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Young Bob's Last Stand

Although no one really expected it at the time, 1946 turned out to be a watershed year in the history of Wisconsin; that August, United States Senator Robert M. La Follette, Jr., lost his bid for re-nomination in the Republican primary election. The defeat of a long-standing incumbent (La Follette had served since 1925) in itself is not particularly newsworthy, but La Follette represented more than just 21 years of public service. His father, Robert M. La Follette, Sr., had served the state as congressional representative, governor, and United States Senator; had run for president in 1924; and had been the acknowledged leader of the insurgent progressive Republicans since the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt. His brother, Philip F. La Follette, had also served as governor, and all three had achieved a national prominence as leading liberal politicians. Young Bob himself was rumored for a time to be a possible successor to President Franklin Roosevelt in 1940. For Wisconsin, his defeat marked the end of an era that stretched back into the 1890s and the end of a political dynasty¹ that rivaled those of the Roosevelts or the Kennedys in national influence.

Accordingly, his defeat made headlines not just in state newspapers and magazines but in national ones as well, and when his successor, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy achieved national fame of a very different kind, historians also began to consider this singular event. The irony was really irresistible: voters had willingly exchanged a popular and well-respected legislator for a man whose name quickly became synonymous with malevolence and ruthlessness. The event also had

its pathos—*Life* magazine ran a full-page photograph of a somber La Follette, head bowed and brow furrowed, on election night standing next to a console radio as the election returns came in. The next morning, he sent McCarthy a one-word telegram conceding defeat: "Congratulations."² What had happened to make Wisconsin voters abandon the torchbearer of its progressive political traditions in exchange for a reactionary demagogue?

Historian Patrick J. Maney, in his political biography "*Young Bob "La Follette*", discusses the election in some detail and places the blame squarely on La Follette's own shoulders. He did not run an effective campaign while McCarthy ran a nearly perfect one. As the campaign began, McCarthy worked hard to overcome his reputation as a political lightweight. An Appleton native, he had been a captain in the Marines during World War Two and became a circuit court judge after his return to civilian life—he had no real political experience. He first gained the approval of the party chairman, Thomas E. Coleman, a conservative Republican who despised the La Follettes. After assuring the support of the party leadership, he traveled around the state to greet voters and make himself known. He actually had few issues and was essentially an "anti-La Follette" candidate, but he made himself highly visible and tried to capitalize on his wartime career with the insipid slogan "Yes Folks: Congress NEEDS A TAILGUNNER."³

La Follette, in contrast, remained in Washington until just eleven days before the election. Working on his bill to reorganize Congress, he relied on newspaper ads and weekly radio addresses to keep in contact with his constituents. His friends urged him to return to the state, but he canceled campaign trips to Milwaukee and Stevens Point. Even after the Senate had passed his

¹ La Follette's son Bronson served as Wisconsin's attorney general from 1965 to 1969 and 1975 to 1987; he ran unsuccessfully for governor as a Democrat in 1968. He has since returned to private law practice. The current secretary of state for Wisconsin, Douglas La Follette, also a Democrat, is a distant relative.

² "La Follette Nadir," *Newsweek* 28 (26 August 1946), 16.

reorganization bill on June 10, he remained at his desk working on the new price-control bill; when that was finally passed, the House of Representatives took up his reorganization bill, so he stayed to shepherd his long-developed plan through the lower house. La Follette certainly could have returned to Wisconsin, but as Maney notes, he simply did not want to and easily found excuses to keep him in Washington. Despite his lack of interest, his advisors were confident of victory.⁴ McCarthy even capitalized on La Follette's long absence by sarcastically referring to him as "the gentleman from Virginia."

La Follette finally returned to the state after President Truman signed the reorganization bill on August 2. He campaigned for only six days, depicting himself—ironically—as the moderate candidate between fellow Republican McCarthy and the Democratic candidate Howard J. McMurray, a popular political science professor at the University of Wisconsin. Despite the general confidence in his victory on election day, by the early morning hours it became clear that the close race would go down to the wire. Milwaukee county finally tipped the balance, delivering over 10,000 more votes for McCarthy. By the next morning, La Follette had lost 202,557 to 207,935. For the first time since 1906, there would not be a La Follette in the Senate.⁵

The post-mortem began immediately. The *Wisconsin State Journal*, a conservative and traditionally anti-La Follette morning paper blamed La Follette's defeat on his return to the Republican party. The La Follettes had been members of the Republican party since Fighting Bob first ran for office in 1882. Constantly fighting with the conservative party leadership on both a state and a national level, they had represented the progressive insurgent wing of the party. In Wisconsin—as in many Midwestern states—the Democrats were a weak minority party, and

³ Patrick J. Maney, *"Young Bob " La Follette: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette, Jr., 1895-1953* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 289-290.

⁴ Maney, 297.

victory in the Republican caucus or primary election virtually guaranteed election. In 1934, after Franklin Roosevelt had revitalized the Democratic party, Wisconsin progressives led by the La Follettes finally abandoned the GOP, and in 1934 and 1940, La Follette had run as the candidate of the Wisconsin Progressive party, formed mainly through the efforts of his brother Philip. La Follette had been uncertain about the Progressive party from the first—he actually discouraged his brother from running for governor in 1934 on the same ticket as he was running for the US Senate, fearing that the voters would balk at "too much La Follette." After the party's precipitous decline during the Second World War, the party met in convention in Portage and, following La Follette's recommendation, voted to return to the Republican party, the old home of La Follette and his followers.⁶ The *State Journal* also pointed to Milwaukee as the key to McCarthy's victory, noting that La Follette had not done as well there as he had done in 1940.⁷

The *Milwaukee Journal* reacted with a bit more surprise than other papers, calling La Follette's defeat "one of the most startling stories in the political history of Wisconsin." Desperate for an explanation, it adopted a sort of shotgun approach and blamed La Follette's defeat on a number of minor issues. His support for gubernatorial candidate and former Progressive Ralph M. Immel over Walter S. Goodland, the popular and conservative Republican, alienated many Republican voters as well as the party leadership. Many liberal voters, on the other hand, were further disturbed when arch-conservative Senator from Ohio Robert A. Taft wrote a letter endorsing La Follette. Moreover, La Follette's vote against the wartime Office of Price Administration price restrictions on dairy products and his opposition to Franklin Roosevelt's

⁵ Maney, 299.

⁶ Maney, 288.

⁷ "McCarthy, Goodland Nominated," 14 August 1946. Perhaps as a final slap at La Follette, the *State Journal* does not even mention him in the headline.

renomination in 1944 made it appear that he was taking a decided turn to the right.⁸ In this sense, La Follette had alienated conservative members of the Republican party by his independent stance as well as liberals dismayed by his dismantling of the Progressive party and return to the GOP.

Newsweek, traditionally sympathetic to La Follette, mourned his defeat but also explained it as the result of the decline of the once-powerful La Follette political machine and his return to the GOP: the state Republican leadership backed the loyal McCarthy over the more independent La Follette, and much of the rank-and-file membership of the former Progressive voted in the Democratic primary instead.⁹ The *Nation*, another long-time La Follette supporter—it had endorsed his father for president in 1924—was much harsher in its criticism, claiming that La Follette should have run as a Democrat, the party to which most members of the Progressive party had moved after it folded in March. Instead, he joined the Republican party, "which he fantastically expected to control through the adulterated magic of the La Follette name."¹⁰ While there is some truth in this, clearly not all of La Follette's supporters had fled to the Democrats, since even though the move to the conservative-dominated Republican party hurt La Follette's chances, he still possessed enough popularity to make it a close race.

Closer to home, Morris H. Rubin, editor of the Madison-based *Progressive*, a magazine founded by Robert M. La Follette, Sr., in 1909 and still owned by the family, took a very different view of La Follette's defeat. He also pointed out McCarthy's support from the Republican leadership, as well as La Follette's failure to return home until just over a week before the election. The main reason, Rubin argued, was the lack of support La Follette received from organized labor, who "buried their knife in the back of one of the best friends they have ever

⁸ "La Follette Defeated; Goodland is Winner," 14 August 1946.

⁹ "La Follette Nadir," *Newsweek* 28 (26 August 1946), 17.

had."¹¹ This assertion was not just the disappointed rant of a die-hard La Follette supporter. Voter turnout in the industrial counties of the Michigan lakeshore—Milwaukee, Kenosha, and Racine—was usually low, and even though La Follette had carried all three in 1940, he came in second in Milwaukee and Racine and third in Kenosha. Maney argues that most of the working class voters who had supported La Follette in the past voted instead in the Democratic primary allowing McCarthy to win the Republican nomination.¹²

The recurring theme is that La Follette himself seriously jeopardized his chances for reelection first by disbanding the Progressive party, which would have guaranteed him a nomination and thereby a place in a three-way race in the November general election. This had been the case in 1940, and La Follette had easily beaten both his Democratic and Republican opponents. Moving back into the Republican party split the progressives, and a larger share of them, particularly in the critical lakeshore counties voted in the Democratic primary and thus robbed La Follette of his past support. Second, La Follette further hurt his chances by not running a serious campaign. By remaining in Washington and campaigning for less than a week, he allowed McCarthy to dominate the debate and the conservative leadership to control the party campaign machinery. The halcyon days of Wisconsin progressivism were long past, and times had changed: the La Follette name alone no longer assured victory, and the former La Follette political machine (with neither Bob who stayed in Washington nor Phillip who joined the army) could compete with the regular Republicans. Young Bob simply did not have his father's personality or political skill to successfully play the role of the insurgent. If anyone is to blame for La Follette's defeat, it is La Follette himself.

¹⁰ "La Follette's Folly," *The Nation* 163 (24 August 1946), 200.

¹¹ Morris H. Rubin, "The First Column," *The Progressive*, 26 August 1946, 1.

Young Bob had never tasted political defeat before, and despite his reluctance to run, he truly enjoyed life in the Senate, and the defeat came as a blow. He never returned to public life and in fact became something of a recluse, staying away from Capitol Hill and avoiding job offers from the Truman administration. La Follette remained in Washington until 1953 when he committed suicide in his home, adding a final touch of tragedy to his once illustrious career.

¹² Maney, 300.

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