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Belle La Follette's Fight for Women's Suffrage: Losing the Battle for Wisconsin, Winning the War for the Nation

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Belle La Follette's

FIGHT FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

*Losing the Battle for Wisconsin,
Winning the War for the Nation*

BY NANCY C. UNGER



A century ago, on May 21, 1919, the US House of Representatives voted definitively (304 to 89) in support of women's suffrage. Two weeks later, Wisconsinite Belle La Follette sat in the visitors' gallery of the US Senate chamber. She "shed a few tears" when it was announced that, by a vote of 56 to 25, the US Senate also approved the Nineteenth Amendment, sending it on to the states for ratification.¹ For Belle La Follette, this thrilling victory was the culmination of a decades-long fight. Six days later, her happiness turned to elation when Wisconsin became the first state to deliver a certification of ratification. Her husband, Senator Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette, confided to their children that Wisconsin "beat 'em to it on the

suffrage amendment [because of] your smart mother." Belle La Follette, worried that Illinois would "try to steal first honors," had wired representatives in her home state to be sure that Wisconsin acted as quickly as possible.² Former state senator David James, whose daughter Ada had been a leader in the state's crusade, was hailed by Belle as "the gallant, veteran courier" for delivering the papers to the state department just moments ahead of the messenger from Illinois.³ As soon as a telegram of confirmation was received, reported Bob, "I went on the floor and had it read into the [Congressional] *Record*. . . . Mamma and all of us feel good, you bet."⁴

Belle Case La Follette speaks with characteristic vigor for women's suffrage at the Fox River Fair during the 1912 Wisconsin campaign.





Former state senator David G. James (R-Richland Center, 1908–1912) celebrates with suffrage supporters outside the National Women's Party building in Washington, DC, after delivering Wisconsin's ratification papers, likely June 13, 1919.

“It was no mere state pride that caused me to thrill with joy,” Belle La Follette insisted when she recalled the incident in *La Follette's Magazine* (published today as *The Progressive*), but rather “the conviction that a great service had been rendered. With Wisconsin as an example . . . ratifying so speedily, almost unanimously, the opposition was . . . left dashed and hopeless at the very start!”⁵ It was a triumph that contrasted sharply with the resounding defeat of women's suffrage in Wisconsin in 1912 following an exhaustive statewide crusade in which she had played a leading role. The story of the two campaigns, the first a statewide failure and the second a national victory, reveals the dramatic changes emerging in the state and in the nation during the intervening seven years and highlights the role of Belle La Follette as a key player in the charge that led to the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution.

Wisconsin's Early Suffrage Efforts

Suffrage was a contentious issue in Wisconsin. When statehood was achieved in 1848, the framers of the constitution denied African American men the franchise, a decision that was overturned when black Milwaukee resident Ezekiel Gillespie sued the state in 1866.⁶ The framers also rejected efforts to grant married women property or voting rights. Attempts to push through suffrage bills in 1855 and 1856 were quickly quashed, giving rise to women's rights groups in the late 1860s. In 1869, the Woman Suffrage Association of the State of Wisconsin (WSASW) was formed and

Wisconsin held its first statewide suffrage convention, a gathering attended by national leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Many Wisconsin women promoted a combination of temperance and suffrage, earning the staunch opposition of the state's beer-drinking population as well as its powerful brewing interests. More acceptable to male policy makers were women who proclaimed themselves bent only on improving public schools. This goal did not interfere with local alcohol production or consumption, and it was more in keeping with women's traditional and non-politically threatening interest in childhood education.

The Wisconsin Women's Suffrage Association (WWSA), established in 1882 as the successor to the WSASW, began an all-out suffrage campaign in 1884. The following year the state legislature, ceding the argument that children's issues were the rightful domain of women, passed a law (contingent upon voter approval) allowing women to run for school boards and other elective school offices, and to vote in “any election pertaining to school matters.” This law, known as “school suffrage,” was approved by popular vote in 1886, but Wisconsin women lost even this limited suffrage in 1888.⁷



Ada James of Richland Center, daughter of state senator David James, was a leader for decades in Wisconsin's fight for women's suffrage.

Once her husband became governor in 1900, Belle La Follette began to use her influence to build on the momentum for women's suffrage established by a plethora of state leaders, most notably Ada James of Richland Center and Theodora Winton Youmans of Waukesha. Governor La Follette, who openly referred to his wife as "my wisest and best counselor," appointed women to state boards and commissions.⁸ In 1901, separate ballots were authorized for school-related issues, reinstating and regularizing women's voting. As the state's First Lady, Belle urged Wisconsin women to make the most of their limited suffrage: "Be sure to vote for State Superintendent of Public Instruction even if you cannot vote for other officers. Don't fold your talent in a napkin. If you vote when you have an opportunity, the opportunities increase."⁹

The Making of a Suffragist

Belle La Follette's belief in the rightness, and the necessity, of votes for women was unwavering. Born Isabelle Case on April 21, 1859, in Summit, Wisconsin, she grew up on her family's farm in Baraboo. Her mother, deeply moved after hearing minister and physician Anna Howard Shaw's promotion of women's right to vote, told young Belle that she felt "very indignant" that women did not have the same rights as men.¹⁰ Belle's brother stated matter-of-factly, "I do not see any reason why I should vote if Belle doesn't."¹¹ Belle La Follette's confidence in women's political power was reinforced during her years at the University of Wisconsin, where she had the opportunity to hear not only Anna Howard Shaw but also Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Julia Ward Howe, Susan B. Anthony, and Carrie Chapman Catt. She revered these early suffrage advocates, later noting gratefully, "We stand on their shoulders."¹²

Belle La Follette's status as the first woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School (an achievement fulfilled after she became a wife and mother) cemented her belief that women were being held back by custom rather than lack of innate ability. While supportive of her husband's political career, she maintained her own set of activities and causes, including raising their four children, urging women

to take up physical exercise and work outside the home, and promoting women's clubs as important ways to contribute to civic life and reform. When, after three terms as governor, Bob La Follette was elected to the US Senate in 1906, his wife despaired of the way club women in the nation's capital resisted civic engagement. She rather tartly reminded her sisters in Washington's official life, "We are not supposed to belong to the butterfly and parasitic class."¹³ Beginning in 1909, her own widening circle of activities came to include writing the Home and Education column for *La Follette's Magazine*, an enterprise dear to her husband's heart but one



Belle La Follette was the first woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School. She poses here with the other members of the class of 1885.

she found a drain on their energy and finances. Nevertheless, her weekly column gave her new opportunities to campaign for women's suffrage.

Campaign Strategies

Belle La Follette knew that many men opposed votes for women because they believed it would distract them from the domestic world of home, husband, and children that should be every woman's sole concern. Moreover, they believed, the natural forces that rendered women so attuned to domestic tasks left them ill-suited for the complex hurly burly of politics, a world that encompassed economics, business, and other subjects too sophisticated for the emotional and sentimental female mind. As California state senator J. B. Sanford argued in 1911, "Let her be content with her lot and perform those high duties intended for her by the Great



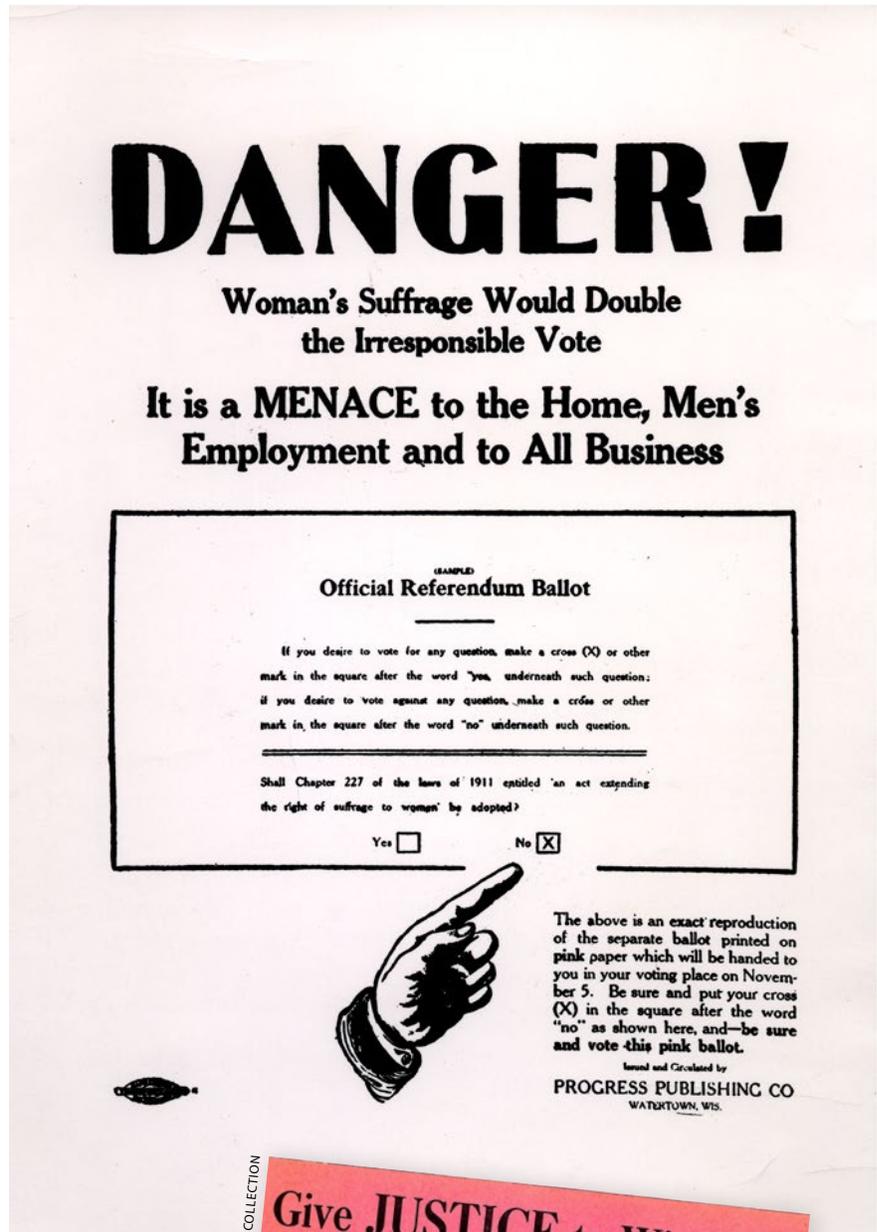
This portrait was probably taken in 1906, when Bob La Follette was first elected to the US Senate and Belle La Follette grew frustrated with Washington women's lack of civic engagement.

Creator, and she will accomplish far more in governmental affairs than she can ever accomplish by mixing up in the dirty pool of politics." Since women were deemed too pure and good to vote, it was a duty best left to the men.¹⁴

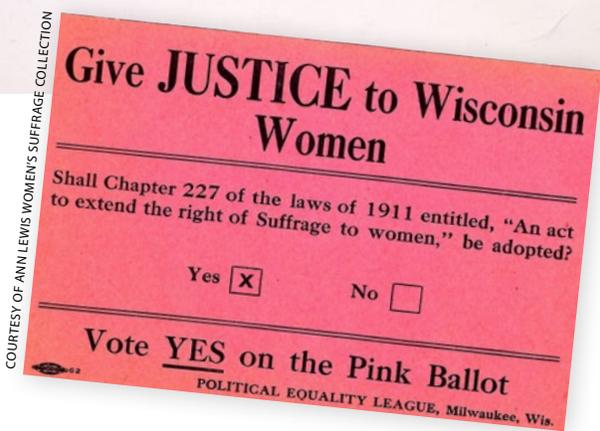
As La Follette honed her pro-suffrage arguments to combat these entrenched beliefs, she was appalled to find that it wasn't just men who held them. She noted with exasperation, "It struck me dumb to be told that a prominent club woman of Wisconsin . . . an effective, tireless worker for every good civic cause . . . was opposed to Woman suffrage."¹⁵ Even some activist women believed that women would lose the authority they currently wielded as outsiders, free from political taint and motivated solely by the righteousness of the causes they promoted. Women's true influence, they asserted, was exercised in the form of making requests and persuading male voters to do what women, in the purity born out of their political powerlessness, identified as right. La Follette, who took pride in the many developments and inventions (from the telephone and typewriter to motorized farm equipment) that were rendering obsolete the time- and labor-intensive methods of the past, was incensed. Without the vote, she explained in her column, when women go to their various representatives to plead, cajole, or shame them into enacting civic reforms, the officials "are very polite and promise us 'careful consideration.' But what woman does not know the difference between this indulgent kindness and the eager response to demands of voters? In these days of efficiency what a waste of physical effort and nervous energy to try to accomplish by 'indirect influence' what could be so much more easily achieved by the direct use of the ballot."¹⁶ In 1910, La Follette joined the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The following year, she was named to its national board, serving with two of the women she most admired, Dr. Anna Howard Shaw as president and Jane Addams as vice president.

Their limited suffrage rankled many Wisconsin women, especially as western territories and states increasingly granted women full voting rights. In 1911, state senator David James worked with the Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs at the urging of his daughter Ada to persuade the legislature

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COURTESY OF ANN LEWIS WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE COLLECTION



Groups on both sides of the suffrage debate produced handbills, advertisements, and other printed material to promote their cause. The poster (top), created during the 1912 campaign, played to stereotypes depicting women as unsuited to vote. In contrast, the "pink ballot" (bottom), distributed by the Political Equality League, urged men to vote Yes on the referendum.



During the hard-fought 1912 campaign, members of the Oshkosh Equal Suffrage League incorporated a sailboat theme into their Fourth of July float.

to approve votes for women, pending support in a general election in 1912. Belle La Follette was overjoyed, stating, “A progressive legislature has given us a great opportunity. Wisconsin can be the first state east of the Mississippi to grant unlimited suffrage to women. The effect would be signal and far-reaching.” The challenge was clear: “It is up to us women of the state to conduct in a broad-minded, liberal spirit, a campaign that will win.”¹⁷ She resigned from the NAWSA board and focused the bulk of her attention on promoting suffrage in her home state.

The Battle for Wisconsin

There was considerable debate over what would constitute a winning campaign.¹⁸ Some Wisconsin suffrage advocates were inspired by a belief in the full equality of the sexes. They emphasized the hypocrisy of a democracy, especially one inspired in part by the slogan “no taxation without representation,” that denied the vote to any adult citizen. This was the position of groups including the Political Equality League of Wisconsin. Others opted for an approach less threatening to the status quo, one that turned a key anti-suffrage argument into an endorsement. They argued that granting women the vote was the logical culmination of their role as the “naturally” more moral sex, generally superior to men in their selflessness and dedication to the greater good. That is, women deserved the vote *because* of their sex, not despite it.¹⁹

According to this view, a woman’s roles as homemaker and mother were her greatest political credentials. Clara Burdette, a leading light in the women’s club movement, described the new role for women as progressive reformers in urban industrial society: “The woman’s place is in the home,” she emphasized. “But today, would she serve the home, she must go beyond the home. No longer is the home encompassed by four walls. Many of its important activities lie now involved in the bigger family of the city and the state.”²⁰

Belle La Follette blended both approaches in her *La Follette’s Magazine* columns and in speeches. “I believe that the Progressive movement . . . has a special significance for women and home-makers,” she proclaimed, declaring, “Politics is merely public housekeeping.”²¹ “What is true of the city is true of the state,” she urged. “State taxes, education, the regulation of public utilities, railway and street car services, telegraph and telephones affect the happiness of the home, and are matters of great importance to women.”²² She stated repeatedly, “My basic reason for believing in equal suffrage is that it will make better homes.”²³ La Follette also voiced decidedly egalitarian sentiments, declaring, “But really when we analyze it, government is not a man’s problem nor a woman’s problem, but a mutual problem for men and women.” She concluded, “I can think of no important subject that has occupied the attention of the Congress in the last twenty years that does not affect women equally

with men.”²⁴ In her view, “Men and women are equally and mutually concerned in government and it is only when they equally understand and are responsible that we shall secure a well-balanced democracy.”²⁵

The *New York Times* focused on her prominent role in the multifaceted Wisconsin campaign in a story headlined simply “Mrs. La Follette Is Leader: Will Direct Suffrage Fight in Wisconsin.” She was quoted as saying plainly, “I am in earnest in this campaign.”²⁶ Looking back on the battle she waged in that year, she recalled, “I spoke seven days a week in succession, usually three or four times a day, sometimes six or eight. A large portion of the meetings were held out of doors.” During one twelve-day tour, La Follette gave thirty-one speeches in fourteen different counties.²⁷ In her standard speech to rural audiences at county fairs, she harkened back to her childhood family farm where her parents worked together as a team. Farmers should take “a more liberal view of woman suffrage than the average city man,” she urged, for “in no vocation are men and women generally so alive and so sympathetic [to each other] as in agriculture.”²⁸

La Follette drew large and enthusiastic crowds. She spoke at the Rusk County fairgrounds in Bruce during a rainstorm so loud she had to use a megaphone. According to eyewitness Elizabeth Gardiner Evans, “Mrs. La Follette . . . pleaded for the home—for the better understanding, the close comradeship, and the fuller sympathy between husband and wife when they have public as well as private interests in common.” La Follette concluded her remarks with the direct appeal, “Oh, men of Wisconsin, don’t you go back on me! If you should, I should be so disappointed, and so humiliated for our state!” The audience, according to Evans, responded approvingly: “How they listened! How they applauded!”²⁹

La Follette’s speeches were not always met with such overwhelming support. She found that “among the German Americans there is often deep seated, often violent prejudice” against votes for women, and they were not afraid to

express it. When, during a speech, La Follette praised the influence that suffrage would have on the home, a man of German heritage shook his fists at her and shouted, “Woman’s place is behind the kitchen stove.” La Follette responded, “But you would not have your wife always behind the stove, would you?” He answered angrily, “Yes, I would.” Ironically, according to La Follette, “His answer was more convincing to this little group who were listening than anything I could say. They were mostly of German descent and opposed to suffrage, but the narrowness of his point of view was a revelation to them.”³⁰

La Follette not only canvassed Wisconsin for suffrage in 1912, she also delivered her message during an ambitious national speaking tour in support of her husband’s bid for the Republican nomination for the presidency. In that campaign Bob La Follette publicly identified the pending amendment in Wisconsin as part of the larger progressive movement dedicated to more equitably redistributing the nation’s wealth and power.³¹ Their oldest child, Fola La Follette, was also an activist for the cause, causing her mother to note, “It is a family affair with us, this fighting for what we believe to be right. We three counsel together and all are stronger for it.”³²

As the election neared, La Follette was cautiously optimistic, yet she urged Wisconsin club women in particular to act promptly, for “almost any club may yet carry a county or an assembly district if the women go about it in earnest.”³³

The Battle Lost

On November 5, 1912, Wisconsin men rejected suffrage by a vote of 227,024 to 135,546. Belle La Follette was frank in her dismay: “It is a keen disappointment that Wisconsin did not win its splendidly-fought battle this time.” She blamed the high number of German immigrants and the opposition of the “liquor interests,” as well as the “well-to-do and socially inclined” women for their lack of involvement. Yet, she warned, “Let no one think this great cause will suffer from dry rot . . . [for] the campaign has not ceased. It is speaking up, better equipped, better organized, much more aggressive and certain.”³⁴

The years after the 1912 referendum were difficult for suffrage

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Although Belle La Follette was too often in the shadow of her more famous husband, progressive giant Bob La Follette, the two were partners in politics and shared the conviction that women’s suffrage was vital to a true democracy.

activists in Wisconsin. The legislature authorized another referendum in 1913, but Governor Francis McGovern vetoed the bill. In 1915, a more conservative legislature rejected yet another referendum bill and dealt an even bigger blow to the movement by replacing elected county boards of education with appointed committees. This wiped out many school board positions gained by women since they were first allowed to run in 1886.³⁵ Concluding that the state legislature was never going to help the suffrage cause, the WWSA joined other state suffrage groups in devoting its time and energy

to the national campaign to secure a constitutional amendment. Conflicts emerged over tactics. What concerned Belle La Follette, who preferred traditional campaigns of education through pamphlets, articles, letter-writing Campaigns, and speeches, was the rise of the more radical approach spearheaded by Alice Paul, who urged American women to adopt British women's increasingly extreme methods of bringing attention to the cause of suffrage.

La Follette initially feared that seeing women acting so aggressively would be too distasteful to the American public.

Gradually, however, her disapproval gave way to endorsement. It was Paul who organized the thousands of women who marched in Washington, DC, on March 3, 1913, one day before the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson. Catering to the prevailing racism, the organizers insisted that Ida Wells-Barnett and other African American members of Chicago's Alpha Suffrage Club (an organization promoting race progress as well as gender justice) march at the end of the parade rather than with the white members of the Illinois delegation. La Follette would become uniquely outspoken among white women's suffrage advocates in her opposition to such minimization of the rights of one group in order to enhance the rights of another. Although she asserted that "this business of being a woman is in many ways, like being a member of a despised race," she opposed the additional forms of oppression heaped on African Americans.³⁶

Although La Follette was scheduled to lead the homemakers' section of the parade, she was instead quarantined at home with her daughter Mary, who was ill with scarlet fever. La Follette's sons

On April 26, 1911, the Wisconsin Assembly approved David James's women's suffrage referendum bill. The pen used by Governor Francis E. McGovern to sign the measure rests on the tally sheet. Suffrage leaders including Belle La Follette were devastated when the measure failed at the ballot box.

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103 S. By Sen. James.
Voted on April 26, 1911.
Assembly Ayes and Noes.
SESSION 1911

The Ayes and Noes being *called for*.....

It was decided in the.....

The vote was as follows:

MESSRS.			MESSRS.			MESSRS.		
Noes.	Absent or Not Voting.		Ayes.	Noes.	Absent or Not Voting.	Ayes.	Noes.	Absent or Not Voting.
		BALLARD			JOERNS			PICKART
		BELL			JOHNSON, AXEL			PLOWMAN
		BERG			JOHNSON, CHRIS.			POTTS
		BERNER			JOHNSON, L. L.			RAYMOND
		BICHLER			JONES, JOHN R.			READER
		BINGHAM			KELLY, PHIL. H.			REED
		BINNER			KAMM			ROESSLER
		BROCKHAUSEN			KAMP			ROHAN <i>Agreed</i>
		CLARK			KATZBAUM			ROYCRAFT
		CROWELL			KAY			RUPP
		DENNHARDT			KEALY			SCHMIDT <i>Agreed</i>
		DORNER			KIEFER			SCHOLEY
		DRAPER			KLENZENDORFF			SCHREINER
		ELLINGSON			KNEEN			SCHWALBACH
		EVANS <i>Agreed</i>			KNIGHT			SHOLTS
		FENSKE			KRUEGER			SMITH
		FISHER			LA BUDE			SPERGE
		FRENCH			LENTZ			STANGE
		FRYE			LONG			STEVENS
		GETTLE			LUDLOW			STROUF <i>Agreed</i>
		GILBERTSON			MAHON			THOMAS
		GILBOY			MCCONNELL			URQUHART
		GOFF			METCALFE			VIEBAHN
		GRIMSRUD			MILLAR			VINT
		GULICKSON			MONSON			WEBER
		HAHN			MORTENSEN			WELLS
		HAIGHT			NELTON			WHEELAN
		HANSEN			NYE			YOCKEY
		HARPER			O'CONNOR			YOUMANS
		HINTZ			O'DAY			MR. SPEAKER
		HOFSTATTER			OLEN			
		HULL			ONSTAD			
		HURLBUT			PARKINSON			
		JANSSEN			PERRY			
								TOTAL

59 29



On March 3, 1919, crowds lined the sidewalks of Washington, DC, to watch the women's suffrage march.

Phil (later three-term governor of Wisconsin) and Bob Jr. (US Senator from 1925 to 1947), were among the few men who marched. Anti-suffrage forces became abusive along the parade route. Police were of little help as attacks on the marchers escalated, and the violence was quelled only when the US Cavalry stepped in. More than two hundred people suffered injuries requiring treatment. Belle La Follette did not mention this outrage publicly, but her daughter Fola, who led the actresses' contingent of the parade, referred to the violence as "disgraceful." Alice Paul and others presented the debacle as proof of the government's disrespect for women.³⁷

Tensions were still running high when the US Senate Committee on Women's Suffrage heard testimony from the public on April 26, 1913. The *Washington Post* reported, "In approaching the Senate committee the suffragists brought along some of their heaviest artillery."³⁸ One weapon in that arsenal was Belle La Follette. In the ten minutes she was allotted, La Follette summed up her primary argument: "One fundamental reason for equal suffrage is that it will arouse homemakers of today to a realization that they can only do their part—the part their mothers and grandmothers did—for the home when they use the ballot to secure these standards of cleanliness and healthfulness for the municipal home which were established in earlier times for the isolated home." La Follette also cited more egalitarian reasons, testifying that "home, society, and government are best when men

and women keep together intellectually and spiritually, where they have the widest range of common interests, [and] where they share with each other the solutions to their common problems." She called women's suffrage "a simple matter of common sense" before concluding, "You know how Lincoln defined government at Gettysburg. ['Ours is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.'] And are not women people?"³⁹ According to the *National Magazine*, "Mrs. Robert M. La Follette made a remarkable and forcible address, and . . . the audience hung upon her words."⁴⁰

Despite La Follette's eloquence, opposition at the highest levels remained strong. Early in the Wilson administration, she was a member of the contingent of ninety-four suffrage advocates who met with the president in the White House. Although Wilson listened respectfully, they were hurried out after ten minutes.⁴¹

An Ambitious Speaking Campaign

Having failed to persuade the US Senate or the president, La Follette decided to take her case directly to the American people. She and her friend Elizabeth Glendower Evans contracted with a lecturers' bureau for a paid speaking trip. They agreed to speak for sixty-three consecutive days in the summer of 1914. Their tour included Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. At each stop, La Follette participated in a debate against anti-suffragist Lucy Price, with Evans offering an evening lecture. The debate format, La Follette



The “silent sentinels” protest outside the White House in February 1917. The words on their sashes indicate where each wearer earned her college degree. Belle La Follette originally disapproved but came to admire this form of protest.

stated publicly, “leads to more converts than when the subject is discussed from one standpoint only.”⁴² Privately, she wrote of how she detested dealing with the “antis,” especially the “professional antis.” “It is the most trying thing in the world,” she complained, “to hear a clever, gifted persuasive woman present . . . objections” that La Follette termed “foolish.” But, she acknowledged, “If all these prejudices did not exist in the minds of men, we would not need to be talking *for* suffrage,” so it was best to address opponents’ objections head on.⁴³

The lecture circuit was grueling, admitted La Follette: “It goes without saying that speakers for county fairs must have physical endurance, voices with carrying power, and must understand people and be very adaptable.” The effort did, however, have its rewards. This kind of speaking, she explained, “shuts out all formalities. You speak to a group in front of a creamery, a country store, or blacksmith shop, you get on very close and friendly terms. There is something very convincing to the average man in just hearing and seeing a woman for whom he has regard make a stump speech.” Her goal was to train “women who believe in suffrage to do something about it; to talk for it, give entertainments, encourage debates in school houses, and be present at the polls on election day.”⁴⁴

The Power of the Silent Sentinels

Back in Washington, Alice Paul and her comrades began to picket the White House and the Capitol, an action that lasted more than two years. While legal, picketing previously had been carried out largely by labor organizations and was

considered radical. La Follette went to the Capitol nearly every day to observe the Senate. She passed by Paul and her associates “standing like sentinels at their posts . . . silent and unobtrusive,” letting their signs and banners speak for them. “More and more I grew to admire the courage, the strength of purpose and devotion to principle which sustained the picketers in their hard undertaking.” Her conviction grew that “they were pursuing a consistent and effective policy.”⁴⁵

When the United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, controversy over women’s suffrage increased. The banners of the suffrage picketers so admired by La Follette asked Wilson why he was so concerned about preserving democracy abroad when he was opposing it at home. Those opposed to suffrage were outraged by this criticism of the president during wartime. On June 25, twelve White House picketers were arrested for obstructing traffic and were convicted and jailed. The jailing of “ladies” incensed many members of the public. Their outrage increased when Alice Paul, arrested on October 27, began a hunger strike and was repeatedly force-fed. When the press revealed that on November 15 hostile prison guards savagely beat other women imprisoned for picketing, the public was further scandalized. By the end of the month, all the protesters had been released.

La Follette valued the attention brought by Paul’s more aggressive, highly publicized methods. Prior to Paul’s arrival, she wrote, “the Capital city of the United States was enjoying a veritable Rip Van Winkle sleep on the subject of suffrage.” Unlike the respectful, orderly tactics employed by La Follette and many others, Paul and her followers “wanted the vote,

[and] they wanted to get it by the shortest cut,” noted an admiring La Follette. “The transformation in sentiment that has taken place on the suffrage issue . . . at the Capitol,” she told her readers, “has been spectacular and extraordinary. If it had not been part of my observation and experience, I could not have believed so radical a change possible. And in my judgment this wonderful result is mostly due to the brains, the energy, the martyr-like zeal and spirit that is back of the organization that has kept the picketers at the Capitol and the White House.”⁴⁶ Seeking to press their advantage, La Follette urged, “Now is the time for intensive work, concentrated effort, persistent drive. Senators and Representatives here should be made to feel all the pressure that can be brought to bear on them from home.”⁴⁷

After Congress declared war in April 1917, many suffrage advocates presented women as dutiful and devoted patriotic citizens carrying out vital civic responsibilities during wartime. Because women were understood to be naturally moral and selfless, their support for the war through a variety of home-front activities (including the Council of National Defense, food conservation programs, and the American Red Cross) validated President Wilson’s claims that the nation’s war aims, including making the world safe for democracy, were entirely noble and altruistic. Eager for women’s endorsement, on January 9, 1918, Wilson announced his support for the women’s suffrage amendment as a “war measure.” When the Senate still refused to pass the amendment, arrests

resumed of the “silent sentinels” who continued to picket the White House. Women protesters dismissed Wilson’s pledge as hollow, publicly burning his printed words in late 1918. In early February 1919, the president himself was burned in effigy. The amendment lost in the Senate by one vote on February 10, 1919. La Follette exploded upon hearing that progressive Senator William Borah (R-Idaho) voted no. “Shame on Borah!” she ranted. “Oh, if he could feel the indignation of the women who understand what his vote against suffrage means and the cost of it!”⁴⁸ La Follette, Paul, and others kept up the pressure.

Victory!

Only months later, their many years of labor were finally rewarded in a Senate vote. According to La Follette, “The reactionary element of both [political] parties has fought just as long as they could,” but they were no longer able to resist the ever-growing public support for suffrage.⁴⁹ A pacifist, she ignored the role that women’s support for the war had played in this win. Although she acknowledged that “the question of credit for the wonderful achievement is the subject of some lively controversy,” she attributed victory exclusively to “the two wings of suffrage workers.” Looking back on the failed 1912 campaign in Wisconsin and the ultimate national victory, La Follette split the difference when assigning responsibility. “Where would we be except for the 70 years of persistent education on which the older more

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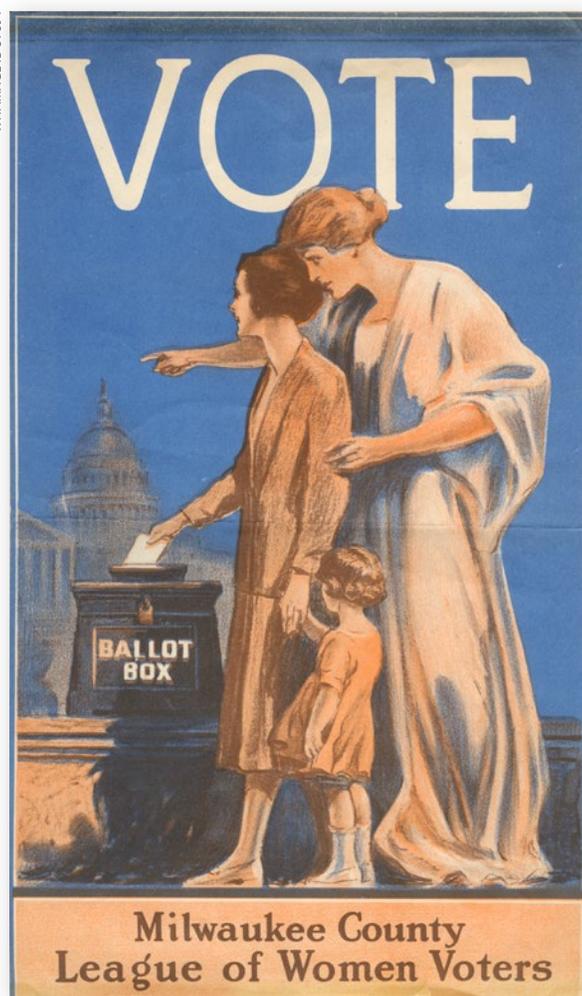
Suffrage workers including Ada James (in plaid dress at center) strategize at a headquarters in Wisconsin in 1918 as the nation closes in on approving the Nineteenth Amendment. A map of the state is prominent at right.



This cover of the 1919 National Women's Party magazine emphasizes that it was up to the states to ratify the amendment passed by Congress. Wisconsin was the first to do so, on June 10.

conservative workers have relied to establish the right of women to the full privileges of citizenship?" she asked rhetorically. She recognized the crucial role of the militants as well: "The wonderful pageants they instituted, their unceasing social and political activities, the martyrdom of prison and hunger strike for which these women of highest character suffered for the convictions all played a large part in causing the remarkable change in sentiment that has taken place at both the Capitol and the White House."⁵⁰

On August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment, providing the necessary three-fourths majority. For Belle La Follette, the work was not over. She believed that she could "best serve the progressive cause by a speaking campaign, appealing to women to become interested in the issues to register, and to come to the polls and vote," and she traveled east to west across Wisconsin by car that fall. "It was an inspiring experience," she recorded. "I felt that sense of real equality and genuine democracy which those who have the ballot and



In a poster created after ratification, Lady Liberty urges women to vote.

use it must surely feel. After all, this ballot we have talked so much about—it is like the birth of a child, we do not know what it means until it is a part of our own experience." La Follette was confident that "the women of the United States are going to be stronger in their faith in themselves," concluding, "We cannot overestimate the ultimate good to society of votes for women."⁵¹ "Our dreams [have] come true," she noted triumphantly by 1924, "and... questions of government [are] receiving consideration in the home—fathers and mothers, sons and daughters equally interested and concerned."⁵²

La Follette's Leadership Honored Nationally

Belle La Follette learned from the bitter loss in Wisconsin in 1912 that the more traditional method of voter education was not enough. As she left statewide strategy behind in favor of a national amendment campaign, she slowly came to value augmenting the genteel approach with more radical tactics. That she herself played a crucial role in gaining suffrage for

American women is undeniable. In 1931, the National League of Women Voters honored seventy-one women, including La Follette, for their service to the league and to the American Woman Suffrage Association. Her name was inscribed on a bronze tablet housed in the national headquarters in Washington, DC.⁵³ Perhaps even more significantly, suffragist and leading feminist Alice Paul, with whom La Follette would break sharply during the 1920s debates over the best course of action for women moving forward, would nevertheless praise Belle Case La Follette as “the most consistent supporter of equal rights of all the women of her time.”⁵⁴

Upon her death in 1931, La Follette was eulogized around the state and across the nation, called one of Wisconsin’s “most notable women” and an “indefatigable champion of American womanhood.”⁵⁵ The *New York Times* hailed her as “probably the least known yet most influential of all the American women who have had to do with public affairs.”⁵⁶ In her fight for suffrage, as in all things, noted Marie Jenney Howe, one of La Follette’s sister campaigners, “she dared to be herself, and the free natural self of Belle Case La Follette is one to be held as an ideal by new generations.”⁵⁷ ❧

Notes

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4. Robert M. La Follette to family, June 10, 1919.
5. La Follette, “May the Women of the United States Vote in 1920?”
6. See Christy Clark-Pujara, “Contested: Black Suffrage in Early Wisconsin,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 100, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 21–27.
7. Theodora W. Youmans, “How Wisconsin Women Won the Ballot,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 5, no. 1 (September 1921): 16; Genevieve McBride, *On Wisconsin Women: Working for Their Rights from Settlement to Suffrage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 167.
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12. Belle Case La Follette, “Columbus Ohio Suffrage Speech,” La Follette Family Papers, Box D, Folder 41.
13. Belle Case La Follette, “In Washington,” *La Follette’s Magazine*, December 20, 1913, 6.
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19. Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 29.
20. Clara Bradley Burdette, “The College Woman and Citizenship,” *Syracusan* 3 (June 15, 1917), Box 125, File 1, Clara Burdette Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
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22. Belle Case La Follette, Untitled Suffrage Debate, 1914, La Follette Family Papers, Box D, Folder 41, 6.
23. Belle Case La Follette, “A Question of Democracy” *La Follette’s Magazine*,

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24. Belle Case La Follette, Untitled Suffrage Debate.
25. Belle Case La Follette, “Roosevelt’s Speech on Suffrage,” *La Follette’s Magazine*, August 17, 1912, 10.
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27. Belle Case La Follette, “Belle Case La Follette (1913),” La Follette Family Papers, Box D, Folder 43; Marie Jenney Howe, “Mrs. La Follette’s Great Work for Suffrage,” *Progressive*, November 7, 1931, 6.
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30. La Follette, Untitled Speech to Suffrage School.
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34. Belle Case La Follette, “The Vote for Woman Suffrage in Wisconsin,” *La Follette’s Magazine*, November 16, 1912, 10.
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42. La Follette, Untitled Speech to Suffrage School, 9.
43. Belle Case La Follette to Mrs. Etz, November 9, 1914, La Follette Family Papers, Box D, Folder 25.
44. La Follette, Untitled Speech to Suffrage School, 13, 15.
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