the legislature.

The way finally had been paved and in the 1905 legislative session several reforms were instituted. A railroad commission was established, a bill to control lobbying was passed, and the civil service system took shape. Many students of Wisconsin progressivism agree that in addition to the direct primary, one of the most significant legacies of La Follette's governorship was the passage of a comprehensive civil service act. John R. Commons, La Follette's ally at the university, drafted the law and worked successfully with progressives in government to secure its passage. In his 1911 autobiography, La Follette praised the landmark civil service law as a triumph in remov-
ing partisanship and patronage from government.

La Follette left the governorship in 1906 to take the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Stalwart Joseph Quidelus. Elected governor three times, he left a legacy that would be built upon by progressive governors and legislators for years afterward.

One of the most important and enduring legacies was his development of the Wisconsin Idea. As the first Wisconsin-born governor and the first University of Wisconsin alumnus to hold the state's highest office, La Follette naturally maintained his ties to the university when he entered the political arena.

Charles Van Hise, a classmate whom he helped to become president of the university in 1903, economists John Commons and Richard Ely, historian Charles McCarthy, and other faculty members and former classmates joined state officials to propose and discuss ideas for new public policies both during and after La Follette's tenure as governor.

McCarthy, as the first director of the Legislative Reference Library, relied heavily on former university colleagues for assistance in bill-drafting. The university, as a land-grant institution, originally had been conceived as a service center for the state, but La Follette and his successors set a precedent that ensured effective communication between the "twin domes of law and learning" on opposite ends of State Street in the capital city.

**On the U.S. Senate**

As La Follette took on duties in the U.S. Senate, progressives' efforts continued in Wisconsin under governors and legislators still convinced of the need for regulation and reform. La Follette had laid the base for such change with his fiery oratory and vilification of machine politicians and greedy corporate bosses, but it was Francis McGovern who, during the 1911 legislative session, put through a record number of progressive acts. In that session, with the help of university experts drafting and polishing the legislation, the lawmakers created the first workers' compensation program, instituted a state income tax, enacted several conservation measures and created a number of regulatory boards and commissions, among them the Industrial Commission and a highway commission. Progressivism was at high tide in Wisconsin.

While Wisconsin governors and legislators were reaping the harvest from La Follette's own seeds, La Follette himself was making his mark in the Senate. There he took up the progressive cause and publicized it with the help of muckraking journalists Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, William Allen White, and others. Progressivism was also becoming a national movement.

In January 1909, in spite of Belle's concern over the financial wisdom of such a venture, La Follette launched what was to become the mouthpiece of progressiveism — *La Follette's Magazine*. Borrowing from the Gospel of John, he used for the masthead the injunction, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." The magazine was a family venture from the start. Belle editing and contributing her own section, and the La Follette children publishing articles also. Steffens, White, and others were regular columnists. Never as great a financial success as La Follette envisioned, the magazine nonetheless was backed by several wealthy philanthropists. It found a market among progressive farmers and working people. It was published for the rest of La Follette's life, first as a weekly and later as a monthly. In 1928 it was re-named *The Progressive*. It continues publication today under the same name.

When he was not working on the magazine, La Follette was diligently pressing for reform bills in the Senate. Just as in the House of Representatives, La Follette refused to abide by the unwritten code of etiquette for freshman lawmakers — to be seen and not heard. He took the floor whenever he felt compelled to do so and expounded upon the evils of corruption in government and corporate abuse of consumers and workers. Early in his tenure as senator he gave one speech that continued for several days. During that lengthy oration and others like it, he harangued fellow senators for leaving the chamber but at the same time endeared himself to the press and the spectators in the gallery for his persistence in the face of ridicule. He suffered physically from overwork and periodically collapsed from fatigue.

By 1911 he was the undisputed leader of the progressives in the Senate. When an investigation showed that state legislators received bribes to vote for certain individuals for U.S. Senate seats, La Follette persuaded his colleagues to begin the amendment process that would lead to the direct election of senators. Unhappy with President Taft for being unsupportive of consumers, La Follette was giving serious consideration to challenging Taft for the Republican nomination for president. With encouragement from his numerous progressive supporters, he undertook the challenge and sent emissaries into other states to launch the campaign.

After months of preparation that included extensive writing and speaking stints, La Follette was disappointed to learn that Theodore Roosevelt was also joining the competition. Roosevelt feared that La Follette had alienated more voters than he had attracted, was covetous of the presidency himself, and thus challenged both La Follette and Taft for the Republican nomination. The result was Taft's nomination, Roosevelt's ill-fated campaign as an independent Progressive (the Bull Moose candidate), and Democrat Woodrow Wilson's ascendency to the highest office.

Partly because of his disgruntlement with both Taft and Roosevelt, La Follette supported Wilson, especially as long as he remained isolationist in regard to the political and military struggles going on in Europe. Fearful that a war would thwart domestic progressive programs and convinced that military expansion would benefit only the corporate industrialists and investors, La Follette became the leader of the outspoken anti-war faction in the Senate.

In 1917 he led a filibuster that prevented Wilson from securing congressional approval for arming merchant ships. On the floor of the Senate, La Follette and his opponents nearly came to blows over the issue. Even though La Follette drew Wilson's criticism for being the leader of "a little group of willful men," La Follette maintained that he had public support for opposing U.S. involvement. When a German submarine sank the *Lusitania*, public opinion throughout the nation shifted in favor of war, and La Follette became a lonely voice in the Senate for his opposition to the war. He was one of only six senators to vote against Wilson's war declaration in April 1917, arguing that the incident could have been avoided.

Along with the war went the Espionage Act, a measure that sanctioned suppression of individual liberties. La Follette strenuously objected to infringement of civil liberties but the more he objected the more criticism he faced. When he was misquoted by the Associated Press as saying, "We had no griev-
ously considered a resolution to expel him; a group of 421 faculty members at his beloved alma mater, the University of Wisconsin, signed a petition condemning his lack of patriotism; and he was burned in effigy on the campus. Such criticism cut deeply, but he was sustained throughout the period by a few close friends and large numbers of supporters in the sizable German communities back home. Among his loyal supporters in Madison was William T. Evjue. Evjue's employer, the *Wisconsin State Journal*, had supported La Follette in the past but denounced him when he refused to support the war. Evjue remained in La Follette's camp, resigned his post as business manager of the *State Journal*, and launched the *Capital Times* to provide La Follette another voice.

After the war La Follette continued to object to the administration's foreign policy and stepped up his appeal for domestic progressive legislation. He favored farm loan programs, women's suffrage, tax policies to redistribute income, and any measure that he thought would dilute the negative effects of corporate control over workers and consumers.

With war memories receding, supporters sought him as a third party candidate for president again in 1920. He finally declined to run, he said, because labor and farm groups, his most prominent supporters, could not agree on a platform. In 1922 a strong coalition of laborers and farmers returned him to the Senate to the dismay of Republican regulars and President Harding.

*Progressive With a Capital "P"
*To small gatherings or large crowds, La Follette campaigned with unbounded energy. His 1924 attempt at the presidency was no exception.*

The Conference for Progressive Political Action—a coalition of labor groups, socialists, and farmers—convinced La Follette to run for president in 1924 as an independent Progressive. With Democratic Senator Burton Wheeler from Montana as his running mate, La Follette once again tried for the presidency.

Throughout the campaign La Follette and his promoters criticized both the Republican and the Democratic candidates for their conservatism, lamented the failure of the nation's economic system to meet the fundamental needs of citizens, and lambasted the Supreme Court for its reactionary interpretations of law. Although his campaign seemed so strong for awhile that some people thought the election might have to be decided in the House of Representatives, he ultimately carried only Wisconsin. Fearing that the choice was "Coolidge or Chaos," the majority of voters chose incumbent Calvin Coolidge.
Less than a year later, in June 1925, at the age of 70, La Follette died of a heart attack. Revered by Wisconsinites and friends across the nation for being “the voice of humanism in politics,” he was eulogized for his philosophies, achievements, and most of all, his impeccable integrity. The Wisconsin legislature commissioned his sculpture to grace Statuary Hall in the nation’s capitol. Two generations later “the dear old rotten Senate,” as La Follette had called it, hung his portrait in the Senate lounge to honor him as one of the five most outstanding senators in the nation’s history.

Another Generation of La Follettes

Bob Jr. and Phil Enter Politics

The senior La Follette gone, it was up to his sons to try to complete the work begun by their father. As father of four—Fola, Bob Jr., Phil, and Mary—he imbued as deep a respect for progressivism in his offspring as he had in his peers. Politics was always at the center of La Follette family life and the children were often present and always interested when discussions took place at the governor’s residence in Madison. When La Follette was governor, Bob and Phil frequently sat with their mother in the legislature’s galleries to watch the proceedings or listen to their father’s addresses. When the family was separated during the campaigns or for other reasons, the elder La Follette faithfully corresponded with his children, often with each one individually.

In Washington the children spent many hours listening to discussions both in the Senate gallery and in their home. La Follette’s expectations for his children were many, including the desire for them to continue the work that he knew he would leave unfinished. Upon his death, it was Bob to whom the torch was passed, largely because it was he who had reached the age of 30 and was eligible to run for his father’s seat in the Senate. Even though it was Phil who acquired his father’s temperament—outgoing nature, love of oratory, spontaneity—it was Bob, who as secretary to his father, had acquired the knowledge and level of understanding necessary to fulfill the requirements of the office. Intending to enter some other profession eventually, he nonetheless wanted to fulfill his father’s expectations by dutifully running for the seat. He easily won the nomination and the special election held in September 1925 becoming the youngest U.S. senator since Henry Clay. He held the seat for 20 years.

The stock market crash and economic and social upheaval of the late 1920s led to disaffection with conservative Republican policies that had held sway throughout the decade. In 1930 Phil La Follette decided to challenge the Stalwart Republican incumbent, Walter Kohler, and run for governor. Using the same campaign style as his father thirty years earlier, he lamented the power of the monopolies, the accumulation of great wealth while wages plummeted, and decried “Hooverism.” He visited nearly every county in the state and drew record crowds. A majority of the voters agreed that Kohler should be retired from office, so they turned to another La Follette. He was just 33 years old.

Shy of a progressive majority in the legislature during his first administration, La Follette proposed many more measures than lawmakers were willing to enact. Disturbed by the effects of the depression, La Follette continually argued that government must reorganize and act decisively to relieve the distress. Regulation by itself was not working, he said, and although he always was opposed to outright government relief, he felt that state government needed to take an active role in solving the problems at hand. Like his father, he was anxious and willing to break new paths if the legislature would only follow.

Although it was not implemented until the federal program went into effect a few years later, unemployment compensation law was first enacted in Wisconsin. The bill provided for industries to contribute to emergency relief funds, a measure that had the support of farm, labor, and business groups. Labor groups felt that some of the cost of unemployment should be borne by industry; farmers, as employers of small numbers of workers, were exempt; and industry leaders felt the law would have a stabilizing effect in an unstable economy. The bill had a full measure of support.

Without a majority of progressives in the legislature, however, most of the ideas promoted during La Follette’s first administration met with resistance. One of
his proposals called for replacement of the Railroad Commission with a Public Service Commission so that government could regulate the utilities in addition to the railroads. He also asked for increased government control over banks—to limit the number of failures—as well as over chain stores, and for expanded public works programs. One program he envisioned was a plan for reforesting sections in the northern part of the state by using unemployed young men. Many of the proposals would become law under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, but for the Wisconsin legislature in the early 1930s, most were ideas whose time had not yet come.

A New Political Party

As the depression deepened, La Follette became dissatisfied with his inability to help relieve the distress. Voters also were unhappy, and in 1932 turned the Republicans, including Phil, out of office. With Franklin Roosevelt in the White House, the La Follettes hoped that somehow the economic situation would improve. They all had come to realize that the problem needed the attention of the national government and Roosevelt was a new-style Democrat with whom the La Follette brothers were initially impressed. Roosevelt also respected the La Follettes and was cordial to them, a fact that endeared neither the Republicans to the La Follettes nor the conservative Wisconsin Democrats to Roosevelt.

As the 1934 election approached in Wisconsin, progressives became increasingly reluctant to work within either of the major political parties. The Republican Party was the party of the Stalwarts, and the Democratic Party, with Albert Schmedeman as governor, was considered reactionary. Led by labor supporters and ex-congressman Tom Amle, a coalition of labor groups, farmers, socialists, and other progressives met to form the Farmer Labor Progressive League. They made clear their desire to start a third party. When a convention was called at Fond du Lac in May, the La Follette brothers, remembering their father's unsuccessful bid for the presidency as a third party candidate, somewhat reluctantly joined forces with the coalition to help launch Wisconsin's Progressive Party. The party's founders preferred that it be called the Farmer-Labor Party but the La Follettes' preference for a more inclusive name prevailed.

The eyes of the nation were on Wisconsin during the midterm three-party contest of 1934. Bob Jr. ran again for the Senate—as a Progressive—and Phil ran for governor. Both won and Wisconsin’s fledgling third party gained nationwide attention. In spite of a personal victory, though, Phil was once again disappointed not to have a majority in the legislature. As in 1930, non-Progressives united to defeat nearly every proposal he introduced. In the 1936 campaign, copying another tactic used by his father, La Follette capitalized on the lack of legislative cooperation by “reading the roll” of his opponents before their constituents in their home districts. The strategy had worked for his father and it also worked for him. La Follette was again victorious and this time carried along enough Progressives to garner majorities in both houses of the legislature.

Not only were Progressives in Wisconsin pleased with the election results, so was Franklin Roosevelt. With the help of Wisconsin’s Progressives, he also won another term and another chance to realign the economy.

Still, the La Follettes and Roosevelt had an uneasy relationship in the ensuing years. Agreeing on the need for an active government role in addressing the economic dilemma of the day, they disagreed on both timing and tactics. Like his father, Phil was not content to play a
passive role, especially since many of the ideas being circulated in Washington had come from Wisconsin. He pushed Roosevelt for relief funds and for discretion in their use, but Roosevelt was always reluctant to allow the governor the level of control that he wanted.

A Progressive Majority

The banner year for progressive legislation in Wisconsin was 1937. Promoted as a bill not so much to appease labor as to encourage communication between business management and unions, the Wisconsin Labor Relations Act, also called the "little Wagner Act," was the second such act to be passed by a state. It required the establishment of a state labor relations board to engage in management/labor mediation. La Follette responded to business leaders' criticism of the bill by saying that there were "few, if any disputes which fair and reasonable men cannot adjust if they will only sit down around the table and work out their difficulties."

At least as controversial was the proposal to establish and fund the Wisconsin Development Authority, a public power agency conceived by La Follette and others as a "little TVA." Feared by conservatives as needless competition for the private power companies, all means of defeating it were attempted. Detractors left the legislative chambers to lounge in nearby bars and hotels so that a quorum would not be present, but Progressives lured them back by threatening to take even more drastic action later. The bill passed, but because of opposition by Republicans in the following administration, the idea was never fully implemented.

The special session called by the governor in October 1937 was the forum for the most hotly debated legislation of Wisconsin's progressive era. Rescinding all the rules, including dispensing with hearings, arbitrarily cutting off debate, and occasionally even calling for a vote without the reading of the bill, La Follette's lieutenants arduously pushed through an assortment of bills. The governor clearly felt that the ends justified the means—that by dispensing with democratic methods on a small scale in the legislature he was saving the larger democracy from failure.

Among the bills passed were those creating the Wisconsin Agricultural Authority to assist farmers and promote farm products, and a Department of Commerce to promote friendly relations within the state's business community and between government and business. The Governmental Reorganization Act also passed during the special session, as did laws to tax chain stores, extend mortgage foreclosure moratoria and assist cities in dealing with federal housing programs. The tendency for La Follette to lead fearlessly against loud opposition had evidenced itself once again. Wisconsin became a model for progressive legislation, but the process by which the bills were sent through the legislature caused factions to develop within the Progressive Party, created unbridled animosity between Progressives and other lawmakers, and led to citizen disillusionment with their political leaders.

In 1938 Phil launched the ill-fated National Progressive Party. Increasingly critical of Roosevelt's policies, he appar-
ently felt that only in a new party with a national scope could the ideas embodied in progressivism take shape. Aside from poor timing—too soon after the 1937 special session—he also made the mistake of choosing a symbol for the party that too closely resembled a swastika. Even though he stressed the need for moderation in order to satisfy all factions of the party, too many observers were tired of what they considered his overweening aggressiveness even if they did agree with him in principle.

Phil lost the gubernatorial election in 1938, and the Republicans regained control of the legislature in what seemed to be a national conservative resurgence. The National Progressive Party had failed dismally. Not only were the voters displeased with Governor La Follette, but the Progressives were increasingly disaffected with Roosevelt—over both domestic and foreign policy.

In Washington, Bob La Follette found fault with Roosevelt's interest in European affairs just as his father had before him, and promoted legislation to require that the cost of war preparations be borne by military industries, not by taxpayers generally. His view did not predominate in the nation's capital.

After Pearl Harbor, in spite of his objections to war in general and American involvement in particular, Phil enlisted and served under General Douglas MacArthur in the South Pacific. Bob remained in the Senate arguing for antimonopoly legislation, taxpayer relief, and improved labor laws.

**Back to the Two-Party System**

By the mid-1940s, the Progressive Party had been irreversibly torn by factionalism between farmers and laborers over domestic issues and between those who favored and those who opposed the war or postwar foreign policies. At a meeting of about 400 Progressives in Portage in March 1946, Bob announced his decision to rejoin the Republican Party—the party of Lincoln and his father, the senior La Follette. The Democratic Party in Wisconsin was still too conservative and too weak, Bob felt, so the Republicans seemed his only hope. Some Progressives followed Bob into the Republican Party, and others turned to the Democrats, a split that partly explained his loss to Joseph McCarthy in the Republican primary that year. With the departure of the La Follettes from politics, Wisconsin entered another political era.

Like their father, the younger La Follettes were at times both revered and scorned for always being on the cutting edge of state and national politics. Admired nonetheless by both critics and supporters for their courage and their impeccable integrity, they left Wisconsin with a tradition of clean government and a respect for progressivism. The many ideas and laws that they and their father promoted and achieved—the direct primary, civil service reform, protection of civil liberties, university/state government cooperation, and numerous others—provided a valuable base upon which public officials could build for generations to come.

**The Robert M. La Follette Institute of Public Affairs**

**The Wisconsin Idea**

Progressivism embodies the philosophy that government can and must seek innovative solutions to problems and that decisionmaking must involve citizens from outside government as well as from within. Such beliefs have been a dominant theme in Wisconsin's history.

Numerous progressive ideas have become part of Wisconsin's heritage, but one of the most important legacies left from the La Follette era is the Wisconsin Idea, a principle promoted at the turn of the century by La Follette, university president Charles Van Hise, and legislative librarian Charles McCarthy. Practiced for nearly a century now, the Wisconsin Idea encourages cooperation between government officials and university scholars in order to solve current problems and anticipate future agendas.

The La Follette Institute of Public Affairs had long been envisioned by public-minded faculty members and academically oriented public servants. Professor Clara Penniman, the first director of the university's Center for the Study of Public Policy and Administration, suggested in 1971 that the center be named after the senior La Follette. In 1984, one hundred years after La Follette was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from Wisconsin's Third District, the La Follette Institute was established at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Its founding director, Dennis Dressang, oversaw the building of a multidisciplinary and multifaceted program of instruction, research, and outreach; succeeding directors have expanded and fostered that mission.

The primary mission of the Institute—educating new generations of students to become skilled administrators and policy analysts, particularly in the public sector—has broadened since the institute's inception. Two Master of Arts degrees are now offered, one with an emphasis on public management, the other on policy analysis. Some students choose to fulfill the requirements of both degrees in their two years here. The program's flexibility and the encouragement students receive to follow a curriculum that allows development of a specialty are primary attractions.

The institute's faculty members conduct research on a wide range of public policy issues and regularly share their findings with policymakers. Demands for La Follette training seminars at all levels of government are at an all-time high and the institute's staff regularly organize conferences and seminars to satisfy the information needs of public officials.

To those unfamiliar with the tradition, the Wisconsin Idea may at times seem unworkable since the mission of the university and the problems faced by state government appear vastly different. Government workers are often accused of spending too much time "killing the nearest snake" while university professors are perceived as hermits in an ivory tower. But the Wisconsin Idea has produced a platform for practical policy solutions and provided a way to bridge the gap between government and citizens.

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*Bob Jr.'s re-entry into Wisconsin's Republican Party divided the ranks. Some followed him while others became Democrats.*
tower. Such attitudes can be a barrier to cooperation.

The mission of the La Follette Institute is to overcome the threat of such barriers and to encourage the cooperation of university scholars and government practitioners in the progressive tradition of the institute’s namesake. Through its master’s degree program, its applied research endeavors, and its outreach efforts, the institute serves as a strategic link between government and the university community. La Follette’s legacy continues.

Selected Bibliography


