

# The Fighting Founder

*Robert LaFollette took on the rich and powerful*

BY BILL LUEDERS

It was 1922, and Wisconsin Senator Robert M. LaFollette was speaking for the first time in four years before an audience in Madison, Wisconsin. Friends had counseled him beforehand that his opposition to World War I—for which he was widely branded a traitor and almost expelled from the Senate—was a topic he would do well to avoid. But suddenly, in mid-speech, LaFollette thrust his clenched fist into the air and thundered, “I do not want the vote of a single citizen who is under any misapprehension of where I stand. I would not change my record on the war for that of any man, living or dead.”

The audience gasped in amazement, then broke into deafening applause. A long-time political enemy was moved to tears. “I hate the son of a bitch,” he said, “but, my God, what guts he’s got.”

Above all else, Fighting Bob LaFollette was known for his courage. Throughout his long career of public service—as district attorney, member of Congress, governor, senator, and leader of the Progressive movement—LaFollette left no doubt that he would rather imperil his political future than compromise his integrity. There was nothing LaFollette held dearer than his reputation as a man who could not be bought and would never give in. Principled obstinance was at the core of his being.

LaFollette stood squarely in opposition to the powerful men and institutions of his time. He was a populist: His allegiance was to the interest of the majority, and beyond that, to the ideal of fairness and equal opportunity. Appalled at the domination of the democratic process by special interests, he struggled to make government responsive to the rights and needs of those it was pledged to serve. He hoped, he often said, to usher in a day when “the will of the people shall be the law of the land.”

In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, the will of the people was a far cry from the law of the land. Industrialization dramatically widened the gap between rich and poor and fostered corruption in the political system. In response to these developments, a grass-roots movement known as Progressivism was born, and LaFollette soon emerged as its most prominent and respected leader. As Republican governor of Wisconsin from



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1901 to 1906, LaFollette secured a host of progressive legislation, including an anti-lobbying law, a corrupt practices act, and a law restricting campaign expenditures. He set up regulatory commissions for railroads, banks, and public utilities. He enacted industrial safety laws, child and woman labor laws, and the first workman’s compensation act in the nation.

The success of the so-called Wisconsin Idea provided a model for insurgent movements elsewhere and propelled LaFollette into the national political arena. As a member of what he called the “dear old rotten Senate” for almost twenty years, LaFollette was that body’s foremost voice of progressive reform. His opposition to the war stemmed from his observation that corporate interests were the chief advocates and primary beneficiaries of armed conflict. LaFollette made two bids for the Presidency: in 1912 as a Republican (losing the nomination to the incumbent, William Taft), and in 1924 as the leader of the Progressive Party (he received 16.5 per cent of the vote).

Lacking the monetary might of the organized special interests and corrupt party

bosses, the Progressives relied on a human resource: education. The muckraking journalists who flourished in the early 1900s greatly aided the Progressive cause with their accounts of corporate and governmental malfeasance, prompting widespread calls for reform. And LaFollette, a captivating lecturer, would read the “roll call” of legislators’ voting records to their constituents, urging the defeat of those who had “wronged the public.”

LaFollette denounced the corporate-owned newspapers of his day as the handiwork of “hired men who no longer express sincere and honest conviction, who write what they are told, and whose judgments are salaried.” He had high regard, however, for the various independent muckraking journals that “strode like a young giant into the arena of public service.” It was in this spirit that LaFollette founded his own magazine, *LaFollette’s Weekly*, in 1909. Billed as “a publication that will not mince words or suppress facts, when public utterance demands plain talk,” *LaFollette’s* became the vanguard of the insurgent movement. LaFollette edited and wrote extensively for the magazine until his death in 1925. It was renamed *The Progressive* in 1928.

For most of his life, LaFollette drove himself to the limit, repeatedly injuring his health. It was not uncommon for him to put in eighteen-hour days. He set a Senate record for filibustering nineteen consecutive hours. On one lecture tour, he spoke on forty-eight consecutive days, averaging, he recalled, “eight and one-quarter hours a day on the platform.” On two occasions, he pushed himself to the point of nervous collapse. Still, he would not rest. “When the last night comes and I go to the Land of Never Return,” he wrote to his son Robert Jr. in 1919, “what an awful account of things undone I shall leave behind.”

For all his accomplishments, LaFollette’s reach always exceeded his grasp. He never broke the back of the power structure, or drove corporate special interests from influence. And yet, he infused a bold new spirit into American politics. LaFollette’s greatest contribution, perhaps, was that he stood up and fought.

As he said seventy-five years ago, “Democracy is a life, and involves continual struggle. It is only as those of every generation who love democracy resist with all their might the encroachments of its enemies that the ideals of representative government can ever be nearly approximated.” ■

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