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La Follette's Wisconsin Idea

By [Peter Dreier](#) - April 11, 2011

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IN FEBRUARY 2011, more than 15,000 Wisconsinites marched on the state capitol building in Madison. By the middle of March, more than 100,000 protestors had joined this challenge to Governor Scott Walker's steep budget cuts, his proposal to strip public employees of collective bargaining rights, and his threat to use the National Guard if government workers go on strike. Many at these rallies called upon the memory of a Republican progressive whose bust stands inside the state capitol: Robert M. La Follette, Sr., who spent his long political career — as a U.S. congressman (1885–1890), governor of Wisconsin (1901–1906), U.S. senator (1907–1925), and candidate for president (1924) — consistently and effectively challenging militarism and corporate power. Signs asked “What Would Bob Do?” and proclaimed “La Follette forever.” A professor at the University of Wisconsin [told the Wall Street Journal](#) that La Follette would “be standing with the protestors, screaming ‘Right on!’” Who was this man called “Fighting Bob,” who influenced so many reformers and radicals during his life and after his death?



Born in Dane County's Primrose township, La Follette worked as a farm laborer before enrolling at the University of Wisconsin. After his graduation, he ran successfully for district attorney. In 1884, he was elected to Congress as a Republican. After an electoral defeat in 1890 he returned to Wisconsin. Philetus Sawyer, a leading state Republican, offered La Follette a bribe to fix a court case against several former state officials. La Follette not only refused the bribe, but took the opportunity to publicly decry the corrosive effect of money in democratic politics. The incident lit a spark, and La Follette spent the next ten years touring Wisconsin denouncing the political influence of the railroad and lumber barons who dominated his own party. In 1900, he ran for governor on a pledge to clean up the corruption. He gave 208 speeches in sixty-one counties — sometimes ten or fifteen a day — and won handily.

Upon taking office, he denounced the “corporation agents and representatives of the machine,” who had “moved upon the capitol.” As a corrective, he promoted “the Wisconsin Idea,” making the state a laboratory for reforms that would prove highly influential. He created state commissions on the environment, taxation, railroad regulation, transportation, and civil service, recruiting experts (especially from the University of Wisconsin) to provide ideas and information. To weaken the political influence of big business and party machines, he successfully pushed for campaign spending limits and direct primary elections, which gave voters the right to choose their own candidates for office. He supported measures that doubled the taxes on the railroads, broke up monopolies, preserved the state's forests, protected workers' rights, defended small farmers, and regulated lobbying to curtail patronage politics.

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Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1906, La Follette became a leader of the Senate's progressive wing. In 1909, as the progressive spirit spread to cities and states around the country, La Follette launched a publication that soon became a major outlet for the movement's ideas. *La Follette's Magazine* was edited by his wife, Belle, and featured articles by leading journalists such as Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, and William Allen White, as well as by La Follette himself. Its goal, La Follette wrote, was "winning back for the people the complete power over government—national, state, and municipal—which has been lost to them." To this end, the magazine championed women's suffrage, led the fight to stay out of the First World War, criticized the postwar Palmer Raids as a violation of civil liberties, and supported workers' rights and control of corporate power. Never a commercial success, the magazine gained popularity among progressive farmers and working people and raised La Follette's national profile. (After his death, the publication was renamed the *Progressive*. Still published in Madison, Wisconsin, it remains a major voice of dissent.)

Breaking again with the Republican Party, La Follette supported Democrat Woodrow Wilson in the 1912 presidential election over Theodore Roosevelt (an erstwhile Republican running on the Progressive, or Bull Moose, Party ticket), the Republican William Howard Taft, and the Socialist Eugene Debs. But La Follette later risked his political career opposing Wilson, becoming one of only six senators to vote against Wilson's war declaration. On April 4, 1917, two days after Wilson called for the United States to enter the war, La Follette delivered a forceful speech in the Senate. "The poor...who are always the ones called upon to rot in the trenches have no organized power," he told the chamber. "But oh, Mr. President, at some time they will be heard....There will come an awakening. They will have their day, and they will be heard."



After the war, La Follette stuck to his principles. He found new outlets for his lifelong struggle against corporate power as a close ally of the labor movement and a supporter of farm loan programs. He called for investigations of corporate "war profiteers" and defended the victims, including Debs, of Wilson's wartime crackdown on dissent. As the Red Scare continued with the notorious Palmer Raids, La Follette became the dissidents' biggest advocate. "Never in all my many years' experience in the House and in the Senate," he told his colleagues, "have I heard so much democracy preached and so little practiced as during the last few months."

Some Wisconsinites, and many Washington insiders and newspapers, condemned him as a traitor. In 1921, the sixty-five-year-old La Follette had to decide whether to seek reelection. He was scheduled to give a major speech before the Wisconsin legislature, and his aides urged him to tone down the fiery antiwar rhetoric.

La Follette opened his speech by acknowledging old supporters in the room and recognizing that this was an important turning point in his political career. Then, suddenly, he pounded the lectern and stretched his clenched fist into the air. "I am going to be a candidate for reelection to the United States Senate," he boomed. "I do not want the vote of a single citizen under any misapprehension of where I stand: I would not change my record on the war for that of any man, living or dead."

After a moment of stunned silence, the crowd erupted into thunderous applause. Even one of his staunchest critics, standing at the back of the chamber with tears running down his cheeks, told a reporter, "I hate the son of a bitch. But, my God, what guts he's got."

Or perhaps La Follette simply had a better understanding of Wisconsin voters. They reelected him that year with 80 percent of their votes.

Many La Follette-watchers viewed his momentous 1922 reelection victory as a vindication of his antiwar and anticorporate stances. The Conference for Progressive Political Action, a coalition of unions, socialists, and farmers, convinced him to run for president in 1924 as an independent progressive. La Follette, historically a Republican, selected Montana senator Burton Wheeler, a Democrat, as his running mate.

La Follette's platform called for government takeover of the railroads, elimination of private utilities, the right of workers to organize unions, easier credit for farmers, a ban on child labor, stronger protection for civil liberties, and an end to U.S. imperialism in Latin America. He pledged an expansion of democracy, condemning reactionary Supreme Court rulings and advocating a plebiscite before any declaration of war. He promised to "break the combined power of the private monopoly system over the political and economic life of the American people" and denounced, far ahead of most political figures, "any discrimination between races, classes, and creeds."

La Follette won almost five million votes (about one-sixth of the popular vote), running first in Wisconsin, second in eleven Western states, and winning working-class districts of major cities. Journalist John Nichols called this "the most successful left-wing Presidential campaign in American history."

Though he died of a heart attack less than a year after the election, La Follette's success inspired other progressive movements and campaigns around the country, including farmer-labor parties in Minnesota and North Dakota, the Progressive Party in Wisconsin, and the American Labor Party in New York City. La Follette's ideas as governor, senator, and presidential candidate helped lay the groundwork for Franklin Roosevelt's reforms in the 1930s. Harold Ickes, Sr., an influential adviser on the 1924 campaign, became part of FDR's inner circle and a major architect of the New Deal. La Follette's progressive political offspring also include Floyd Olson of Minnesota, perhaps the most radical governor of any state; Upton Sinclair, whose 1934 campaign for California governor borrowed many of La Follette's ideas; and New York Congressman (later Mayor) Fiorello La Guardia, who nominated the senator for president in 1924, declaring, "I speak for Avenue A and 116th Street, instead of Broad and Wall."

Decades after La Follette's courageous opposition to the First World War, a U.S. president once again asked Congress for an authorization to go to war—this time in Vietnam. Ernest Gruening (D-AK) and Wayne Morse (R-OR), the only senators to vote against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, shared something else in common. Gruening had served as spokesman for La Follette's 1924 campaign. Morse, a Wisconsin native, told *Time* magazine in 1956 that his fondest memory as a young man was lapping up liberal philosophy "at the feet of the great Robert La Follette, Sr."

And, even before the current protests broke out, La Follette's specter haunted Wisconsin's Scott Walker. Breaking with convention, Walker held his inauguration in a part of the capitol rotunda far from La Follette's bust, avoiding the possibility that he might be photographed sharing a frame with the progressive stalwart.

Among La Follette's political heirs are also several literal descendants, who have served Wisconsin as senator, governor, secretary of state, and activists. His son Phil, elected Wisconsin governor in 1930, ushered in what some have called a "little New Deal" during the Depression. In 1931, the state enacted its first labor code, declaring that all workers had the right to form unions and to picket, four years before the federal Wagner Act. That year, too, Phil La Follette pushed through Wisconsin's unemployment compensation system, the first in

the nation. Doug La Follette, a veteran environmental activist, is Wisconsin's current Secretary of State. His great-grandfather and Bob La Follette were brothers.

The revival of Wisconsin's radical spirit, so evident in the massive and sustained mobilizations in Madison, suggests that it will take more than these ceremonial logistics for conservatives to erase the legacy of Robert La Follette.

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Top image: Bust of La Follette in Madison, Wisconsin state house, during labor protests there in 2011 (Ann Althouse/Flickr); Bottom image: La Follette speaking in Illinois in 1905 (Wikimedia Commons/Library of Congress)

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