The ‘Political Suicide’ of Robert M. La Follette: Public Disaster, Private Catharsis

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On February 2, 1912, progressive Wisconsin Senator Robert M. La Follette gave a speech at the Periodical Publishers Association banquet in Philadelphia that altered not only the course of his presidential campaign, but the course of his entire subsequent career. He lashed out publicly at members of the press with such a complete lack of self-control that it haunted him forever (most notably during his opposition to U.S. entry into World War I and during his final presidential bid in 1924). This public breakdown perplexed contemporaries and has baffled historians. Existing explanations of the origins and implications of the shocking performance are inadequate because they present it as an aberration. In fact, the causes of his behavior were deep-rooted in his psyche and shaped by past experience. La Follette’s public breakdown and his apparent preference for a small group of fervent supporters over a much larger and more powerful group of less radical ones demonstrate clearly the lifelong control his personal needs held over his political life.

The office of the presidency and an admired place in history held more than even the conventional appeal for La Follette. Only 8 months old when his father died, La Follette’s mother drove him to worship this man he had never known and to emulate his life. In her relentless efforts to mold her son to idealize his dead father, Mary La Follette stressed her late husband’s integrity and his righteousness. Thus, at a very early age, La Follette was saddled with a great and unending responsibility: he must never do anything that might dishonor his father’s name.

The impact of Mary La Follette’s directive cannot be overestimated. Thoughts of his father, Robert La Follette later told his wife, were always part of his consciousness, even in his extreme youth, and his devotion to his memory was, in her words, "almost morbid." He spent a lifetime seeking the approval of this phantom
father, whom he "thought of ... by day and dreamed of ... at night" (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:6). At the age of 24, for example, he imagined himself at the grave of his father, imploring, "Oh my idolized father lost to me before your image was stamped upon my child-mind—nothing left to me but your name! What would I not give to have known the sound of your voice, to have received your approval when it was merited." Upon the death of his mother in 1894, La Follette, then aged 39, had his father's remains disinterred to be reburied next to his mother. La Follette, intent on "reproducing in imagination the form of his father," personally removed the relics of his father's skeleton and studied them carefully (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:7).

By demanding that her son fix his attention on his dead father, Mary La Follette prohibited him from idealizing, then realistically seeing, any other parent figure, thereby blocking forever his ability to become, in effect, his "own parent" and achieve the emotional maturity necessary to attain true self-esteem (see Kohut 1971, 3, 146). In an effort to maintain a continuous union with external figures who could provide the kind of emotional thermostat he lacked, La Follette formed strong bonds with older men who resembled his father morally or physically. Such attachments were never entirely fulfilling, however. To feed the constant craving for reassurance of his own righteousness, La Follette, insufficiently equipped to regulate or maintain his own sense of self, immersed himself in increasingly ambitious and vigorous activities to evoke admiration, approval and acceptance in others.

Ultimately, political office provided the adult La Follette with the perfect arena in which to battle evil (particularly the many evils of a modern urban-industrial society) and thereby prove his righteousness. "The supreme issue, involving all the others," he maintained, "is the encroachment of the powerful few upon the rights of the many" (La Follette 1913, 321). After three terms of battling the "powerful few" as Wisconsin's governor, La Follette

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1 Diary, 20 November 1879, Robert La Follette Papers (RLP), B-1, La Follette Family Collection (LFC), Library of Congress (LC).
began what was to be a nineteen-year tenure as senator in 1906. His celebrated refusal to indulge in political compromise is epitomized in his oft-repeated rejection of Theodore Roosevelt’s acceptance of the maxim "Half a loaf is better than no bread." No loaf, countered La Follette, is better than half a loaf. "Half a loaf, as a rule, dulls the appetite, and destroys the keenness of interest in attaining the whole loaf" (La Follette 1913; 166). Such impracticality frequently frustrated his fellow politicians, but La Follette’s integrity made him a much loved figure in his home state and his role as a leading progressive gained him national recognition as well.

In 1911, La Follette’s decision to run for the presidency was rewarded by much public support, but his initial satisfaction was marred by his suspicion that the immensely popular former president, fellow Republican Theodore Roosevelt, was looking for a progressive to "do the Light Brigade act, stop Taft, and get shot about the right time." As rumors of Roosevelt’s candidacy increased, pressures mounted for La Follette to quit the race. With predictions of his imminent withdrawal circulating freely, La Follette felt that any attempt to cancel a speaking engagement at the Periodical Publishers Association banquet in Philadelphia might be misinterpreted as a concession of withdrawal. La Follette, however, was acutely aware that the banquet was scheduled for the evening immediately preceding his youngest daughter’s scheduled surgery to remove a suspected tubercular gland near her jugular vein. Worried, anxious, angry, and frustrated, La Follette made his way to Philadelphia.

For weeks prior to the journey, La Follette had been unable to sleep for more than a few hours each night. Upon arrival in Philadelphia, however, he insisted in his autobiography, a "very brief rest" prior to his speech restored him to "full vigor" (La Follette 1913, 259). To friends, however, he later admitted his exhaustion stemmed not from simple lack of sleep, but strain over having to "fight a crowd in my own camp who were undermining me every

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2 Robert M. La Follette (RML) to Fremont Older, 18 April 1911, RLP, B-106, LFC, LC.
hour to force through a combination with Roosevelt, "exacerbated by other campaign and legislative pressures. La Follette’s wife, Belle, had written to their son-in-law, George Middleton, who accompanied La Follette to Philadelphia,

Mr. La Follette is dreading the publishers’ dinner, as he always does a new audience. His time is so interrupted that it is almost impossible for him to do anything more than outline his ideas for the occasion. I wish he could prepare definitely what he is going to say, as to be sure and keep in the time limit.

On the day of the speech La Follette suffered an attack of indigestion, probably the result of lack of sleep combined with anxiety over his daughter’s impending surgery. He consumed nothing but a "lukewarm and nauseating" cup of hot chocolate and a shot of whiskey, a drink he sometimes took prior to going on the platform when fatigued. In his autobiography, La Follette provides a very brief account of his performance at the Periodical Publishers banquet:

I went, arriving after the dinner. It was very late when I began to speak. I was not at my best and did not at once get hold of my audience. It was, I do not doubt, entirely my own fault—but I [was] determined to make them hear me to the end. In my effort to do so I talked too long without realizing (La Follette 1913, 259).

Rupert Hughes, a self-proclaimed anti-La Follette reporter for the New York Times, provided an eyewitness account, titled "La Follette’s Political Suicide," an account remarkably in keeping with that supplied by Belle in her biography of her husband. According

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3RML to Charles Zueblin, 15 February 1912; idem to Charles A. Lindbergh, 20 February 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC.
4Belle Case La Follette, (BCL) to George Middleton, 29 January 1912, Family Papers (FP), A-11, LFC, LC.
5The two accounts vary on several relatively insignificant points, such as the exact time La Follette entered the hall and the precise amount of time he originally declared his edited speech would last. Although Hughes’ account appears to be generally accurate, it was included in the file La Follette accumulated in 1917 when he considered instigating several libel suits.
to Hughes, La Follette arrived at the banquet hall at approximately 11 o’clock. The dinner for 500 or 600 guests had been in progress for approximately three hours. He was scheduled to deliver the next to last speech, following a brief, witty but profound address by the Democratic presidential candidate, Woodrow Wilson. La Follette began his own speech with a gracious reference to Wilson, then announced in a hostile tone that he was going to read his forty-five minute speech for two reasons: first, because his family had requested he do so in order to curb his tendency to lose track of time, and second, because he was tired of being constantly misquoted by the press.

According to son-in-law Middleton, the audience, appalled not only at La Follette’s grossly insulting insinuation, but at the prospect of being read to for forty-five minutes at so late an hour with still another speaker on the roster, felt “instantly the tactlessness of his remark.” Middleton added, “I am sure [La Follette] ... felt the quick unfavorable reaction of the audience. ... He struck an aggressive attitude at the beginning and this put them in an aggressive attitude toward him” (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:400-01). La Follette announced his topic as an attack on predatory interests and, according to Hughes “again hurled his mental cuspidor in the face of his hosts and fellow-speakers by declaring that many of those present were hirelings of the trusts.” Considering he was at a dinner arranged to bring together newspaper and magazine publishers, La Follette’s attack on the subserviency of the newspapers while praising the great educational service rendered by more independent weekly and monthly periodicals could not have been less appropriate. Since the newspaper men were the guests of the periodical publishers, his attack seemed doubly rude and ill-advised. La Follette’s prepared text, including a greatly detailed history of several periods of American industrialization, bored his already alienated audience, a fact he attempted to remedy by speaking extemporaneously, a tactic that worked previously when

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6Rupert Hughes, “La Follette’s Political Suicide,” The New York Times, 21 October 1917, RLP, B-322, LFC, LC.
faced with a restless audience in the Senate or on the platform. On this occasion, however, La Follette’s diversion from his text found him shaking his finger at inattentive members of the audience, attacking them as corrupt. As the tension mounted, he frequently lost his chain of thought, returned to his manuscript, and became repetitious. So tiresome did La Follette become that members of the audience began to make cynical retorts to his rhetorical questions. At one point, after painting a picture of dismal conditions, he asked, "Is there a way out?" and someone cried, "We hope so" (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:402).

Gradually, several hundred members of the audience gathered out in the hall to express to each other their disgust and annoyance. Even son-in-law Middleton took a break an hour and a half into the harangue. As audience members returned to their seats, many began to applaud as a way of drowning La Follette out with polite contempt. La Follette, furious, threatened to talk all night if they continued. Resigned, the audience quieted and remained seated through La Follette’s concluding remarks, which came more than two hours after he began. Toastmaster Donald Seitz then stated, "I shall not attempt nor have I the time to come to the defense of the newspapers of the country which have just been foolishly, wickedly, and untruthfully assailed." La Follette left the hall, went to his room, and "ill from exhaustion" (La Follette 1913, 259), vomited. Resting briefly on the train to Washington, he arrived at the hospital in time to be present in the operating room during his daughter’s successful surgery. Not one but three tubercular glands were removed near her jugular vein during the two hour and twenty minute procedure.

Belle La Follette’s account of her husband’s notorious speech is peppered with excuses for his behavior. She noted that he suffered from acute indigestion in addition to the fatigue induced by recent physical and emotional strains. Nevertheless, she acknowledged that it was not just La Follette’s strident tone and poor organization that

7"Calamity Ends Meeting," *Daily Northwestern*, 3 February 1912, RLP, B-268, LFC, LC. Less than six months later Seitz, unexpectedly, became an avid La Follette supporter.
so offended his audience, for "even if Bob had read in his best form, early in the evening, the [briefer] version of his address, the audience might have resented the content of the latter as a premeditated attack" (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:403). She did, however, minimize the abusiveness and complete lack of self-control exhibited by her husband. Woodrow Wilson’s Wisconsin ally, Henry Cooper, wrote on the back of his dinner invitation, "It was a shocking scene. He lost his temper repeatedly—shook his fist—at listeners who had started to walk out too tired to listen longer,—was abusive, ugly in manner." Noted another eyewitness, "I had a long talk with ... other insurgents the next day, and they were pretty well agreed that La Follette had committed political suicide. ... It seems an entirely silly and trivial idea that a man should make or break himself in a single speech. But it looks as though that were La Follette’s situation."

Ironically, on February 3, the day after the speech, there appeared in The Outlook an assessment of La Follette’s speaking abilities written just prior to the incident. It asserted that during the campaign La Follette "would have enjoyed a little vigorous opposition and a few hisses would have added fire to the order of his enthusiasm." It continued, "We are by no means sure that he has the patience which would enable him to endure the vociferations of a hostile audience. ... Mr. La Follette impressed his hearers as a man of great patience, but not of exhaustless patience." The article prophesied, "We do not believe that the mob ever existed which would daunt him."

According to La Follette, even as he agonized over his daughter’s condition, "sensational accounts of this speech and its reception were published throughout the country, and at the same time equally sensational and false reports were spread concerning my physical condition" (La Follette 1913, 259). One article

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9Unidentified letter, Meyer Lissner Papers, Box 40, file 717, Stanford University Special Collections.
10"Mr. La Follette as Seen From the Gallery," The Outlook 100 (3 February 1912): 255.
appearing nationwide on February 4 reported an interview with Donald Seitz, the banquet’s toastmaster. Seitz rebuked La Follette not only for his rudeness and lack of control, but accused him of coming to the dinner with the idea of attacking newspapers and currying favor with magazine publishers. Seitz concluded, "I would not be surprised if the man had been seized with a complete mental breakdown." 11

For days newspapers headlined La Follette’s "collapse" and "mental breakdown" and coupled the reports with unauthorized announcements of the withdrawal of his presidential candidacy. These stories were supplemented, then and in later years, with a variety of rumors, including that the Senator had frothed at the mouth, was totally incoherent, a confirmed alcoholic, and terminally ill. Rumors that he had suffered similar breakdowns both previous and subsequent to the Philadelphia incident were persistent, as were those claiming he had been institutionalized.12 Despite all denials, it was almost universally accepted among politicians and members of the press that La Follette had suffered a "nervous breakdown," a nonmedical, nonspecific euphemism for a mental disorder.13 As the rumors grew, La Follette, who admitted only that he had been under a long nervous strain and needed a little rest, fired off letters denying a breakdown or even ill health. He blamed his performance on exhaustion.14

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11 Angus McSween, "Overwork Cause of La Follette Scene; Doctors Urge Rest," Philadelphia North American, 4 February 1912, RLP, B-322, LFC, LC.
12 Without actually naming him, President Taft referred to La Follette as a "neurotic" publicly. During the period of La Follette’s intense unpopularity during World War I, these rumors were revitalized and cited as evidence of his mental instability.
13 A "mental disorder" is defined as "An illness with psychologic or behavioral manifestations and/or impairment in functioning due to a social, psychologic, genetic, physical/chemical, or biological disturbance. The disorder is not limited to relations between the person and society. The illness is characterized by symptoms and/or impairment in functioning." (Arnold Werner, M.D., et al., eds., The American Psychiatric Association's Psychiatric Glossary [Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, Inc., 1984], p. 89.)
14 "They have lied like fiends about me," he complained. "I am not sick and have not broken down, as they will find in good time." (RML to Unidentified, 20 February 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC.) To his sister Jo he wrote, "Whatever you may see in the papers don’t you get fooled nor...think for a moment that I am worn out. Physically I have not been in better trim in years. I have not had sleep enough in months and am tired that way." (RML to Josephine Seibecker, FP, A-12, LFC, LC.)
Even reports discounting tales of La Follette’s unbalanced behavior were far from soothing. An editorial in the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* concluded, "Mr. La Follette is not suffering, as Mr. Seitz says, from some sort of aberration due to overstrain; he is suffering from too much La Follette" (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:405). According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, neither La Follette’s physical condition nor his remarks about the subserviency of the newspapers to money trusts constituted the "great tragedy of the evening." Rather, it was that La Follette had "no power"; like an athlete who had overtrained, he had "gone stale." Rupert Hughes called La Follette "less a dangerous man than an unutterable bore."

Some La Follette supporters looked for a silver lining around the dark clouds. *Philadelphia Evening Telegraph* editorialist Paul Hanna, present at the banquet, thanked La Follette for

the service rendered a dreadfully deceived but rapidly awakening public by your address at the banquet. ... You are creating a sentiment among the people which demands and soon will support a Free Press, from which will spring freedom and genuine democracy in both industry and politics.

A witness somewhat less strident in his defense of La Follette dismissed one supporter’s idea that the most vocal members of the Philadelphia audience were plants, prearranged to be antagonistic to La Follette. The witness did, however, comment on the "extraordinary number of stand patters present."
La Follette’s lawyer and close friend Gilbert Roe even suggested that the speech and its aftermath might work out advantageously, for at last the public would be aware of the newspapers’ hostility towards La Follette. La Follette readily agreed, adding that the audience was "stung by my plain truths about the subserviency of the press." He concluded hopefully, "If I am right they won’t be able to make their misrepresentations stick." In New Jersey the Newark News deemed it difficult to blame La Follette for his sweeping condemnation of newspapers as he had never been treated fairly by the press, but suggested he inspired such treatment because he was much more radical in words and manner than in actions and policies. Another paper noted that, while all that La Follette said was true, he was indiscreet and discourteous and concluded, "We do not want a man for President who forgets what he has said, and repeats several times." The newspapers’ "gross misrepresentation" of her husband’s "overtired condition" infuriated Belle (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:407-8). Key La Follette supporters who longed for an excuse to switch their allegiance to Roosevelt quickly seized upon the opportunity to declare La Follette broken down. On the morning of February 5, the core members of La Follette’s campaign committee, including manager Walter Houser, submitted to La Follette a statement of withdrawal from the presidential race. La Follette did not immediately refuse to sign but stated he must consult with Belle. When presented with the petition in their home, Belle, despite her personal dislike of her husband’s candidacy, stated she would rather see him dead in his grave than have him sign that statement. So incensed was Belle that she wrote to family friend Gil Roe: "I know Bob suffers from brain fag all the time because he will not try to rest but to hear these men talk you would think he had been a dead man for several years instead of carrying the whole load of the

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19RML to Josephine Seibecker, 5 February 1912, FP, A-12, LFC, LC.
20Dr. George Keenan to RML, 4 March 1912, RLP, B-71, LFC, LC.
21She included in her biography of La Follette a copy of a New York Globe cartoon by J.N. Darling lampooning the way La Follette’s political enemies were utilizing rumors of La Follette’s ill health to render him politically impotent.
political movement. It needs a man to talk back with them" (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:412). La Follette directed Houser to issue a complete denial of any intention of withdrawal, but predicted, "I am likely to be attacked in every conceivable and underhanded way by the friends of another candidate in order to force me to quit the field."

Further damage to La Follette's candidacy occurred that same day when George Record, chairman of the first Progressive Republican League conference at Chicago, relayed to his fellow progressives the message he had received from Houser (who was still La Follette's campaign manager and had just that day been present when La Follette refused to withdraw), announcing the senator's withdrawal due to illness. Despite warnings from still loyal friends, La Follette refused to accept Houser's action as a betrayal and announced, "The attempt of any of my former supporters to justify their desertion of my candidacy by making Houser their scapegoat is a cowardly perversion of fact," for "they know that no one had the authority to withdraw me as a candidate. ..." Belief in La Follette's official withdrawal strengthened when Gifford Pinchot, previously one of his most influential and financially generous supporters, sent a widely published telegram to the Minnesota Progressive Republican League stating that in his judgment "La Follette's condition makes further serious candidacy impossible."

The impact of all this on Roosevelt was the subject of some debate. The progressive New York Evening Mail concluded that the Philadelphia incident "puts the Rep[ublican] nomination ... very

22 RML to Gilbert Roe, 6 February 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC.
23 Idem to Rudolph Spreckles, 17 April 1912, RLP, B-107; John Commons to RML, 24 June 1912, LFP, E-81, LFC, LC.
24 RML to Rudolph Spreckles, 17 April 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC; La Follette, Autobiography, p. 261. This "betrayal" incensed La Follette particularly because he had informed Pinchot personally of his intention to remain a candidate. Greatly hurt, he indignantly directed his secretary to inform Pinchot of his decision to cease all communications with his former friend. (Nellie Dunn to Gifford Pinchot, 15 February 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC.) For Hiram Johnson's decision to withdraw his support of a La Follette candidacy, however, he voiced a grudging respect, writing that Johnson was "mainly about it," and did not attempt to "sneak out under the pretense" supplied by La Follette's campaign headquarters, but withdrew his support of a La Follette candidacy because he felt La Follette could not win and Roosevelt could.
definitely in the hands of Colonel Theodore Roosevelt."25 The Cleveland Reader disagreed:

La Follette's collapse will make little or no difference. He was virtually out of the race... before he showed any signs of illness or exhaustion and his condition could not affect in any material way the assured swing of the Republican Progressives to Theodore Roosevelt. That movement has gone so far and gained such momentum that it would not have been checked or weakened if the Wisconsin Senator had been able to go on with his campaign under the heaviest pressure of abounding vitality and good health.26

Roosevelt, in order to avoid giving "color to the belief that he [was] trying to hustle poor Senator La Follette,"27 was forced to delay his official entry into the campaign. He did, however, deny that he had ever urged La Follette to become a candidate and further denied any role in the mass exodus of key La Follette supporters into his own camp: "It's perfectly silly for him [La Follette] to feel hurt at me, and... I have done absolutely nothing. ... If ever there was a perfectly spontaneous movement, this is it."28

The stories of La Follette's "breakdown" and "collapse" had far greater impact on journalists and political leaders than voters, who simply either did not understand or did not accept the conflicting statements about La Follette's health and candidacy, as evidenced by a poll of the Kansas City Star's readers, which showed no change in La Follette's support after the Philadelphia speech.

Belle believed her husband's brief withdrawal from active campaigning following the banquet encouraged rumors of a prolonged breakdown.29 Although La Follette reiterated his assurances to friends that he had not been in better physical

25"Mr. La Follette, as Seen by his Party Press," Literary Digest 40 (February 17, 1912), 319.
26Ibid.
27Paraphrased letter, Theodore Roosevelt to Gilson Gardner, 8 February 1912, FLP, E-80, LFC, LC.
28Theodore Roosevelt to Callan O'Laughlin, 8 February 1912, in Morison 1951, 7:499.
29Support for this claim can be found in Charles A. Lindbergh to Theodore Roosevelt, 13 February 1912; Walter F. Cushing to Theodore Roosevelt, 9 February 1912, FLP, E-80; Fremont Older to Walter Houser, 20 February 1912, FLP, E-81, LFC, LC.
condition for years and needed only sleep, he used this period not to rest, but to finish a series of autobiographical articles for *American Magazine*. He resolved to "bring the story down to date" by collecting and publishing the articles in book form and announced, "I want in the last chapter to give this history of this d___d campaign." During that period of "rest," on February 26, 1912, Theodore Roosevelt officially announced that his hat was in the ring.

Predictably, in the final chapters of his autobiography and in the spring issues of his magazine, La Follette, to the delight of the Taft forces, vilified Roosevelt while lauding his own actions. He accused the Roosevelt forces of stooping to treachery in order to make it appear that La Follette had pledged his support to Roosevelt. He even hinted broadly that Roosevelt had been "bought" by railroad money. He did, however, grudgingly admit that he should have campaigned more following the completion of the earlier autobiographical articles, but dismissed this crucial political error quickly with the justification that he had been conscientiously attending to matters pending in the Senate. Having devoted less than a paragraph to his own errors, La Follette devoted the remaining pages to the culpability of others. In addition to Roosevelt, his long list of traitors included Hiram Johnson and Gifford Pinchot. He even included an edited version of the manuscript he claimed to have delivered to the Periodical Publishers Association, ignoring the fact that he deviated far from his prepared text that night. These writings provide remarkable insight into La Follette's attempts to rationalize his behavior and his inability to accept personal responsibility for his actions.

Roosevelt organizer Gilson Gardner worried over the impact of La Follette's assertions and reported that Taft supporters were encouraging La Follette forces to make additional attacks on Roosevelt to further split the progressive vote within the Republican party. Other Roosevelt forces, however, had anticipated La Follette's accusations and advised the former president, "a sick man is not to be held responsible." Moreover, they asserted, even La Follette's

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30RML to Gilbert Roe, 17 February 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC.
stauncest supporters, "except for a few extremists," would not follow the broken-down senator.

A few days after the speech La Follette admitted it had been "outrageously long," had contained serious errors, and that his mind had taken refuge in digression. Slightly more than a week later, however, he professed, "The affair in Philadelphia was greatly (and designedly) exaggerated because I aroused the hostility of the press by my criticism." He maintained ultimately that his delivery of the speech was insignificant; only the way it was twisted and used against him was important, for he was merely the innocent victim of the immoral treachery of conniving and deceitful men. Furthermore, according to La Follette, this was not the first time the state of his health had been maliciously misrepresented.

La Follette's cryptic account of the speech in his autobiography minimized his own errors, but he devoted considerable attention to attempts to discredit him subsequent to the speech. His own valiant responses, he claimed, disproved completely the stories circulated (La Follette 1913, 259, 268). He even bragged that such a temporary defeat as the ensuing scandal meant less to him "than to men unseasoned in strife" (La Follette 1913, 260).

La Follette's anger and frustration were evident, however, in a Bowling Green, Ohio, speech in which he referred to Roosevelt as an "inconsequential playboy" (Manners 1969, 230). La Follette did not hold a monopoly on name-calling in the 1912 campaign. Earlier Roosevelt privately referred to Taft as "a flubdub with a streak of the second-rate and common in him" (Frost 1988, 235), and, as the race grew more heated, publicly called the President a "puzzlewit" and a "fathead." On May 13 Taft openly referred to Roosevelt as

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31 C.D. Willard to Theodore Roosevelt, 16 February 1912, FLP, E-80, LFC, LC.
32 Statement, circa February 6, 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC. See also RML to John S. Phillips, 4 February 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC.
33 RML to George Kennan, 12 February 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC.
34 The entire affair "would be scarcely worth mentioning," he claimed, "except as it tends to show the difficulties under which I was compelled to prosecute my campaign."
35 Footnote to Theodore Roosevelt to Sturges Bigelow, 10 May 1912, in Morison 1951, 7:541.
an "egoist" and "demagogue." All this prompted satirist Finley Peter Dunne's creation, the ever present political commentator Mr. Dooley, to note, "Ivrybody callin' each other liars and crooks, not like pollytical inimies, d'ye mind, but like old friends that has been up late dhrinkin' together" (Manners 1969, 230). Roosevelt was very careful, however, not to say anything bitter about La Follette in public, for fear of a sympathy backlash, but privately called him "half zealot and half self-seeking demagogue" and termed his political goals "impossible."³⁶

Although a majority of the accounts of La Follette's performance at the Periodical Publishers Association banquet were grossly sensationalized and at times even fabricated, even the unembroidered facts undeniably reveal disturbing and politically debilitating facets of La Follette's personality. Even if, as has been contended, La Follette decided on that particular speech because, unaware of the banquet's purpose to reconcile newspapers with magazines, he believed it potentially pleasing to an audience of magazine publishers, this explanation neglects the significance of La Follette's ignorance of the nature of his audience, a grave error for a man who prided himself on his devotion to thoroughness and detail. Personally careless and inadequately prepared, La Follette can also be faulted for having poorly organized campaign forces, since the composition of the audience should have been noted and brought to his attention as a matter of course.

Regardless of when La Follette noted his audience included newspapermen, once that information was received he most certainly should have tailored his remarks accordingly, particularly since La Follette was noted for his ability to adapt his speeches quickly to fit his audiences. Instead, already harried, he fell victim to the insecurities that had been mounting continually during the progress of his campaign. Even before his ill-fated speech, La Follette was strongly on the defensive, hurt by the recent withdrawals of many of his supporters. Newspaper accounts of his withdrawal from the race appeared more and more frequently, accounts he considered not just

³⁶Theodore Roosevelt to John Strachery, 26 March 1912, in Morison 1951, 7:531.
false but malicious. His sensitivity at that point to the slightest opposition, real or imagined, made him an emotional powder keg. (In a story headlined, "TR Branded 'Traitor': La Follette Manager Declares Treachery Caused Illness," Houser declared that the actions of the Roosevelt camp had "overtaxed La Follette’s nervous and physical energies.") La Follette entered the hall, late and frazzled, only to hear Woodrow Wilson ending a gracious, extemporaneous speech, intensifying his own fears of inadequacy. It seems likely that toastmaster Seitz’s "aghast" look at his bulky manuscript reinforced La Follette’s reproachful feeling of ill-preparedness. Thus the powder keg ignited. La Follette’s defensiveness caused him to lash out at those whom he felt were maligning him. "At Philadelphia," he confided to his sister, "I felt that the crowd was against me & threw down my manuscript determined to compel them and master them." (In hindsight, one witness offered a simpler solution: "If only he’d had sense enough to tell a funny story and sit down.")

La Follette had long resented having to keep his dislike and distrust of Theodore Roosevelt confidential in order not to alienate progressives. For a man who prided himself on being completely honest in addition to morally superior to others, especially Roosevelt, this created an enormous strain. Frustrated and angry, La Follette managed in Philadelphia to refrain from making a personal attack on the popular former president, but could no longer resist venting his general frustration. Harried by overwork and depressed over reports of a failing candidacy, La Follette’s ability to control his temper failed. Unable to accept responsibility for his decreasing and Roosevelt’s increasing status, La Follette lashed out at the messenger bearing the bad news, the press. The aggressive

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37"TR Branded Traitor," dateline Minneapolis, 15 February 1912, enclosed in Meyer Lissner to Walter Houser, 16 February 1912, Box 3, file 54, Stanford Library Special Collections.
38RML to Josephine Seibecker, 5 February 1912, FP, A-12, LFC, LC.
39Unidentified letter, Meyer Lissner Papers, Box 40, file 717, Stanford Library Special Collections.
40His self-destructive actions may be seen as an attempt by his suffering ego to do away with his self in order to wipe out the offending, disappointing reality of failure. See Kohut 1971, 181.
41Theodore Roosevelt declined the invitation to the banquet. Perhaps some of La Follette’s wrath would have been directed squarely at Roosevelt had he been in attendance.
language and determination to keep speaking until the audience was won over were hallmarks of a La Follette speech. What made this one different was that some of the very people he was railing against were in the audience. After feeling so long at their mercy, he now controlled them and punished them accordingly.

As a presidential candidate confronting men with potentially enormous influence over his career, the speech was disastrous. Several sources referred to La Follette’s actions as political suicide. Personally, however, the speech was undoubtedly cathartic. La Follette’s emotional needs clearly outweighed his desire to perform in a politically expedient manner, for he certainly could have maintained his integrity without so completely alienating his audience.

Following his Philadelphia speech, La Follette suffered financially as well as physically and emotionally and desired only to complete his autobiography, then retreat for several months of complete and isolated rest. Despite obviously intense feelings, according to Belle, he "worked out in silence and solitude" that which "must be accepted as unalterable failure or sorrow" (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:406-07) and did not discuss the Philadelphia speech with his family. This refusal to acknowledge and explore painful emotions is typical of the La Follettes, but perhaps La Follette’s reluctance to discuss his feelings about this particular issue stemmed in part from Belle’s insistence on his continued candidacy as a commitment to principle. He agreed to a speaking campaign across North Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oregon, and California only at Belle’s urging. Belle confided in their children, "I have felt its great importance in clearing up all this misconception as to the state of his health. It is the best way to give the lie to these deserters who are going about claiming they left him because he was disabled—I don’t mind those who come out in the open so much and said they left him because their beloved Theodore Roosevelt could win."42

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42BCL to children, 11 March 1912, FP, A-11, LFC, LC.
With Belle unwilling to accept without challenge her husband's and, less directly, her own, tarnished reputation, La Follette pursued the remainder of the campaign with a vengeance despite the attempts of "everybody ... outside of the immediate household" to convince him to withdraw. According to Belle, when La Follette reentered active campaigning in North Dakota, "so far as he was concerned the humiliating failure of his speech at the Publishers dinner slipped into the background in due proportion to the totality of his life and work" (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:415-16). From then on, La Follette refused to acknowledge publicly the enormity of that "humiliating failure," although accounts of the incident and the rumors stemming from it did not fade in the memories of politicians and the public alike.

Belle joined La Follette during the post-Philadelphia campaign and proved to be a persuasive advocate of votes for women at many meetings sponsored by the suffrage organizations. La Follette attempted to refocus attention on politics rather than personalities. The key issues, he asserted, were support for the Initiative, Referendum, Recall; direct nominations and elections; graduated income and inheritance taxes; the parcel post; government ownership and operation of Alaskan railways and coal mines; physical valuation of railways; extension of powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission, and a strengthening of the tariff commission. He opposed ship subsidies, excessive defense expenditures, "dollar diplomacy," the Aldrich-Vreeland currency bill, and Canadian reciprocity plans. Critics noted the absence of any specific discussion on the larger issues of proper relations between capital and labor and the relation of the judiciary to social reform. While his supporters reiterated his contention that such subjects were inherent in his proposed regulation of trusts and in the Recall, detractors denied La Follette's ability to see the big picture.

Although he had rejoiced in 1911 when fellow progressives appointed him their leader, La Follette returned to his status as a "lonely man" in 1912 with some relief. Belle noted, "Bob feels

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43RML to Gilbert Roe, 6 February 1912, RLP, B-72, LFC, LC.
better always when things are straightened out and the decks seem cleared for action, no matter how big a fight he has on his hands.\footnote{BCL to George Middleton, 6 March 1912, FF, A-11, LFC, LC.} No longer stifled by efforts to please as many progressives as possible, La Follette returned to the style and the image with which he felt the most comfortable—a lone altruistic crusader, fighting bravely against overwhelming odds, unencumbered by annoying compromises.\footnote{La Follette's secretary sent out a form letter emphasizing this image, describing La Follette as a man who "refused, as he always has, to make any deals or combinations that would confuse the issues, or mislead the people, who looked to him as the unswerving, uncompromising leader of Progressive principles." Form letter by John J. Hannon, circa February 1912, RLP, B-71, LFC, LC.} One close friend observed,

La Follette has not withdrawn, and what is more, he will not do so, and what is still more ... is ... that he is more anxious to have the thing he is Fighting for succeed than he is anxious to be President of the United States. ... No power on this green earth will swerve him from the line of what he conceives to be his duty, and in [that] lies his great strength.\footnote{George Kennan to John Darling, 4 March 1912, RLP, B-71, LFC, LC.}

Ten years after these events came a somewhat different interpretation of this lifelong "strength": "His strongest trait is a delight in overcoming obstacles. He would rather have the mass against than with him; he glories in such a contest .... He would deliberately choose the road with opposition, provided he did not thereby sacrifice a principle" (Barry 1922, 566).

An extremely self-righteous La Follette responded to the request that he remove his name from the California primary ballot:

There is hanging on the wall of my study ... these lines from Browning:

"One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right wore worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake."

It was a little present from my children who believe it should be my epitaph .... I should be unworthy of the regard of all men of right standards, if I did not follow my conviction in this as I have done in all things. I am everlastingly sure of the righteousness of my resolution to fight straight on, never halting, never turning one single step aside to bargain with sham success. Every day strengthens that resolution and the future will vindicate my course. For the present I must endure the pain and mortification attending upon the loss of political followers and even personal friends. But out of many trials I have been taught the lesson of fortitude and patience.47

Despite the loss of many influential supporters, La Follette’s solitary, blustery stance was enthusiastically rewarded by those still loyal. Friends, family, and supporters showered him with reassurance that he was the only rightful candidate. The Minneapolis Tribune reported that La Follette, who, "had his fighting clothes on ... plunged into the North Dakota campaign with a vigor which had given him an added right to his title of "Fighting Bob. ... [He] look[ed] anything but a sick man ... [and was] tense, vigorous, and full of fighting ire." The Tribune concluded, "There is an indomitable something in this little fighting man that evokes admiration whether willing or unwilling" (B.C. & F. La Follette 1953, 1:427-28). La Follette had sacrificed the general but less devoted approval of the powerful many for the passionate, sometimes even fanatical approval of the few.

The early primaries confirmed reports that La Follette’s alleged debilitated condition had little effect on the voters, for he won the North Dakota primary with fifty-eight percent of the vote compared with thirty-nine percent for Roosevelt and three percent for Taft. On April 2, La Follette triumphed over Taft in Wisconsin by a three-to-one margin, and Roosevelt received only six hundred and twenty-eight votes. La Follette claimed Roosevelt’s overwhelming victory in Illinois, where his own showing was poor, was in no way

47 RML to William Kent, 15 February 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC.
indicative of progressive sentiment because he did not consider that state to be progressive.

In Oregon, where he received few votes and no delegates, La Follette gave a speech that revealed some of the motivations that kept him running in the face of so much adversity:

I ran five times for Governor of Wisconsin and you may just as well make up your mind to elect me President next November. ... I shall continue to be a candidate for President until our Government is entirely restored to the people. I would rather have the place in history as the man who led such a fight than to have been one of a score of Presidents whose names you cannot remember tonight (Case & La Follette 1953, 1:431).

La Follette’s fellow progressives were not impressed. California Governor Hiram Johnson and some of La Follette’s other former supporters described his mission as "one of selfish ambition, selfish revenge, and selfish disregard of the progressive cause." 48

La Follette entered the Republican National Convention in Chicago on June 18 with only the thirty-six delegates he had been able to garner in Wisconsin and North Dakota. At the convention’s end, of the ten thousand and seventy-eight delegates (five hundred and forty constituted a majority and was the minimum number of votes necessary to secure the nomination of any candidate), Taft received five hundred and sixty-one, Roosevelt one hundred and seven, La Follette forty-one, other candidates nineteen, and delegates not voting or absent three hundred and fifty. Since the combined total of all delegates save Taft’s still did not constitute the necessary majority, this contradicts La Follette’s assertion that Roosevelt’s candidacy robbed him of the nomination. La Follette, however, staunchly maintained neither Taft nor Roosevelt had a majority of

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48 This charge of selfishness is bolstered by La Follette’s refusal to follow the advice of his wife and other staunch supporters that he work at the convention to nominate Senator Joseph Bristow or some other progressive with whom he could work and support heartily, and thereby prove that his greatest concerns were with the success of the progressive cause rather than his own personal advancement.
"honestly or regularly elected delegates." La Follette’s resentment of Roosevelt remained unabated by Taft’s renomination. Two days after the convention he wrote an editorial for La Follette’s Magazine accusing Roosevelt of attempting to buy the presidency through lavish campaign expenditures and the support of notorious members of the country’s largest trusts.

Roosevelt, undaunted by the rejection of the Republicans, created his own Progressive party, popularly known as the Bull Moose. La Follette ended his autobiography with a plea to progressives not to break ranks by joining the Bull Moose, but refused to support or endorse Taft or Wilson (the Democratic candidate) officially. He did, however, give Wilson behind-the-scenes support. He also co-sponsored Senate resolutions directing an investigation of campaign contributions during 1904, 1908, and 1912 in hopes of embarrassing Roosevelt.

La Follette was painfully aware that the split between himself and Roosevelt destroyed the rapidly growing progressive movement within the Republican party. Belle commented, "I think the breaking down of the Progressive alliance, which ... took him so long to build up, is the hardest part of the situation." He continued to place the blame for his defeat and for the breakup of the movement solely on Roosevelt’s decision to run, refusing to accept any responsibility himself.

La Follette’s long and distinguished career subsequent to the events of 1912 disprove the diagnosis of "political suicide" made by many of his contemporaries. He remained a powerful force in the Senate, tirelessly pressing for progressive legislation until his death in 1925. His final presidential bid, as an independent in 1924, brought him almost a million votes. Despite this recovery, however, the scar of 1912 would never be obliterated and rumors of mental

49RML to Fred McKenzie, 24 June 1912; Idem to Gilbert Roe, 8 July 1912, RLP, B-107, LFC, LC; La Follette 1913, 280-85.
50BCL to Emily Bishop, 20 February 1912, BCL, D-11, LFC, LC.
51Historians George E. Mowry and Henry F. Pringle concur with La Follette’s assessment (Mowry 1946, 208; Pringle 1931, 548), while more recent scholar Herbert F. Marguiles refutes it (Marguiles 1976, 54-76).
illness and instability were periodically revitalized. Ultimately, La Follette suffered more in 1912 than just the temporary loss of a leading role within a growing progressive movement. He lost more than the Republican nomination for the presidency. He lost forever, at least in the eyes of many key politicians and members of the press, not only the chance of ever becoming president, but of ever again being completely trusted and respected.

La Follette's insecurities forced him to refuse any possible conciliatory meetings with Roosevelt, needlessly alienating the popular and powerful former president early on. La Follette's inability to accept responsibility for his own actions led him to maintain a disloyal campaign manager and attack influential members of the press. This culminated in a storm of ugly publicity, but also in his sense of relief at no longer having to share whatever glory came his way. La Follette's personal characteristics—his refusal to accept failure, his unwillingness to compromise or delegate authority, his desire for unqualified approval, and his dedication to his principles no matter what the cost, in short, the very things that had brought him to the political forefront—ultimately proved to be enormously damaging in 1912 as his personal needs were satisfied at great political cost.

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References


