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La Follette's Autobiography: The Good, the Bad, the Ugly, and the Glorious

It's a great pleasure to take part in this roundtable "La Follette's Wisconsin in Retrospect." I thank Alan Lessoff for putting it together and allowing me this opportunity to interact with such wonderful group of fellow La Follette enthusiasts. I am experiencing what my husband calls "Nerdvana."

La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences is a remarkable primary document of the Progressive era. Originally published in 1913, it remains in print today, and has the dubious honor of being one of Richard Nixon's three favorite books.¹ It illuminates the crucial role that La Follette's home state of Wisconsin played in molding La Follette as a man and as a politician, thereby influencing his national progressive agenda. But it also reveals much more.

In writing La Follette's biography, I of course pored over countless documents: his diaries, letters, and other papers. I've read everything he said on the floor of the US Congress, and every word he wrote in *La Follette's Magazine*. But to capture the essence of Bob La Follette, all one really needs to do is read his autobiography. It reveals, in one tidy package, the heart and soul of Fighting Bob and, as such, makes plain the good, the bad, the ugly—and the glorious.

The autobiography came about in part because La Follette needed money. My fellow panelist Matt Rothschild today edits *The Progressive*, the magazine that began as *La Follette's Weekly*. The title has changed—but the magazine's perpetual state of debt,

¹ David Thelen, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976), p. 152.

as Matt can attest, has not.² During the sweltering summer of 1911, La Follette holed up in his senate office in Washington with muckraking journalist Ray Stannard Baker, editor of *American Magazine*, for whom La Follette had agreed to write, for a fee, an autobiographical series. Collaborating closely, the two began to write a series of ten articles, the first of which was published in October of 1911.³

There were political as well as financial motives for the articles. Fighting Bob wanted all the publicity he could get, reasoning that the time was ripe for a La Follette presidency in 1912. The ideas and programs that he had painstakingly developed and promoted for years were being woven into the very fabric of the nation. As the campaign approached, La Follette played a leading role in formalizing the National Progressive Republican League, an organization that included senators and governors, and advocated more genuine democracy through direct primaries; the direct election of senators; a thoroughgoing corrupt practices act; and the initiative, referendum, and recall. To his mind, it was his turn to occupy the White House. He was the true progressive, the leader of a powerful political league, and the logical choice—all facts leading to a triumphant scenario that could be spoiled only if former president Theodore Roosevelt, that insincere grandstander, decided to return to the presidential stage and seek a third term.

Perpetually overextended, physically and financially, La Follette was devastated by the desertion of some of his key, and previously faithful, supporters in favor of a

² Subscribers to *The Progressive* are routinely asked for donations to help settle the magazine's financial difficulties. For the magazine's debt in La Follette's day, see Robert M. La Follette to Alfred Rogers, 7 August 1911, Robert La Follette Papers, Box 106, Library of Congress.

³ Although La Follette's daughter maintained that Baker assisted only in the editing process, it is clear from the correspondence between La Follette and Baker that La Follette, pressed for time was, by the sixth installment, reduced to editing (albeit aggressively) what was ghostwritten by Baker. See Robert M. La Follette to Ray Stannard Baker, 9 December 1911, Robert La Follette Papers, Box 107, Library of Congress.

possible Roosevelt candidacy. La Follette refused to withdraw from the presidential race in early February 1912, but gave a rambling, hostile speech that so insulted his audience of newspaper and periodical publishers, it permanently damaged his reputation and led to the breakup of the progressive alliance he had worked so hard to create.⁴ It was in the immediate aftermath of this unfortunate speech that La Follette decided to revise the *American Magazine* articles and publish them in book form, with three new chapters added to, in his words, “give the history of this damned campaign.”⁵ As Roosevelt famously threw his hat into the ring, an infuriated La Follette worked feverishly to bring his story up to date. As details of those chapters leaked out, the book’s publisher, Doubleday, grew alarmed by threats of libel suits. The contract was cancelled by mutual consent. La Follette mortgaged his home in order to publish the book himself.

So what are the “bad” and “ugly” elements of La Follette’s autobiography, as it first appeared on April 10, 1913? According to some, none. His collaborator Ray Stannard Baker called it “a remarkably clear, calm, and convincing narrative.”⁶ A few reviewers credited the final three chapters, in which La Follette lambasts Roosevelt, with finally revealing the true nature of the former president: lukewarm and fickle in his commitment to progressive reform, so ruthless in his desire to regain power that he would

⁴ See Nancy C. Unger, “Incident in Philadelphia,” *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2008), pp. 200-220.

⁵ Robert M. La Follette to Gilbert Roe, 17 February 1912, Robert La Follette Papers, Box 107, Library of Congress.

⁶ Ray Stannard Baker to Robert M. La Follette, 10 August 1912, Robert La Follette Papers, Box 71, Library of Congress.

stop at nothing for the sake of power alone; a dishonest traitor to the La Follette candidacy and the progressive cause.⁷

Most reviewers, however, were appalled by the final three chapters. They were amazed by La Follette's claims that he might well have secured the nomination had he not been stabbed in the back by Roosevelt and his cronies, and Fighting Bob's all-out efforts to vilify the former president garnered reactions from mild distaste to complete disgust.⁸ La Follette was branded as bitter, preachy, pompous, rancorous—as petty, selfish, and self-aggrandizing as he accused Roosevelt as being.⁹ Noted the *New York Times*, “He constantly weakens his narrative by telling what he assumes to know is in Roosevelt's mind.”¹⁰ Such critics were right: Those final three chapters reveal how La Follette's greatest strengths could become his worst weaknesses.

Overly detailed and stridently self-righteous, the concluding section is reminiscent of his ill-fated speech in Philadelphia, the text of which La Follette appended to his final chapters. The speech, like the final third of the book, was actually quite accurate for the most part—it was the way in which it was delivered that left La Follette vulnerable to criticism. In discussing his botched presentation of the speech, he acknowledges only that he was not at his best and “talked too long without realizing it,” ignoring the fact that he repeated himself multiple times and frequently abandoned his text to speak

⁷ See Clyde Tavenner, “Capital Comment,” *Rock Island Argus*, 25 April 1913, in Robert M. La Follette Papers, Box 322, Library of Congress.

⁸ See Charles Willis Thompson, “A Political Mystery,” *The New York Times*, 25 May 1913, BR309; “Book Notes,” *Political Science Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (December 1913): 160-61.

⁹ See “Books and Reading,” *New York Post*, 19 May 1913, in Robert M. La Follette Papers, Box 322, Library of Congress.

¹⁰ Charles Willis Thompson, “A Political Mystery,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1913, BR309.

extemporaneously.¹¹ He also ignored that he was generally obnoxious that night, that he had grown so angry and wounded by rejection that his stridency undercut his dignity, ultimately undermining his credibility. Reprinting the text from which he had widely strayed hardly vindicated La Follette's performance.

The final third of his autobiography highlights La Follette's best and worst qualities, which were often one and the same: tremendous attention to detail; a determination to expose wrong-doing, heedless of the personal or political consequences; unwavering confidence that he—and perhaps he alone—knew what was best for the progressive cause, and that those who disagreed with him could not be sincere in their different opinion, but must be corrupt and evil. There is much in the final third of the book that is bad and ugly.

So what makes *La Follette's Autobiography* not just good, but glorious? There can be no better accounting of all that made La Follette the personal hero of his home state—and of fervent followers all across the land. Almost every reviewer, even the ones who hated the final three chapters, loved the first ten, calling them entertaining, insightful, moving, and sincere. They praised La Follette for his courage, high ideals, and devotion to the truth.¹² As well they should. Anyone looking for an understanding of what the combined Gilded Age and Progressive Era was all about should read *La Follette's Autobiography*. As Allan Nevins wrote in his foreword to the 1960 edition, “For an understanding of Bossism, Reform and Progressivism as they were known in the

¹¹ Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, WI: The Robert M. La Follette Company, 1913), p. 609.

¹² See Belle C. La Follette and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), pp.471-72.

United States between 1890 and 1912, this book is the most illuminating as well as the most interesting work in existence. It carries us into the very heart of Progressive sentiment and principle.”¹³

La Follette wrote in his introduction, “Every line of this autobiography is written for the express purpose of exhibiting the struggle for more representative government which is going forward in this country, and to cheer on the fighters for that cause. . . . It expresses the hopes and desires of millions of common men and women who are willing to fight for their ideals, to take defeat if necessary, and to go on fighting.”¹⁴ It is this singularity of purpose that makes *La Follette’s Autobiography* so compelling.

Although the first chapter of the first edition includes a couple of childhood photographs, there is little of La Follette’s family background and childhood in the narrative. The story begins in 1880 when he is already twenty-five years old and just deciding to run for district attorney of Dane County, Wisconsin, cementing the impression that La Follette was first, last, and always a politician. By the top of the second page, he is already pitted against one of the many bosses and machines in control of politics in his state and across the nation. Yet even as he immediately immerses his readers into his battles, he reminds them of the ongoing nature of the struggle for what is right. He tells of being inspired by the principled men who came before him to wage his unending battle for true representative government. And he states unequivocally the power of the people: “the only way to beat boss and ring rule [is] to keep the people

¹³ Allan Nevins, Foreword to Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette’s Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. viii.

¹⁴ Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette’s Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, WI: The Robert M. La Follette Company, 1913), pp. ix-x.

thoroughly informed. Machine control is based on misrepresentation and ignorance. Democracy is based on knowledge. It is of first importance that the people shall know about their government and the work of their public servants. ‘Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.’”¹⁵

La Follette knew the truth, and he knew the people of Wisconsin just as thoroughly as he understood the forces that oppressed them...and him. Surveying the corrupt politicians, the powerful trusts, the exploitation and waste of natural resources, and a thousand other abuses in the new industrial, urban age, La Follette put his finger on the problem. “The supreme issue, involving all the others, is the encroachment of the powerful few upon the rights of the many.”¹⁶ In order to thwart the two most powerful forces of boss rule -- patronage and the large sums of money behind it -- La Follette set out to build up and maintain “an intelligent interest in public affairs in my district and afterward in the state...[do so] and you have laid firmly the foundations of democratic government.”¹⁷ “The will of the people shall prevail,” he promised his fellow Wisconsinites in 1898, “The fight is on. It will continue to victory. There will be no halt and no compromise.”¹⁸

In his autobiography, La Follette detailed some of the important victories already won in that fight. He had taken advantage of the famed “Wisconsin Idea,” which

¹⁵ Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, WI: The Robert M. La Follette Company, 1913), p. 64.

¹⁶ Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, WI: The Robert M. La Follette Company, 1913), p. 760.

¹⁷ Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, WI: The Robert M. La Follette Company, 1913), pp. 67-68.

¹⁸ Ellen Torelle, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Robert M. La Follette*, (Madison, WI: Robert M. La Follette Company, 1920), p. 31.

emphasized cooperation with the University of Wisconsin, and was ultimately termed the fourth branch of the state's government. That partnership was credited with stimulating more genuine reform in state and national politics than any other influence in the previous forty years.¹⁹ Wisconsin led the nation in many aspects of the fight to more equitably redistribute the nation's wealth and power. By 1906, when La Follette left the governor's chair for a senate seat, many of the state's progressive reforms were eagerly adopted by progressive governors across the nation. Wisconsin boasted a thoroughgoing and efficient reform of railroads and other powerful utilities; civil service reform for state officials; a stringent anti-lobby law that required lobbyists to register with the secretary of state and to publish details of contracts with legislators; stronger provisions against corrupt practices; conservation measures including the forest conservation program; tax reforms; and nominations by primary elections.

It becomes clear in his autobiography why La Follette was so beloved by his followers. He not only fought successfully on their behalf, he trusted them. He believed in their intelligence. They flocked to his speeches and read his magazine and his book because he spoke in words they could understand about things that mattered to them. He reminded them that, in a proper democracy, they should have the power. And he told them in clear terms how to go about achieving genuine reform. His was an optimistic and inviting message.

In the inspirational words of Fighting Bob, "Mere passive citizenship is not enough. Men must be aggressive for what is right if government is to be saved from men

¹⁹ French Strother, "The Death of the 'Wisconsin Idea,'" *World's Work* 50 (October 1925): 622.

who are aggressive for what is wrong.”²⁰ La Follette thrived on dramatic confrontations. His autobiography is filled with intense moments in which, heedless of the consequences, he fearlessly stands up to powerful but corrupt men. According to the *New York Times*, it was “a record of a long, gallant and single-handed fight,” told with “simplicity and force.”²¹ The historian Charles A. Beard told La Follette that he was pleased by “how quick you get to the point and illuminate every big problem in American politics by your own story.”²² La Follette’s self-portrait as indefatigable lone crusader made the book, according to Ray Stannard Baker, “of great value to many struggling young men, who aren’t sure yet that the long fight is the one that wins—really wins.”²³

La Follette’s ability within the pages of his autobiography to make plain both the political problems of the day and his own dedication to solving them established all the more firmly his reputation as a tireless and righteous reformer. The people of Wisconsin believed him and gave him the political power to introduce important reforms onto the floor of the US Senate, sent him their complaints and ideas for the solution to those complaints, and made public their hearty approval when he courageously swam against the tide of his colleagues.

As detailed in his autobiography, La Follette, armed with the support of his constituents, was by 1912 leading some of the progressive movement’s successes on the

²⁰Ellen Torelle, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Robert M. La Follette*, (Madison, WI: Robert M. La Follette Company, 1920), pp. 111-112.

²¹ Charles Willis Thompson, “A Political Mystery,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1913, BR309.

²² Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette’s Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, WI: The Robert M. La Follette Company, 1913), p. 472.

²³ Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette’s Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison, WI: The Robert M. La Follette Company, 1913), p. 472.

national level, making important gains in tax reform, industrial working conditions, workers' compensation, electoral reform, education, public health, and women's suffrage. Written, as he put it, "from the field," his autobiography provides a sense of immediacy and a ringside seat to one of the most exciting and meaningful movements in American history. I only wish he had provided a second volume, covering 1913 to 1925, detailing, among many other important accomplishments, his heroic opposition to US entry into World War I, and his independent bid for the presidency in 1924, in which he garnered a spectacular 17% of the vote.

La Follette's Autobiography, like its author, was not perfect. Yet, as journalist William Allen White concluded, "When all is said and done, he and the insurgent group are the best element--the most sincere, the nearest to the people, the most truly representative of our national opinion. And it is too much to demand that they be immaculate white giants. Almighty God carves out his ends with dull tools—always."²⁴

La Follette's Autobiography was written almost one hundred years ago. Despite its flaws, it retains its vitality and relevance. What Allan Nevins wrote fifty years ago remains true: *La Follette's Autobiography* deserves "a careful reading by conscientious citizens; for the battle La Follette led still goes on, and the lessons he instilled still need pondering."²⁵

²⁴ William Allen White, unaddressed letter, 17 July 1911, Book M, 11-15, William White Papers, Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, CA.

²⁵ Allan Nevins, Foreword to Robert M. La Follette, *La Follette's Autobiography: A Personal Narrative of Political Experiences* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. viii.