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In 1924, Belle Case La Follette wore a confidence that grew out of her personal and public achievements.
The Two Worlds of Belle Case La Follette

By Nancy Unger

BELLE Case La Follette, it has been frequently noted, was deemed "my wisest and best counselor" by her husband, Wisconsin progressive great Robert M. La Follette. She chose to fulfill that counselor's role in remarkable ways throughout their forty-three years of married life, perhaps most significantly by earning a law degree, yet never practicing law herself. This decision was one of many that allowed her to function as her husband's equal in the professional matters that affected him publicly, while reserving for herself a more private and personal role. Belle Case La Follette's lifetime of decisions reflected her wish to fulfill the ideal and complex partnership that she and Bob La Follette carved out together, and she did so by skillfully utilizing the opportunities made available to her by the changing roles for women as the late nineteenth century passed into the twentieth. Throughout her life she found herself straddling the increasingly amorphous divide between conservative tradition and radical innovation as the boundaries of the prescribed "sphere" for women continuously expanded. And it was not just gender roles that were constantly changing—and frequently conflicting. Belle La Follette herself wanted to create public reform while at the same time she desired to bask in the private joys and comforts of family life. These more personal, rather than political, aspects are the focus of this inquiry into the life of one extraordinary Wisconsin woman.

In an obituary entitled "Wisconsin's Matriarch," Belle Case La Follette was hailed by the New York Times as "perhaps the least known, yet the most influential of all American women who have had to do with public affairs in this country." In a separate story, the Times credited her low public profile to the fact that "her personality along with her work was merged in the fame of her menfolk." In truth, Belle Case La Follette was, as several recent biographers and a documentary film maker have noted, an important reformer in her own right.

Throughout her life she spoke in support of world disarmament and civil rights, but always and most avidly for women’s rights. All three, she believed, were inextricably bound together: “This business of being a woman is in many ways, like being a member of a despised race.” It was her fervent belief that “if women had a larger voice in the counseling of nations, there would be no war slogans, no dreams of empire which could lead to the great sacrifice of life, which woman alone knows the real value.” She publicly attacked the racial segregation policies enacted under President Woodrow Wilson in 1913, and during World War I she protested not only the draft, but even the misleading nature of military recruiting posters for their romanticizing of war. She co-founded The Women’s Peace Party, later to become The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, an organization still active today.\(^3\)

Despite her own major contributions to reform, Belle Case La Follette, like Eleanor Roosevelt, is too often eclipsed by her more famous politician husband; the “little woman” behind the “big man.” And like Eleanor Roosevelt, Belle La Follette refused to support her husband unquestioningly in all political efforts or to subvert her private interests to his. Instead, she played a vital role in setting rigorous standards and was quick to express concern, occasionally even publicly, when she disapproved of her husband’s policies and actions. Bob La Follette depended enormously upon his wife’s advice and counsel, and her approval was vital to him. The complex dynamics of their relationship reveal the enormous influence of this intelligent, demanding, yet at the same time retiring woman. Despite her intelligence and dedication to social change, when presented with the opportunity to seize the reins of political power for herself, Belle La Follette demurred. An indefatigable advocate of women’s rights, including the right to vote and to hold public office, she refused the opportunity to claim her husband’s senate seat upon his death in 1925, insisting it was against her nature to do so. Her strong political influence, however, continued to be felt. She served as key adviser and confidant to his successor, their son Robert M. La Follette, Jr., until her own death in 1931. Thus the impact of her thinking and advice spanned two generations of national politics.\(^4\)

Even those who have not overlooked Belle La Follette’s reform contributions have tended to romanticize her character while ignoring the important social contexts that help address the many questions that remain unanswered. For example, what are we to make of the various political positions and personal decisions of this important reformer? Which of her choices are revealing of her particular personality and which the result of the unique intersection of her time and place in history, especially as determined by her class, gender, and race? For the life of Belle La Follette reveals the great changes that affected American women as the gender prescriptions of the early to mid-nineteenth century gave way—or rather, led the way—to the challenges and reforms of the twentieth. Belle La Follette’s shyness and longings for the perceived security of a simple life as a housewife conflicted with her sense of duty to help others, especially her devotion to furthering women’s rights. She

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struggled mightily with the strengths and limitations that each century's prescribed
gender roles had to offer a woman of her
position and class. Her mixed emotions over
the conflicts between her personal and pub-
lic aspirations may have complicated her
dedication to progressivism, but rarely did
they diminish her role among the myriad
women who labored tirelessly for the bet-
terment of society.

Most Americans still lived on farms in
1859, the year of Belle's birth, but even
there, where the household continued to be
more of a cohesive unit, men were increas-
ingly attuned to the modern, market econ-
omy while women continued to focus al-
most exclusively on the household, or
pre-modern economy. Meanwhile, nearly a
fifth of the national population and just un-
der a fifth of the state's population were liv-
ing in towns and cities. As the ranks of this
more urban group swelled during the early
industrialization prior to the Civil War, their
lifestyles, particularly their gender relation-
ships, came to influence the way virtually all
Americans defined "true womanhood," or
"woman's proper sphere."³

The concept refers to an idealized do-
meric environment of home, upheld by
four pillars: piety, purity, submissiveness, and
domesticity. Within this home, women were
described as innately dependent, affection-
ate, gentle, nurturing, benevolent, and sac-
rificing. Morally and spiritually superior to
men, women (mothers, ideally) within this
sphere maintained a high level of purity in
all things: immaculate furnishings, clean lan-
guage, noble motives, reverent beliefs,
wholesome entertainment, modest dress,
and so forth. Women were to embody, by
virtue of their sex, all of these qualities on an
individual level, while also bearing the com-
plete responsibility for inspiring and culti-
vating purity within all of the home's inhab-

³ Richard N. Current, The History of Wisconsin.
Volume II: The Civil War Era, 1848–1873 (Madison,
1976), 77.

itants. According to the prescriptive litera-
ture of the day, true happiness for these ideal
women was found not in selfish pursuits, but
in renouncing themselves in favor of total
dedication to the service of others.⁶ In order
for women to carry out their "true natures,"
and to retain the control they were obliged
to exercise over this world, all outside influ-
ences or experiences were considered sus-
pect. Men, and most aspects of "their" world,
posed a constant threat.

Although the concept of true woman-
hood tied women more closely to their pre-
industrial daily routines, it delivered to
them a greater, more powerful, and fre-
cently autonomous role within their own
homes, as middle-class men were increas-
ingly tied to the more industrialized world
of politics, power, business, professions, and
money. This change for women was limited
primarily to the urban middle class, yet its

⁶ Lydia H. Sigourney, "Home," in Whisper to a Bride
(1850), quoted in Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M.
Alexander, eds., Major Problems in American Women's
History (Lexington, Massachusetts, 1996), 109–110.
impact ultimately spread across geographic and class lines. Countless books, magazines, pamphlets, speeches, and sermons held up the middle-class home as an example for families of virtually all classes, ethnicities, and income levels: a soothing retreat from the fast-paced, secular, cold commercialism of modern life, a haven in a heartless world made possible by the endless domestic and cultural pursuits of the woman at its center.

The value of this sphere for women remains highly controversial. Previously, household labor garnered little praise or even attention. By the nineteenth century, all aspects contributing to tranquil domestic life engendered careful study and promotion because its elevated, spiritual nature demanded greater esteem, as did the women who made it their lives’ work. Compared to the powerful worlds of business and politics, it seems curious to consider the limited world of domestic life as positive or liberating for women. Even such a restricted sphere of influence, however, is better than no influence at all. Excluded from the conventional worlds of prestige and power, middle-class women enjoyed a new consciousness and value of themselves as unique contributors to society. A self-contained female world emerged as women found increasing solidarity with each other.³³

The women who truly internalized the values of the “sphere” found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Ideally, their pure, domestic feminine world was wholly divorced from the tainted masculine world of politics, business, and money. In reality, however, the two worlds intertwined. Women discovered that to protect their sole basis of power, they often had no recourse but to immerse themselves in the world of men—like a person who, fearful of dangerous water, jumps from a boat to swim to the safety of the shore. The course from domestic to public life was a long and often convoluted one, but it was a journey a vast number of women felt they had no choice but to undertake.

Generations before Belle Case undertook this same journey, middle-class women banded together in voluntary associations bent on uplifting those they deemed spiritually and materially deprived. In the early 1800’s women wrote religious pamphlets and countless books and articles of domestic advice—and more. They quickly moved from prayer circles and missionary societies to addressing the variety of specific issues that threatened the sanctity of their homes. Compelled by society to bear the responsibility of imparting the prescribed female virtues into young, impressionable minds, many women became teachers. (By 1860, roughly one-quarter of the nation’s teachers were women, and they would soon come to dominate that profession held almost exclusively by males previously.)³⁴ Mothers who initially sought only to


³⁵ Nancy Woloch, Women and the American Experience (New York, 1984), 129.
influence school board decisions soon campaigned to participate as duly elected official members. Others expressed their desire to vote in not just the school board elections, but local, state, and national elections as well—at any level where issues affected the home. Although suffrage remained a distinctively minority movement even among middle-class women in the nineteenth century (it was the only resolution not unanimously supported at the 1848 Seneca Falls convention for women’s rights), the large-scale internalization of their sphere in the first half of the 1800’s left women no choice but to attempt themselves to remedy the huge societal wrongs of immoral, impure, and impious men such as alcohol abuse, urban slums, crime, and—the greatest immorality of them all—slavery.

Participation in such crusades was by no means universal, however, even among middle-class women. This ideal was a luxury that many—exhausted from trying to meet ever-increasing standards of cleanliness, godliness, household efficiency, and child rearing—simply did not have the desire or energy to pursue. And if the exacting demands of true womanhood were sometimes too much for middle-class women, working-class women shouldered even heavier burdens. After laboring a full day at either in-house production or a factory, the running of the household fell “naturally” to the women.

BELLE Case, like so many other women born in the mid-nineteenth century, would inherit these conflicting messages and pressures and struggle with them. She viewed women as significant contributors to society, never as weak or ornamental, and her strong beliefs can be traced to her family’s influence and support. As a child, she idolized her grandmother, Lucetta Moore Case, for her calm, capable response to life’s demands. Even before Belle’s birth, women like her grandmother were beginning to become politically active, establishing the tradition of reform in Wisconsin, laying the foundation upon which Belle would later build. Internationally known suffragist and author Mathilde Franziska Anneke, for example, was exiled

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9 Their agitation was not universally ignored. Wyoming enacted votes for women in 1869, while still a territory. Through the 1870’s and 1880’s, “partial suffrages” were secured in various places throughout the country, allowing women to vote in municipal elections and for school boards.

from Germany for her role in the 1848 revolution and arrived in Wisconsin later that year. Her short-lived (six issues) Deutsche Frauen-Zeitung, dedicated to the complete emancipation of women, made her the first woman publisher and editor in Wisconsin. In 1855 Anneke arranged for national suffrage leader Lucy Stone to tour Wisconsin, leading to an intensification of statewide demands for women’s suffrage. Emma Brown, with her brother Thurlow, co-founded and co-edited the progressive Wisconsin Chief in the 1850s, which boasted a readership of fifteen thousand, although most subscribers were the Browns’ loyal eastern followers.

Following the Civil War, many Wisconsin women, still loath to channel their energies into anything that could be construed as outside the private sphere, focused their reform efforts on a goal in keeping with their prescribed purity: temperance. During the formative years of Belle’s early childhood, as her parents devoted themselves to raising hops in Baraboo from 1862 until the crop failures of 1870, Wisconsin women seasoned by the abolitionist movement pounced upon the growing evils of alcohol consumption. In their temperance crusades, they honed their organizational skills and concentrated their forces. In 1869 leading suffrage advocates Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton came to Wisconsin for the first statewide suffrage convention and found a hotbed of temperance workers poised on the brink of adding suffrage to their agenda. The number of suffrage forces had grown within the state as alcohol consumption soared by 30 percent in Wisconsin following the war, the result of bumper crops of hops and hundreds of new breweries. Passage of a temperance law had little effect and Wisconsin women mounted a widespread temperance crusade. Lavinia Goodell, who in 1874 became the first woman admitted to the Wisconsin bar, argued in a letter to the Woman’s Journal entitled “Women Waking Up in Wisconsin” that those women who had held “strong prejudice” against “the principle that Woman’s sphere may extend to the platform, and that she may labor for the State as well as for the family,” soon found themselves “converted to . . . faith in the propriety of Woman’s preaching.” Moreover, “several things [including the crusade against alcohol] . . . served to broaden and deepen thought on the subject of Woman’s duties, and her relation to the community.” Demands for votes for women in Wisconsin would follow on the heels of one of the most active temperance crusades in the country.

13 Ibid., 60.
Women leaders in Wisconsin like Goodell and Emma Brown drew less upon the ideology of organized religion than on secular politics to support their reform crusades. In her call for political action, Brown denounced "the men who legislate and make powerful an infamous traffic and then expect the women to pray it down." The defeat of the temperance ticket in various local elections in 1874 brought home to increasing numbers of women scattered throughout Wisconsin the necessity of creating a more permanent statewide organization. By the time Belle Case entered the University of Wisconsin in 1875, the membership in the Wisconsin Women’s Temperance Alliance was rising steadily, and the rhetoric of its members, whose press coverage was also growing, increasingly strayed from the narrow topic of temperance into broader issues of reform.  

Belle would come to admire Wisconsin’s various activists and add her own steady, calm voice to the call for myriad reforms to benefit women, but as she left for the University of Wisconsin in 1875, the bulk of her heroes could be found closer to home. In addition to her strong and self-sufficient grandmother, Belle Case greatly revered her own parents, Anson and Mary Nesbit Case. They were farmers who placed a high value on a university education and gladly sacrificed to ensure that their only daughter benefit from such an experience. Belle too was determined to take full advantage of the University of Wisconsin’s commitment to co-education. She excelled in her studies: although she was more than four years younger than her future husband, the two were in the same class and she, in sharp contrast to Bob, finished near the top. Exceedingly conscientious, Belle never missed a class or was late while attending the university.

Despite the shyness that would plague her throughout her lifetime, Belle Case intelligently protested any measure or contrivance that she felt stifled humanity’s true nature. The dress, manners, morals, and prejudices of the day, frequently described as "natural," struck her as contrived and warping. Her faith in people in their unfettered state has been called almost Rousseauian for its discouragement of all things artificial. During her college years she spoke out in defense of humanity by attacking those institutions she judged to be interfering with people’s genuinely natural modes of behavior. In her sophomore year she railed against the artificiality of class badges in a speech reviewed favorably by the Madison Democrat: "With bitter sarcasm she portrayed the vanity of many of us in trying to make an empty display and

14 Ibid., 62-63.
15 It can, therefore, be argued that this “True Womanhood,” by virtue of proclaiming women’s duty to uplift society, contained the seeds of its own destruction and, in fact, laid the groundwork for the modern women’s movement.

16 David Thelen, Early Life of Robert M. La Follette (Chicago, 1966), 41.
neglecting for it true stability and depth of sentiment." The following year her speech "Children's Playthings," delivered at the Junior Exhibit, provided a thoughtful comparison between the effect caused by toys versus pets on children's expectations: "This love of dumb beasts, of pets, is one of the purest and healthiest means of developing the emotional nature.... If a girl spent the best part of her childhood in playing with her doll, she will spend the best part of her girlhood in dreaming dreams of impossible future happiness; she will spend the best part of her womanhood in learning how unreal were the dreams of her girlhood, and the disappointment makes her a dissatisfied, nervous, complaining woman." In her senior oration, "Learning to See," Belle criticized adults for subverting children's natural curiosity by insisting that they conform to preconceived standards. Her speech won the prestigious Lewis Prize for the best essay or oration produced by a member of the graduating class and was delivered at commencement in the assembly chamber of the state capitol on June 18, 1879.17

BELLE and Bob were initially attracted to each other by their mutual interests in speech and reform, in addition to their similar rural backgrounds. They began to see each other regularly, meeting frequently to work on various speeches. Although segregated by gender, the University of Wisconsin was co-educational, and courtships among students were commonplace. The young Belle was short and rather heavyset with dark blonde hair and blue eyes. Reluctant to commit herself romantically, Belle preferred to keep their relationship purely on the level of friendship, "free from sentiment, so lighthearted and joyous," at least until they had finished college. "Mamma laughed when I proposed to

17 Ibid. Belle revisited this theme in La Follette's Magazine (LM), 5:6 (April, 1913).
her,” Bob would later tell their children. His persistence paid off at the end of their junior year, although the engagement was kept a secret for almost twelve months.18

La Follette’s diary for 1879 includes entries for only a few days, but it reveals the sharp contrast between his feelings for women in general and his feelings toward Belle Case in particular. Within its pages he staunchly maintains the prescribed gender standards of the day in romantic, flowing language: all women are inherently weak, helpless, tender, virtuous, and consumed with yearning to be fulfilled by a home and family. By contrast, men are physically and intellectually stronger. Although frequently ruled by crude passion, they remain the “natural guardian and chivalrous protector” of women. Such notions, however romantic and chauvinistic, were contradicted by Belle’s obvious reluctance, despite their engagement, to fully and openly commit herself to him. Bob’s idealistic certainty and eloquence on the true nature of woman disappeared completely when he wrote about Belle, rendering him an insecure, anxious man in the throes of a love he feared was unrequited. A brief entry in his diary suggests it was at Belle’s insistence that their engagement be a secret and lengthy one, and several entries betray Bob’s fears that she might one day end it altogether. He pleaded, “Oh hasten [the] time when I can see her the center of a home into which shall flow plenty from my own hands, over which shall hover happiness wooed hither by the loving content that glorifies the perfect home.”19

Upon graduation, Belle both taught and served as assistant principal at Spring Green High School, thirty miles west of Madison. She enjoyed immensely the sense of independence, pride, and accomplishment it brought her and was reluctant to spend time with her fiancé. Bob’s diary entry describing their first weekend visit reveals a most unhappy and insecure suitor: “Had the [first] evening mainly with Belle [in Spring Green] & was puzzled not a little to understand her. I hardly know why but she at times did not seem like herself nor could I shake this off nor dispel it all the time she was with me till Monday morning.” On Saturday morning they took the train for Madison. Bob urged her to stay “only to regret it very much. For though it seemed like the promise of our future to see her here in our house just as she would be in our own home; yet it seemed that I could read her thoughts that she half regretted having come.” Belle’s return to Spring Green was equally disappointing to Bob. Finding the railroad car full of “great coarse men & the air heavy with smoke,” he recorded dejectedly:

I could have strangled myself for it all. Though almost blinded with unshed tears & looking the very picture [of] misery she would neither remain for another train nor permit me to accompany her (& miss a lecture) & so fearing to go [sic] lest I should add even more to her discomfort I left her as the train moved away. But oh how reluctantly & what a miserable day I passed.20

Bob’s next note to Belle did not evoke the reassurance he desired, plunging him further into despair:

Oh how she has misunderstood and how much pain her words cost me. I know she did not mean to hurt me but it seemed like the black days of the past and brought me face to face with my old enemy [i.e. depression.] I had thought him well out of my way but he came, dark counselor that he is, with a power that I had nearly forgotten.

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19 Robert Marion La Follette (RML), diary, undated entry for 1879 and for November, 17, 1879, Robert La Follette Papers (RLP), B-1, LFC.
20 RML, diary, November 4, 1879, RLP, B-1, LFC.
It was typical of Bob to deny that Belle meant to hurt him. He so idolized her that he praised her when she criticized him, even when she put him off by ridiculing him. His loyalty and belief in her nobility caused him to note, after receiving a letter from her full of grumbling about being overworked, "She would not complain if it was not worse than it is." In a striking reversal of the prescribed gender roles, her pleasure mattered more to him than his own, and he seemed to be almost completely at her mercy. Belle taught her second year of school in her hometown of Baraboo. In an incident that seems symbolic of their relationship, Bob decided "after much mental debate" to pay Belle a visit there, but he did not arrive until after dark. Belle's window provided a guiding light until it unexpectedly went out, leaving her suitor totally in the dark: "After knocking the bark off about all the trees in the front yard I succeeded in reaching the door & was 'taken in' literally and metaphorically [by Belle's parents] for Belle had retired."  

MORE than two years after these diary entries were recorded, Belle Case overcame her reluctance and married Bob. Perhaps his resentment of Belle's coolness during their long engagement contributed to Bob's having to make a note to "remind" himself to attend the ceremony, ostensibly because he was so immersed in his duties as the new Dane County district attorney. The ceremony was held New Year's Eve, 1881, in the Case home in Baraboo. It was attended only by the two families and a Unitarian minister, who honored Belle's request that the word "obey" be omitted from the marriage vows. Immediately following, Bob returned to his office to complete his day's work. The newlyweds spent their honey-

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21 RML, diary, November 17, 1879, RLP, B-1, LFC.

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Belle Case taught at Baraboo High School, pictured here before it burned down in 1905, during the 1880-1881 school year.
moon in their new home on West Wilson Street, also occupied by Bob’s mother, Mary, and Jo and Robert Seibeker, Bob’s sister and brother-in-law. Any tensions, conflicts, or jealousies created by living with these family members were zealously repressed. Belle’s mention of her mother-in-law’s sarcasm and tendency to “fret and scold” is the harshest criticism preserved. In 1911, however, Belle wrote a story entitled, “I Married a Lawyer.” This fictional work reveals many of Belle’s unrealized desires and fantasies. In it, her fictitious husband’s mother died during the summer following their senior year and only then did the couple become engaged. In reality, the beautifully appointed and very large house that they all shared had been purchased with the profits from the sale of the La Follette family’s farm in Primrose, in western Dane County. In order to rationalize their living in Madison, when they had agreed that farm life was their mutual goal, Belle and Bob preferred to perceive the arrangement as only temporary although it remained their primary residence for the next nineteen years.22

With her new husband vigorously pursuing a legal career, Belle was often left with her female in-laws. In September of 1882, eight months and ten days after the wedding, she gave birth to a daughter, Flora Dodge, called Fola, who remained an only child for the next thirteen years. When Bob spent evenings at home reading law books, Belle joined him. This choice by no means indicates a rejection on her part of the prescribed female sphere for the competitive, masculine world of business. Rather, Bob’s desire to have her as a helpmeet, combined with her confidence in the myriad abilities of women, led her to enroll in law school the same year that Fola was born. This move satisfied many of her needs: she excelled in an almost wholly male discipline far removed from her prescribed gender sphere, demonstrating the intellectual equality of women; she was better able to understand, counsel, and influence her husband; and she was no longer left alone all day in the house with her female in-laws and a new baby. Belle was determined, not only from the beginning of her marriage but from the very beginning of motherhood, to have a hold in both the professional and personal worlds. “The supreme experience in life is

motherhood,” she declared unequivocally; yet she noted, “It did not require much urging to convince me I could do so [study law] without rejecting my child and other home duties.”

In 1885 Belle Case La Follette became the first woman to graduate from the University of Wisconsin Law School. Although she never practiced law, she was an excellent student, and a brief she wrote for her husband in the 1890’s broke new legal ground and won his case before the state’s supreme court. Bob’s obvious pride in correcting Justice W. P. Lyon, who mistakenly complimented him later as the author of Belle’s brief, was unpatronizing, for he did not view Belle’s intelligence, talents, or interests as a personal threat and never appeared to be jealous or competitive. He thus proved himself the exception to Crystal Eastman Benedict’s caustic report to the National American Suffrage Association: “[T]he last thing a man becomes progressive about is the activities of his own wife.”

Belle’s enthusiasm for sweeping liberal, even radical, change never faltered. The seemingly endless temperance campaigns that had swept Wisconsin during her youth led women reformers to agendas expanded to combat the multitude of challenges faced by an urbanized, industrialized society. These included a variety of concerns generally perceived as women’s issues, such as wages and working conditions for women and children, education, and impure food and drugs. Hull House founder Jane Addams observed, “As society grows more complicated it is necessary that woman shall extend her sense of responsibility to many things outside of her home, if only in order to preserve the home in its entirety.” But, like so many of her sister reformers, Belle did not confine her interests and activities to those based on gender. In 1919, for example, she wrote: “Just as I do not believe we can ever return to the old order of personal competition in the business world so I think we must accept some changed conditions in the political world. Communism seems to be the forward step in the solution of economic conditions at this state of society." This initial interest in communism waned, however, after Belle witnessed first hand the suppression of freedoms in the Soviet Union in 1923.

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23 Freeman, La Follette, and Zabriskie, Belle, 23.
24 McBride, Wisconsin Women, 229. Belle’s claim to being the first woman to graduate has been the subject of some controversy. Due to a clerical error in a 1921 alumni publication, Elsie Buck has repeatedly been misidentified as the first woman graduate. See Edward Reisner, “First Woman Graduate: Belle Case La Follette or Elsie Buck,” Gargoyle (University of Wisconsin Law School Forum), 22:10–11 (Winter 1991/92). See also BCL, “The Law,” LM, 18:89 (June, 1926).
Belle took on new challenges throughout her lifetime and championed causes ranging from the Montessori system of education to pure food and drug legislation and wage and prison reform. For ten years, until overwhelmed by her duties as governor’s wife, Belle was president of the Emily Bishop League, a group devoted to exercise, pure foods, and the more “natural” way of life she had so strongly advocated during her college years. She jogged regularly and further defied convention by abandoning stays and corsets for more comfortable, looser-fitting garments.26

Belle’s professors encouraged her to pursue a career in writing, advice she later regretted not heeding. She wrote hundreds of articles over a period of more than fifty years, primarily for La Follette’s Magazine. According to the Minneapolis Morning Tribune, Belle La Follette was “a pioneer in the establishment of a new sort of women’s page.” As the editor of “one of the clearest and most readable women’s pages in the country,” she provided “stronger intellectual food” than the usual fare of “Vaseline and cold cream.” By accepting the utility of a “woman’s page,” distinct from the political focus of the rest of the magazine, Belle implicitly acknowledged acceptance of woman’s separate sphere; yet many of the subjects she chose to address reveal a rejection of its confines. Within the pages of La Follette’s, she skillfully bridged the traditional domestic concerns of women with their new, enlarged public role.

Perhaps her most courageous columns were written in response to the plight of African Americans, especially the racial segregation of the Treasury Department by President Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of the Treasury, William McAdoo, in 1913. Many African Americans were summarily
discharged from their jobs, including those originally hired through the color-blind application civil service process. These and a variety of other repressive actions prompted Booker T. Washington to observe: “I have never seen the colored people so discouraged and bitter as they are at the present time.” Within the pages of *La Follette’s Magazine*, Belle openly criticized the administration’s racial policies as well as the racist speeches of Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi and Representative James T. Heflin of Alabama. In addition to pointing out the crucial role African Americans played in the nation’s economy, she took up cudgels in the case of three African-American women working in the Treasury Department suddenly forced to eat at a separate table apart from their white coworkers. One of the women, Rosebud Murraye, had been fired immediately after granting Belle an interview, despite her faithful and efficient service of nine years. Belle appealed the case in letters to McAdoo and to President Wilson himself, reprinting in *La Follette’s* the entire correspondence, including the replies upholding Murraye’s dismissal as well as a variety of denials, excuses, justifications, and rationalizations concerning the segregation policy. Belle rather pointedly placed one letter from what she termed “a refined, intelligent colored woman” eloquently decrying American racism next to an article (on an unrelated matter) by President Wilson’s daughter, Margaret.27

Belle received magazine subscription cancellations as well as hate mail, some of which she published in the pages of *La Follette’s*. Undaunted, she spoke to black as well as white audiences against lynching, racial segregation, and the disfranchisement of women and African Americans. Her remarks on enforced segregation in government services were pointed: “To have the United States Government take a backward step, to have the color line drawn in places where they have won on their merit, to be humiliated, repressed and degraded at the capital of the nation by their own government, which has no right to discriminate among its citizens, is a body blow to hope and pride and incentive.” She reprinted retired brigadier general Richard H. Pratt’s denunciation, in biting terms, of some of the more common justifications for segregation and discrimination. Despite the personal attacks it invited, Belle La Follette refused to let the subject die. When Wilson defended his segregationist policies in late 1914, Belle La Follette asked, “What becomes of the fundamental principles of our institutions if the color line or any other arbitrary line can be drawn by the government among its

civil service employees?" In 1914, Wilson succumbed to the pressures of Belle La Follette and like-minded others, rescinding his orders to segregate government offices.  

WHEN it came to civil rights and other subjects about which she felt passionately, Belle, like her husband, was an energetic speaker. Although her style was somewhat quieter, people often remarked that the two resembled each other both on and off the speaker's platform. Belle contrasted dramatically, however, with her husband in other areas. Their son Phil noted, "People who knew [Belle] in her younger days reported her as being gay, high-spirited, and having the most contagious laugh they ever heard." Belle's writings, both personal and public, reveal someone very different. Conscientious, highly principled, and self-disciplined, Belle appears earnest, sincere, and extremely serious. Although she spoke in favor of breaking free from confining habits and repressive customs, her writings reveal not a free-spirited, fun-loving woman, but an inflexible, rather stern one, more in keeping with the traditional view of woman as self-sacrificing protector of purity. On a lecture series promoting women's suffrage, she was accused of being "too argumentative—and not light enough for audiences." In a speech to university women she stated, "Discrimination and subordination of social life to more important duty should be a part of women's education." She found trifling gossip more annoying than serious misrepresentations, and she once rather prudishly reprimanded her daughter, then twenty-two, for wearing a gown in a publicity picture whose neckline was "too low to

be pretty." In contrast to her husband, Belle rarely displayed much facility for fantasy or levity even in private. In her speeches and in her letters to the family, jokes, teasing, or any general attempt at humor are conspicuous by their absence.

Following his oft-quoted assertion in his autobiography that Belle was his "wisest and best counsellor," Bob added, "That this is not partial judgment, the Progressive leaders of Wisconsin who welcomed her to our conferences would bear witness. Her grasp of the great problems, sociological and economic, is unsurpassed by any of the strong men who have been associated with me in my work." In his later years he spoke of "when we were governor." When not with Belle, Bob showered her with requests for her views on political matters. He so valued his wife's judgment that when he was urged to drop out of the 1912 presidential campaign and a statement of withdrawal was submitted for his signature, he read it and handed it back, saying he would sign no statement without consulting Belle; a committee resubmitted the paper to the couple in their home. Belle herself conceded, albeit via her fictionalized counterpart, "I had an easy way of grasping a subject and even a knotty law problem did not stagger me."

Belle La Follette, maintained a family friend, "was the most thoroughly married woman I ever knew." According to son-in-law George Middleton, "Except John Adams with his Abigail, no man in public life was to have so equal a mate."

"I KNOW of no couple," stated family friend Mary Livingston Burdick, "more companionable, more helpful, sympathetic and complementary to one another than the La Follettes." The La Follettes agreed, claiming publicly to have a near-perfect marriage, and citing as evidence their lack of arguments. They liked to give the impression of complete and total unity, yet at the same time stressed their individuality and independence, as evidenced by a newspaper story based on an interview with Belle:

Mrs. La Follette has good health and unusual vital power. She leads a thoroughly normal and happy life. Although she is interested in her husband's work and appreciates his importance, she is not absorbed in it. She is his sincerest friend and most ardent admirer. They are good comrades. From the day of their engagement to the present time, they have not had a lovers' quarrel or domestic difference... The family life is ideally happy.

Belle shed some light on that vision of perfect harmony in her biography of Bob:

We seldom seriously differed, and I think I can honestly say we never quarreled. At times one or the other or both may have been deeply hurt, as happens in making life's adjustments; but we did not nurse the sense of wrong, nor did we discuss it. We

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29 Philip Fox La Follette (PFL), Adventures in Politics: The Memoir of Philip La Follette, ed. Donald Young (New York, 1970); 2; BCL to family, August 1, 1914; FP-A-13; BCL, speech, March 18, 1901, BLP, D-38, LFC. Belle punctuated her disapproval of Fola's dress by misplacing the photograph. BCL to FL, August 4, 1904; FP-A-2, LFC. See also interview, Mary Livingston Burdick (MLB) with Albert O. Barton (AOB), May 25, 1930, Albert Barton Papers (ABP), 4-1, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW).

30 Belle was not completely bereft of a sense of humor, however. Describing a train trip she shared with her husband, for example, she wrote: "We had two evenings at poker. Bob won enough to pay his debts, but I lost enough to make him poor again. Such is the fate of gamblers... Praise the president's message. It is all right. Bob thinks, I have not read it and of course you will not, but praise it." BCL to Samuel Harper, December 2, 1890, RLP, 1.385, microfilmed collection of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at California State University, Hayward (SHSWH).

31 RML, La Follette's Autobiography (Madison, 1913; reprint Madison, 1960),135; Freeman, La Follette, and Zabriskie, Belle, 61; Interview, MLB with AOB, May 25, 1930, ABP, 4-1, SHSW; George Middleton, These Things Are Mine (New York, 1947), 96.
treated it as we would physical pain—a cut or burn which it was useless to think much about and which would heal in time. We were ourselves good comrades and we were comrades with our children.32

The La Follettes liked to think of their marriage as one virtually untouched by disagreement, for they viewed an unspoken disagreement as a nonexistent one. This kind of reasoning kept them from pointless bickering, but it also prohibited them from speaking openly and constructively about the endless stream of differences and problems that afflict all couples. The La Follettes’ dedication and love for each other was deep, and their correspondence contains many touching declarations of that love, although Bob seems to have been more effusive, at least on paper. Nonetheless, they lived with his relatives for many years, raised four children, endured endless political pressures, suffered financial strain and, at times, tremendous public disapproval—all conditions that inevitably lead to tensions and differences. Regardless, in an interview in 1924 Belle said:

I have loved my life. I have been fortunate, marvelously lucky in having all these years a companion. True companionship is the greatest thing in the world. We have been through everything, my husband and I, bad times and good times, disappointments, illness, poverty, hard work, the struggle for principle, the climb to success. But when you have a companion to count upon through thick and thin, it’s all

32 Interview, MLB with AOB, May 25, 1930, ABP, 6-1; Undated article among miscellaneous papers of 1904, 78:797, RLP, SHISWH; BCL and FL, La Follette, 1:56.
easy. We two have kept together because—well, because our minds and our hearts matched.  

All these avowals of identical thoughts and desires do not alter the fact that the La Follettes did disagree over such issues as politics, personal goals, lifestyle, and money. At the time of her death, Belle had written several hundred pages of an ambitious biography of her husband. Their daughter Fola completed the study, adding a second volume. Belle’s portion is well-written and she emerges as a politically astute woman who does not allow sentiment or loyalty to prevent her from voicing opinions different from her husband’s, while Fola is far more apt to rationalize or excuse her father’s errors or failures.

Despite her outspokenness and her willingness to campaign in matters of importance, Belle La Follette was a very shy woman, uncomfortable with life in the public eye. At the age of fifty-eight she confided to her daughter Mary, “Even now after all my experience I suffer with anxiety and when I was your age, it was agony for me to even recite in class. I always hoped none of you children would take things like that as seriously as I did . . . .” Her competence as a speaker surprised her; in a letter to her husband she wondered “if the nerve I have comes from long association with you or if it comes from within. Certainly I should not have believed I had it in myself alone to rise to the occasion as I have.” Belle’s early objections to her husband’s political career were not based merely on her own discomfort with public speaking. When Bob proposed to run for Congress, Belle’s “instinctive love of home and the dread of change led me, in a mild way, to take the negative side of the argument.” Her husband, she noted, “was on the road to success in his profession; Madison offered every advantage of a permanent home for ourselves and the children we wanted. Why sacrifice such a prospect for the uncertainty of a public career with its inevitable change in our mode of living? I was not insistent; I recognized his unusual gifts and wanted him to follow his bent. It was not long before I was happy and content in the thought of his going to Congress.”

BCL and FL, La Follette, 2:1143.

BCL to ML, March 26, 1917, A-20; BCL to RML, July 20, 1914, FT; A-13, LFC; BCL and FL, La Follette, 1:58.
mands of a large family of growing children have influenced him in this determination. However, when I suggest that he has sacrificed his personal ambitions to our comfort and happiness he tweaks my ear and makes me laugh." When Bob considered running for the governorship again in 1898 after his first unsuccessful attempt in 1896, he believed he must fight for "the interests of better methods and better government for Wisconsin or quietly retire from the field and attend to ‘private business.’" Claimed Bob, "The latter will be an alternative easy for me, as in so doing I will simply yield to the entreaties of Mrs. La Follette." Yet ultimately Belle chose not to insist that her husband forsake his political ambitions, a decision that reveals her sense of responsibility to support his efforts to improve society.

BELLE claimed in 1916 that the six years in the governor’s residence had been "the most taxing from a woman’s standpoint," citing personal threats against the family and "the continuous and merciless fire of newspaper criticism." During Bob's many years in federal service she so disliked the constant shuttling between Washington and Wisconsin that she and the children occasionally remained in Madison when Congress was in session. During one such separation Bob urged her to rest up in order to meet the demands of life in Washington in the coming year. She replied that it was not the social obligations she dreaded, but "the intense interest in you [which] seems too much for me at times." Yet, despite her denial, Belle did indeed dread the many social obligations her husband's position forced upon her. Her 1911 article, "What it Means to be an Insurgent...

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55 BCL, circa 1911, BLP, D-38, LFC; RML to A.R. Hall, November 6, 1897, 9:324, RLP, SHSWL.
Senator’s Wife,” details her dislike of having to participate in the public officials’ wives’ fixed social program of making and receiving calls, often as many as thirty or more, in a single day. Although she found some of these calls valuable, she abhorred many because of the snobbery of the hostess who received most of her guests with “a distant nod that made the magnificent house seem chilly and the outdoor sunshine welcome.” To the query, “What do Washington women talk about?” she answered, “Altogether too much about the weather. Women in official life come from all parts of the country, have widely varied experience as well as much in common. They are intelligent, and have insight. They might discuss current events, politics, religion, education, philosophy. But there is nothing of the French salon or English drawing-room in the social life of Washington... An exceeding graciousness and desire to please pervades every function, like having all the meals only for entertainment. Women in official circles are scarcely less interested in politics than men, the majority talk politics intelligently in the home, but it is characteristic of their social life to avoid discussion of public questions, where there is a difference of opinion, as they would a fire brand.” Two years later she concluded more pointedly that such absence of purpose “reacts unfavorably on the country.” “How,” she queried, “can we continue to justify the expenditure of such an enormous amount of effort and money in formal visiting?” She pled for “an official social center” to serve as “a clearing house for official calls and receptions.” Perhaps this disdain for the rapid social routines that stifled women’s intelligence and creativity is the best indicator of Belle’s rejection of the cardinal women’s virtues (piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity) of the nineteenth century for the more politically attuned and outward-looking expanded roles for women in the twentieth century. “We are
not supposed to belong to the butterfly and parasitic class,” she reminded her sisters in Washington’s official life, for “we should represent the earnest, intelligent womanhood of the nation.”

In her speech, “Our Story,” Belle La Follette concluded: “Washington life is an unsettled existence. When we are there we think about home. And when home, we think we must soon be going to Washington. . . . If she [the wife of a politician] sets her heart on some ambition,—his political success or her special supremacy, she is building on uncertainties. More than any other life, politics is full of the unexpected.—now success, now disappointment. It is a life of strain with few breathing places. One cannot tell and must always be prepared for what comes. And one must have an inner calm if she would be the mate of a political fighter and reformer.”

Belle’s “inner calm” deserted her when she contemplated the family’s finances. Throughout Bob’s lifetime, his family never lacked the essentials, and enjoyed many comforts, but never lived in a mortgage-free home or experienced life without debt. The family papers are ripe with notes from various bill collectors dunning them for payments past due, and pleas from Bob to various friends and supporters for money. Even though Bob’s income was at times quite substantial from official earnings supplemented by profits from writing and lecturing, according to Belle, “If funds were lacking when he thought it important to send out some political literature, he would pay for it out of his own pocket. If he hadn’t the money, he borrowed, and debt accumulated.” By remaining in a perpetual state of debt, Bob demonstrated to the world that he desired not material gain, but greater and more lasting rewards. His “poverty,” in many ways voluntary, was “proof” of his uncorrupted state. Therefore, when Bob was criticized in the press for earning money on the speaker’s platform to the neglect of official duties, his response was indignant: “We try to live economically but at that we have put by the chance to lay up anything for our children’s future. We understand each other at home; we have talked it all out and are agreed. I wish to leave something to the state more

37 BCL, speech, “Our Story,” February 5, 1911, BLP, D-41, LFC.
lasting than bronze or marble and a better legacy to my children than mere wealth.  

"Mere wealth" was certainly not Belle’s goal either, but the burden of their constant state of indebtedness usually weighed more heavily upon her than upon her husband. To his wife’s letters detailing her frustration over their constant debt, Bob responded with perpetual optimism and encouraged her to view their indebtedness as a temporary condition, to not waste energy worrying but to save her “precious self” for him and the rest of the family. He chose to withhold from her his own frequent concerns about their financial status, and left most of their personal bookkeeping up to her while making clear his own impatience with such matters.  

During roughly the first half of their forty-three years of marriage, depressed that the ideals she had espoused in her university days did not seem to be wholly successful on a practical level, Belle was more willing to berate herself for the family’s predicament: “I think I must manage [the finances] badly for I seem to be so driven all the while that there is no time to think and consider. I keep looking forward to a time when I can systematize and regulate things but the time does not arrive and I am convinced I must have fallen into bad habits….” Belle had been taught to abhor debt, and her concern over the grim state of the family’s finances haunted her throughout her married life. Bob never understood, Belle confided to their son, that the uncertainty of the extent of their indebtedness was more of a strain on her than the actual knowledge. Belle noted matter-of-factly in public: “We have always been under financial pressure, and I expect we always shall be….” Privately, she was less calmly resigned to this eternal strife.  

The condition of the La Follettes’ finances deemed “temporary” by Bob did in fact remain constant throughout Bob’s entire life. Son Phil painted a dark picture of the family’s finances during his father’s later years: “From September, 1919, to June, 1920, I ran the family checkbook….” Deficits were especially high at times, and it would show up in the family car’s standing in the garage for want of a spare tire—or in Dad’s wondering if the help might be fltering a bit from the larder. I felt the painful frustration of stretching Dad’s salary further than it would go….” This experience, on top of all that had gone before, gave me a horror of debt that stayed with me.” As late as 1921 during hot weather that son Bobbie said, “fries the juice right out of one even if he sits under a fan.” Belle spent sev-
eral discouraging weeks searching for a house to rent in Washington. For political and financial reasons, the La Follettes had never purchased a home there, and a rent increase had made their present dwelling unaffordable. It took Bob's death in 1925 to put an end to the constant drain on the family's finances. Some of the land adjoining their house in Maple Bluff was sold and the mortgage on the La Follettes' Wisconsin home finally paid. Only then was Belle able to experience the financial freedom that had so long eluded her.41

At times during the first half of their marriage, Belle seems to have wholly internalized the prescribed sphere of "true womanhood": "Whenever I get discouraged I always think there is nothing I would rather be than your wife and the mother of your children and I have no ambition except to contribute to your happiness and theirs and to your success and theirs." Such internalization brought anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. "[S]ometimes I feel I am not well adapted to home making and the constant efforts to hold myself and keep my balance in the midst of so many distractions wears me out." Belle's commitment to attaining an ideal had captured Bob's undivided attention during their university years, and that same quality kept it riveted to her throughout his life. Bob depended enormously on Belle's seriousness, her clear-sightedness, and most of all her idealism: "You give me such courage dear one for my work—Your letters are a great source of comfort and inspiration to me—You do not realize how deeply philosophical—how noble, lofty, and far seeing they are. I preserve them all as precious. They, like yourself, are a part of me." Belle's approval was vital to Bob. During their engagement he wrote that "[truth] must be my rule in all my work & will give me the approval of my conscience & my little girl [Belle]."42

Belle's high standards made her approval all the more desirable during Bob's periods of relatively good health, but during his many illnesses, she responded maternally and generously. She wrote to a friend that it was "true Bob undertakes more work than he should. He sees the end and not the difficulties and obstacles. But it is his faith and persistence that have sustained him through his long struggle. He has to live and act according to his light." Accordingly, Belle viewed herself as a guardian of her husband. Rather than insist he be responsible for his own habits and their negative effects, she claimed, "I had to be the ogre and insist on his getting sleep. His habit of talking too

41 PFL, Adventures, 63; BCL and FL, La Follette, 2:1033. See also BCL to family, April 5, 1920, A-28; PFL to BCL, April 19, 1919, FP, A-26, LFC.

42 BCL to RML, August 16, 1905, A-3; RML to BCL, February 2, 1907, FP, A-6; RML, diary, November 29, 1879, RLP, B-1, LFC.
long grew out of his own desire to cover the ground thoroughly and the insistence of his audiences that he go on. When I thought it was getting late, I would signal him to stop. He would sometimes give me away: "There's my wife shaking her head and looking daggers at me. She thinks I'm talking too long." The crowd would laugh and urge him to go ahead." Belle bought Bob a watch that chimed on the hour designated by her as a sensible stopping place. Greatly concerned about her husband's notorious habit for overwork, she often tried to persuade him not to push himself too hard. Bob once ended a rather long letter with: "Belle says to quit for tonight or she will claw me. I quit—." Belle utilized subtler means as well, such as pointing out that Bob could accomplish very little from a sickbed. Throughout their marriage Bob often took on the persona of an irresponsible, sometimes naughty child, with Belle playing the frustrated but loving mother. In keeping with this relationship, Bob often addressed Belle as "Mama," in his letters, and on at least one occasion closed with "I am always your boy."\(^3\)

A TACIT acceptance of constant debt, internalized feelings of anxiety and guilt over household finances, an acceptance of the role of monitor, and ultimately the role of "Mama" for her husband: all are reflections of attitudes and beliefs that existed as

\(^3\) BCL to Elizabeth G. Evans, September 24, 1914, FP, A-14, LFC, BCL and FL, La Follette, 1:72; RML to Sam Harper, January 1, 1908, 1:262, RLP, SHSWH; RML to BCL, August 7, 1903, A-2; and September 30, 1897, FP, A-1, LFC. See also BCL to Robert La Follette, Jr. (JR), June 16, 1919, FP, A-24, LFC.
the norm for many nineteenth-century women. But a major shift in the way she perceived both herself and her husband occurred within Belle La Follette. It happened slowly and gradually, yet was nonetheless profound. As Belle entered her middle years and the strict gendered spheres that created her nineteenth-century perceptions of the ideal woman began to expand and transform, she relieved herself of certain responsibilities. She no longer saw her husband’s various frustrating behaviors as indicators of her own failures, but as qualities of his personality that she was entirely unable to change, no matter how sincere and well-intentioned her efforts. Without this burden of guilt, she did not wholly abandon her personal ideals, but was free to focus on creating coping mechanisms with which to deal best with her husband’s more maddening behaviors. As Belle’s love for Bob matured, being his wife involved increasing acceptance of his faults as well as his admirable qualities, and an intensification of her own efforts to carry out desired social reforms in addition to supporting his.

The reasons for Belle’s advocacy of women’s suffrage are certainly in keeping with the strains she endured as Bob’s wife. Her early arguments, which claimed the right to vote as merely the extension of woman’s prescribed sphere, slowly evolved into a defense of woman’s natural rights as an equal to man. Belle gradually ceased blaming herself for poor management and placed more responsibility on her husband for his willingness to incur debt. The woman who, in 1905, claimed no ambition but to contribute to the happiness and success of her husband and children was, six years later, advocating women’s full participation in society, urging them to free themselves from their parasitic dependence on their husbands, develop their talents, and be of service to humanity. A bright woman forced to lead a lifestyle different from that which she truly desired, her work on behalf of women may be seen as a way of

protesting being so dominated by her husband’s needs; of expressing her rebellion against the unfairness of being thrust against her will into public life; of being continually in debt, and having to suffer with her husband the controversy and criticism which often only he had evoked.

The expression of suffragist views allowed Belle a forum to protest her subserviency to her demanding husband without incurring his wrath but instead generating praise and approval. And yet, when she addressed the Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage on April 26, 1913, Belle’s message was temperate. Her emphasis was that equal suffrage “will make better homes,” for “home, society [and] government are best when men and women keep together intellectually and spiritually.” Woman suffrage was “a simple matter of common sense” which would not
"bring about any great immediate changes," because, she explained, "it has always seemed to me natural that men and women of the same family should hold somewhat similar political views, much as fathers and sons and brothers do now." 44

To Bob's great chagrin, Belle steadfastly refused to campaign for him directly. "She thinks she won't talk for me," Bob confided to a reporter during the 1912 campaign, "but I think she will. Why there isn't a man in the country whom I'd rather have making campaign speeches for me than my wife. There is no one in the world better fitted to be in politics than a brainy and conscientious woman and there isn't a brainier woman in the country than my wife, and she can make a fine speech." Belle's refusal remained firm, however, until 1924, when she campaigned actively in her husband's presidential race. 45

For all Belle's dislike of public life with its chaos and uncertainty; her frequent urgings that her husband not work so hard; and her criticisms of his strategies and policies, she labored tirelessly on his behalf. According to their daughter, Fola, "[Belle] prepared briefs for his law firm and followed his legal and legislative work with professional understanding. While he was a member of the House of [R]epresentatives she attended the important debates and traveled with him on his speaking campaigns." Belle spent a great deal of time performing such routine, time-consuming chores as addressing and stuffing envelopes; personally responding to constituents' mail; and tracking down late shipments of campaign posters, pamphlets, and the like. Her work with the mailing lists made her familiar with names and addresses


45 The Los Angeles Evening Herald, April 26, 1912 (3 in Meyer Lissner Papers, 40–717, Stanford Library Special Collection).
of constituents, enabling her, she said, "when I accompanied Mr. La Follette on his campaigns through his congressional district to sometimes jog even his excellent memory with a hint as to 'who was who.'" During the congressional years, and during his three terms as governor, there were few important conferences in which she did not participate—probably none that he did not share with her. When he went to Washington as senator, she continued to participate in the more intimate conferences and shared every important aspect of his work, including the editing of a department in La Follette's Magazine. In 1907, Bob paid tribute to her continuing efficiency and capability. He reported, "When I met [muckraking journalist] Ida Tarbell the other day I told her I was not half so much in awe of her as I expected to be in meeting next to the ablest woman in America—due to the fact I believed that Mrs. La Follette [is] the ablest individual in the land [and she has] been my wife for a quarter of a century." 

Belle endured many conflicts between her desire for simplicity and security for herself and her family, and her longing for positive political change. She wrote to their older son when Bob achieved an important political goal, "It makes this life seem worth all the strain if something like this goes through that is a real service to humanity." Whatever her personal suffering, Belle, a determined, intelligent woman, was a wife—ideally suited for Bob in many ways: she was, when they were in agreement, loving and supporting, but also relentlessly challenging and demanding. In many respects during their early years, she provided for an even stronger incentive to attain "moral perfection" that had his mentor, University of Wisconsin President John Bascom, for Belle admitted openly, "I want you to be perfect in all things," and claimed, "No one can know as I know how truly great your character." While she later came to accept certain of her husband's character flaws, she never lowered her standards as to his public role. In her "wisely anxiety that he should attain a standard of perfection," she conceded, "sometimes I was so eager to point out where he might do better that I forgot to express my appreciation of how well he had done." She maintained, "If he were doing one thing I thought wrong, and the world were praising him, I could not endure it; but so long as I believe he is right, and all the world is maligning him, I am proud." It was perhaps that quality more than any single other that drew Bob to Belle. During their many separations, despite the strength he drew from her letters, he often expressed his longings for her. Bob wrote, "She grows more wonderful to me as time passes . . . . She knows what's best and just about when it's best." 

For Bob La Follette, Belle Case, with her political ideals, her refusal to compromise on moral issues, and her belief in public service and duty, served as a measuring stick by which he could gauge his own achievements and worth. She was, according to a close family friend, the journalist Ray Stannard Baker, "as near an alter ego as any person could be." Following Bob La Follette's death in 1925, his widow was urged to pursue his Senate seat. Belle favored women sharing the responsibilities of high office and was deeply mindful that her virtually assured election might pave the way to the Senate for other women. Nevertheless, she stated in no uncertain terms, "At no time in my life would I ever have chosen a public career for myself. It would be against [my] nature for me to undertake the responsibilities of political leadership." At the age of sixty-six, Belle Case La Follette knew herself well. The finely honed
social conscience and sense of "womanly" duty was no match for her discomfort in the public eye and "womanly" longing to work for the betterment of society comfortably behind the scenes, within the safety and security of home.

Belle Case La Follette’s life choices were the results of a unique blend of personal and political forces. An assessment of her character far more penetrating than Baker’s was offered at her funeral by another journalist and family friend, Lincoln Steffens, who better understood the social, political and personal cross currents perpetually buffeting this complex woman. Calling her “historically and romantically the woman triumphant,” he paid tribute to this “great woman, this Belle La Follette, great as great men are great. She too was a statesman, politician: she could act but she was content to beget action and actors. She played, herself, the woman’s part; she sat in the gallery in the congress or at home with the children and the advisors. She could but she did not often make the speeches or do the deeds.” Steffens assessed Belle’s life from the time when “a pretty young girl with a gypsy spirit...found her man”: “She wanted to fly. She inspired flight and she bore fliers, but she herself—Belle La Follette—walked all her life on the ground to keep the course for her fliers. That was her woman’s victory; that was a woman’s tragedy, too.”