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## The Burden of a Great Name: Robert M. La Follette, Jr.\*

Nancy C. Unger

In 1925, following the death of the progressive giant Robert Marion La Follette, the people of Wisconsin elected the 30-year-old son who bore his name to complete his father's term in the United States Senate. Throughout his life, Robert La Follette, Jr.'s sense of self—natural interests, hobbies, ideas, and ambitions—never fully emerged and developed, so pressured was he to carry out his parents' will, especially his father's. Despite his initial reluctance to serve as his father's political successor, "Young Bob" went on to serve a total of 21 years in the Senate, three more than his famous patriarch. Labeled a superior senator but weak political leader, he was defeated in the 1946 Republican primary by none other than Joseph R. McCarthy. Seven years later Robert M. La Follette, Jr., died by his own hand. The La Follette family cited depression brought on by ill health in his later years as the key to his suicide. Portents of this event, however, appear in his earlier life, and an examination of those years sheds light not only on the lifelong drives and compulsions of La Follette, Jr., but on his far more famous father as well.

La Follette, Sr., nicknamed "Fighting Bob," was, despite his short stature, a giant among men. From his birth in a log cabin in Primrose, Wisconsin, in 1855 agrarian America, he ultimately rose to leadership in the first national comprehensive efforts to grapple with the ills of a modern urban-industrial society. As a progressive governor and senator he sought to bring a truer democracy nationwide by his efforts to extend his Wisconsin Idea. He strove to limit the power and wealth of big business. His achievements include the direct primary, fairer taxation, the initiative and referendum, plus rail and labor legislation. While his ideas were initially perceived as radical and often earned him the scorn of his

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\*To improve readability, spelling errors in the source materials have been corrected.

peers, many gradually came to be accepted and today are woven into the very fabric of American politics and society.

Driven and self-righteous, Robert La Follette, Sr., was nearly as demanding of his family as he was of himself.<sup>1</sup> The letters of his wife and children reveal pride in his high ideals and accomplishments combined with frustration over the emotional toll these took on the family. The toll of their heritage began very early in the lives of the La Follette children and was certainly greatest on the second child, Robert La Follette, Jr., known within the family as Bobbie.

Despite the advantages of being, in his sister's words, the "Crown Prince," Bobbie paid dearly for his birthright. While his father let it be known that all his children's shortcomings and transgressions caused him much disappointment and personal pain, Bobbie, as the oldest son, was warned that he in particular had "no right" to upset his father in any way. The pressure on him to excel was constant. Even granddaughter Sherry La Follette, who refers to to Belle La Follette's character as "crystal pure," concedes, "The one negative...was that both she and Bob demanded an unachievable standard of perfection for the next generation."<sup>2</sup> When Bobbie was six, for example, Belle brought to his attention the pleas from various constituents sent to the family on a daily basis, and impressed on him his personal obligation to ameliorate suffering whenever possible.<sup>3</sup>

Bob wanted to ensure that his children, particularly his sons, "grew up as familiar with politics as children raised on the farm are with its day's work; and in that same spirit of practical knowledge and experience [be] ready, when it came their turn, to put their hands to the plow and go straight ahead to the end of the furrow."<sup>4</sup> Belle occasionally questioned the wisdom of encouraging Phil and Bobbie to become engrossed in subjects so remote from the thoughts of other children their age, but Bob entertained no such doubts. Phil recalled, "In politics and in public affairs he had no secrets from us....At first some of his progressive callers looked askance at us [during political meetings at the La Follette home] because the subject was thought to be too confidential to trust to young boys.

But Dad would assure them that we were to be trusted."<sup>5</sup> By age 11, Bobbie was closely following his father's political trials and tribulations as a first term senator and clearly identifying with his struggles: "I suppose that the Senate is trying to act like a 'icicle' to you. Never mind, they will have to do something worse than act like an 'icicle' to freeze a La Follette won't they?"<sup>6</sup>

Implicit in this carefully nurtured interest in politics was the expectation that both boys, but Bobbie in particular, would not only follow in their father's footsteps, but surpass his already daunting record of accomplishments. On Bobbie's 12th birthday his father advised:

Look well to it that you grow in gentleness and tenderness as well as in strength....The boy Bobbie is a mighty important part of the man....Every day and hour of life is precious. Every act lays the foundation for another. I love you dear lad and count on you for many things in the future.<sup>7</sup>

At 16 his father praised his "natural abilities awaiting development," but urged "severe discipline to train them for the highest usefulness in life." He concluded:

You have the brain and the constitution and the courage to take high rank in any company and to be a leader of power for good as a man. Every hair of your head is dear to me. Every day of your life is precious....Oh my boy, my boy, I want you to realize right now the vital importance of fixing the habits of industry and self-discipline to bring out all your splendid powers. Now, every hour, every day of the next five years will tell the story of your life to follow.<sup>8</sup>

At 18 came the declaration, "So much depends on your making [it known]...that you have the real stuff in you,"<sup>9</sup> a message reinforced at 19 with "I love you, my dear lad,—so much that you must love me enough to do...things right."<sup>10</sup> At 20 Bobbie was instructed to "Get the habit of mastery—control—discipline—that is



everything....[N]o matter how hard it is, just remember you are at work on the armor and weapons with which to wage a great fight against the wrongs which oppress and the evils and ills which afflict the world in which you live."<sup>11</sup> And as early as 1914, heedless of Bobbie's protests, Bob had begun urging his oldest son, then 19, to begin preparations to run for governor.

Although she advised other parents to encourage their children to think and act for themselves, Belle La Follette revealed much about the parenting philosophy she and her husband shared when she concluded: "Give them [children] rope, lots and lots of rope—all they can use—more and more as they learn to use it. And when there is a positive need to make it taut, just a little give and take in drawing the slack usually answers the purpose better than a sudden pull."<sup>12</sup> Despite their claims of encouraging youthful independence, Belle and Bob kept their children, as youngsters and as adults, on a very tight rein indeed.

Not surprisingly, Bobbie, the most pressured of the La Follette children, was a tremendously insecure youngster who needed constant reassurance. As a little boy, Bobbie, in his father's absence, was especially anxious each night to know if Belle thought he had been good, and was the most traumatized of the children by unsettling events.<sup>13</sup> Although older than Mary and Phil, Bobbie suffered most severely by far from separation anxiety during the absence of their parents. (Phil took thinly veiled delight in his brother's misery during such times. When Belle once left Wisconsin suddenly to nurse Bob through influenza, Phil noted gleefully, "How it did surprise Robert to find that Mama had gone. He pretty near fainted....")<sup>14</sup>

As a child Bobbie was preoccupied with his health. He discovered quickly that people would be "awfully good"<sup>15</sup> to him in times of sickness even as "doctor's orders" provided a guilt-free excuse to avoid unwanted burdens. Belle worried about Bobbie's tendency to exaggerate or fabricate illness, but usually her concerns about health won out and made her treat all symptoms, real or imagined, seriously. Bob, too, was very apprehensive about Bobbie's

health and he confided in Belle, "It keeps haunting me that he may get hurt."<sup>16</sup>

Bobbie's first serious illness, pronounced "a congestion of the covering of the nerves resulting from poison or infection by the grippe," occurred when he was nine years old. He was already feeling the pressures of his father's expectations and desirous of attention and acceptance on his own merits. Bob, preoccupied previously with an impending gubernatorial campaign, found himself obliged to be at home much of the time. He wrote, "[Bobbie] is so nervous that Belle or I must be with him all the time....It will be weeks before he will be where he will not require constant attendance," and noted proudly, "I can soothe and 'steady' him better than anyone else."<sup>17</sup> As Bobbie recovered, the pressures and expectations resumed. Other illnesses would follow. Although all were marked by much physical pain and suffering, each would also ensure a period of emotional respite and reassurance. The cycle was in motion.

In 1906 Bob and Belle decided to leave their three younger children at Wisconsin's Hillsdale Home boarding school during Bob's first session as senator. According to Bob's sister, Josie Seibecker, whom the children visited often during this period, Phil was "happy as can be," making his envious and wistful older brother comment, "Phil wouldn't be homesick at the north pole."<sup>18</sup> Bobbie, who turned 11 during this separation, wrote to his parents nearly every day, pouring out his misery and loneliness in letters that are literally tear stained. He complained bitterly of the treatment he received at the boarding school and begged piteously to be allowed to stay with his Aunt Josie. "Oh mama and papa," he wrote shortly after their departure, "5 months seems 10 years....oh if you only knew how homesick I was."<sup>19</sup> A month later he lamented:

Oh mama and papa, you don't know how homesick I am. I hardly know what to do. Mama and papa, if you only knew how homesick I am you would pity me. Mama and papa, it just seems as though I can't stand it and when I think that I have to—Oh Mama, I am disappearing. My heart is as big as

a mountain and oh, it seems I just can't stand it. Oh, I will be sick. Oh, but I must not. Oh, I am in agony all the time....remember how I love you. Oh Mama, I just can't stand it. Oh, I will go crazy, not really but love crazy, homesick crazy. I just can't stand it.<sup>20</sup>

Even in his misery Bobbie noted shamefully, "Phil and Mary do not mind it much compared with me."<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, four years later, during a much briefer separation, Bobbie's emotions remained substantially the same.<sup>22</sup> Such overwhelming dependence caused him, when separated from only one parent, to cling all the more tightly to the other.

That dependence was surely intensified by an event in the spring of 1912. Following a period of intensification of their already great pressures on Bobbie, then 17, Bob and Belle left for a prolonged campaign journey. The very day of their departure Bobbie, enjoying a carefree drive in the family car, struck and nearly killed a black child, fracturing the boy's skull and necessitating surgery. The child was in a coma for over a week and, owing to a brain injury, was still in the hospital unable to talk more than a month later. Upon hearing of the accident, Bob endeavored to keep the news a secret, even from Belle; he assumed responsibility for all medical bills and instructed that he be kept informed of the boy's condition. The event did not become public, and scandal was averted. Bobbie's anxiety and guilt over this incident can only be estimated, but it probably left him forever frightened by independence and its responsibilities, enlarged his perception of his father's omnipotence, and heightened his anxieties during subsequent separations.

Certainly the demands on Bobbie increased after this event during his studies at the University of Wisconsin, his parents' alma mater. All the La Follette children expressed anxiety about their performance in school and feared disappointing their parents. Knowledge of his father's difficulty in reconciling himself to their separation compounded Bobbie's fears of academic failure. Bobbie's election to the presidency of the freshman class pleased his father



enormously, but Bob disapproved of Bobbie's membership in a fraternity, insisting he live with Josie and her husband, Robert Seibecker. Although Bob claimed that his disapproval stemmed from concern over Bobbie's academic performance, his letters suggest far more concern over Bobbie staying dependent and willing to carry out his father's will.<sup>23</sup> Bob, whose own university record had been poor indeed, and who had downplayed the importance of scholastic achievement, now insisted on nothing but academic excellence from Bobbie, claiming "your success in life depends on the thoroughness and character of your work in the University."<sup>24</sup> Belle was better able to accept their temporary separations from Bobbie and the risk that he might find independence. When Bobbie's performance fell below his father's expectations, only Belle's entreaties kept Bob from demanding that Bobbie "pack his trunk and come to Washington and stay here with me."<sup>25</sup>

Bob offered much advice and sent his son self-addressed stamped postcards, instructing him to report daily and in detail on his class work and study habits because, he wrote, "My interest and anxiety are so deep and so constantly with me...."<sup>26</sup> When Bob received a form letter from the dean declaring Bobbie on academic probation, he reiterated his overwhelming need for Bobbie to be successful. Bob denied any selfish motives in his concern for Bobbie's college career, claiming it only mattered because Belle was "not well."<sup>27</sup> Belle, however, asserted that the opposite was true: "Oh Bobbie, this is a critical time and you must come out right." When Papa got those discouraging reports, it seemed to take the gimp right out of him."<sup>28</sup>

Despite her denials, Belle too was far from accepting Bobbie as an independent adult. She wrote soothingly to her "tootsie, wootsie baby boy," that "Mother's heart ached for her baby boy. She knew exactly how he felt over his exams."<sup>29</sup> Belle defended such baby talk: "Although you are twenty to-morrow, there trudges beside you in mother's memory, a beautiful sturdy boy with golden curls and big blue eyes with long curling lashes; he wears a red sweater and red stocking cap and corduroy pants with leather leggings."<sup>30</sup>



Bob wanted Bobbie's professors and classmates to say, "He proves that the second generation can be better than the first!"<sup>31</sup> To ensure that goal, Bob demanded not only that Bobbie notify him of his progress, but that his professors do so as well. Bob rationalized this interference into his son's life to one of Bobbie's professors:

My heart is set on Bobbie's making good in the University. I cannot contemplate having him fail. It will effect all his life. That life is very precious to me. I have a father's hope that it will be useful to society.<sup>32</sup>

When Bobbie's grades improved, Bob's interference continued unabated. He even requested that one professor confront Bobbie unexpectedly and "make sure he is doing his daily work without any assistance on the side."<sup>33</sup>

Bobbie occasionally protested his parents' refusal to allow him any real independence but never defied them outright. He promptly lost the report cards his father wanted sent daily, and occasionally urged his parents not to take his academic performance so seriously, reminding them that, although his marks were frequently lower than desired, they were passing. For the most part, however, he demonstrated no meaningful attempt to reject his parents' expectations. His inability to fulfill his parents' expectations culminated in a desire to retreat back into the family circle, an understandable response from one for whom a conventional opportunity to assert independence—leaving home for university life—had been so quickly and thoroughly thwarted.

Only later did Bob once admit he might have been wrong in meddling in Bobbie's college life, but, as with similar admissions, he minimized the significance of such interference.<sup>34</sup> At the time he harbored no doubts whatsoever. Bobbie became depressed over the enormous pressures upon him, particularly because they impaired his ability to perform up to his capabilities during examinations. Letters detail his homesickness during his college years and getting him back to the campus after Christmas vacation "was like pulling teeth."<sup>35</sup>

Not surprisingly, Bobbie's second serious illness occurred during his sophomore year. Initially his complaints of feeling unwell were greeted with thinly veiled skepticism and derision, but, upon personal investigation, Bob declared his son's illness genuine. This quickly evoked the desired response as Belle wrote to Bobbie, "Once more I must urge you not to think about your work. It is of no importance compared with your getting well."<sup>36</sup> Bob wrote frantically and in great detail to several doctors and friends throughout this illness, voicing his concern over Bobbie's usually mild but persistent fevers and the diagnosis of a streptococcal infection, no small matter during those pre-antibiotic times. When it was determined that Bobbie should have his tonsils removed, Bob brought him to Washington where he could supervise him directly and called in three specialists. For more than two months Bobbie's temperature fluctuated enough to prohibit a tonsillectomy and he suffered enormously from the infection. Once the tonsils were removed he rallied briefly, then suffered a recurrence of the infection, which for several weeks caused much pain and swelling in his thighs and groin, eventually spreading throughout his body. Family friend and secretary Nellie Dunn did not discount Bobbie's physical symptoms, but in her opinion Bobbie was suffering most from depression, a condition noted by Belle as well.<sup>37</sup>

Bob's personal secretary tried to calm Bob's increasing panic over his son's condition. Bob, however, remained attentive to every detail,<sup>38</sup> and he and Belle showered their son with praise and affection. In direct contrast to their scolding over his academic progress, Belle now bathed Bobbie daily and catered to his wants, while Bob praised him for having endured such an illness, calling it "the year of your greatest growth, your greatest development of character and strength, and power and patience."<sup>39</sup> Bobbie's chief physician, Charles Marbury, cautioned the La Follettes that they were "likely to notice every little thing and over emphasize it" during Bobbie's convalescence and directed that Bobbie be urged to build up strength and resistance.<sup>40</sup> The La Follettes, however, considered this too "risky," and, Belle noted, "Bobbie was least of all inclined to be rash."<sup>41</sup> Dr. Marbury marvelled that, once on the



mend, Bobbie experienced none of the irritability and depression usual in convalescence. To the contrary, illness and a lengthy recovery period provided Bobbie with relief from the depression brought on by the family pressures, which were so overwhelming during periods of good health. Thus Bobbie's contentment with his convalescent condition may be seen as a direct result of his father's cry, "How other things fade away when one of the family gets on the down grade!"<sup>42</sup> and the dread of renewed parental expectations upon his return to health.<sup>43</sup>

As Bobbie recovered, Bob rejected confinement to classrooms as a health risk for his son, putting him to work instead in his office at the Capitol. Although this arrangement was the fulfillment of Bob's ultimate desire, it was short-lived and Bobbie soon returned to the university. There he was once again overcome with dread concerning his examinations. Belle, still apprehensive lest he re-injure his health, remained in Madison and indulged him greatly. For example, she wrote to Bob, "Bobbie was very tired when he got home last night....So I persuaded him to go to bed and I read his lesson to him....He went to a little dance tonight."<sup>44</sup>

In the end, Bobbie claimed "doctor's orders" necessitated his dropping out of school. He returned to Washington to assist his father, ostensibly to work on the family magazine. Bob, in the midst of rationalizing this turn of events, admitted, "I dread to have him leave here...."<sup>45</sup> Rather than work on the magazine and recover his health, however, Bobbie found himself working directly with his father as his private secretary and complaining, "I am so tired that I could sleep standing on the toes of one foot."<sup>46</sup>

Although working with his father allowed Bobbie to escape from academic pressures, he soon found himself under even greater strain as he witnessed the vilification of his father over Bob's opposition to American entry into World War I. Bob's leadership of the movement to prevent the war vote by filibuster was particularly trying for Bobbie, who feared his father's commitment to long-term peace would result in short-term violence on the Senate floor. When Bob asked Bobbie to deliver his traveling bag, Bobbie complied only after removing the revolver it contained. The correspondence



between father and son during the final hours of the congressional session clearly demonstrate Bobbie's sense of responsibility for his father. One of Bobbie's notes ran, "Please, please, be calm—you know what the press will do—remember Mother," and another pleaded,

Daddy, I expect you to make your protest, but there must be a limit to the lengths which you can go.... You cannot afford to get into a physical argument or be arrested by the Serg[ean]t at Arms for misconduct. You are noticeably & extremely excited. For God's sake make your protest & prevent passage of [the] bill if you like, but...do not try to fight [the] Senate physically. I am almost crazy with strain.<sup>47</sup>

Bobbie took the hatred generated by his father's anti-war stance quite personally. When he learned that all but two of the 423 University of Wisconsin faculty had signed a petition condemning Bob for his disloyalty, Bobbie raged to Phil, "Damn that faculty to hell. I hope that I may live to see each one get what is coming to him if there is any justice in this damn world." Bobbie himself came under fire on January 25, 1918, when he sent a letter defending his father to the *Capital Times*, a paper that had, he said privately, "about as much policy as a piece of wet toilet paper and is and will be just about as useful."<sup>48</sup> The letter went out to 45 newspapers and earned Bobbie a reprimand for circulating rumors. Bobbie immediately drafted a sharp answer, denying the charge of rumor-mongering, citing sources, and offering to give additional evidence. Illness provided a means of escape, illness that can be seen as a desperate attempt to bring a halt to his father's total domination of his life and as a refuge from the ugly reactions to his own effort to emulate his father's activism and commitment to principle.

The illness, a recurrence of the streptococcal infection he first contracted in 1915, began with a very high fever that within a few weeks required surgery to drain pus from the pleural cavity. Family friend Lincoln Steffens noted: "You are gathering unto yourself more than your share of the affection of all of us. That is the effect of

sickness and all other forms of unwilling behavior. It makes everybody love you."<sup>49</sup>

Like an infant, Bobbie, unable to chew his food, looked to his parents for relief and comfort. Good health became Bob and Belle's only concern for their children, making Phil's academic life far less pressured than his brother's.<sup>50</sup> Belle recorded, "Each day we are engrossed in [the] one thought of what we can do for Bobbie,"<sup>51</sup> and Bob's secretary advised outsiders, "Senator La Follette is giving attention only to his son's condition."<sup>52</sup> Belle noted that Bob "has had almost as hard a time as Bobbie. He has been so wrought up over him he will not go to bed nights and hovers about his room. But he will be all right if Bobbie keeps going ahead."<sup>53</sup>

After several months Belle took Bobbie away from the oppressive political and physical climate of Washington to Hot Springs, Virginia. Encouraged when he benefitted from the change, she took him next to La Jolla, where "Californians seem so occupied with living that they need not philosophize much."<sup>54</sup> The absence of familial and political adversity coupled with warm weather and the uncritical love and care of his mother and his sister Mary allowed Bobbie to slowly improve. Bobbie had been bedridden for so long the ligaments in his legs had begun to atrophy. Belle noted his unwillingness to push himself, an attitude she encouraged, and his dependence upon her was enormous.<sup>55</sup>

With Bobbie's gradual recovery came the promise of renewed expectations. When Phil's post-war graduation from the University of Wisconsin brought Bob "the greatest possible satisfaction,"<sup>56</sup> he pressured Bobbie, "My Bob, it will be a great joy to me—I can't tell you how great—to see you and Phil take the law course together."<sup>57</sup> Alone with Bobbie and Mary, Belle reflected on her oldest son's illnesses and their causes. She noted how susceptible he was to the suggestion of others, particularly his father, and his inability to shape his own career or even take an initiative. In response to Bob's urging that they return to Washington as soon as possible she asserted that Bobbie's health and emotional well-being demanded he be allowed to develop a sense of independence and self-esteem:



Would it be wise, would it be safe although he appeared free from [the disease's effects,] to let him go back to the environment and conditions in which he had twice succumbed to the disease?...Bobbie is deeply desirous of doing what will meet your wishes. But what I feel much more deeply and profoundly than I can ever find words to express, is that it is essential to Bobbie's highest and fullest development that he find something he wants to do and can do.<sup>58</sup>

Ultimately, Belle and Bobbie determined that Bobbie would stay on his own in La Jolla, a decision Belle lauded as his "best foundation for future action,"<sup>59</sup> while Bob viewed it with "dread and apprehension." He chided Bobbie, "I hope you don't get so wedded to [La Jolla] that you won't ever want to come home to the family."<sup>60</sup> A month later he worried, "It is positively getting dangerous, this hold that La Jolla and vicinity is getting on you. We will have one time trying to wean you—if ever you give us the chance."<sup>61</sup> Bobbie enjoyed his time alone in La Jolla immeasurably, celebrating it in a letter to his father as "this place [where] one may be lazy and yet it does not seem to give cause to anxiety to you or anyone else," and calling it a "life saver for me."<sup>62</sup>

Upon his return to Madison in the summer of 1919, Bobbie was quickly immersed in old pressures, noting, "I was surprised at how little attachment I have left for this town"; the anti-La Follette "patriots" killed the home feeling."<sup>63</sup> Bob had "hungered" for Bobbie, and his presence seemed to bolster Bob physically. As Bob aged and his health deteriorated, his fear that he would not live long enough to achieve his goals increased commensurably with his desire to have his oldest son and namesake continue in his stead.<sup>64</sup> Bobbie, as political heir, was pressured to keep his father informed of all his thoughts and activities, no matter how trivial, and Bob made no secret of his expectations or of his ambitious plans for his oldest son:

I have been contrasting him as he is today with myself at 24. He has better book training than I had at that time. And he has



a knowledge of affairs—a grasp of national and world conditions and problems and men equal to that of the men who are called the mature and profound statesmen of our time—of today. You will start life as a man, Bobbie, standing on my shoulders. You have your mother's brain my boy—the best brain in the world. With established health, what a service you can be to your community—your country and humanity!<sup>65</sup>

Bobbie, painfully aware of his father's accomplishments and his own shortcomings, protested, "No dad, I don't start on your shoulders by a long shot. If I did I certainly would set the world on fire."<sup>66</sup>

Although Bobbie had been manipulated into being as dependent on his parents as possible, as Bob aged he acknowledged more and more openly his own dependence on this son whom, in many ways, he idolized. He confessed to terrible loneliness and despair during Bobbie's absences and confided, "You do not know [how] hard it has been to be separated from you, Bobbie. As you grow toward manhood and a full understanding of my work I find myself wanting you near me all the time."<sup>67</sup> During Bob's many illnesses toward the end of his life he referred to Bobbie as a "son, brother and companion," and they talked frequently of his responsibility and his future, for Bob was "anxious he [Bobbie] should have the opportunity to show the good stuff that is in him."<sup>68</sup> Bob confided in his diary, "I am awfully dependent on that lad and feel guilty at taking so much out of his life to keep me company as the years come on me."<sup>69</sup> He attributed this to a quirk of aging.

It quickly became evident that Belle's efforts to encourage Bobbie to be self-assured and independent had been too little and too late. At one point, Bobbie had shown an interest in journalism, but it is impossible to determine if this was of his own volition, or merely a fulfillment of his mother's unrealized ambition. Phil La Follette contended that his brother, "under different stars," would have pursued a career in science, most probably medicine. In any event, despite his complaints of continued bitterness and resentment over public treatment suffered by the family during the war years, Bobbie succumbed to his father's urging that, "We can never have

real mastery of ourselves and a proper development of willpower unless we make ourselves do something every day of our lives that we are strongly inclined not to do."<sup>70</sup> The deep roots of Bobbie's feelings towards his father led to his return to Washington, where he served as an aide, secretary, campaign manager, and successor-in-training. Despite his earlier assertions about the necessity of Bobbie's success in formal training, Bob made no protest when Bobbie neither attended law school nor completed college.

Although Belle claimed that all were thoroughly pleased with Bobbie's position, one political reporter noted, "Anyone acquainted with [Bobbie] La Follette knows it is his desire to get out of politics, even as his father's secretary, and that it is only his sense of filial duty that keeps him at that task."<sup>71</sup> Bobbie complained to Phil of the identity problems inherent in being "The Senator's son Bob." In addition, Bobbie held himself responsible for his father politically and felt duty-bound to safeguard and protect the health and well-being of both his parents. For example, in 1920 Bobbie was horrified by the potential drain a presidential bid might take on both his father's political and physical reserves, and he lamented to a family friend his father's eagerness to undertake such a folly should sufficient funding become available. "For the first time," confided Bobbie, "I will look askance on anyone who comes along and seems to have any indication of carrying money bags."<sup>72</sup> Bobbie's letters to his siblings during the final years of their father's life reveal a dutiful, anxious son taking increasing responsibility for his parents, constantly urging them to conserve their energy and safeguard their health. He also confessed the strain of trying to protect Bob's failing health while squelching rumors about any such problems.

Bobbie's intense identification with all family members did not fade with adulthood; he begged them during separations, "Please let me hear often as my heart is wrapped up in each one of you and the time away from home seems too big a sacrifice."<sup>73</sup> When in the company of his father he longed for the presence of all the other family members, remarking, "I sure was not cut out for a wandering Jew or prodigal son (I believe they go away from home don't



they?)...You don't have to miss me because I do more than enough missing for the whole bunch."<sup>74</sup> At 24 he voiced again the same feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness he had experienced as a child during his parents' absences: "This business of having a home without a mother is not what you seem to think it and somehow it just feels as though we were all just sort of existing until you could get back here....I do not know just what it is, but it is."<sup>75</sup> During a trip to Europe at the age of 30 he noted, "Even the famed women of gay Paree do not appeal to me," and complained, "I am suffering from the reaction of getting away from the family and the job and feel as though I am walking and talking in my sleep. I have never felt so washed out in all my life."<sup>76</sup>

Bobbie managed to maintain his delightful, if sardonic, sense of humor as he resigned himself to becoming his father's political heir. (As a child, after he and his father had a chance encounter with the corpulent president William Howard Taft, Bobbie wrote to his mother, "We...saw his fatness and he spoke!")<sup>77</sup> Reviewing a speech delivered on his father's behalf *The Nation* reported, "That young man has his father's fire along with a comfortable amused humor which his father, if he has it, keeps carefully concealed within the recesses of his most intimate family life. Young Bob captivated the convention. He read with such spirit! He smiled with such charm! He was the perfect picture of youth and gallantry and fun."<sup>78</sup> Bobbie's letters, however, reveal a very different young man preoccupied with his health,<sup>79</sup> guilt-ridden whenever he enjoyed rest and relaxation and enormously pressured as he assumed what he deemed to be his responsibility. That sense of responsibility led him to serve, albeit reluctantly, as his father's campaign manager in Bob's final bid for the presidency in 1924. Following Bob's defeat Bobbie overcame his reluctance and attended the Chicago Conference for Progressive Political Action to push his father's plan for the individual states to select delegates to a national convention. Writing to his physically failing father, who was resting in Florida, Bobbie confessed, "I dread very much to have to carry alone the responsibility connected with my representing you at Chicago. It is a burden greater than any one man should be asked to carry but



under the circumstances I see no other way out and I trust you will be lenient in your judgment...."<sup>80</sup> Bob, who assured his son of his "absolute confidence in your judgment and ability to meet all requirements tactfully and wisely,"<sup>81</sup> rejoiced in reports of Bobbie's warm reception at the conference, for it confirmed his belief in his son's leadership abilities and bright political future.

Bob's death in 1925 offered his oldest son no relief from his feelings of duty to carry out parental expectations. Bobbie's relationship with Belle remained exceptionally close and probably contributed to his reputation for being "distinctly woman shy."<sup>82</sup> Belle transferred her full energies to Bobbie following her husband's death and acted as his main source of counsel and encouragement. He seldom made an important decision without appealing to her for advice. Mother and son lived together until Belle's death from peritonitis in 1931. Although Bobbie first met Rachel Young in high school and had expressed his love for her for at least 13 years, he did not marry her until less than a year before his mother's death, when he was 35.

In 1925 Bobbie made a successful bid to complete his father's unexpired term, a duty he undertook with a deep sense of obligation and a determination to maintain the principles to which his father dedicated his life. However, when taunted during the special election campaign, "You ain't as good as your pa and you never will be," Bobbie replied, "No one knows that better than I, my friend. No one knows that better than I."<sup>83</sup> At 30 he became the youngest senator since Henry Clay, and embarked upon the service that would last 21 years.

The first few years were spent as an able but rather unimaginative successor to his father, but beginning in 1928 he became more self-assured. Following an illness in 1926 that was both serious and, in the words of his doctors at the Mayo Clinic, "mysterious," he enjoyed 14 years of relatively stable good health. His Senate attendance record was excellent and he was noted for his conscientiousness. He served as a transitional figure in the history of modern reform movements, achieving national attention during the Great Depression as one of the first to develop a coherent plan for

combatting declining purchasing power. Bobbie abandoned the Republican party to create the Progressive party of Wisconsin in 1934, the same year he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. There was even serious talk of his being Franklin Roosevelt's 1936 running mate and/or eventual successor. The height of his prominence occurred between 1936 and 1940 when he served as chairman of the Senate Civil Liberties Committee investigating unionists' civil liberties violations by industrialists.<sup>84</sup>

Bobbie's character during his years in the Senate remains elusive. Despite his sometimes brilliant successes, he endured rather than enjoyed public life and increasingly resented the intrusions on his privacy. He managed, however, to retain some of his biting wit. When asked if he could be called "Bob," he answered, "Sure can. Everyone in Wisconsin calls me Bob, or that son of a bitch."<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, the specter of his father always loomed large and the fear of failing his father's memory was constant.<sup>86</sup>

According to his detractors, Bobbie shared his father's self-righteousness and excessive moralism. Virtually all agreed that he was immensely private about his personal life. His wife Rachel shared his intense resentment of the intrusions upon their privacy. The couple found refuge, when Bobbie's very heavy schedule allowed, in the company of their sons Joseph and Bronson. With such a strong dislike for public life, why did Bobbie continue to "administer this self inflicted punishment?" His biographer, Patrick Maney, suggests a number of contributing factors, but stresses that the most important was his father: "It seemed almost as though father and son had struck a sacred pact, and now Young Bob was driven to carry out his part of it."<sup>87</sup>

Bobbie's steadfast opposition to U. S. entry into World War II vanished with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, but the war years marked the steady erosion of his popularity, especially with organized labor. During the war and after he suffered a number of political disappointments. Bowing to pressure, most of it coming from his brother Phil, with whom relations had become increasingly strained, Bobbie embarked on a demanding political tour of his home state in 1943. While campaigning had been his father's forte,



it was a ritual Bobbie heartily disliked. Thrust back into an activity that invited only negative comparisons to his father, the burden of carrying that great name was temporarily lifted, yet again, by illness. A bout of bronchopneumonia confined Bobbie to the hospital for six weeks. In 1946, faced with yet another campaign, he complained of depression and considered retiring from politics.

Bobbie attributed his aversion to active campaigning in later years to concerns about his ongoing health problems, which accelerated proportionally to his political decline. In 1946, reluctantly seeking reelection, he decided to return to the GOP but was beaten in the primary by Joseph R. McCarthy. Although a number of Bobbie's political positions and activities doubtlessly contributed to his loss, it can also be attributed to his aloofness toward his constituents, underscored by a campaign of a mere six days' duration. As Bobbie himself ruefully observed, "I didn't go back to talk to the voters. My father did just what Joe McCarthy did [to win] and I guess I made a mistake."<sup>88</sup>

Following this defeat Bobbie, at 52, became a successful business consultant. His release from political life did not bring emotional relief, however. Surprised at how much he missed public life—the only life he had ever known—he seriously considered reentering politics and served in a variety of government-sponsored positions. Yet when urged to run for his father's old Second District Congressional seat, he made it clear that the burden of his great name remained heavy indeed:

If the people of Wisconsin would be content to let me come to Washington and serve as a Congressman, I would be happy. But they won't let me. They would make me go out and rebuild the Progressive movement. I am not as young as I was. I don't have it in me.<sup>89</sup>

His health became permanently compromised following a two-month hospital stay in 1948. As had been so often the case during previous periods of ill health, doctors had difficulty determining a definitive diagnosis, but ultimately suspected coronary disease. Unable to take



satisfaction from his lifetime of considerable achievements, Bobbie became increasingly preoccupied by his poor health (he developed diverticulitis, bursitis, and mild diabetes) and suffered from depression and "anxiety attacks." Unlike in his early years, however, ill health no longer provided a temporary emotional refuge, so internalized were the pressures and expectations. Illness became an additional ceaseless and overwhelming burden in its own right.

Bobbie complained of memory loss and had fears, apparently groundless, that McCarthy intended to summon him to testify about his efforts to stamp out Communist influence while chair of the Civil Liberties Committee. Friends and family noted a sharp increase in his emotional instability early in 1953, but no psychiatric treatment was sought. His son Bronson, then 16, was struck by the vision of his father sitting alone, clearly agitated, but for no apparent reason. The senior La Follette fidgeted nervously and broke out into a cold sweat. When Bronson entered the room his father uncharacteristically hugged him and told him that he loved him.<sup>90</sup> But the love of family and friends and his achievements as senator were no match for the weight of his burdens, which had become intolerable. The expectations associated with the family name prohibited the political future he desired and illness, his former ally, overwhelmed him. Around noon, on February 24, 1953, Bobbie committed suicide. He had appeared calm to his family and coworkers that morning and left no note. Days before he shot himself in the head, however, he expressed to friends "how he never should have let McCarthy beat him, how he had let his father down."<sup>91</sup>

The La Follette family cited depression brought on by ill health in his later years as the key to Bobbie's suicide. It seems likely, however, that Bobbie's death, like his life, was more the product of his early years, of incredibly high parental expectations, of a boy prohibited from exploring or even discovering his own wants and identity and who found temporary refuge in acute physical suffering. His suicide was a tragic end to a distinguished senator and the man who had been his father's pride and best hope.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For an investigation into the sources of La Follette's particular drives, see Nancy C. Unger, "The 'Political Suicide' of Robert M. La Follette: Public Disaster, Private Catharsis," *The Psychohistory Review* 21 (Winter 1993): 197-220.

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Freeman, Sherry La Follette, and George A. Zabriski, *Belle: A Biography of Belle Case La Follette* (New York: Beaufort Books, 1986), 142.

<sup>3</sup> Belle Case La Follette (BCL), "Bobbie's Lesson," 1901, Belle La Follette Papers (BLP), D-38, La Follette Family collection (LFC), Library of Congress (LC).

<sup>4</sup> Belle Case La Follette and Fola La Follette, *Robert M. La Follette* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1953), 1:111.

<sup>5</sup> Phil La Follette, *Adventure in Politics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Robert M. La Follette, Jr., (JR) to Robert M. La Follette (RML), December 1906, Family Papers (FP), A-5, LFC, LC. See also BCL to RML, 14 January 1907, FP, A-5; Ibid., 3 July 1905, FP, A-3; Ibid., 27 January 1907, FP, A-5; Ibid., 28 October 1918, FP, A-24, LFC, LC.

<sup>7</sup> RML to JR, 5 February 1907, FP, A-6, LFC, LC.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 29 July 1911, FP, A-11, LFC, LC.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 7 October 1913, FP, A-13, LFC, LC.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4 March 1914, FP, A-16, LFC, LC. See also Ibid., 7 October 1913, FP, A-13, LFC, LC.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13 March 1915, FP, A-18, LFC, LC.

<sup>12</sup> BCL, "Apron Strings—A Substitute," circa 1911, BLP, D-38, LFC, LC.

<sup>13</sup> Travel and excitement exhausted him and upset his stomach, while the other children suffered no such ill effects.

<sup>14</sup> Freeman, La Follette, and Zabriski, 87.

<sup>15</sup> JR to RML and BCL, 17 January 1906; December 1906, FP, A-5, LFC, LC.

<sup>16</sup> RML to family, 30 August 1909, FP, A-8, LFC, LC. See also Ibid., 20 August 1909, FP, A-8; 14 April 1907, FP, A-6, LFC, LC.

<sup>17</sup> RML to Gilbert E. Roe, 24 February 1904, 125:19:65, Robert La Follette Papers (RLP), State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW).

<sup>18</sup> Josephine Seibecker to RML and BCL, 7 February 1906, FP, A-5, LFC, LC.

<sup>19</sup> JR to RML and BCL, 21 January 1906, FP, A-5, LFC, LC.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 17 February 1906, FP, A-5, LFC, LC.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 5 January 1906, FP, A-4, LFC, LC.

<sup>22</sup> To his father he wrote, "It seems a year since you went away. We are so lonesome without you and the darling mother. When can you come home? We want you both so badly." JR to RML, October 1910, FP, A-9, LFC, LC.

<sup>23</sup> See RML to JR, 9 November 1914, FP, A-16, LFC, LC.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 29 July 1911, FP, A-11, LFC, LC. See also Ibid., 4 March and 9 November 1914, FP, A-16, LFC, LC.

<sup>25</sup> RML to Alfred T. Rogers, 7 August 1911, RLP, B-106, LFC, LC.

<sup>26</sup> RML to JR, 1 October 1914, FP, A-16, LFC, LC. See also Ibid., 12 October 1914, FP, A-16, LFC, LC.

<sup>27</sup> RML to Alfred T. Rogers, 7 August 1911, RLP, B-106, LFC, LC.

<sup>28</sup> BCL to JR, 29 October 1914, FP, A-14, LFC, LC. See also RML to JR, 9 November 1914, FP, A-16, LFC, LC.

<sup>29</sup> BCL to JR, 23 January 1914, FP, A-13, LFC, LC.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 5 February 1915, FP, A-17, LFC, LC.

<sup>31</sup> RML to BCL, 18 November 1914, FP, A-16, LFC, LC.

<sup>32</sup> RML to F.W. Roe, 22 October 1914, RLP, B-109, LFC, LC. See also BCL to Professor Dowling, 13 November 1914; BCL to Carl R. Fish, 29 October 1914, FP, A-14, LFC, LC.

<sup>33</sup> RML to Voyta Wrabetz, 20 August 1911, RLP, B-106, LFC, LC.

<sup>34</sup> See RML to JR and Phil Fox La Follette (PFL), 23 January 1917, FP, A-21, LFC, LC.

<sup>35</sup> RML to JR, 31 March 1914, FP, A-16, LFC, LC.

<sup>36</sup> BCL to JR, 26, March 1915, FP, A-17, LFC, LC.

<sup>37</sup> John J. Hannon to RML, 25 May 1915, RLP, B-77; BCL to RML, 21 May 1915, FP, A-17, LFC, LC.

<sup>38</sup> When unavoidably separated from Bobbie, La Follette insisted that he be informed of his son's temperature twice daily.

<sup>39</sup> RML to JR, 29 June 1915, FP, A-18, LFC, LC.

<sup>40</sup> BCL to Fola La Follette (FL), 28 September 1915, FP, A-17, LFC, LC.

<sup>41</sup> BCL to family, 13 September 1915, FP, A-17, LFC, LC.

<sup>42</sup> RML to family, 16 October 1915, FP, A-18, LFC, LC.

<sup>43</sup> Bob enthusiastically predicted, "Give Bob back his health and he is a winner in anything he goes after." Ibid., 3 October 1915, FP, A-18, LFC, LC.

<sup>44</sup> BCL to RML, 29 January 1917, FP, A-20, LFC, LC.

<sup>45</sup> RML to family, 14 July 1917, FP, A-21, LFC, LC.

<sup>46</sup> JR to FL, 10 October 1917, FP, A-20, LFC, LC.

<sup>47</sup> JR to RML, 4 March 1917, FP, A-20, LFC, LC.



<sup>48</sup> JR to PFL, 16 January 1918, FP, A-23, LFC, LC.

<sup>49</sup> Lincoln Steffens to JR, 5 February 1918, RLP, B-83, LFC, LC. See also PFL to family, 18 February 1918, FP, A-23, LFC, LC.

<sup>50</sup> In direct contrast to Bobbie's weak protests against parental expectations and interference, Phil proclaimed during his college years, "Life is too blamed short to worry so much about one or two papers...and if...I flunk, why that will be hard luck, but just because I've flunked the exam, that is no sign they can take away from me what I have learned during the semester and anyway, we are coming here to learn and not to be examined." PFL to family, 19 January 1916, FP, A-10, LFC, LC.

<sup>51</sup> BCL to PFL, 5 May 1918, FP, A-22, LFC, LC.

<sup>52</sup> John J. Hannon to John S. Donald, 18 February 1918, RLP, B-112, LFC, LC. See also Idem to Charles H. Crownhart, 3 August 1918, RLP, B-83, LFC, LC.

<sup>53</sup> BCL to PFL, 5 April 1918, FP, A-22, LFC, LC.

<sup>54</sup> BCL to family, 27 October 1918, FP, A-22, LFC, LC.

<sup>55</sup> For example, Bobbie put off trying crutches, preferring to move about the house by leaning directly on his mother. In addition, he called her frequently in the night to rub his back for half an hour at a time when he was unable to sleep. Belle's indulgence as Bobbie recuperated included the purchase of a car because he so enjoyed driving, which led her to rationalize that it was therefore a "good investment" as "the use of his feet running the car is a constant stretching exercise." BCL to RML, 3 December and 16 December 1918, FP, A-22, LFC, LC.

<sup>56</sup> RML to PFL, 8 May 1919, FP, A-24, LFC, LC.

<sup>57</sup> RML to family, 24 December 1918, FP, A-24, LFC, LC.

<sup>58</sup> BCL to RML, 6 February 1919, FP, A-24, LFC, LC.

<sup>59</sup> BCL to JR, 8 May 1919, FP, A-24, LFC, LC.

<sup>60</sup> RML to family, 25 March 1919, FP, A-26, LFC, LC. See also *Ibid.*, 31 March 1919, FP, A-26; *Ibid.*, 14 April 1919, FP, A-27, LFC, LC.

<sup>61</sup> RML to JR, 14 April 1919, FP, A-27, LFC, LC.

<sup>62</sup> JR to RML, 21 May and 29 June 1919, FP, A-26, LFC, LC.

<sup>63</sup> JR to BCL, 30 July 1919; Idem to RML, 30 July 1919, FP, A-26, LFC, LC.

<sup>64</sup> He wrote to Bobbie, "When the last night comes and I get to the Land of Never Return—what an awful account of things undone I shall leave behind....A week is really a lot of time out of the short end of life—when every tick of the clock seems to say 'hurry, hurry.'" RML to JR, circa 1919, FP, A-27, LFC, LC.

<sup>65</sup> RML to family, 6 February 1919, FP, A-26, LFC, LC.

<sup>66</sup> JR to RML, 12 February 1919, FP, A-26, LFC, LC.

<sup>67</sup> RML to JR, 20 August 1911, FP, A-11, LFC, LC. See also Ibid., 2 September 1911; JR to BCL, 30 August 1911, FP, A-11, LFC, LC.

<sup>68</sup> RML to Professor Roe, 19 September 1914, RLP, B-189, LFC, LC.

<sup>69</sup> Diary, 2 April 1925, RLP, B-1, LFC, LC.

<sup>70</sup> RML to JR, 15 May 1919, FP, A-26. See also JR to BCL, 30 July 1919; Idem to RML, 30 July 1919, FP, A-26, LFC, LC.

<sup>71</sup> Robert S. Allen, *The Wisconsin State Journal*, 12 April 1925 in Roger T. Johnson, *Robert M. La Follette, Jr., and the Decline of the Progressive Party in Wisconsin* (Archon Books, 1970), 7.

<sup>72</sup> JR to Gilbert Roe, 2 August 1920, RLP, B-113, LFC, LC.

<sup>73</sup> JR to family, 6 February 1915, FP, A-17, LFC, LC. "How hard it is to be separated," he wrote to his mother, "I wish we could see our way to being together next winter I shall be dreadfully unhappy if we can't...." Idem to BCL, 31 May 1917, FP, A-20, LFC, LC.

<sup>74</sup> JR to family, 20 February 1917, FP, A-26, LFC, LC.

<sup>75</sup> JR to BCL and ML, 5 October 1919, FP, A-26, LFC, LC.

<sup>76</sup> JR to Rachel Young, 30 April 1925, FP, A-32, LFC, LC.

<sup>77</sup> JR to BCL, June 1910, FP, A-9, LFC, LC. See also Idem to family, 5 December 1917, FP, A-20; Idem to family, 11 April 1919, FP, A-26; Idem to Rachel Young, 30 April 1925, FP, A-32, LFC, LC. Although many of Bobbie's letters reveal his dry wit, controversy continues over the true nature of his temperament. His biographer concludes his tendency to show different aspects of himself to different people allowed one acquaintance to describe him as the least introverted, least depressed man he ever knew, while another friend called him a "gloomy Gus," and his sister-in-law recalled him as humorless. Patrick Maney, *"Young Bob" La Follette: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette, Jr., 1895-1953* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 150; 312-313.

<sup>78</sup> William Hard, "That Man La Follette," *The Nation* 119, 16 July 1924, 65.

<sup>79</sup> He noted in a letter to his family, "I still have 2/5 of a degree of temperature today." JR to family, 21 January 1925, FP, A-32, LFC, LC. See also Ibid., 20 January and 22 January 1925, FP, A-32, LFC, LC.

<sup>80</sup> JR to RML, 17 February 1925, FP, A-32, LFC, LC. See also Ibid., 9 February and 19 February 1925; RML to JR, 19 February 1925, FP, A-32, LFC, LC.

<sup>81</sup> RML to JR, 19 February 1925, FP, A-32, LFC, LC.

<sup>82</sup> Maney, 80.

<sup>83</sup> Freeman, La Follette, and Zabriski, 242.

<sup>84</sup> See Jerald S. Auerbach, "The La Follette Committee: Labor and Civil Liberties in the New Deal," *Journal of American History* 51 (December 1964): 435-39.

<sup>85</sup> Maney, 150.

<sup>86</sup> See JR to BCL, 7 May and 12 February 1929; Idem to Rachel Young, 26 July 1929, FP, A-37; PFL to JR, 14 June 1943, FP, A-48, LFC, LC.

<sup>87</sup> Maney, 153.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson, 159.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>90</sup> Maney, 311.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 314.