

An Arsenal of Progressivism: How Familial Bonds Built and Broke the La Follette Dynasty of Wisconsin (1924-1953)



*Source: Wisconsin State Historical Society, Family Portrait in Executive Residence, around 1906.*

While writhing in the jaws of defeat during the presidential election of 1924, Robert La Follette declared, “I want to die, as I have lived, with my boots on.”<sup>1</sup> These words are some of the last uttered by “Fighting Bob,” who had battled valiantly as both the governor and U.S. Senator from Wisconsin throughout his long and illustrious career. This sort of fiery rhetoric brought La Follette political success as he fought for women’s suffrage, the power of labor unions, and the end of inhumane child labor. These words inspired the next generation of La Follettes to continue the fight when the family founded the Progressive Movement after he passed away on June 18, 1925.

A week after his death, thousands of mourners, both rich and poor, gathered on what was a pleasant morning in Madison, Wisconsin for La Follette’s funeral.<sup>2</sup> The city’s often-sleepy streets were at their liveliest. The roads were cleared for the procession, police were stationed to

<sup>1</sup> Philip La Follette, *Adventure in Politics*, ed. Donald Young (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 89.

<sup>2</sup> The Chicago Tribune, *Fighting Bob, On His Shield, Home At Last*, June 21st, 1925.

hold Madisonians from running after the carriage with the coffin, and a cortege of black cars carrying colleagues from Washington, DC such as Senator Bronson Cutting and Theodore Roosevelt. Most importantly, the entire La Follette family was together for the first time in years, waiting at Forest Hill Cemetery to receive their patriarch's coffin.<sup>3</sup> They were the only people there not wearing black, knowing that Bob Sr abhorred that "depressing color."<sup>4</sup>



*Source: Wisconsin State Historical Society, La Follettes and Madisonians lowering Robert Sr to his grave in Forest Hill Cemetery, 1925.*

While the La Follettes were bereaved as a family, each had an immediate duty to fulfill as members of a political dynasty. Belle Case La Follette, the wife and matriarch, was tasked to oversee the entire event. The two sons, Bob Jr and Phil, addressed Wisconsinites on the future of their father's legacy. Fola and Mary had to act the role of sad but stoic daughters.<sup>5</sup> But an even more pressing issue remained. For there was no clear heir apparent to Robert La Follette, Sr. as leader of the progressive movement. Even on the day he died, the La Follette family was unsure

<sup>3</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, Robert M. La Follette Sr., Funeral, 32416, Viewed online at: <https://preview.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM32416>

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Freeman, Sherry La Follette, George Zabriskie, *Belle: The Biography of Belle Case La Follette*, (New York: Beaufort Books, 1986), 227.

<sup>5</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society, *La Follette Casket Flag*, Viewed online at: [wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS2793](https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS2793)

of how to proceed.<sup>6</sup> Most immediately, the titan of progressive politics had left his Senate seat vacant, with three years left in his term.

There were three possible candidates to replace him: Belle Case, Bob Jr, and Phil. Despite Phil's ambition to inherit his father's power, he was two years too young to run. Between the remaining candidates, the matriarch and her eldest son, there was more support for the feminist Belle Case. If she ran at the end of the current term, she would surely win the election. However, if she rejected the nomination and supported her eldest son Bob Jr, he was likely to sweep the state as well. After arduous deliberation, Belle, at the age of sixty-six, decided to stay away from politics in favor of Bob Jr, who was only turning thirty that year.<sup>7</sup> She could have been the first female elected to the Senate in U.S. history, which could have been a major achievement for this lifelong feminist. As it turned out, Wisconsin would not have a female senator for another seventy two years.<sup>8</sup>

Even as messages from progressives flooded in, begging her to change course, Belle Case would not budge. She knew she would die soon and that putting Bob Jr in the senate seat was the best way to keep her family in power. She rejected her party's wishes and sacrificed the women's movement she had led to ensure the future of her family's dynasty and the La Follette Progressive Party.<sup>9</sup> Family power had apparently trumped her feminist principles.

Through Belle's decision to relinquish the Senate seat to her son instead of becoming a pioneer for women in politics, it becomes clear that the strong familial bonds between the La

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Belle Case La Follette to Robert La Follette Jr, July 2, 1925, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers, Box BC2, Folder 43.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Maney, *Young Bob: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette Jr.* (Madison, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2002)

<sup>8</sup> *Belle*, 225.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Belle Case La Follette to Phil La Follette, August 9, 1925, Library of Congress, Belle Case La Follette Papers, Box D17, Folder 47.

Follettes dominated how they managed their political enterprise. Despite the palpable connection between the La Follettes' familial bonds and their political careers, historians and political scientists have, for decades, separated the family's public and personal spheres. Both fields suffer from the separation, as neither is able to fully explain how the political dynasty operated and how it advanced their Progressive agenda in the early 1900s. By extension, this reductive method of study complicates the ability of historians' to investigate parallels between the La Follettes and other political families in 20th century America such as the Long, Brown, Kennedy, and Howe dynasties in other regions.

In general, there are two types of historiography when studying the nature of political dynasties: the personal biographical works, and the political analyses of their public careers. Both fail to connect the private and public lives of the La Follettes or analyze the effect of the family dynamics on the rise and decline of their Progressive Party. This separation is problematic because the La Follette enterprise depended upon the strength of their family bonds, and the La Follette familial relationships were often molded by their political successes. These two spheres were so intertwined that they formed a veritable Gordian Knot. Most commonly, there are narrow biographies that focus largely if not solely on the family life of the La Follettes.<sup>10</sup> Such sources plunge deep into the sibling rivalries and methods that the older La Follette generation used to train their children to carry on their legacy. But they always stop short of making an argument about how these familial relationships affected public policy. Other notable biographical sources do try to connect the family's personal lives to the public sphere, but are only based on one

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<sup>10</sup> (Unger, 1995; Weisberger, 1994)

member of the family, usually focusing on either Bob Jr or Phil La Follette. In all of these many accounts, there is not a full analysis of the entire La Follette family as a political dynasty.<sup>11</sup>

The second sort of narratives only speak of the public life of the La Follettes. For instance, James Auerbach's monograph and similar sources typically attribute most of the dynasty's collapse to external politics while ignoring how the La Follette familial dynamics affected their decline. While several authors have written about the personal and public lives of the La Follettes, none craft an argument about how these spheres interact. As this essay will argue, there is no way to effectively separate the political enterprise from the family if one wants to understand why the Progressive Party collapsed and the La Follette family's political leadership ultimately failed. For a fuller understanding of how the La Follettes' interpersonal relationships affected their public careers, this essay will employ the three-generation family business model rather than treating the family as a unique phenomenon like most of these biographical works. At the risk of simplification, political dynasties are simply family businesses. Rather than selling a product, they market their personalities and ideas to gain power and influence. These dynasties also follow the same line of succession that American family businesses do.<sup>12</sup> In this illuminating model, the family business is often founded by a larger-than-life patriarch much like Bob Sr. This founder then grows older and passes the enterprise to the next generation, when competitive siblings similar to Bob Jr and Phil vie for their parents' legacy. These rivalries between siblings can sometimes lead to division and lack of communication, weakening the family business until the third generation takes over, now a

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick Maney, *Young Bob: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette Jr.* (Madison, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Alfred W McCoy, *Beer of Broadway Fame: The Piel Family and Their Brooklyn Brewery*, (Albany, SUNY Press, 2016).

network of distant cousins who have much weaker family bonds. The La Follettes can best be analyzed through this model to blend their personal lives and political careers.

Once one understands the familial business structure of the La Follette political dynasty, it becomes clear that both their meteoric rise and sharp decline were shaped by familial bonds. When they were unified, the La Follettes established a stronghold in Wisconsin with the governorship, extended their reach to national politics by winning a U.S Senate seat, and managed their Progressive Party as though it were an extension of their family.<sup>13</sup> But the reliance on family labor made the dynasty inherently vulnerable and fragile. As the relationships began to fray, the dynastic political enterprise began to suffer as well. This breakdown left Wisconsin politics open to a challenge by other parties, notably by radical Republicans led by Joe McCarthy, the man who began the Red Scare against alleged Communists.<sup>14</sup> Just as the strong daily bonds defined the ascendancy of the La Follette dynasty, so too did the breakdown of these same bonds lead to their downfall.

This thesis will focus on the second generation of the La Follettes, who oversaw both the zenith and nadir of the family's power. The La Follette dynasty lasted for a century, and so I will highlight the most important turning points that represent their unity and rupture, pausing to explain how this trench also affected their Progressive Party. Bob Jr and Phil are the two most important actors of this work, as it is their alliance and eventual rupture that shaped the trajectory of the La Follette political enterprise. However, the eldest sister Fola and the youngest sibling Mary will also make appearances throughout the story as well. While not as politically prominent

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald L. Feinman, *Philip La Follette: The Second Son*. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Larry Tye, *Joe McCarthy's first victim: How the Senator brought down a La Follette*, Viewed online at: [https://madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article\\_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html](https://madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html)

as their brothers, both sisters impacted the dynasty in important ways.<sup>15</sup> Through examining major points of fracture throughout the second generation of the La Follette enterprise, we will come to realize that just like a family business, the interpersonal relationships between each member of the clan define its political strength. Following the same three-generation model, this dynastic quality culminated in a corrosive sibling rivalry that tore the family apart and doomed the dynasty to defeat.

Although overshadowed by their father who was undeniably a political Titan in his time, the family's second generation's decline has undertones of tragedies since they arguably achieved political influence comparable to that of Robert LaFollette, Sr. Their father was, of course, a household name and constituents hung his portrait above the mantle, just as the State of Wisconsin chose his image for the Hall of Statuary in the US Capitol just four years after his death.<sup>16</sup> While the patriarch was an unparalleled ideological leader who shifted American politics towards caring about the working class, it was the second generation that pushed his agenda forward through progressive legislation and led some of the most important investigations in congressional history. By creating a state program that became the model for the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps and drafting legislation for its National Labor Relations Board, the second generation LaFollettes transformed their father's rhetoric into political reality. Although the family's second generation had had more substantial, sustained political accomplishments than the first, their tragic downfall has tarnished their legacy and obscured their role in both state and national history.

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<sup>15</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> "La Follette, Robert Marion, Jr., 1895 - 1953." *Wisconsin Historical Society*, 8 Aug. 2017, Accessed on February 27, 2021. [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS9539](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS9539).

By studying both generations of the LaFollette family, particularly that overlooked second generation, historians will better understand not just how much American-electoral politics and public policy was once dominated by ambitious familial dynasties, but also how much personal relationships influenced these the political fortunes on these same dynasties. Indeed, this same three-generation approach that connects the private and public spheres could also be applied to analyze several other major political families of the twentieth century such as the Browns of California whose stronghold developed a modern environmentalist platform as early as the 1970s and the Longs of Louisiana whose radical populist and isolationist agenda governed their state for nearly a century.<sup>17</sup>

Section I: Childhood with Robert “Fighting Bob” Marion La Follette (1895-1924)



*Source: Wisconsin State Historical Society, Belle Case, Robert Sr, and Fola La Follette posing for La Follette’s Magazine’s Women’s Section, 1920.*

Before diving into the intricate but illuminating relationship between family bonds and political strength in American dynasties, we need to understand who the La Follettes were. Specifically, there were six La Follettes that we will focus upon in the first and second generations. Robert La Follette Sr was the undisputed leader of the family. Serving as both governor and U.S Senator, he revolutionized the Progressive movement.<sup>18</sup> By his side throughout

<sup>17</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 24.



these years was Belle Case La Follette, a hardworking and caring feminist who acted as the eyes and ears of the family. She always knew what everyone was up to at any given moment. Their first child was Fola who turned out to be an actress and suffragette activist. Her siblings referred to her as their “second mother.”<sup>19</sup> The eldest son was Robert Jr, the anxious but loyal son who stepped into his father’s Senate position when he was still only twenty-four years old. He could not have been more different than the bombastic and ambitious second son, Philip, who served as Wisconsin’s governor for three terms before being rejected as a right-wing radical by his Progressive constituents.<sup>20</sup> Finally, there was the youngest Mary, who never fully dove into politics due to the fear of appearing inferior to her siblings.<sup>21</sup> Within this family, there were moments of unity and rupture that would define their political careers.

The patriarch and matriarch of the dynasty: Robert La Follette Sr and Belle Case La Follette were the “larger than life” founders and main engines of the dynasty. Both were born in rural Wisconsin into extreme poverty with barely enough funds to finish high school. Crucially, Bob and Belle were accepted into the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where they first met. The couple was already making history even in their university days. Bob created the University Press and more notably won the esteemed Statewide Oratory Contest, returning to UW-Madison as a hero almost equal in stature to the football team winning the Rose Bowl.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Belle Case became the first female student law graduate from the UW Law School. Nothing it seemed could get in the way of budding politician Bob Sr and prominent feminist Belle Case when they married in 1881.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Philip La Follette: The Second Son*, 410.

<sup>21</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 123.

<sup>22</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 37.

But misfortune struck in Bob's first attempt at the governor's seat. In 1896, Bob ran as a Republican as he always did in regional races. He was popular among the people of Wisconsin and so he was confident of victory. But Bob Sr's first few campaigns before this one were direct elections. Therefore, it did not matter that he was popular with the people, only other state elected officials could vote. As a result, La Follette was astounded to find that he was betrayed by twenty other Republican delegates who had made a corrupt bargain to defend Edward Schofield, who was backed by the local Republican machine.<sup>24</sup> La Follette consequently lost the GOP nomination. This defeat was Bob Sr's first major encounter with the American political machines of the 19th and 20th century, and it would change his politics forever.

"Fighting Bob" finally found his first battleground, as he would become a steadfast, radical Progressive from this moment onward. The La Follette platform stood upon the ideals that all corruption should be purged from politics, that the general populace should vote in all of their elected officials directly, strengthening labor unions, universal suffrage, and fairer taxes for the poor, while raising tariff rates and fighting for neutrality in foreign wars.<sup>25</sup> Make no mistake, many of these pillars of the La Follette Progressive platform were considered radical. Statewide elections were still chosen by elected officials, women could not vote, and corporate titans such as the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts still ran the United States. Bob Sr placed himself in diametric opposition to every powerful establishment figure in America. At last, in 1898, La Follette received a great legislative victory by passing the direct election bill, and went on to win the general election for governor of Wisconsin in 1900.<sup>26</sup> During these decades of political struggle, Bob and Belle had four children: Fola in 1882, Bob Jr in 1895, Philip in 1897, and Mary in 1899.

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<sup>24</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1896.

<sup>25</sup> *Young Bob: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette Jr.*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 38.

While they were loving parents who allowed their children to speak their mind, they set high standards for their academic and political growth. The primary goal was to prepare each of them “so they will be ready to join the fight.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, when the La Follettes hosted European diplomats, prominent Progressive leaders, and even the Democratic opposition, the children participated in political conversations as early as eight years old.<sup>28</sup> Since Bob Sr was frequently in Washington DC rather than Madison, Belle Case took charge of the childrens’ education. She vigilantly checked report cards and met with teachers to ensure that her children were excelling.<sup>29</sup> These strict parental techniques taught the children to be politically aware, high-achieving citizens from an early age.

Their high expectations did not stop at school and politics, but also extended to writing proficiency. Daily letter-writing was the most vital parenting strategy that Bob and Belle used to foster a future dynasty. This practice also made the La Follettes and their legacy extremely accessible. Their letters fill the Library of Congress with personal and political information, allowing historians a glimpse into the machinations of the dynasty and the family. All of the children had to either dictate a letter to the family secretary, Nellie Dunn, or write a hand-written letter to their parents about their day.<sup>30</sup> After all of the children’s letters were received, Belle Case wrote a mass response to the entire family, almost like a tiny newsletter on how the family was holding up. This daily practice of constant communication between the La Follettes, while not specifically designed to maintain the dynasty, forced all of the members to know each other's affairs before the outside world did. While still in elementary school, for example, a young Bob

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<sup>27</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Sr to Fola La Follette, January 12, 1903, Library of Congress, La Follette Family Papers, Box A2, Folder 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Belle Case La Follette, May 6, 1900, Library of Congress, La Follette Family Papers, Box A2, Folder 5.

Jr would frequently ask for advice from eldest sister Fola about his schoolwork, friends, and even crushes. From childhood, the second generation of La Follettes were taught that family should be trusted over everyone else.<sup>31</sup> Their familial bonds already were extremely close from the beginning of the second generation, a promising start for the La Follette family enterprise.

While the family was unified at this time, high parental expectations caused the children to constantly, even obsessively, strive for parental approval. This need created a competitive atmosphere between the siblings and exacerbated mental health issues in some members of the La Follette second generation which would affect their roles in the later Progressive Party and helped shape them into the politicians and activists they would become.<sup>32</sup>

The emotional effects of Bob and Belle's strict, even smothering parental techniques were most apparent in Bob Jr, whom they turned into a loyal soldier of the La Follette dynasty and who was also overly-dependent on other family members. In early childhood, "Bobbie" was a perfectly happy boy who took a lot of his traits from his mother, as he was a bit more soft-spoken, gentle, and bookish than his father. But after years of relying on his mother for emotional, academic, and moral support, Bobbie developed a severe case of separation anxiety. In 1904, when Bob Jr was only nine, Belle Case abruptly left for Washington DC to assist Bob Sr in trying to pass a women's suffrage bill. While he was meant to be the "man of the house," Bobbie instead scrawled out heartbreaking letters every day in big letters about how he, "cried every night" for both of his parents to come home, and how his homesickness was, "much much worse than Phil or Mary's" which made him feel weak in comparison to his younger siblings.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Sr to Belle Case La Follette, January 12, 1906, Library of Congress, La Follette Family Papers, Box A5, Folder 4.

<sup>32</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 69.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Belle Case La Follette, April 3, 1905, Library of Congress, La Follette Family Papers, Box A5, Folder 7.

Bob Jr's separation anxiety was so debilitating that his grades plummeted and he fell into a terrible fever that left him bed-ridden for weeks.<sup>34</sup> His repeated pleas for parental support worked, as Belle Case returned to Madison within a year.

This fragile emotional and physical state plagued the whole of Bob Jr's early life. In UW-Madison, Bobbie's separation anxiety overwhelmed him once again, and Belle Case met regularly with her son's professors to ensure that he was not flunking. He longed for his parents' presence and developed another life-threatening bout of pneumonia. In response, Bob Sr decided to take Bobbie out of school in 1915 and make him his official secretary in the Senate. Bobbie loved it and thrived while working alongside his father.<sup>35</sup> While other historians may argue that Bob Jr would not have chosen politics as his career had his father not "forced" him into the field, it was clear that Bob Jr enjoyed politics and thought the work was more fulfilling than his schoolwork in UW-Madison. He no longer wrote about his lack of motivation in his letters, and even stopped drinking during his time in Washington DC.<sup>36</sup>

In sum, while it was beneficial for the members of a family political dynasty to be close, Bob Jr's childhood is a cautionary tale against overly present parents, as he had difficulty in functioning without them. This separation anxiety and poor health would define his role in the later Progressive Party. While he was clearly a skilled politician, Bob Jr was considered less passionate and therefore weaker than his father and younger brother.<sup>37</sup> This "softer" behavior would place him in direct contrast to Phil, the other potential political heir.

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from Philip Fox to Robert La Follette Jr, March 15, 1915, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C1, Folder 10.

<sup>35</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Phil La Follette, October 8, 1915, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C1, Folder 10.

<sup>37</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 6.

Phil certainly felt some of the same pressure Bob Jr did over his academic performance, but the younger brother thrived because he relied on hobbies outside of school and politics, never showing his anxieties outside of personal letters to his girlfriend, Isabel Bacon.<sup>38</sup> As a result, the younger brother carved a role for himself in the dynasty by denying parental expectations as he transformed into the outspoken political radical of the family who was willing to direct the La Follette dynasty by himself.

While he was quieter and more pensive in his private hours, in the public arena Phil could be just as thundering and energetic as his father. The La Follettes were never rich, but at age eight, Phil built up the courage to beg his parents for ponies. With the little bit of extra money she had saved up, Belle Case fulfilled that wish to Phil's elation. His horse racing performances were the talk of Madison and he was often featured in the local newspapers.<sup>39</sup> The ponies were also a way to relate to his younger sister, Mary. The two became best friends, so when they were without their parents, isolation did not affect them as much as it affected Bob Jr.<sup>40</sup> This ability to be resilient under pressure remained throughout his adult life. Within the dynasty, even if Phil did not hold the most political power in the family, he was the most outspoken of the second generation and the most politically extreme, to the point where he sometimes pushed the family's enterprise in his direction rather than attempting to compromise with the rest of the family.<sup>41</sup> Despite the strict expectations of his parents, Phil always found ways to pursue his own interests, and he would continue to charm both family and friends well into his teenage years.

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from Phil La Follette to Isabel La Follette, May 9, 1917, Wisconsin Historical Society, Phil La Follette Papers, Box 15, Folder 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> *Philip La Follette: The Second Son*, 412.

Phil was not the model student that Belle Case hoped for in high school, often attempting to hide his report cards from his mother. But he was already an amazing politician. In his own memoirs, Phil recounts a party the La Follettes hosted at the governor's Executive Residence where he spoke to Lady Barlow, a British dignitary, across the dinner table. She was impressed with his political know-how. When she asked about his age, he admitted, "seventeen" to which she responded, "My word, you *are* previous."<sup>42</sup> Before even going to college, Phil was making a name for himself as an experienced politician with all the added dramatism his father instilled in him as well.<sup>43</sup>

At UW-Madison he continued this pattern. Phil won several oratory contests just as his father had done, received a Bachelor's of Laws, and headed his father's old honor fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa. Through it all, Phil kept in touch with his family every day. Though independent, he clearly loved his siblings and parents, even if they did not write him back the next day, he would simply write to them again. The politicians of the day were quick to notice the likeness between Fighting Bob and his second son, and were excited that the legacy of Progressivism could be carried on to the second generation.<sup>44</sup> Throughout his political career, Phil desperately attempted to maintain this reputation as the next fighter for Progressive politics. He often spoke for the second generation of the La Follette dynasty, and was the first to direct his siblings to the next cause.

In almost every letter, both brothers could always bond over the adoration they shared for their older sister, the second mother of the family, Flora "Fola" La Follette, who always met and

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<sup>42</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Herman Ekern to Philip La Follette, September 19, 1917, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 16, Folder 4.

exceeded parental expectations. Fola was born thirteen years before Bob Jr, already in college by the time Bob Jr reached first grade. She was a spitting image of her mother with the charisma of her father. Independent, an exceptional student, and a penchant for acting, Fola was consistently a versatile player for the La Follette dynasty.<sup>45</sup> She advocated for voting rights in the La Follette Magazine when the women's section was added in 1914 and even attended labor strikes with her father on the campaign trail. Even with her impressive political career early in life, she never desired to inherit her father or mother's influence.<sup>46</sup> Instead, Fola was more passionate about theater. She wrote plays such as "How the Vote was Won" and, in 1911, married a New York playwright named George Middleton but kept her name. Fola was a bold and compassionate woman who made Bob and Belle proud as she wholeheartedly advocated for the Progressive La Follette beliefs while following her theatrical career.<sup>47</sup>

Within the dynasty, Fola was a constant source of empathy and advice for her younger siblings. In fact, some of the first letters any of the younger La Follettes wrote were to Fola while she was in New York. Bob Jr would ask about how to study in class, to act around his crush, and deal with drama in friendships in elementary school. Phil would always request that she come back to visit as soon as possible and Mary would ask about how to properly take care of their ponies. When Belle Case was in Washington DC, Fola attempted to make up for her absence, offering motherly advice and support. Though Fola eventually drifted away from political advocacy in the late 1930s, her supportive behavior remained into her advanced age.

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<sup>45</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 56.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Fola La Follette to Belle Case La Follette, February 10, 1921, Library of Congress, Belle Case La Follette Papers, Box D15, Folder 5.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Fola La Follette to Robert La Follette Sr, November 13, 1916, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers, Box B79, Folder 1.



Finally, the youngest sister Mary is the anomaly of the family. Crushed under the weight of Bob and Belle's strict expectations and feelings of inferiority around her older, outgoing siblings, she pulled away from politics despite multiple opportunities to join the La Follette political enterprise.<sup>48</sup> Since her three older siblings were succeeding and the dynasty's future was already bright, Mary thought Belle Case did not care as much about what she pursued. This disinterest was untrue. In almost every letter between the La Follettes, there are words of encouragement for Mary. They knew she could accomplish anything if she believed in her ability. Nonetheless, the youngest sibling was convinced that no one had any faith in her ability to succeed as her older siblings had. Consequently, Mary found her passion in art, far from the influence of the La Follette name. Her self-doubt, however, remained. Even though she was a talented artist and was accepted to art school, she ended up dropping out, assuming she would fail.<sup>49</sup> A few years later, Bob Sr offered her a position as his secretary. She declined, stating that she did not want to hold her father back. While Bob and Belle's high expectations pushed some of their children to greater heights, they also estranged themselves from one of their children.<sup>50</sup>

Aside from Mary's distance from politics, the La Follette family established itself as a cohesive unit throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. When guests came to the Executive Residence of Wisconsin, many were astounded when little Bob Jr would open the door for the ladies. And when the children debated intricate legislative matters with politicians at least thirty years their senior, many looked to Bob and Belle to reprimand them, but they were only greeted with prideful faces. According to Phil, their father held "his complete confidence. In

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<sup>48</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 79.

<sup>49</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 80.

politics and in public affairs he held no secrets from us.”<sup>51</sup> More than anything, the first generation desired their children to follow their dreams. That desire remained true especially when speaking truth to power even if it was considered disrespectful. While the family had its petty disputes periodically, the La Follettes were exceptionally close. This unity was apparent to everyone in American politics as well.

But this closeness was also when the dynasty had its first potential rupture. Both sons were poised to become the political heir to Robert La Follette. Bob Jr was the likely pick, as he was the secretary to his father, had more direct political experience, and, as the eldest son, carried the “Robert La Follette” name. Unfortunately though, he was notably weaker than Phil emotionally. This weakness was not only present in private, but Progressive leaders realized it as well. Both heirs received letters from Bob Sr’s political allies wishing them good fortune when it fell to them to inherit the mantle and lead the Progressive Party.<sup>52</sup> The brothers unwittingly found themselves as political rivals, both maneuvering for the position of being Fighting Bob’s political heir. But if they knew each other as rivals, they certainly did not show it. They traded letters everyday to talk about school, politics, girls they liked, and updates on the rest of the family.<sup>53</sup> In other words, their bond was close enough in their young adulthood that their political rivalry did not weaken the strength of their partnership, or damage the family’s political enterprise.

## Section II: A Perfect Storm (1916-1922)

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<sup>51</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Andrew Furuseth to Robert La Follette Jr, July 3, 1921, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C1, Folder 22.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Robert La Follette Jr, May 5, 1921, Library of Congress, Belle Case La Follette Papers, Box D15, Folder 3.



*Source: Library of Congress, Rollin Kirby comic on Robert La Follette Sr's "betrayal" towards the United States in World War I, 1917.*

All of this context brings us to a pivotal year: 1917. This crucial year taught the La Follettes just how important it was to only trust those within the family and to remain unified to triumph over a litany of personal and political problems. Within just a few years, Robert La Follette became the most hated man in America, Bob Jr would spend years on his deathbed due to illness, Phil left the country to join the military, and the family was on the verge of bankruptcy. The La Follettes were isolated in the face of these tribulations. The strength of their familial bonds were put to the ultimate test, as they had to save their political reputation, climb their way out of poverty, and ensure the health of their eldest son and potential heir.<sup>54</sup> These years between 1915 and 1917 proved to the La Follettes that the strength of their family determined whether their dynasty could survive. Despite all odds, the patriarch overcame all obstacles and won the subsequent 1922 Senatorial election by the largest plurality in Wisconsin political history with

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<sup>54</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin, Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 45. Letter from Robert La Follette Sr to Philip Fox, November 23, 1917, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers, Box B79, Folder 39.

the strong support of every La Follette on the campaign trail.<sup>55</sup> Through his triumph, Bob Sr also proved himself as the larger-than-life founder of the La Follette political enterprise that his children believed him to be.

In 1917, most Americans were eager for retaliation after a German submarine sank the American ship *Lusitania*. But not Robert La Follette Sr, much to the dismay of even his most ardent supporters.<sup>56</sup> While speaking to a crowd of politically independent voters in St Paul, Minnesota, Bob Sr joked about possible American involvement in the Great War. When one voter in the crowd raised that America should retaliate for the *Lusitania*, La Follette stated sardonically, “I don’t mean to say that we hadn’t suffered grievances; we had—at the hands of Germany. Serious grievances!”<sup>57</sup> The next day, the Associated Press reported that Robert La Follette declared that the United States had *no* grievances with Germany.<sup>58</sup> The political fallout was catastrophic and nearly destroyed the entire La Follette dynasty in one fell swoop.

For the rest of that fateful year, all of the La Follettes could only watch as their patriarch was dragged through the cesspit of politics. Several Senators called for Bob’s expulsion from the Senate. He lost all of his speaking opportunities and the *La Follette’s Magazine* subscriptions tanked, debilitating the family’s main source of income<sup>59</sup>. Emmanuel Phillipp, then governor of Wisconsin, called La Follette a traitor and declared that, “La Follette’s reputed attitude misrepresents the state of Wisconsin.”<sup>60</sup> Even within his own city of Madison, his once-loyal

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<sup>55</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 51.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Alfred Brandeis to Robert La Follette Sr, October 24, 1917, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers, Box B80, Folder 14.

<sup>57</sup> Robert La Follette Speech in Minneapolis, September 29, 1917, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers, Box B81, Folder 23.

<sup>58</sup> Associated Press Release, September 30, 1917, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers, Box B81, Folder 23.

<sup>59</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 55.

<sup>60</sup> Emmanuel Phillipp’s Speech to Madisonians, October 2, 1917, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers, Box B81, Folder 25.

constituency repudiated him. Outraged supporters flocked to the UW-Madison campus square to burn him in effigy. After the horrific event, Belle Case wrote to her friend Zona Gale that she “finds it hard to believe in the people anymore, they all have false faces.” Bob Sr himself wondered if he would, “be the same person ever again.”<sup>61</sup> This political earthquake reverberated beyond the first generation. Phil was still studying on UW-Madison’s campus. He recounts that he “lived with an awful fear,” in his memoirs.<sup>62</sup> His fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa, was told to hold their tongues. Professors treated him coldly and every time he heard his last name Phil would flinch, expecting derision.<sup>63</sup> To navigate this political quagmire, the La Follettes’ familial bonds would have to become iron-clad in order to resuscitate their political reputation and recover the trust of their constituency.

Amidst all these political hardships, Bob Jr attempted to prove himself in front of his parents as a future leader of the dynasty by responding to criticisms in the press and managing his father’s affairs. However, Bobbie’s illness returned much worse than before, exacerbating the already present problems twofold. His eroding health not only took his father’s attention away from politics, but also drained much of the remaining family funds. According to the family doctor, Philip Fox, Bobbie was suffering from a streptococcal infection in his throat, kidney complications, and strain on the cardiac functions, resulting in decreased circulation throughout his body and major swelling on every limb.<sup>64</sup> Dr Fox attempted to treat these symptoms in 1915, but the issues remained. Ever attentive to his eldest son, Bob Sr, stayed by his bedside every night he could. After months of constant bedrest, Dr Fox decided in August of 1917 that it was

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<sup>61</sup> Weisberger, Bernard A. “The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America” (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, Wisconsin), 1994.

<sup>62</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 55.

<sup>63</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 52.

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Philip Fox to Robert La Follette Jr, April 7, 1915, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C1, Folder 10.

best for Bobbie to move to a fairer climate, so Bob Jr and Belle Case moved to La Jolla, California.<sup>65</sup>

While the move might have been beneficial for Bobbie's health, Bob Sr was only more isolated. In fact, they all were.<sup>66</sup> For the first time ever, the La Follettes were all separated except for Bob Jr and Belle Case. Were it not for the constant letter-writing instilled in the children early in life, the La Follettes ran the risk of drifting apart. The strength of their familial bonds, however, kept them in touch as every family member served as support systems for each other. With all of them working together, the La Follette dynasty was able to fight even when they were scattered across the country.

With his father and older brother down on their luck, it was Phil's turn to take the mantle and support the dynasty's survival. He decided the best way to prove his family's patriotism was to enlist in the war effort against Germany, even if he thought his father would disapprove. In a discarded letter to his father, Phil wrote that he needed to go to war to, "strengthen myself morally and physically...If I am ever to amount to what I aspire to -- I have got to have something I haven't got now."<sup>67</sup> His parents talked him down in early 1917 due to fears that Phil would be treated poorly by military officers, but they could not keep him away from service forever. In his mind, he thought that entering the military was the best method to help gain the good graces of the people once again.

The second son's need to help his family regain their reputation was greater than concerns for himself, and so Phil enlisted in the army in November 1917 at age twenty. When he

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<sup>65</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Belle Case La Follette, June 19, 1916, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C1, Folder 16.

<sup>66</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 245.

<sup>67</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 57.

told his parents of the news, Bob Sr. resigned himself and supported Phil's wishes, emphasizing that he should do what he thought was right.<sup>68</sup> His choice to join most likely did not matter anyway, as most boys his age were already drafted. Before leaving he visited his dear brother Bobbie. At this time, the two brothers were the closest they ever would be. Phil could not even say goodbye without tearing up, so he wrote to Bobbie that, "You have a personality possessed by one in a million. If you could only know the hold you have on people's thoughts and affections..." Phil did not return until Christmas 1918, but he came back with honor, as he was promoted to sergeant and later colonel for excellent service.<sup>69</sup> To Phil's surprise, he was no longer scorned at UW-Madison. His good name was generally reinstated.<sup>70</sup> Though Phil was vehemently opposed to World War I, he sacrificed his safety to spare his family's name from being equated with sedition. He now realized how important the La Follette name was to protect and is now an irreplaceable cog in the La Follette machine.

Bob Sr continued his crusade to clear his name as well, employing the assistance of his family members to revive his former influence. The fight appeared impossible as he faced an expulsion trial in the Senate, demonization in every newspaper, and bankruptcy from the failure of *La Follette's Magazine*. The patriarch's first battle was in the Senate. He appeared before the legislative body on October 6th to jeers from senators on both sides of the aisle.<sup>71</sup> Even former Progressive president Theodore Roosevelt called him, "the most sinister foe to democracy."<sup>72</sup> In response, Bob Sr prepared a fiery speech in support of freedom of speech in wartime. As always, he relied on Belle to ensure that the rhetoric was effective. He reminded all Americans the

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<sup>68</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 59.

<sup>69</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 58-59.

<sup>70</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 62.

<sup>71</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 247.

<sup>72</sup> New York Times, *Roosevelt Rouses Big Chicago Crowd; Assails La Follette as Foe...*, Sept. 27, 1927.

importance of, “the right of the people to discuss the war in all its phases and the right and the duty of the people's representatives in Congress to declare the purposes and objects of the war.”<sup>73</sup> He did not spend any time defending himself, because there was nothing to defend: he had been defamed.

The speech was well-received by the majority of the American people though he would remain under investigation for another fourteen months. But from this moment onward, La Follette’s Senate seat was safe. Furthermore, he received five thousand dollars in legal winnings from the federal government as an apology for libelous behavior from the federal government. This financial boost certainly alleviated a portion of the family’s debt. Once again, Bob and Belle proved themselves to be the larger-than-life leaders of the La Follette dynasty.

This was a huge victory for the entire family, but the fight was not over. In November 1917, Fighting Bob sued the *Madison Democrat* newspaper for libel, on grounds that the paper had claimed La Follette had no grievances with Germany.<sup>74</sup> This move was an enormous risk. If he lost, Bob Sr would be labeled as a traitor for the rest of his life and he would have to pay the *Democrat* for their legal fees with money he did not have. He won the trial, however, and gained enough from the settlement to revitalize *La Follette’s Magazine*. Readership immediately climbed back to about 30,000 readers in 1919.<sup>75</sup> The patriarch also made the paper even more of a family publication than it had been. Fola became an assistant editor to Belle Case for the women’s section, while Bob Jr and Phil were promoted to managing editors.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Robert C. Byrd, *The Senate, 1789–1989: Classic Speeches, 1830–1993* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1994).

<sup>74</sup> Madison Democrat Press Release, November 18, 1917, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers: Box B82, Folder 20.

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Sr to Belle Case La Follette, December 9, 1918, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C1, Folder 21.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Belle Case La Follette to La Follette Family, December 5, 1918, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C1, Folder 21.



Vindication is the only word that can describe La Follette's next Senatorial campaign in 1922. Not only was his name cleared, but Bob Jr recovered from his illness in time to join Belle to work on the election, even promoted to campaign manager. Phil was also back from the war, speaking over two hundred times on behalf of his father to crowds of hundreds on the Minnesota-Wisconsin border.<sup>77</sup> While not in Wisconsin, Fola worked with the rest of the family tirelessly to publish *La Follette's Magazine* on a monthly basis.<sup>78</sup> The entire La Follette machine worked in tandem for the first time, brought closer by the hardships they faced throughout the past five years. The results of their work shone through as Robert La Follette won the 1922 Senatorial election by a greater plurality than any politician in Wisconsin history, gaining over eighty percent of the vote and winning seventy of the state's seventy-one counties. La Follette was not the only winner that night either. His influence helped several other Progressives win as well.<sup>79</sup> It was nothing short of a political miracle.

By 1922, Bob Sr had led his family out of poverty and created an avenue for the family to directly speak to their constituents without restraint through *La Follette's Magazine*. Through perseverance and unity among all of the family members, the La Follette dynasty survived some of its darkest days to emerge even stronger. These resilient familial relationships between the La Follettes are what defined their newfound strength in the 1920s and would allow the second generation to rise even further.

For the members of the La Follette dynasty, Bob Sr's thunderous victory came as no surprise. For Bob Jr and Phil, it only confirmed their beliefs that their father was a man, as Phil

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<sup>77</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 252.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Fola La Follette, March 15, 1921, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 25, Folder 4.

<sup>79</sup> Progressive Party Platform, April 2, 1922, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 128, Folder 2.

put it, “of great human character and political leader who was leaving an imprint on the life of his generation.”<sup>80</sup> Throughout the past five years, their parents solidified themselves as the first generation leader within the family business whom each of the La Follette children desired to craft their identity around. Therefore, when both of them died, each of the second generation La Follettes had their own conceptions about how the family legacy should be continued. This transition would eventually lead to bitter sibling rivalries and the eventual demise of the Progressive Party when the family ties slowly frayed.

### Section III: Life After Robert and Belle Case La Follette (1924-1931)



*Source: Wisconsin State Historical Society, from left to right: Fola, Belle Case, Phil, Former Governor John Blaine, Robert Sr, Bob Jr, on listening to election results over the radio, 1924.*

In a three generation business model, sibling rivalries are usually exacerbated when the founder of the business dies. The La Follette family, however, broke this mold. From the day Bob Sr passed in 1925 until her death in 1931, Belle staved off sibling rivalry by sacrificing her own opportunities to further the dynasty. She undertook the primary role of founder and unifier so that her children could follow their own political aspirations after she was gone.<sup>81</sup> While the death of

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<sup>80</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 67.

<sup>81</sup> *Belle*, 235.

Robert La Follette Sr had been politically devastating, it was not until Belle Case passed away that the second generation sibling rivalries began tearing at family ties.

Robert La Follette's last election in 1924 was his most valiant battle yet. He announced that he was running for the presidency. Similar to the 1922 Senatorial election, this campaign required unity in the La Follette arsenal of progressivism. Bob Jr was, of course, named the campaign manager. He, his mother, and all of his siblings spoke across the United States to spread the La Follette Progressive ticket.<sup>82</sup> By this time, all of the politically active La Follettes were seasoned campaigners who even impressed their patriarch. Every member of the family brought out hundreds of people, receiving good reviews for each speech. Even Bob Jr and Belle, the two La Follettes who hated public speaking the most, appeared firm on the podium.<sup>83</sup>

Above all, however, it was Phil who flourished on the campaign trail. In one speech to the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, Phil was said to have spoken with such passion that he was called "Bob La Follette Jr" in the *Capital Times*, a confusing headline considering his brother's name.<sup>84</sup> But more importantly, Robert Sr embraced his son after his performance crying, "You are *my* boy."<sup>85</sup> For the second son, this speech was one of the times he felt closest to his father. Finally, the entire family was still running *La Follette's Magazine* for thousands of readers. The monthly publication was filled with pamphlets and advertisements for supporters to post around their towns, endorsements from prominent politicians for La Follette, and accounts of Robert Sr's character from longtime Senatorial colleagues.<sup>86</sup> Once again, the La Follettes were able to extend

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<sup>82</sup> Progressive Party Platform, May 11, 1924, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers: Box B83, Folder 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Belle*, 210.

<sup>84</sup> *Capital Times*, "Bob La Follette Jr Charms Crowd," May 16, 1924, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 26, Folder 3.

<sup>85</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 78.

<sup>86</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette to Fola La Follette, May 23, 1924, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 26, Folder 3.

their influence as a political enterprise through relying on family labor rather than turning to a political machine run on patronage, with all its inherent compromises.

While the La Follette enterprise was strong, Bob Sr's health could not hold up at age sixty-nine. According to the family physician, Dr. Philip Fox, La Follette contracted a horrible case of pneumonia.<sup>87</sup> It brought on fever symptoms and a debilitating cough that tore at his voice. His failing health forced him to cancel several of his speaking events and lose momentum in the election. The patriarch could not even speak to newspaper reporters to defend himself because his voice was so weak.<sup>88</sup> When political allies and opponents alike encouraged Bob Sr to drop out of the campaign out of concern, he refused, declaring that, "the people still need him."<sup>89</sup> His popularity remained in Wisconsin, but La Follette could not convince out-of-state voters that he was healthy enough to lead the country. As a result, Bob Sr ended up only winning Wisconsin's thirteen delegates in the 1924 election. But the defeat was not a complete loss for the dynasty. In fact, La Follette won the most votes out of any third-party candidate until the 1990 Presidential election.<sup>90</sup> Adding to the signs of the dynasty's dominant position in state politics, Phil was also elected as District Attorney of Dane County on the same day.<sup>91</sup> Even if the La Follette dynasty was not formidable enough to carry Bob Sr to the presidency, it was still strong in Wisconsin.

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<sup>87</sup> Letter from Philip Fox to Robert La Follette Sr, June 4, 1924, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Sr Papers: Box B83, Folder 16.

<sup>88</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Herman Ekern, June 7, 1924, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 26, Folder 5.

<sup>89</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 82.

<sup>90</sup> Weisberger, Bernard A. "The La Follettes of Wisconsin", 267.

<sup>91</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 83.

After the election, it became clear that Bob's health was not improving. Dr. Fox ordered Bob and Belle to vacation in Florida, so he left his senatorial duties to Bob Jr.<sup>92</sup> The family doctor believed that the fairer climate would alleviate some pain. But the warm weather could not delay the inevitable. In May of 1925, Bob Sr returned to Madison to receive more intensive care. On June 18th, 1925, he was officially declared dead.<sup>93</sup> His funeral occurred just a few days later. While the family was still in mourning, the question of who would lead their dynasty next weighed heavy on their minds. As noted above, there were three possible candidates for succession: Bob Jr, Phil, and Belle Case.

While historians claim that Belle never wanted to enter politics, I argue that this was the time when Belle Case made her largest sacrifice for the sake of the La Follette dynasty. For Bob Jr to flourish, she chose to step down as a possible heir to her husband's Senate seat even though she was supported by several members of the Progressive party and other feminist allies. In *La Follette's Magazine*, she stated that while she always supported Bob, that it was "against nature" to seek public office for herself.<sup>94</sup> Even though Belle was not particularly fond of politics, she had always thrown herself into the fray when needed. She was an active participant of the Women's Peace Party and the Wisconsin Progressives.<sup>95</sup> The matriarch regularly advocated for women's suffrage and equality in *La Follette's Magazine* and encouraged her fellow women to play an active role in politics.<sup>96</sup> Clearly, female empowerment was extremely important to Belle. Her

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<sup>92</sup> Maney, Patrick J. "Young Bob' La Follette: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette, Jr., 1895-1953" (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, Madison, Wisconsin), 2002.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Philip Fox to Robert La Follette Jr, June 18, 1925, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C2, Folder 30.

<sup>94</sup> *La Follette's Magazine*, "Belle Case Senate Rejection," July 8, 1925, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 129, Folder 4.

<sup>95</sup> Letter from Belle Case La Follette to Women's Peace Party, June 22, 1925, Library of Congress, Belle Case La Follette Papers: Box D14, Folder 15.

<sup>96</sup> *La Follette's Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1909.

leadership in the Women's Peace Party earned her the allegiance of its members even in 1917 when the La Follette name was scorned.<sup>97</sup> When Bob Sr died, feminists such as Zona Gale told Belle that this was her, "great opportunity" to advance her sex.<sup>98</sup> Gale had a point. Belle's decision held an enormous weight on women's political advancement.

Not only did Belle disappoint the Women's Leagues to allow her sons to become her husband's heir, but she did the same for the Wisconsin Progressive Party. In fact, Bob and Phil created a template letter explaining the reasons why their mother had turned down the nomination. Close La Follette supporters such as Chicago businessman and UW-Madison alumnus W.T Rawleigh wrote pointedly to Bob Jr that Belle, "was the only choice to succeed your father."<sup>99</sup> National politicians agreed. Representative Edward Voigt spoke for the Progressive delegation in the House of Representatives when he said, "there was considerable sentiment that your mother should run... There is no question that she could win in the special election." Among feminists and Progressives alike, Belle Case seemed to be the most suitable choice to fill her husband's expired term.<sup>100</sup>

Belle gave up the Senate seat for two reasons. Above all, the special election of 1925 was the perfect opportunity for Bob Jr to step up and lead the La Follette dynasty. Since he was only thirty years old, the minimum age one for a U.S. senator, he could ensure the dynasty's power for much longer than she could at the age of sixty-six with poor health. In addition, he was the only child in the La Follette political enterprise who had not earned a college degree and had lost

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<sup>97</sup> Letter from Elizabeth Evans to Belle Case La Follette, October 11, 1917, Library of Congress, Belle Case La Follette Papers: Box D14, Folder 18.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Zona Gale to Belle Case La Follette, June 20, 1925, Library of Congress, Belle Case La Follette Papers: Box D14, Folder 22.

<sup>99</sup> Letter from W.T Rawleigh to Robert La Follette Jr, July 1, 1925, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C2, Folder 37.

<sup>100</sup> Letter from Women's Peace Party to Belle Case La Follette, July 3, 1925, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C2, Folder 43.

many years to illness.<sup>101</sup> Even if Bobbie desired another career, his only professional experience beyond high school was working under his father. He flunked out of several classes in college due to his separation anxiety, fell into depressive episodes that made him an unpredictable worker, and did not have the same fiery ambition his father or brother possessed.<sup>102</sup> While Belle was favored, Bob Jr was also well-liked in Progressive circles. Supporters considered him a great compromiser and praised his sharp wit.<sup>103</sup> With his extensive experience in politics, it was clear that Bob Jr was the family's best shot at carrying on the La Follette legacy.

The second reason Belle Case dropped out of contention was to quell any potential second-generation feud between Bob Jr and Phil. When Progressives supported Belle to cover Bob Sr's unexpired term that summer, several of these same allies wrote to both Bob Jr and Phil separately about their excitement for the chosen son to eventually inherit the leadership of the La Follette dynasty. If both brothers had been keen to succeed their father, these letters could only exacerbate their latent rivalry. Furthermore, Phil's well-received speaking tours in the election of 1924 had convinced many political allies that the second son's personality was more akin to his late father.<sup>104</sup> But Phil was only twenty eight years old in 1925, two years too short to run for a Senatorial election.<sup>105</sup> Thus, it was a perfect year for Belle Case to advocate for Bob Jr, as it was still impossible for Phil to challenge his older brother. To ensure the dynasty's survival for the next generation and to silence any inkling of sibling rivalry, Belle Case decided to step aside..

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<sup>101</sup> "Young Bob," 90.

<sup>102</sup> "Young Bob," 34.

<sup>103</sup> Letter from Herman Ekern to Robert La Follette Jr, July 14, 1925, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C2, Folder 14.

<sup>104</sup> Letter from Isabel La Follette to Philip La Follette, June 27, 1925, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 149, Folder 3; Letter from Bronson Cutting to Robert La Follette Jr, June 13, 1925, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C2, Folder 19.

<sup>105</sup> *Philip La Follette, The Second Son*, 89.

Robert La Follette Sr's death forced the family into a major reorganization of his political organization. In this process, Bob Jr and Phil were the key players since they soon emerged as the leaders of the La Follette dynasty and the Progressive Party as a whole. In the years immediately following their father's death, the La Follette brothers were still extremely close, with little sign of the sibling rivalry that often afflicts the second-generation heirs in that multi-generational family business model. For the next couple of years, both supported each other personally and politically—indeed, almost unconditionally. In fact, when Phil went on vacation in 1927, Bob Jr admitted that: “You mean so much in my life Phil, that I feel poverty stricken when I attempt to express my affections.”<sup>106</sup> Meanwhile, the La Follette women quickly faded out of the political spotlight while Belle Case was attempting to finish her husband's biography and Fola returned to New York to support her playwright husband.<sup>107</sup> As always, Mary remained at the periphery of the political dynasty, only involving herself in politics through her husband, prominent Wisconsin attorney Ralph Sucher.<sup>108</sup>

After his nomination for the La Follette Republican candidate in the special election for his father's Senate seat in 1925, political analysts predicted that Bobbie would triumph over his Independent Republican opponent Edward Dithmar, but not without a fight.<sup>109</sup> The La Follette name was unquestionably strong, but Bob Jr and the Wisconsin public both knew that the eldest son did not have that same drive and presence as his late father. In one campaign speech to a rural Wisconsin town, a farmer heckled Jr, “You got guts boy, but you'll never be half the man

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<sup>106</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette to Philip La Follette, February 20, 1927, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 149, Folder 4.

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Belle Case La Follette to Herman Ekern, March 4, 1926, Library of Congress, Belle Case La Follette Papers: Box D17, Folder 55.

<sup>108</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 203.

<sup>109</sup> Madison Democrat, “*Can Bobbie Step Up to the Plate?*” August 19, 1925, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C2, Folder 20-21.



your Pappy was.” All Bob Jr could do was to reply: “Trust me, no one knows that better than me.”<sup>110</sup> Despite the unflattering comparison with his famous father, Bob Jr convinced Wisconsin voters to continue their support for the La Follette family, winning with a solid sixty-seven percent of the vote.<sup>111</sup> Gracious in victory, Bob Jr vowed to the Wisconsin people that he would always try his hardest to “continue my father’s legacy” and traveled to Washington DC the following month with his mother for support, as he was still unmarried in 1925.<sup>112</sup>

He quickly acclimated to the intricacies of the Senate and finished his first term even more popular than before, upholding his father’s legacy as an honest politician who fought for the working class. His loyalty to the La Follette cause extended to turning down corrupt bargains and patronage offers whenever they appeared. When constituents begged him to use his influence in their favor, Bob Jr replied: “It was always my father’s rule not to interpose his influence upon state patronage...and I intend to strictly adhere to that rule.”<sup>113</sup> Bob Jr proved to the people that even though he was newly elected, he was not new to politics.

When he stood for re-election in 1928, Bob was again facing members of the Republican party. Even so, he trounced his opponent William Markham, winning 85 percent of the vote.<sup>114</sup> With his political career now on track, Bob Jr married his high school sweetheart Rachel Young, a woman who loved him dearly even though she disapproved of politics. More broadly, Bobbie’s Senatorial victories cemented continued La Follette influence in national politics. Furthermore,

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<sup>110</sup> Maney, Patrick. “Young Bob: A Biography of Robert M. La Follette Jr (1895-1952).” (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, Madison), v.2, 2002.

<sup>111</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1925.

<sup>112</sup> Robert La Follette Jr Speech to Wisconsinites in Madison, November 12, 1925, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C2, Folder 1.

<sup>113</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Ray McKaig, December 12, 1925, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C2, Folder 6.

<sup>114</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1928.

his position as the family's second-generation leader as he held the most political power in the family and was the closest to the matriarch, Belle Case.

But Bob Jr was not the only family member that gained more agency following Robert La Follette's death. Just before the patriarch's passing, Phil had married Isabel Bacon, a natural political operator who immersed herself in politics. She dove straight into the Progressive movement by volunteering to edit *La Follette's Magazine* and made speaking tours for Phil in his own campaigns.<sup>115</sup> Her involvement in politics slowly added to Phil's power within the dynasty, as he was transformed from a single player into a dyad.

After winning the race for District Attorney of Dane County in 1924, the year that Bob Sr had lost the presidential election, Phil was also a rising political star. During his two-year term, Phil certainly kept busy as he took down the Greenbush mafia in Madison, was contacted by UW-Madison to serve as Dean of the Law School, and served as the main editor, along with Isen, of *La Follette's Magazine*.<sup>116</sup> Like most other Dane County district attorneys, Phil only ran for one term. After stepping down, he mainly worked on the *La Follette Magazine* from 1926 to 1930.<sup>117</sup> After Bob Sr's death, magazine subscriptions took a major hit, as their audience shrank to only a couple thousand readers. *La Follette's Magazine* lost money every month, and began begging for donations until Phil and Bob Jr met William Evjue, the editor-in-chief of another Madison newspaper, *The Capital Times*, who revitalized the magazine.<sup>118</sup> In 1929, *La Follette's Magazine* returned as *The Progressive*, a name that was meant to draw in all Progressives

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<sup>115</sup> Letter Isabel La Follette to Phil La Follette, January 5, 1927, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 135, Folder 1.

<sup>116</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 104-105.

<sup>117</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to William Evjue, March 23, 1926, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 135, Folder 1.

<sup>118</sup> *La Follette's Magazine*, "Letter from New Editor: William Evjue," September 7, 1928, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C5, Folder 37; Letter from Philip La Follette to William Evjue, August 8, 1928, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 151, Folder 2.

nationwide and serve as their platform. Bob Jr, Belle Case, and Fola were all editors on *The Progressive*, but they owed the idea to Phil, Isen, and Evjue. The magazine's subsequent success added to Phil and Isen's aura as capable leaders of the La Follette second generation.

But Phil's real triumph was his victory in the Wisconsin gubernatorial election of 1930. Fresh from Bob Jr's 1928 Senatorial win, the La Follette Progressive Republican ticket was as popular as ever. But the party was clearly transitioning. The old guard, epitomized by Herman Ekern, who had served with Bob Sr was aging and new blood was needed. While the party still supported Ekern, the Wisconsin State Board of Control wrote to Bob Jr that: "If we are to put Ekern over, you have got to work as you have never worked before."<sup>119</sup> As it became obvious that Ekern could no longer carry the Progressives, so the party began looking to a future under Phil's leadership as governor.

The second son accepted the nomination, but knew he would face a hard path ahead of him as he would have to beat the incumbent governor, Walter Kohler, in the primary. However, with the help of Bob Jr and Isen, the La Follettes were able to come together once again and pull off a political upset as Phil won with a solid sixty-seven percent of the vote.<sup>120</sup> Between the three of them, they gave an astounding 600 speeches around the state within three months.<sup>121</sup> By winning the governor's office, the second generation La Follettes effectively controlled Wisconsin politics without any political machine or patronage. Without any sign of sibling rivalry to hinder them, Bob Jr and Phil were only thirty-five and thirty-three respectively and had already

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<sup>119</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Philip La Follette, November 19, 1929, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C5, Folder 3.

<sup>120</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1930.

<sup>121</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Gordon Sinykin, July 17, 1930, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 135, Folder 1.

experienced a meteoric rise to what would become the second highest peak of their political careers.

While the two sons of Robert La Follette were flourishing, the women, other than Isabel, of the family stepped back and assumed supporting roles. Mary married early in 1921 to Phil's close friend Ralph Sucher, a local Wisconsin politician.<sup>122</sup> This couple was the first to have children as well. Even though Mary had married a politician, she still had no interest in joining the La Follette political enterprise.<sup>123</sup> She visited her family for the holidays and encouraged them privately, but she did not write the consistent letters that the rest of the siblings did, indicating her detached position.<sup>124</sup>

Although a much more active participant in the family business, Fola also largely escaped the political grind. She returned to New York after her father's death and stopped campaigning though she continued to edit her sections of *The Progressive* with Isen. Between 1925 and 1931, Fola and Isen shared an impressive correspondence, bouncing ideas back and forth about potential interviewees and articles for the magazine. Typically, Isen was the one to think of a story or person to write about and Fola would respond with her approval. When Isen wanted to write about her travels to Europe in 1926 for example, Fola supported the idea enthusiastically, saying, "I'm sure everyone would love to hear about your insight my dear."<sup>125</sup> While the second-generation La Follette sisters did not hold the direct political power their brothers did, their contributions were by no means inconsequential.

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<sup>122</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 157.

<sup>123</sup> Letter from Mary La Follette to Robert La Follette Jr, September 4, 1929, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers: Box C5, Folder 27.

<sup>124</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 157.

<sup>125</sup> Letter from Fola La Follette to Isabel La Follette, April 26, 1927, Library of Congress, Fola La Follette Papers, Box E10, Folder 40.

Belle Case La Follette spent the rest of her life in Washington DC, helping Bob Jr with his senatorial duties and grooming Isen into a perfect political advisor for Phil. But most importantly, she attempted a biography about Bob Sr. To her, the biography was her “Last labor of love” for her late husband.<sup>126</sup> It was a painstaking effort. Editors contacted her constantly about the progress of the book, but she never gave them any tentative dates for chapters’ release, stating that she was just, “making progress.”<sup>127</sup> In addition to the biography, Belle trained Isen to help out Phil with his speeches, just as she had done for Bob Sr years before. When Isen expressed doubt about her own knowledge of politics, Belle shushed her saying, “You are an intelligent woman. If what Phil writes doesn’t appeal to you, rest assured it will not appeal to others.”<sup>128</sup> Even as she reached her late 60s, Belle was still the family’s foundation.

But as 1927 came to a close, the strong-willed matriarch began to experience a horrible pain in her stomach and teeth. She had peritonitis, which is heavy intestinal inflammation stemming from infection in the bowels. Belle also suffered from several serious infections. She moved in and out of the hospital for the next four years. And on August 18, 1931, Belle Case La Follette had a surgery that was meant to rid her of peritonitis. Bob Jr and Phil sat at her bedside, each holding one of her hands. But the operation was botched. The doctors accidentally punctured her intestines and on that day there still were no antibiotics. Belle Case slowly drifted away, first into a coma, and was declared dead later that day.<sup>129</sup>

A deafening, devastated silence lingered over the La Follettes. Phil’s letters to Isen ceased for a week. Stacks of grief-stricken letters from Wisconsin constituents and politicians

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<sup>126</sup> Letter from Belle Case La Follette to Fola La Follette, December 10, 1930, Library of Congress, Belle Case La Follette Papers: Box D17, Folder 6.

<sup>127</sup> Letter from Belle Case La Follette to Franklin Lane, May 13, 1930, Library of Congress, Belle Case La Follette Papers: Box D17, Folder 7.

<sup>128</sup> *Belle*, 235.

<sup>129</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 155.

alike filled Bob Jr and Fola's mail boxes, most only briefly answered. Their mourning was private, but impactful. The fact that they were not writing letters, as they had been taught to do for so long, indicates how distraught they were. At her funeral, Belle's good friend, University of Wisconsin-Madison professor Max Otto, reflected on her character, telling the small crowd at Forest Hill cemetery that: "Belle Case La Follette was perhaps the least known yet the most influential of all the American women who have had to do with public affairs in this country..."<sup>130</sup>

The founders of the La Follette dynasty, lionized by their children and supporters alike, had finally left the business in their children's hands. When orphaned, sibling rivalries would deepen. Bob Sr's death had sparked a massive organizational upheaval amongst the La Follettes. As we have seen, it took multiple family members to make up for the great man's absence. But the family was able to carry on. Belle Case's death, however, sparked a more personal conflict. From 1925 to 1931, she was the matriarch who kept the family together. She quelled petty arguments, hosted every party, and was every La Follette's personal advisor.<sup>131</sup> While she lived, the La Follette family held on to its most important political asset: its close ties. Their ties were so strong that even without their patriarch, Belle and her children still experienced a meteoric rise to the point where they controlled state politics.

After her death, disagreements between the second generation La Follettes, particularly between Bob Jr and Phil, became arguments that eventually divided the brothers. Each of the second generation seemed to interpret their parents' legacy differently, further separating them. These divisions were not only detrimental to the La Follette family, but also to their political

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<sup>130</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 156.

<sup>131</sup> *Belle*, pg 235.

enterprise. If they could no longer depend on the family's unity, the Progressive Party was vulnerable. The next section, covering the years following Belle's death, indicates how these divisions began and why the La Follette dynasty started to fracture.

### Section III: First Taste of Defeat (1932-1934)



*Source: Wisconsin State Historical Society, Bob Jr and Phil in front of the White House after winning the Senatorial and gubernatorial races respectively in 1934.*

Bob Jr and Phil maintained their formidable family business by retaining their close bond in the immediate aftermath of Belle Case's death. Their path to cementing the dynasty's power was clear. The eldest son's place in the U.S Senate was secure until 1934. It was now Phil's turn to prove that he could control state politics through the governorship. As the Depression roiled the nation in 1930, the La Follette brothers created New-Deal type economic policies such as the Wisconsin Works Program. Their plan was so successful that FDR claimed that it was the framework to the popular Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that brought tens of thousands of workers back into the workforce throughout the 1930s.<sup>132</sup> By 1931, the La Follette name had become synonymous with power in Wisconsin. Phil recounted that politicians from as far away

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<sup>132</sup> Kasperek, Jonathan. "Fighting Son: A Biography of Philip F. La Follette" (Wisconsin Historical Society Press: Madison), 2006.

as Arizona exclaimed during his campaign that, “Why, the La Follettes have *always* run Wisconsin!” Even though the brothers had only been in power a few years, their name defined the state’s politics.<sup>133</sup>

This meteoric rise, however, nearly crashed in the gubernatorial race of 1932. Phil failed to hold his position and faced the first defeat in his career. For the first time since 1917, Phil separated himself from his family and traveled to Europe to search for new styles of economics and leadership, meeting Benito Mussolini in Rome and top Nazi officials in Berlin. While he later claimed not to admire these Fascists, it seems clear that Phil came back from Europe in 1933 with a very different view of politics.<sup>134</sup> After his return in 1933, the brothers began to suffer the fate of the three-generation family business model. They started quarreling over Party responsibilities and how best to continue their parents’ legacy. Even though both brothers were victorious in reclaiming center stage of national and state politics in 1934, potential rupture waited in the wings.

At the height of the Great Depression, Wisconsinites needed La Follette progressivism more than ever. While Phil wanted to champion the laborer’s ideals, his need to compromise between the conservative stalwarts Republican and radical Socialists framed him as an ineffectual state leader. Phil worked with Bob Jr throughout the unprecedented crisis to write an updated version of the Workman’s Compensation Laws. In addition, Phil protected dairy farmers by imposing taxes upon milk substitutes and exempted Wisconsin property owners from millions of dollars in tax obligations to keep families afloat. According to his memoirs, Phil saw the Depression as an opportunity to revolutionize the capitalist system to work for the laborer rather

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<sup>133</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 175.

<sup>134</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 201.



than major corporations. But, he was not willing to completely turn to collectivism. Over the next five years, Phil attempted to appease both groups. He joined the patriotic nationalism of the state's conservative Northern tier with the socialist ideology of Milwaukee. This union formed his own version of Democratic Socialism: i.e., fascism. While Phil's compromise between the two groups benefited him at first, his compromise soon made him enemies of both sides.<sup>135</sup> Stalwarts believed that Phil changed the system beyond repair with plans he could not pay for and the Socialists denounced him for abandoning the working class because he did not adopt collectivist ideals.<sup>136</sup>

Despite these pressures Phil still had his greatest asset: the illustrious family name, which connected Phil to power and more importantly, the legacy of his father. But this admiration declined once a new Progressive champion appeared in 1930. Franklin Delano Roosevelt revitalized the once-dead Democratic party in Wisconsin. His influence pushed the Progressives and Democrats alike to follow him in support of his New Deal rather than La Follette policies. One former secretary for the La Follettes, Julia Boegholdt, described Roosevelt as a "new craze" for Wisconsin politicians.<sup>137</sup> Instead of seeing FDR as the fulfillment of his father's progressive ideas, Phil, for complex personal reasons, began to oppose New Deal initiatives in the pages of *La Follette's Magazine*, arguing that, "each program should be so framed that it stimulates individual initiative," rather than only focusing on advancing the collective position. Unfortunately for Phil, America's new fascination with Roosevelt meant that his own popularity

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<sup>135</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 148.

<sup>136</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 149.

<sup>137</sup> Coberly, Catherine. "Interview with Julia Boegholdt, October 30th, 1982." Recorded on October 30, 1982 at Wisconsin Historical Society Sound Archives, Madison WI.  
<https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll11/id/348/rec/3>.

began to diminish amongst both Progressives, stalwart Republicans, and Democrats, despite his legendary name.<sup>138</sup>

In truth, Phil and the New Dealers had strikingly similar politics. Both believed that government should be used to solve the inequality in wealth that came with the Industrial Revolution. The La Follettes, however, emphasized individual financial responsibility much more than the New Dealers. While the La Follettes entrusted the government to create social safety-net programs for the unemployed, the responsibility of taking advantage of that program should fall upon the individual, not the government. Phil's reluctance to side with either the New Dealers or the stalwarts meant that he was forced to oppose several bills from a special session of the Wisconsin Legislature in 1931. In one radio speech, the Governor La Follette declared, "I shall veto any bill which proposes to make the situation worse by loading the costs [of relief] upon the farmer, home owner, and small businessman."<sup>139</sup> To other Progressives in the Wisconsin Legislature such as Thomas Fairchild and Tom Amlie, his stubbornness and loyalty to only his own policies came off as the, "behavior of a demagogue"--the first sign that his close followers had detected of an uncomfortable undercurrent that would later emerge in his post-European politics.<sup>140</sup> This peak of opposition to the La Follettes from both stalwart Republicans and Democrats coincided with the gubernatorial election of 1932. Phil admitted that it would be a tough fight, but did not get his real first taste of this new reality until the beginning of the election cycle. Newspapers around the state such as *Uncensored News* berated the La Follettes, charging that Phil and Isen hid their wealth from the public and that the Executive Residence was filled

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<sup>138</sup> Philip La Follette: The Second Son, 327.

<sup>139</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 153.

<sup>140</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 153.

with “ornate European gold goblets.”<sup>141</sup> On the other side, industrialists hoping to keep the status quo abhorred the La Follettes, claiming that they were too sympathetic to communism. One northern Republican even threatened that, “I’ll get down in the gutter to get all the dirt I can lay my hands on to destroy him.”<sup>142</sup> To make matters worse, in 1932 the Wisconsin Legislature ominously flipped from a dominant Progressive Republican plurality to a stalwart Republican majority. Between the Democratic party primary in April and the September primary, the usually unpopular party saw their votes increase from a modest 17,000 to an overwhelming 200,000.<sup>143</sup>

Phil knew the writing was on the wall. In 1932, the second son lost the Republican primary to Walter Kohler and became the first La Follette to lose a Wisconsin election since 1898, a period of over thirty years. Kohler was not even popular enough to win the general election. Indeed, after the primary Phil recalled that it was a, “personal, political disaster.”<sup>144</sup> That night, Phil writhed in his bed in the Executive Residence, unable to sleep in the house he had grown up in. In his own memoirs, he laments that, “[My father] had not risen so high, so fast. And he was the maker of tradition, and I, only the inheritor.”<sup>145</sup> For the first time in his career, the La Follette name was not enough.

Phil’s humiliation left him desperate for answers on how to return to power. All he knew was that he could not stay in the Executive Residence, as he saw it as a symbol of his failure. In his own words, “Power attracted me to the governorship, and defeat repelled me.” So he and Isen immediately rented an apartment on the edge of Madison while they planned a trip to Europe at

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<sup>141</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 151.

<sup>142</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 152.

<sup>143</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1932.

<sup>144</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 153.

<sup>145</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 153.

the encouragement of Fola and Bob Jr.<sup>146</sup> Every member of the family agreed that 1933 would be a perfect time for La Follette to investigate the rise of new populist leaders such as Italy's Mussolini and Hitler in Germany. This was the first time Phil would leave Madison since World War I.

On January 4, 1933, Phil and Isen escorted their successors around the Executive Residence in Madison and immediately left for Plymouth, England. While Fola and Bob Jr encouraged their brother to use the time abroad as a vacation, Phil attempted to find the root causes of the Great Depression that had brought about his political defeat.<sup>147</sup> During the voyage to England, he was already in contact with several economic leaders such as Jim Causey at the London School of Economics. Additionally, Phil intended to speak with members of the House of Commons to fill in the gaps of his understanding of the great economic collapse.<sup>148</sup>

Phil loved England for two reasons. First, he was able to gain some insight as to why the Depression began, and, for the first time since his childhood, he was again treated as the political prodigy he had been at his father's side. The La Follette couple landed on British soil on January 13 and, within just three days, Phil had meetings from the early morning to dusk with British lords and ladies.<sup>149</sup> Through these stimulating contacts and conversations, Britain offered Phil a chance to regain his confidence because he was given what he seemed to need most: attention.<sup>150</sup> He was once again the remarkable son of Robert La Follette, Sr.

Even though the letters back to the rest of the La Follettes are sparse throughout his European trip, Phil's accounts of Britain are filled with the exciting new speaking opportunities

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<sup>146</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Philip La Follette, January 15, 1933, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 135, Folder 3.

<sup>147</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 159.

<sup>148</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 172.

<sup>149</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 172.

<sup>150</sup> *Philip La Follette: The Second Son*, 367.

he received at the Royal Institute and the soirees he attended during the week. After one speech at the Royal Institute, lords in the audience were able to debate La Follette on his proposals for solving the Depression. After nearly an hour of this discussion, Lord Charnwood stood up and asked how old Phil was. When he responded that he was only thirty-five, the room was apparently awash in admiration.<sup>151</sup> This moment was reminiscent of the gatherings his parents used to hold where seasoned politicians would be impressed with Phil's intellect as a child.<sup>152</sup>

The younger La Follette made lifelong friends with several influential British policy makers such as Sir Josiah Stamp and Lord Waldorf Astor. As an economist and the director of the Bank of England, Sir Josiah explained that Britain, like Hoover, thought that the world economy would adjust to the Depression but was proven extremely wrong.<sup>153</sup> Stamp then quickly cautioned Phil about extreme economic models, advising that: "Communism and fascism have this in common: They propose to do the job by force -- they will put people to work, but the price is the loss of human freedom."<sup>154</sup> Phil agreed with Stam, as he admitted that the economist influenced his thinking about possible solutions to the Great Depression. Another economist named Robert Vanisstart gave him an even graver message, saying: "Time and time again we have seen approaching danger...and unwillingly edge closer and closer to World War II if that horrible Hitler and his Nazis come to power."<sup>155</sup> In 1933, Europe knew that Germany's bitterness from World War I and the Great Depression would be the impetus for the next global conflict.

Phil would observe the effects of World War I and extremist economic models first hand when he and Isen departed London for Berlin on January 20, 1933. While he would denounce

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<sup>151</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 189.

<sup>152</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 190.

<sup>153</sup> *Philip La Follette: The Second Son*, 370.

<sup>154</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 203.

<sup>155</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Fola La Follette, January 21, 1933, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 135, Folder 3.

Nazi Germany in his memoirs thirty years later, the letters he wrote home during his trip tell a different story. In his published book, *Adventure in Politics*, Phil describes how Berlin's "air reeked with anger and hate" and that fights regularly broke out in the streets. He described Germany as, "a vast human powder keg. An explosion was coming. It was only a matter of days."<sup>156</sup> Indeed, Phil and Isen visited Germany in its most turbulent period. Just as Phil mentions in the memoir, he had arrived only ten days before Hitler made a deal with the current German Chancellor Franz Von Papen. The deal was for von Papen to step down and become Hitler's vice chancellor to open the path for Hitler to become Chancellor. Nazis flooded the streets to protest the Weimar Republic and celebrated the rise of their leader with even more violence in the streets of Berlin.<sup>157</sup>

Amidst this chaos, Phil met with the Burgermeister of Berlin, Karl Brandt, who was a Nazi sympathizer. He took La Follette to the edges of the capital city to show him how the victors of World War I had ruined his country. The Depression forced over 750,000 citizens out into the fields from Berlin. But no one had the money to move far away, so their cattle grazed right outside the city limits.<sup>158</sup>

Phil's opinions in his confidential correspondence differed greatly from his published works. One letter to his secretary Gordon Sinykin reports: "While the situation is bad here, I could still see it as more stable than our situation with Roosevelt at home."<sup>159</sup> Despite all of the violence and poverty Phil had seen in Berlin, he still believed that it was a better alternative than the New Deal.

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<sup>156</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 201.

<sup>157</sup> *Philip La Follette, The Second Son*, 389; *Adventures in Politics*, 193.

<sup>158</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 193.

<sup>159</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Gordon Sinykin, January 30, 1933, Wisconsin Historical Society, Phil La Follette Papers, Box 135, Folder 3.

But the Nazi party was not the only brush with major Fascist leaders during his European tour. After leaving Berlin on February 1, Phil and Isen took a van to Italy to meet Il Dulce himself, Benito Mussolini in Rome. Another Wisconsin Progressive, Lincoln Steffens, had also met the dictator, but did not have quite the enthusiasm that Phil did. The younger La Follette actually asked for a signed picture from Mussolini as a memento of his visit, an odd request from someone who was so clearly oppressing his own population. In addition, La Follette asked Mussolini why he had taken power so forcefully if he had already captured the popular support of the people. Mussolini grinned and responded, “Sir, no one invites you to sit on a throne.”<sup>160</sup> Phil lionized Mussolini’s appearance as well, comparing him to, “a hard old war hero” with “a hard jawline that matched his fiery demeanor.”<sup>161</sup> Il Dulce clearly left an indelible imprint upon Phil, as the younger La Follette kept that signed picture in a collection of memorabilia from leaders whom he admired.<sup>162</sup> In comparison to Mussolini, meeting Pope Pius XI the next day was more mundane, as he refrained from asking for any memorabilia from the Vatican even though Phil stated that the La Follettes and the papacy were consistent allies. Phil was apparently more fascinated by the authoritarian power of Mussolini than the Pope’s spiritual leadership.

The last stop on the trip was Russia, a place that the La Follettes were not even sure they wanted to visit. After recommendations from friends, however, Phil and Isen thought it might be interesting to see how the Soviet Union dealt with the Great Depression. What they found in Russia was not as impressive for Phil as Germany or Italy. In his memoir, he described Moscow as a degraded city with, “breadlines, gaunt and hungry faces. Life [was] cheap. People were more

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<sup>160</sup> *Adventures in Politics*, 200.

<sup>161</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Gordon Sinykin, February 3, 1933, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 135, Folder 3.

<sup>162</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Gordon Sinykin, February 3, 1933, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers: Box 135, Folder 3.

plentiful than goods.” Phil goes on to criticize Stalin’s cruelty to his people, particularly his agricultural workers.<sup>163</sup>

His talks with Soviet officials were also tenuous than his conversations in Western Europe focusing on the war and FDR. Rather than discussing solutions to the Great Depression, one leader of the COMINTERN, Karl Radek, advised Phil that: “The great weakness of this new President of yours is this: He thinks he is smarter than [Woodrow] Wilson... All this means is that your Mr. Roosevelt vastly overrated himself. He will not only avoid Mr. Wilson’s mistakes; he will make vastly bigger ones.”<sup>164</sup> Even in countries with rampant violence, oppression and poverty such as Germany and Italy, Phil still listened to and appreciated their economists’ advice, but did seem to take away any such insights from his time in Moscow. In truth, Phil likely did not want to hear the Soviets’ side because he seemed more willing to embrace the strongman ethos of Fascism over the collectivism of Communism. While Phil found a new way to regain political power through populist style of fascist dictators, Stalin’s methods were less appealing so he was better able to see the problems in his rule.

Before the couple could visit Paris, however, their European tour was cut short. Bob Jr called Phil about an exciting opportunity to join Roosevelt’s administration. Phil was desperate to dive back into politics, so he sailed back to the United States immediately, setting foot on American soil once again on March 15, 1933.<sup>165</sup> But when he returned, he was disappointed by Roosevelt’s offer. The President-elect claimed that he needed Phil’s assistance only to help draft successful New Deal policies. Phil was not impressed, and advised the President that he needed

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<sup>163</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, pg 198.

<sup>164</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, pg 198.

<sup>165</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 204.



to ready the United States for war, as Europe “will not hold her breath for much longer.”<sup>166</sup>

Roosevelt shook off Phil’s assertions and both decided it would be best to hold off on bringing Phil into the administration until a “real fight” comes along.<sup>167</sup> Already, this position was a distinct change. After his father had been politically crucified for believing that America should stay out of World War I, Phil was now advocating U.S. intervention in European affairs. His European tour was already shifting his political and moral grounding.<sup>168</sup>

But above all, Phil had returned from Europe as a reinvigorated politician. After his meeting with Roosevelt, Phil proposed to Bob Jr that they should begin a new third party in their state, the Wisconsin Progressive Party. Bob Jr was expectedly hesitant. The older brother’s main concern was that there would be “Too much La Follette” on the ticket.<sup>169</sup> Without the other Republicans filling the ticket, Bob Jr thought that their constituency would see the La Follette family as demagogues once again attempting to take total control of the state. Phil agreed that perhaps there might be too much La Follette on the ticket, but argued that it was even more important to separate themselves from the unpopular Republicans and the Democrats that Phil disdained from his personal disagreements with FDR.<sup>170</sup>

Over the course of the next few months, Phil convinced Bob Jr to start the third party with the two brothers at the top of the ticket. The older La Follette brother acceded to Phil, but wrote privately to fellow Progressive Herman Ekern that: “The plan for the new party was overly

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<sup>166</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Frederick Delano Roosevelt, March 22, 1933, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 135, Folder 3.

<sup>167</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 206.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with Julia Boegholdt, October 30th, 1982, 31:12.

<sup>169</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Philip La Follette, August 2, 1933, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C12, Folder 19.

<sup>170</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 207.

ambitious and reckless.”<sup>171</sup> 1934 was the first and only campaign when the La Follette brothers both ran for office, providing the ultimate test of their dynasty’s power. Bob Jr would run for the Senate again, while Phil would try again for the governorship. Both brothers campaigned for each other tirelessly while Fola and Isen worked together to keep *The Progressive* as industrious as ever. On November 6th, the formidable La Follette machine achieved its greatest victory yet. Phil retook the governorship, winning by over 20,000 against the incumbent, Albert Schemeden.<sup>172</sup> Bob Jr trounced his opponent by a much wider margin. The elder brother gained forty seven percent of the vote and won over Democrat John Callahan by about 100,000 votes.<sup>173</sup> The two brothers were the most popular men in Wisconsin by far. The La Follettes’ triumph is hard to overstate because it was trifold. Not only did both brothers win, but it was the first victory for the Wisconsin Progressive Party.<sup>174</sup> While they could bypass the primary due to their third party status, they still faced the classic third party challenge. They had to outperform both major parties in the general election. Therefore, the fact that the La Follettes could establish a new political party, fight against both political machines and still win both the gubernatorial and senatorial races in one election cycle, was remarkable. Thus, this 1934 election was the peak of La Follette power within the second generation.

Despite their success, rupture loomed. Bob Jr and Phil disagreed outwardly about politics for the first time in their careers. While Bob Jr eventually succumbed to Phil’s will, it is significant that he still disagreed when the Wisconsin Progressive Party was founded. These disagreements between the brothers only intensified from this election onward as the patterns in

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<sup>171</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Herman Ekern, September 3, 1933, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C12, Folder 19; *Adventure in Politics*, 209.

<sup>172</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1934.

<sup>173</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1934.

<sup>174</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1934.

the three-generation family business model became evident.<sup>175</sup> Their growing sibling rivalry was in a sense natural as it has now been three years since the death of Belle Case and two years since their surrogate mother Fola moved to New York City. But it has been especially exacerbated by Phil's political shift towards fascism, making him more stubborn than before.

Phil romanticized totalitarian dictators because their head-strong and charismatic nature reminded him of his father. But in truth, the second La Follette son was simply projecting his father's image of power onto Fascist leaders out of feelings akin to desperation. He wanted to find new methods to regain his constituency and he found them in these populist despots. So even though the La Follettes enjoyed absolute victory in 1934, the pillars of their familial bonds on which their political power rested began to weaken. Not only had the sisters moved away from the enterprise as a whole, but Bob Jr and Phil began to bicker as well.<sup>176</sup>

#### Section V: Interpretation of Legacy (1937-1938)



*Source: (left) Library of Congress, Bob Jr with La Follette Committee aide, 1938; (right) Wisconsin State Historical Society, Phil's Opening NPA Speech, 1938.*

The tension between the brothers had been building for several years, and finally erupted and eroded the once-deep family ties. During the next five years, they split apart politically, even

<sup>175</sup> Jaffe, Dennis T., and Sam H. Lane. "Sustaining a Family Dynasty." *Family Business Review* 17, no. 1 (2004): 81–98.

<sup>176</sup> "Young Bob," 365.

if Bob Jr and Phil worked on the same project. Bob Jr moved further towards Progressivism, but Phil rejected this ideology and sided with Fascist models. While the brothers had faced disagreement before, such as starting a third party in Wisconsin, the circumstances were much different in this period--rooted in ideals rather than the mechanics of starting a political party. But most importantly, there was no one there to stop them from fighting. Their matriarch, Belle Case, was long dead. Their "second mother" Fola was helping run *The Progressive*, but was much too busy finishing their father's biography to solve their quarrels.<sup>177</sup> In these two years, 1937-1938, the brothers no longer race to each other's aid in times of need, nor do they celebrate together in victory. Slowly but surely, their brotherly bond attenuates into a dry, professional relationship.

Bob Jr was no longer the young upstart Senator he had been back in 1925. Between 1934 and 1936, the elder La Follette brother established a reputation of honesty, hard work, and passion for workers. With the help of many of his father's old labor allies such as International Seaman Union President Andrew Furuseh and Senator Bronson Cutting, he regularly introduced bills that brought more bargaining power to unions and the rights for working people. He updated the Seamen's Worker Act in 1934, a bill called the "Magna Carta of the Sea." But he also aimed higher.<sup>178</sup> Bobbie built rapport with several high-level Progressives in the Executive Branch. He became good friends with household names such as Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, and of course, President Roosevelt.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Fola La Follette, December 21, 1937, Library of Congress, Fola La Follette Papers, Box E10, Folder 6; *The La Follettes of Wisconsin, Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 243.

<sup>178</sup> Letter from Andrew Furuseh to Robert La Follette Jr, May 2, 1935, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C15, Folder 5.

<sup>179</sup> Letter from Harold Ickes to Robert La Follette Jr, November 30, 1936, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C14, Folder 14; Letter from Frederick Delano Roosevelt, December 5, 1936, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Folder 26.

FDR had their support as well, as every one of these figures turned to him for help and took his advice. When Bob and Phil hatched the New Wisconsin Works Program—a plan to create “valuable, useful” jobs through hiring young men to work in public works such as building highways and parks and increasing rural electrification— it was Bobbie’s relationship with Roosevelt that got the brothers a meeting with the President.<sup>180</sup> In the White House, the elder brother did most of the talking, pleading with Roosevelt that, “five million dollars was an immense sum -- [but] it was too small to put the unemployed to real work.”<sup>181</sup> Roosevelt eventually relented and promised to carefully consider whatever plan Wisconsin would put in front of him. Later, when Roosevelt ran for president in 1936, he asked Bobbie for political advice about old Harvard allies who claimed they would support him. La Follette replied: “Mr President, if you crawled back to New York on your belly, they would welcome the opportunity to kick you in the teeth.” Roosevelt did nothing but nod and uttered solemnly, “Bob, this is hard to believe, but if you say so I must believe it.”<sup>182</sup> The President clearly had a lot of respect for the elder La Follette, and he was far from the only one.

The most influential Progressive ally Bob made was Felix Frankfurter, who would help La Follette start what is considered his greatest achievement, the Civil Liberties Committee. After watching Bobbie valiantly fight for workers’ civil liberties for years and play a central role in creating the National Labor Relations Board in 1935, Frankfurter wrote to Bob that he had his respect and that, “one thing that makes you so damn effective is your amazing sense of perspective.”<sup>183</sup> In truth, Frankfurter wanted La Follette to help him lead a new project: the La

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<sup>180</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 223.

<sup>181</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 222.

<sup>182</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Fola La Follette, December 12, 1936, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C15, Folder 25.

<sup>183</sup> Letter from Felix Frankfurter to Robert La Follette Jr, October 6, 1936, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C12, Folder 10.

Follette Civil Liberties Committee. While Bobbie was reluctant to join at first, explaining that his other Senatorial duties kept him too busy, Frankfurter convinced him after a few months of gathering political aides and investigators to assist him in this effort.

The goal of the La Follette Committee was to expose the dark underside of union and laborers' oppression. In the midst of labor militancy during the depression decade of the 1930s, corporations utilized two main tools to keep their unions underfoot: labor espionage and strikebreaking. First, corporate leaders hired spies from one of the plethora of private security organizations such as the Pinkerton Company or the Belton-Welts Agency to keep watch on the union leaders.<sup>184</sup> If the unions planned any strikes, the spies would sow seeds of discontent among the other workers to weaken support for union leaders. If this did not work and the union actually began striking, these spies also operated as highly trained operatives that would "break the strike" for a company.<sup>185</sup> They threw tear gas bombs and struck workers with clubs to deter the strike, often begetting more violence. La Follette and Frankfurter argued that the workers' "were subjugated to the will of their employers and denied their constitutional rights"<sup>186</sup>

Starting in February 1936, preliminary examinations into labor conditions began in California, but the first true investigation was an inquiry into the General Motors Company. In early 1938, anonymous reports from the Union of Automobile Workers (UAW) flooded into Bob's office about "tyrannical practices at the General Motors plant" in a factory town, Flint, Michigan.<sup>187</sup> Not only were there rumors about possible labor espionage, but also that local police officers participated as union busters on GM's payroll. One UAW organizer, Joseph Ditzel,

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<sup>184</sup> Auerbach, Jerold S. "Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal." (The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc: Indianapolis), 1966.

<sup>185</sup> *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*, 42.

<sup>186</sup> "Young Bob," 164.

<sup>187</sup> Letter from Joseph Ditzel to Robert La Follette Jr, February 18, 1938, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C15, Folder 29.

wrote that, “a gang of toughs detained me in my hotel room.” and when they set him free he was, “trailed constantly in Flint before his car was side swept and three organizers were sent to the hospital with serious injuries.”<sup>188</sup> La Follette sent his team to investigate the situation in Flint, only to find the unions honeycombed with spies. Even though GM attempted to erase the evidence that they colluded with union busters, investigators uncovered fifty-two spies inside the UAW. Twenty of them were Flint police officers. In the fall of 1938, Bob Jr subpoenaed several GM corporate leaders to testify in front of his Senate Committee.<sup>189</sup>

While Bob Jr was rather soft spoken to his friends and loved ones, he was ice-cold in questioning. He spoke like a prosecutor, only drawing out the information he needed while discarding the chaff. In a long distance call between him and GM executive Frank Palmer, the executive attempted to appeal to Bob by feigning support for the Progressive cause and explaining: “I have been for many, many years one of the biggest supporters of the cause you are fighting for. Do you remember me?” Bob replied, “No, I don’t.” Palmer tried yet again, “I was the Secretary of the State Committee in Minnesota in 1924, when your father ran.” Once again, Bob brushed him off, “I didn’t notice you then.”<sup>190</sup>

After the La Follette committee questioned Palmer for a few days, he eventually admitted to hiring spies from the Belton-Welts Agency and bribing Flint police officers to control the unions. Bob Jr immediately presented the committee’s findings to the rest of Congress and demanded that legislators “rebuke their labor practices publicly.”<sup>191</sup> Together with Senator Key

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<sup>188</sup> Letter from Joseph Ditzel to Robert La Follette Jr, February 18, 1938, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C15, Folder 29.

<sup>189</sup> *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*, 87.

<sup>190</sup> Transcript of Robert La Follette Jr Questioning of Frank Palmer, September 14, 1938, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C16, Folder 1.

<sup>191</sup> Robert La Follette Speech on Senate Floor, November 21, 1938, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C16, Folder 1.

Pittman, Bobbie introduced and passed a resolution that warned businesses against denying collective bargaining rights and denounced unfair labor practices. The Senate passed the resolution with overwhelming support, resulting in a 75-3 vote.

From 1936 to 1939, the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee was unstoppable, as both Bob Jr's name and his work gained national recognition. Roosevelt wrote in his support for Bobbie's work at least once a year, telling him to, "keep up the great work."<sup>192</sup> Even the usually hostile *New York Times* called the Civil Liberties Committee, "one of the greatest domestic investigations in Senatorial history."<sup>193</sup> Other newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* cheered the Civil Liberties Committee on. Their pages would contain articles entitled, "Finish the Investigation!" and "New SOS from Steel Workers to La Follette!"<sup>194</sup> By fighting against labor espionage, Bob Jr became as forceful an advocate for workers' rights as his father had been.

Meanwhile, Phil was following a very different path. He remained in Wisconsin after 1936 and struggled to hold on to his popularity. Even though Bob gained the President's favor for the New Wisconsin Works Program, Phil still had the mighty task of passing it through the Wisconsin Legislature, which was once again hostile to his plans.<sup>195</sup> In March 1936, Phil officially introduced the plan to the Legislature. Older Democrats searched for any reason to discard it. In fact, one Democratic representative, Henry Bolens, complained that: "Hell, this program is sound. The trouble with it is that it is too damned sound. I'll tell you why I'm against it. If we pass this bill, we will have these La Follettes on our hands for the next hundred

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<sup>192</sup> Letter from Frederick Delano Roosevelt to Robert La Follette Jr, March 19, 1939, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C17, Folder 25.

<sup>193</sup> *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*, 96.

<sup>194</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "New SOS from Steel Workers to La Follette!" April 5, 1939, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C17, Folder 16.

<sup>195</sup> *Philip La Follette: The Second Son*, 247.



years!”<sup>196</sup> In the summer session of 1936, the bill passed in the Assembly, but lost in the Senate by a single vote.

Phil placed the bulk of the blame for this humiliating defeat on President Roosevelt since he now felt forced to implement the administration’s Works Program Administration (WPA). In Phil’s opinion, the WPA was a prime example of how the New Deal programs did not bring actual wealth because they placed no responsibility on the individual worker. In his anger, the younger La Follette brother reminded himself that: “I only received his verbal confirmation that he [the president] would fund the Wisconsin Works Program, not actual confirmation.”<sup>197</sup> His bitterness consumed him, as Phil would later write in his memoirs that he, “did not fully realize at the time that the President had no grasp whatsoever of the great economic forces at work in the world.”<sup>198</sup> For the next two years, Phil would search for any opportunity to disparage FDR and his political positions. When wildfires spread across northern Wisconsin in the summer of 1936, Phil took it as an opportunity to remind Wisconsinites that they could have been better insured under his Wisconsin Works Program. The people of Wisconsin took his word to heart, and repudiated the Legislators that voted against the La Follette economic recovery plan.<sup>199</sup>

As a result, Phil won the 1936 re-election campaign in a landslide, even without the physical presence of his older brother. He outpaced both candidates, winning about forty-six percent of the vote in comparison to the Republican runner-up who only won about twenty-nine percent, with the balance going to the Democratic candidate, Arthur Lueck. In fact, he only lost about eleven counties in the entire state.<sup>200</sup> But Phil was not done yet. He took the win in 1936 as

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<sup>196</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 224.

<sup>197</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 224.

<sup>198</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 218.

<sup>199</sup> Progressive Party Platform, August 3, 1936, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 135, Folder 5.

<sup>200</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1936.

a sign that his statewide popularity could extend to the national stage. Furthermore, his negative feelings towards Roosevelt had only deepened. In February 1937, Phil talked with the president about the possibility of reviving the Wisconsin Works Program, claiming that the WPA was “crass and cruel” to many unemployed people.<sup>201</sup> The President lost patience and shot back. “Phil, there have always been poor people; there always will be. Be practical!” Stunned at FDR’s dismissal, Phil determined that he “would never support Roosevelt again.”<sup>202</sup> With his newfound hatred for Roosevelt and his own return to popularity, the second La Follette son decided that he would begin a new national party to oppose the New Deal: the National Progressive Association.

From February 1937 to April 1938, Phil’s animus toward President Roosevelt festered into an anger that inspired him to quickly expand the Wisconsin Progressive Party into the National Progressive Party and force his agenda through the Wisconsin Legislature. Immediately after his return from Washington in March 1937, Phil began to write to his closest secretary and confidant, Gordon Sinykin, about these bold plans.<sup>203</sup>

By 1937, at the start of his third term, the main issue Phil wanted to address was expanded authority for the governor to take more executive control over Wisconsin’s education system and pensions. He told his aide Sinykin that if, “democracy is going to survive, it had to *function*...and I am willing to take charge to change our system.”<sup>204</sup> Phil’s desire for more executive power led him to draft the Wisconsin Reorganization Orders, declaring that:

“Whereas, In order to promote greater efficiency and economy in the administration of the state government, the Governor recommended to the Committee of Reorganization the transfer of

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<sup>201</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Frederick Delano Roosevelt, February 13, 1937, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 135, Folder 3.

<sup>202</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 247.

<sup>203</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Gordon Sinykin, March 17, 1937, Wisconsin Historical Society, Phil La Follette Papers, Box 96, Folder 1; *Adventure in Politics*, 248.

<sup>204</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 249.

certain divisions, agencies, functions, powers, and duties to the Executive.”<sup>205</sup> If this bill passed, Phil could propose bills while the legislature merely disposed of, either ratifying or rejecting.

This controversial proposal was considered overbearing and radical. In fact, it was this plan that broke the crucial alliance between the La Follettes and William Evjue, the co-editor of *The Progressive* and editor-in-chief of the *Capital Times*. On April 12, the newspaper wrote that: “*The Capital Times* has always felt that Governor La Follette has placed too much importance on the Machinery of government rather than the personnel of government.” Furthermore, Evjue warned Phil that, “If the government doesn’t run correctly, he can’t shift the blame.”<sup>206</sup> Evjue could see that Phil was following a dangerous path and therefore began to distance himself from the governor. Phil’s radical new plan lost the family of one of the most prominent newspaper men in Wisconsin, further weakening the dynasty.

During the two-week special session of the state legislature that he convened, La Follette proposed a fundamental change in the checks and balances of state government: i.e., henceforth, the executive would propose legislation and the legislature would either ratify or reject. While Phil may well have had good intentions, his attempt to push this plan through the Legislature once again alarmed Wisconsin politicians as demagogue-like behavior. Evjue observed, perhaps ruefully, that the special session was, “a week in which democratic processes were abandoned and an executive dictatorship was in the saddle.” But this massive reorganization of the Wisconsin government was but a down payment on what was to come.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> *Journal of Proceedings of the Sixty-Fourth of the Wisconsin Legislature*, (Democrat Printing Company, Madison) 1939, 37.

<sup>206</sup> William Evjue. “The Statehouse” *The Capital Times*, 1.

<sup>207</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 250.

During these same months, Phil was also hard at work planning for the start of the National Progressive Party, which would result in yet another rift between the La Follette brothers. In August 1937, Phil traveled to Washington DC once again, this time to speak with his elder brother about realigning the national Democratic Party more closely with their progressive agenda. When Bob Jr told Roosevelt about the possible new party, the President did not seem to care, waving his hand cheerfully and replying, "Go ahead!" But Bob was not so carefree about the prospect.<sup>208</sup> The elder brother believed that forming a new party would ruin his relationship with Roosevelt. However, he did not want to break publicly with Phil so he only objected in a private letter to Gordon Sinykin, complaining that: "There was too much La Follette already with the WPA, I hope Phil knows what he is doing." But Phil did not want to hear these objections, and declared that: "Isen and I have always agreed that a basic lesson of life is that the bitterest regrets are for lost opportunities -- lost because of fear."<sup>209</sup> Once again, the second generation La Follette brothers were fighting over the future of their dynasty without any other family members to mediate.

Phil decided to launch the new party on April 28, 1938, even without Bob Jr's approval. In preparation, Phil contacted over 1,200 liberals across the country and invited them to his new party's launch. In these invitations, he vaguely promised that the main difference between Roosevelt and his party would be its attempt to harness "America's great productive power available to all our people instead of killing pigs and plowing under cotton."<sup>210</sup> The most prominent Progressive he talked to was Mayor Fiorello La Guardia of New York City, who

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<sup>208</sup> Letter from Frederick Delano Roosevelt to Philip La Follette, September 1, 1937, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 96, Folder 3; *Adventure in Politics*, 252.

<sup>209</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 251.

<sup>210</sup> Phil La Follette's Opening Speech in the Stock Pavilion, April 28, 1938, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 96, Folder 2.

promised to be there. While most politicians agreed to attend the event, they were skeptical of Phil, believing that the party was just a vehicle to support his run for president.

Even though Phil networked tirelessly, he noted in his memoirs that: “Wisconsin Congressman were as scared as rabbits, and our meetings attracted no news or attention at all.” In truth, La Follette did not tell most of his old Progressive allies such as Tom Duncan, Tom Amlie, or Thomas Fairchild about the National Progressive Party event.<sup>211</sup> In her oral history, Amlie’s wife Gherta recounted that: “Phil was shifty by that time, we only found out about the NPA through posters around town.”<sup>212</sup> In addition to not compromising with his brother, he also cut himself off from his local friends. For several Wisconsin progressives, Phil’s silence was a grim foreshadowing of worse to come.

As spring came to Wisconsin in April 1938, Phil and Isen realized they were missing a crucial element of their new party: a symbol. According to Phil, some clear icon was needed to tell their story and represent their ideals. In the end, they decided upon a large red X within a blue circle. The X stood for the multiplication of wealth, while the blue circle represented equality in the ballot box and abundance of economic life.<sup>213</sup> The night before the event, Isen stayed up all night sewing the new flag of the Progressive Party. She also made banners to hang around the venue the next morning, all adorned with the new party’s symbol.

The morning of April 28, 1938 was a balmy sixty degrees, warm for Madison, Wisconsin at this time of the year. A warm breeze drew more people than expected, as nearly eight thousand gathered for the speech in front of the Stock Pavilion at the University of Wisconsin-Madison--a

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<sup>211</sup> Coberly, Catherine. “Interview with Gehrta Amlie, June 1, 1983.” Recorded on June 1, 1983 at Wisconsin Historical Society Sound Archives, Madison WI.

<https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll11/id/357/rec/7>.

<sup>212</sup> Interview with Gehrta Amlie, June 1, 1983, 43:00.

<sup>213</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 253.

unique structure that embodied many diverse elements of the state's heritage. Not only did the Agricultural School parade cows across the sandy floor, but this was the place where the city's Orchestra played, State fairs were held, and the university did most of its large animal research. Designed to show off farm animals, the building resembles a picturesque German farmhouse with several sharply pointed roofs and large windows around the entire pavilion.<sup>214</sup> There were no seats inside, just dust-covered concrete levels around the interior of the building.

On the day of the speech, the sand was covered by a carpet for more seating, while the stage and podium were juxtaposed against the main entrance. A formidable tapestry hung behind the podium, showing the NPA cross waving proudly. Moreover, Isen's hand-sown NPA banners adorned the wooden bars that connected between the high ceilings. As it turned out, the Pavilion was not large enough to hold the crowd, and so Phil's voice had to be amplified for the packed audience to hear him outside.<sup>215</sup>

As Phil and Isen stepped out of the car in front of the venue, the UW-Madison band began to play a fanfare for the governor. La Follette proceeded to the stage and paused dramatically to look out at the thousands who came to see him unveil his new plans. But several important figures had not shown up. Mayor La Guardia broke his promise, sending a low-level aide in his stead. Roosevelt sent a secretary. Most importantly, Bob Jr was not there.<sup>216</sup> The elder brother cited no reason in his letters for remaining in Washington DC, but local newspapers and politicians pointedly noted his absence. For the first time in the La Follette dynasty's reign, one of the family members was acting on their own.

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<sup>214</sup> UW-Archives, *Stock Pavilion*, S02975, <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/17111.dl/WNIOLZB6MFAKP8R>.

<sup>215</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 254.

<sup>216</sup> "Young Bob," 214.

Phil delivered his opening speech with just as much passion and fire as usual, but between the vague, quasi-Fascist themes and the ambiguous symbolism of the NPA flag, the event became a disaster. The audience's most visceral reaction was to the flag and its resemblance to Nazi imagery. To most who saw it, the giant X in the middle of a circle mimicked the Nazi flag. The *New York Times* called it a, "circumsized swastika."<sup>217</sup> A scathing review of the kick-off event from *The Wisconsin State Journal* mockingly reported that, "the dictator finally has his battle flag."<sup>218</sup> Phil, however, did not realize this striking resemblance at the time. In his speech, Phil dug himself deeper into his political grave as he gushed about his new creation for far too long. According to the report in Evjue's *Capital Times*: "The governor rambled on about his new flag for a horrendous thirty minutes."<sup>219</sup> The alarming Fascist undertones did not end with the flag.

Phil's speech, titled "Orderly Progress," also caught his audience off guard, as it was strikingly different from the usual La Follette rhetoric. Instead of attacking specific problems and explaining his own solutions for constituents, as Robert La Follette Sr had done, Phil spoke with broad, ominously vague strokes. He opened by criticizing the failing leadership of the current president, claiming that: "It is tragic, but true, that the Roosevelt administration has had to dissipate the gifts of leadership in a course so confusing that no one knows where it has led."<sup>220</sup> He then offered an alternative to Roosevelt and the New Deal, declaring: "A beginning has been made here and now. Not in 1944, not in 1940, but here in 1938. State by state we shall build as rapidly as firm foundations can be laid. Definitely and irrevocably, we are here to stay as

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<sup>217</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 254.

<sup>218</sup> "Overflow Crowd Hears Phil Launch 'THE' Party," *The Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 29, 1938, 1.

<sup>219</sup> "Announcing the Advent of New Party" *The Capital Times*, Apr. 29, 1938, 2.

<sup>220</sup> Phil La Follette's Opening Speech in the Stock Pavilion, April 28, 1938, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C16, Folder 30.

American people reclaim their heritage. Make no mistake, this is NOT a *third* party. As certain as the sun rises, we are launching THE party of our time.”<sup>221</sup>

As the speech continued, Phil offered some of his solutions to some of society’s biggest problems. He denigrated both Fascism and Communism as a response to the Great Depression. In one unwittingly ironic statement, Phil said: “Autocratic dictatorship violates every principle of Americanism -- if we are to preserve a free America, then it is clear beyond all doubt that neither Fascism or Communism serve the slightest hope.”<sup>222</sup> When he uttered this line, the crowd applauded loudly. But as the *Wisconsin State Journal* would point out, this statement was, “almost laughable” because just a few months earlier Phil had basically jammed his Wisconsin Reorganization Orders through the Legislature without much progressive support.<sup>223</sup>

While Phil was critical of Fascism, he mimicked several of its central ideals. He claimed, for example, that the main reason why the Depression was not ending was because the United States harbored, “too many idle men and women” and that “organized action must again open the way for the people to do wealth-creating work.”<sup>224</sup> This concept of an ‘organized society’ echoed Hitler, who frequently spoke about the importance of personal responsibility in the midst of the Depression. The German dictator often argued that to reach prosperity, the Germans must, “subordinate their desires and interests to the *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community)” and emphasized that: “We are responsible for our future generations.”<sup>225</sup> Both of these leaders argued

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<sup>221</sup> Phil La Follette’s Opening Speech in the Stock Pavilion, April 28, 1938, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C16, Folder 30.

<sup>222</sup> Phil La Follette’s Opening Speech in the Stock Pavilion, April 28, 1938, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C16, Folder 30.

<sup>223</sup> “Overflow Crowd Hears Phil Launch ‘THE’ Party” *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 29, 1938, 1.

<sup>224</sup> Phil La Follette’s Opening Speech in the Stock Pavilion, April 28, 1938, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C16, Folder 30.

<sup>225</sup> Moritz Follmer. “Was Nazism Collectivism? Redefining the Individual in Berlin (1930-1945)” (University of Chicago Press, Chicago), 4.



it was the laborers that had to take responsibility to create wealth for society rather than relying on the government. Even the name of Phil's speech, 'Orderly Progress,' closely resembled the title of one of Hitler's recent speeches in Berlin titled "Progress with Order" Not only were the titles similar, but the German chancellor had emphasized the importance of personal responsibility and the curse of idleness--themes that Phil now reprised in this speech. At the end of this overly long address, Phil concluded with a promise that "we are coming to a new dawn in this country that any such action will have to be public action."<sup>226</sup> After about an hour, Phil finally rested his hand from repeatedly slamming the podium and stepped down, eager to see how the media would react to his new-born party.

To his surprise and chagrin, the media repudiated the National Progressive Party and Phil La Follette. The family's long-serving advisor and editor William Evjue was now officially Phil's enemy, calling him a "traitor to democracy" in the *Capital Times*.<sup>227</sup> Even the the editor of the more conservative *Wisconsin State Journal*, Charles Backstrom, warned Madisonians that La Follette was, "only offering people an emotional, quasi-religious experience aroused by banners, symbols, marching, and appeals to nationalism and a Fascist mentality."<sup>228</sup>

Moreover, popular national magazines such as *Life* published unflattering images of Phil on the podium. The article had little political commentary on the event itself, but the pictures presented Phil as sweaty and disheveled, consistent with the negative representation in the rest of the media. When Julia Boegholdt, one of his secretaries, was asked whether she thought Phil had turned into a radical in 1938, she responded, "If it looks and smells like a Fascist, it's probably a

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<sup>226</sup> Phil La Follette's Opening Speech in the Stock Pavilion, April 28, 1938, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C16, Folder 30.

<sup>227</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 255.

<sup>228</sup> Charles Backstrom, "Something Extremely Important for America Started in Madison" *The Wisconsin State Journal*, May 3, 1938, 3.

Fascist.”<sup>229</sup> Through all of this political heat, there was not one public statement from Bob Jr. His silence helped to doom Phil in his next election.



*Source: Life Magazine, April 30, 1938.*

Not only was Phil publicly derided because of the massive failure of the NPA, but his electoral popularity dwindled as well. In the months after the NPA kickoff, the younger La Follette brother attempted to find allies. However, none of the liberal parties wanted to join, not even the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, which stated that: “While we were interested in the governor’s party, we will not be integrating with the NPA nor changing our name.”<sup>230</sup> This loss was a huge blow, as Phil had officially lost one of his late father’s most loyal factions outside of Wisconsin.

Now politically isolated in the face of national derision, Phil found himself too discouraged to run again for governor. He had, he said, “done all [he] could in the governorship” and that he would, “concentrate my efforts on building NPA.”<sup>231</sup> But Gordon Sinykin and the rest of his team implored him to run and he reluctantly agreed. His demagogue-like behavior in the

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<sup>229</sup> Interview with Julia Boegholdt, October 30th, 1982, 34:20.

<sup>230</sup> “New La Follette Party Prepares for the Future” *The Wisconsin State Journal*, May 2, 1938, 2.

<sup>231</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 256.

1937 special session and his massive failure with the NPA, however, caused him to lose almost his entire voter base in the November 1938 gubernatorial election.

To make matters worse, Bob Jr refused to come back to assist his brother's campaign. The La Follette dynasty was splitting at the seams, and Phil lost spectacularly. He spoke and traveled significantly less than his other campaigns, only making about three speeches a week rather than his past pace of one speech a day in the 1930, 1932, and 1934 campaigns.<sup>232</sup> In the November 1938 balloting, he only won about thirty six percent of the vote and lost by about 200,000 votes to his Republican opponent, Julius Heil. In contrast, Heil won fifty five percent of the vote, while the remaining eight percent went to the Democratic candidate Harry Bolens. As a result of a crumbling relationship between the brothers and their inability to compromise over the National Progressive Party, the dynasty had lost the governorship, a key element of its power. Phil would never run for office again, leaving Bob Jr as the last La Follette in public life.<sup>233</sup>

Bob Jr and Phil had faced ruptures in the past, whether it be over who would be chosen as their father's political heir or whether to start the Wisconsin Progressive Party. In 1937 and 1938, however, they moved in completely opposite directions. Through the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, Bob Jr had shifted towards the traditional labor-focused Progressive ideals his father championed, while Phil embodied his father's populist methods through his fiery speeches.<sup>234</sup> But even if Phil sounded and looked like his father to onlookers, his quasi-Fascist political stances were in direct opposition to what his father stood for. Clearly, both sons had conflicting interpretations of how to carry on their father's legacy, splitting the La Follette dynasty apart and leaving their political enterprise vulnerable, as the brothers could no longer count on family labor

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<sup>232</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Fall 1938.

<sup>233</sup> "Young Bob," 221.

<sup>234</sup> *Philip La Follette: The Second Son*, 186.

to dominate Wisconsin politics. In the next few years, World War II would rupture the family dynasty even further as Phil again left the United States, this time to follow another far-right leader.<sup>235</sup>

Section VI: World War II and the Death of a Dynasty (1941-1948)



*Source: (left) Wisconsin State Historical Society, Phil in Military Uniform, about 1944; (right) Wisconsin State Historical Society, Bob Jr in an interview for the 1946 Senatorial election*

As the 1940s dawned, war loomed while the two brothers' relationship crumbled. Their deep-seated disagreements turned into petty conflicts. Bob Jr and Phil fought over their next political steps--how the NPA should be run, how the old La Follette estate should be managed, and even over their own personal aspirations. The letters between the two became terse, only speaking on a “need-to-know” basis. In the end, Bob Jr and Phil isolated themselves from each other, leaving the dynasty vulnerable to rival political parties such as the Radical Republicans led by Joseph McCarthy who would stamp out the La Follette Progressive agenda. By the end of this decade, the two La Follette brothers’ once loving relationship became consumed by bitterness.

But as the arc of history bent towards war in 1941, Phil La Follette attempted to carry on his father’s anti-war legacy, standing against the tide. Now out-of-power, Phil joined the America

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<sup>235</sup> Philip La Follette: *The Second Son*, 187.

First Committee, an extremist group that opposed entering World War II. America First opposed Roosevelt's interventionist foreign policy and believed that World War II could be blamed not only on the Axis powers, but on European militarism. At its peak, the America First Committee had over 80,000 people who subscribed to its cause. Phil's position placed him in direct opposition to the president. Throughout 1940 and 1941, Phil broadcast radio speeches to national audiences condemning Roosevelt's reckless war-mongering. In each of his speeches, the younger La Follette announced that, "the fight against foreign wars had only just begun" and urged listeners to join the Committee soon.<sup>236</sup> He also agreed with other far-right political actors such as Charles Lindbergh that culpability for waging war could not be placed solely on Nazi Germany, but was a "divided responsibility" amongst the Allies and the Axis powers.<sup>237</sup> Phil walked a dangerous path, even more dangerous than in his 1938 speech. Not only was he insinuating fascist beliefs, but he was now openly sympathizing with them.

The second La Follette son truly believed that he was following in his father's legacy by opposing World War II. He felt that both Woodrow Wilson and FDR took advantage of war to achieve greatness abroad because they could not do so at home. He compared the two, asserting that, "Wilson and Roosevelt each strove to unseat economic tyrants here in the United States. One called his campaign 'The New Freedom'; the other, the 'New Deal.'"<sup>238</sup> But what Phil did not realize at the time was that he and his father spoke against the war for entirely different reasons. While Robert Sr struggled against American imperialism over colonies such as Puerto

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<sup>236</sup> Transcript of Philip La Follette's Speech to America First Committee, October 14, 1940, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 142, Folder 3.

<sup>237</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 257.

<sup>238</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 264.

Rico and the Philippines, Phil's opposition to World War II was founded on Fascist sympathies and bitterness toward his political enemy, FDR.

Throughout this period from 1940 to December 1941, Bob Jr did not support Phil's efforts. He had his own political troubles within the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee. After completing four successful investigations similar to its work with General Motors between 1937 to 1940, the Committee ended up being the longest-running Congressional investigation of the twentieth century. But its positive reception faded as fears of Communist infiltration within the Committee arose.<sup>239</sup>

In November 1940, Representative Thomas Dies of Texas and his House of Un-American Activities (HUAC) led an attack on the La Follette Committee for possible Communist ties. HUAC quickly found definitive evidence that four aides within the Committee openly sympathized with Communist ideals. When Dies questioned Bob Jr in December 1940, the eldest La Follette was nearly silent in his responses. At one point, Dies asked if Bobbie had any inkling that his staffers had Communist leanings and Bob Jr only replied, "I trusted them, they got the job done."<sup>240</sup> This defeat dealt a huge blow to Bobbie's mental health and his political strength. President Roosevelt offered a short apology, saying in a single sentence that: "If it were up to me, it wouldn't have ended, Bob." Phil sent no letters about the end of the La Follette Committee.<sup>241</sup>

Even if Bob Jr wanted a break from politics, he would not receive one. The Wisconsin Senatorial election of 1940 occurred at the same time as the Committee investigation. Bob Jr, however, told his wife Rachel that he was "too tired" to return to Madison to campaign for an

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<sup>239</sup> *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*, 136.

<sup>240</sup> *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal*, 140.

<sup>241</sup> Letter from Frederick Delano Roosevelt to Robert La Follette Jr, December 17, 1940, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C18, Folder 8.

entire election cycle, so local progressives such as Tom Amlie and Herman Ekern campaigned for him.<sup>242</sup> Just as Bob Jr decided not to support Phil in the 1938 gubernatorial election, so Phil did not speak on behalf of his brother. He wrote to Bob that he was too, “entrenched in NPA politics” to run for his brother and so he simply donated to Bob Jr’s campaign instead.<sup>243</sup>

While Phil was unpopular with Wisconsin voters at the time, they were still mildly supportive of Bob Jr. In the end, Bob Jr squeaked out a victory, winning about forty-five percent of the vote over the Republican challenger Fred Clausen who won about forty one percent of the vote. The remaining thirteen percent flowed towards the Democratic candidate James Finnigan.<sup>244</sup> Bob Jr might have won the election, but his popularity had dwindled through the combined effect of not returning to Wisconsin and the fall of the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee. Most importantly, his latent depression from his early childhood had returned in full force as he traveled back to Washington DC. His doctor noted that Bob Jr had “symptoms of a hypochondriac” and ordered La Follette to work less to deal with stress. As a result, Bob Jr had a rather uneventful term from 1940 to 1946.<sup>245</sup>

Phil remained with the America First Committee until that fateful day on December 7, 1941 when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. In the days following the attack, FDR whipped the American people into action against the Japanese and the Axis powers. The America First Committee disbanded immediately. But Phil did not wait to find his new adventure. After the attack, the *Capital Times* asked what Phil thought America’s next steps should be, and Phil

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<sup>242</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Rachel La Follette, November 13, 1940, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C18, Folder 1.

<sup>243</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Robert La Follette Jr, July 14, 1940, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 142, Folder 2.

<sup>244</sup> Wisconsin Blue Book, Spring 1940

<sup>245</sup> “*Young Bob*,” 226.

responded, “I would go back to the army if I was acceptable.”<sup>246</sup> Isen and the rest of the La Follette family were devastated. Fola sent a rare letter from New York pleading with Phil that he “was much too old” to go back to war.<sup>247</sup> But he returned anyway and was quickly agreed to travel to Melbourne, Australia to join General Douglas MacArthur’s staff in October 1942. A woeful Isen recounts in her memoirs that when, “Phil asked me to help him pin on his insignia properly, I could hardly force myself to do it.” She continued to write against the war in *The Progressive* and allowed other women to write in their own submissions and commiserate over the loss of their husbands.<sup>248</sup>

Phil’s assignment was to work under General Douglas MacArthur as a public relations officer. While Phil and his commanding officer left no correspondence that would allow an assessment of their relationship, Phil was apparently mesmerized by MacArthur. He served under the general for thirty months in the Pacific from October 1942 to June 1945. Similar to his reaction to Mussolini and other authoritarian leaders, Phil projected his father’s personality onto strong leaders whom he admired. The younger La Follette described MacArthur as, “endowed with a first-class mind, which he enriched with prodigious reading and study. And all was dominated by a will of iron.”<sup>249</sup> He exalted the general, saying that MacArthur was, “rarely put to his mettle by other mortals. And when he was -- if in his own military field -- he was superb, dazzling.”<sup>250</sup> Over the course of the war, Phil moved across the Pacific theater with MacArthur and developed an intense attachment to his superior officer at the expense of the close bond he once shared with his brother. Instead of praise, Bob Jr only received Phil’s derision.

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<sup>246</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 265.

<sup>247</sup> Letter from Fola La Follette to Philip La Follette, January 16, 1942, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 142, Folder 4.

<sup>248</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 267.

<sup>249</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 269.

<sup>250</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 269.



Phil wrote to Isen frequently during the war even when he could not write to Bob Jr. Most of their letters between the couple began as life updates either on the military or how their children, but then quickly devolved into petty gossip about politics and family. Their most common topic was Bob Jr. In March 1943, the La Follettes decided to sell off their old family farm, Maple Bluff. It was a small ranch house with many acres and ponies as well, which Belle Case had left to the brothers.<sup>251</sup> Since Phil was abroad, it was up to Bobbie and Isen to sell the house together. But Isen could not stand Bob Jr's depressive attitude. She frequently complained to Phil about how it was "impossible to get Bob to even drag his damn feet!"<sup>252</sup> and how she had no idea how Bobbie stayed on top of all of his Senatorial duties. Even if these sorts of comments could be taken as a joke, later letters would reveal deep resentments. As the selling process dragged on into the summer of 1943, Isen wrote to Phil that Bob, "could not remain sad forever" and needed to, "ask for help or get out of this awful mood."<sup>253</sup> These are the first letters of open gossip from one La Follette family member about another, indicating their growing alienation.

Rather than defend his brother, Phil only added to the gossip. Phil no longer wrote the flowery letters to his brother about how lucky he was to have Bob Jr in his life and how his older brother was a "light in every life he touched" as he had in 1924.<sup>254</sup> Instead, when Isen complained about the elder La Follette, Phil replied: "I mean no disrespect to Bob, but he is a man who fulfills expectations, not exceeds them. He just goes through the motions."<sup>255</sup> After drawing a

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<sup>251</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Isabel La Follette, March 1, 1943, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C19, Folder 1.

<sup>252</sup> Letter from Isabel La Follette to Philip La Follette, June 24, 1943, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 143, Folder 2.

<sup>253</sup> Letter from Isabel La Follette to Philip La Follette, June 24, 1943, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 143, Folder 2.

<sup>254</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Robert La Follette Jr, March 7, 1924, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 26, Folder 4.

<sup>255</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Isabel La Follette, July 6, 1943, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 143, Folder 3.

contrast between Bob Jr and himself, Phil mentions that Bobbie always, “had more of my mother in him than my father. Smart and sharp, but not fiery.”<sup>256</sup> In Phil’s view, Bob Jr did not have the same La Follette passion that he and his father had shared. After all of their fights over the Progressive Party, their disagreements over New Deal policy, and childhood competition for their parents’ legacy, Phil finally admitted that Bob Jr has disappointed him. Sibling rivalry had torn the brothers apart. As seen in the three generational business model, this rupture would doom the La Follette political dynasty.<sup>257</sup>

Adding to this sense of alienation in the brothers’ relationship, their letters during World War II were devoid of the compassionate language they had shared in the past. There are few family updates even though both have children. In fact, most letters from Bob Jr and Phil were telegrams as simple as, “Heard about your promotion to colonel, good job. Things are going well here. Worlds of love, Bob.”<sup>258</sup> Most importantly, the La Follettes no longer know each other’s affairs before the public. This unity that had once allowed the dynasty to speak with one voice and avoid political complications was lost. The second generation La Follettes never recovered their communication after Belle Case died and Fola distanced herself from the dynasty.

After three years overseas, Phil returned to the United States in October 1945. But unlike his return in 1933, the younger La Follette had no interest in running for office. He also did not work to maintain his National Progressive Party, allowing the organization to wither. Instead, he supported his new hero, Douglas MacArthur. La Follette was by no means a high-ranking officer in MacArthur’s court, but he was a valuable asset as a former governor with a famous last name

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<sup>256</sup> Letter from Philip La Follette to Isabel La Follette, July 6, 1943, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 143, Folder 3.

<sup>257</sup> Barbara Murray, “The Succession Transition Process,” *Family Business Review* 16, no. 1 (2003), 17–20.

<sup>258</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Philip La Follette, August 14, 1943, Wisconsin Historical Society, Philip La Follette Papers, Box 143, Folder 5.

in Wisconsin, the general's home state. Instead of resuming his own career, Phil used his statewide contacts to prepare a campaign for MacArthur's native-son nomination in the 1948 Republican Presidential primary.<sup>259</sup>

Meanwhile, Bob Jr's next Senatorial race was already upon him in 1946, but the elder La Follette was burnt out and unwilling to campaign. To make matters worse, the Progressive Party had collapsed after Phil's departure. Bob Jr had to decide whether to either return to the Republicans or switch to the Democrats. According to Wisconsin progressive Thomas Fairchild, Bob Jr had, "a lot of offers to run as a Democrat in 1946" from former FDR allies.<sup>260</sup> Fairchild continued to explain that it was Phil, however, who convinced Bob Jr to come back to the Republican party as that, "was the way they had done it for decades."<sup>261</sup> Even after all of their fallouts, the brothers still listened to each other's political advice. With Phil's encouragement, Bobbie decided to return to the Republican Party.

But not all of the Republicans wanted the La Follettes back, as the party had shifted hard-right during their absence. Rather than run a Progressive candidate such as Bob Jr, the party wanted a new, headstrong candidate named Joseph McCarthy who was running on an anti-La Follette platform. McCarthy rejected everything Bob Jr fought for such as the Civil Liberties Committee and staying out of foreign entanglements after World War II.<sup>262</sup> Instead, the young Republican ran as a militant young bull, who touted his military experience in World War II to gain advantage over Bob Jr. This was an admittedly unfair attack, as Bob Jr's health and age

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<sup>259</sup> Philip La Follette: *The Second Son*, 381.

<sup>260</sup> James Cavanaugh. "Interview with Thomas Fairchild, March 12, 1985." Recorded on March 12, 1985 at Wisconsin Historical Society Sound Archives, Madison WI. <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll11/id/374/rec/12>.

<sup>261</sup> James Cavanaugh. "Interview with Thomas Fairchild, March 12, 1985." Recorded on March 12, 1985, 46:25.

<sup>262</sup> Joe McCarthy's First Victim: How the Senator Brought Down La Follette, Viewed online at: [madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article\\_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html](http://madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html).

meant that he could not serve in both World Wars. In one press conference, McCarthy even called Bob Jr, “a Communist sympathizer” for his stance on international policy.<sup>263</sup> Bob Jr responded by, “firmly disavow[ing] Communism in all forms.”<sup>264</sup> But no matter how many attacks he responded to, the older La Follette brother never returned to Wisconsin to campaign in the primaries. Since he had never lost an election and no longer had the drive to care if he was voted out, he remained in Washington DC for the campaign to finalize the La Follette-Monroney Reorganization Act, which offered free education to House and Senate Pages.

Seeing the downturn of La Follette popularity in Wisconsin, Phil actually offered help to Bob Jr’s 1946 campaign. But to his surprise and disappointment, Bobbie’s campaign staff turned him down. They claimed that Phil was “too controversial” and might further hinder their reelection bid. The younger brother’s affection for MacArthur was, “hurting Bob” according to Bob Jr’s advisors.<sup>265</sup> So, Phil remained in the wings, offering small amounts of money to support the campaign. As the primaries approached, La Follette lost his initial lead to “Tail-Gunner McCarthy.”<sup>266</sup> Although the elder brother returned to Wisconsin only on the day of the primary election, he lost by a margin of just 5,000 votes.

The loss was a shock to all of Wisconsin. For the first time in twenty-four years, Robert La Follette Jr had lost an election. And for the first time in over fifty years, a La Follette was not representing Wisconsin. In his memoirs, Phil recalls that, “the day after the primary, the wife of

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<sup>263</sup> Joe McCarthy’s First Victim: How the Senator Brought Down a La Follette, Viewed online at: [madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article\\_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html](http://madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html).

<sup>264</sup> Joe McCarthy’s First Victim: How the Senator Brought Down a La Follette, Viewed online at: [madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article\\_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html](http://madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html).

<sup>265</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 275.

<sup>266</sup> Joe McCarthy’s First Victim: How the Senator Brought Down a La Follette, Viewed online at: [madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article\\_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html](http://madison.com/ct/news/local/history/joe-mccarthy-s-first-victim-how-the-senator-brought-down-a-la-follette/article_15c85974-7bb7-5498-a4e2-ef7f9bcf41c7.html).

one liberal Democratic candidate...came to Isen with tears in her eyes over Bob's defeat."<sup>267</sup>

Arizona Senator Henry Ashurst called Phil asking how Bobbie could have lost and Phil replied that he just, "didn't come home to campaign."<sup>268</sup> That same day, Bob Jr sent McCarthy a bitter one-word telegram that read "Congratulations."<sup>269</sup> In the next few years, Bobbie began working in the Truman administration as a functionary in the State Department while the Marshall plan was written. He never ran for political office again. Although only fifty-one, his political career was over.

Phil continued to work for MacArthur, and rendered valuable assistance during the 1948 presidential campaign. MacArthur was powerful, authoritarian, and charismatic, and fascination with him was especially strong in his native Wisconsin. Since Phil was the most prominent Wisconsinite in MacArthur's organization, he was central to the campaign. Not only did La Follette help launch the "MacArthur for President" campaign and file his nomination papers in Wisconsin, but Phil also conducted voluminous correspondence discussing campaign affairs and drafting speeches for MacArthur with his other acolytes such as his Chief of Intelligence, Charles Willoughby.<sup>270</sup> While MacArthur never actually spoke to Phil himself, La Follette worked tirelessly for the success of his campaign. In his radio speeches across Wisconsin, Phil argued that MacArthur was, "the only true leader."<sup>271</sup>

But even if Phil believed MacArthur should have been president, the press did not agree.

In the months leading up to the Republican National Convention, publications such as the

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<sup>267</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 274.

<sup>268</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 276.

<sup>269</sup> Letter from Robert La Follette Jr to Joseph McCarthy, November 10, 1946, Library of Congress, Robert La Follette Jr Papers, Box C24, Folder 2.

<sup>270</sup> Letter from Charles Willoughby to Philip La Follette, May 19, 1945, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 143, Folder 1.

<sup>271</sup> Transcript from Philip La Follette's Speech to Madisonians, April 18, 1948, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 144, Folder 1.

*Sheboygan Press* wrote that, “As far as the presidency is concerned, we may hear a former Sheboygan resident nominate him and that is about as far as his cause will get.”<sup>272</sup> Once again, Phil fought an uphill battle in an unpopular campaign in Wisconsin without any familial support.

Not only did Phil make speeches for MacArthur, but he also planned a part of the general’s delegation for the 1948 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia held in the Municipal Auditorium from June twenty-first to the twenty-fifth. Throughout that week, various candidates held grandiose events in an attempt to sway the nomination process. But in the end, MacArthur’s presentation was not as impressive as the others. The *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Press* reported a sorry display where, “two ill men leaning on canes – a nearly blind lawyer and a partly-deaf old soldier – early today placed an absent warrior in nomination for the Republican national candidacy.”<sup>273</sup> His advocates then approached the podium to speak for the general. One MacArthur supporter, a Milwaukee attorney named Harlan Kelley, declared that, “Politicians are a dime a dozen, but there is only one MacArthur.” As he stepped back to halt for applause, Kelley realized that the auditorium was still three-fourths empty and this appeal to his candidate was met with silence. Phil chose not to speak during the convention, claiming that wanted, “others to recount their own experience with the illustrious general.”<sup>274</sup>

Every candidate also planned a parade where they could distribute letters to potential supporters. Once again, MacArthur fell short. The parade actually started quite well as, “Cheers bounced off the empty gallery seats. Supporters trooped around the hall carrying the 1,103,574 letters and telegrams endorsing MacArthur.” But the aura of power that MacArthur’s campaign had hoped to project quickly dissipated as, “the parade and the cheering was briefer than the

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<sup>272</sup> “Harmony Likely for GOP Delegates,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 11, 1948, 2.

<sup>273</sup> “Rebelling Dixie Demos Get Virginia Setback,” *The Wisconsin Rapids Daily Press*, March 14, 1948.

<sup>274</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 279.

demonstrations accorded by any of the other six candidates.”<sup>275</sup> Not only did MacArthur fail to receive the Republican nomination, but he only received nine electoral votes from Wisconsin’s total of twelve. In sum, the election of 1948 was a disaster for Phil La Follette and he never worked on another campaign. Bob Jr and Phil exchanged no letters about the campaign and kept their distance from each other.<sup>276</sup>

From 1940 to 1948, Bob Jr and Phil were isolated from each other and from the rest of their family. Mary and Fola did not write as much, and even close allies such as William Evjue sided against them, ending their media influence through *The Progressive*..<sup>277</sup> The La Follette unity that had held the political dynasty together for decades had disappeared.

In assessing this sudden reversal of their political fortunes, I would argue that this rivalry was rooted from their contrasting interpretations of how to carry on their father’s legacy. While Bob Jr followed his father by fighting for workers’ rights and civil liberties, he did not have his father’s political passion to champion other causes such as furthering women’s rights or other Progressive ideals.<sup>278</sup> Phil, on the other hand, had betrayed his father’s ideals by substituting style for substance in advocating Fascist ideals after his 1933 trip to Europe. The younger brother, however, did inherit his father’s speaking ability and charisma.<sup>279</sup>

In the end, their differing interpretations of their father’s legacy pitted them against each other and destroyed the La Follette dynasty from within. The formidable La Follette second generation, which controlled the state politics through the governor’s seat and influenced national politics through a senatorial seat and a popular journal, turned into a tragedy that, in purely

<sup>275</sup> “Harmony Likely for GOP Delegates,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 11, 1948, 2.

<sup>276</sup> “Young Bob,” 278; *Philip La Follette: The Second Son*, 301.

<sup>277</sup> *Adventure in Politics*, 280.

<sup>278</sup> “La Follette, Robert Marion, Jr., 1895 - 1953.” *Wisconsin Historical Society*, 8 Aug. 2017, Accessed on February 27, 2021. [www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS9539](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS9539).

<sup>279</sup> *Philip La Follette: The Second Son*, 410.

political terms, could have easily been avoided. At least in the second generation, the La Follette political dynasty proved less of a political movement and more of a family business that traded in politics rather than a product. As such, they bowed to the same three-generational business model that bedevils many family businesses, which often collapse from bitter sibling rivalry.

#### Conclusion: The Final Tragedy

On February 24, 1953, former Senator Robert La Follette Jr, was late to lunch with his wife Rachel in a cozy restaurant in Washington DC.<sup>280</sup> After an hour of waiting, she began to worry and rushed home where she found her husband dead on the floor with a pistol in hand and a suicide note on his desk. While Bob Jr's family was in shock, the signs of his worsening conditions are clear to historians now. The former senator had always struggled with depression. In an interview with the *Capital Times* only a few months earlier, he was asked if he was going to run against Joe McCarthy to reclaim his old seat. In a playful, but wistful tone, he explained that, "I have already let my father down once."<sup>281</sup> He gave an eerily similar message while hugging his son Bronson that morning, as he apologized to his father Robert and brother Phil for allowing the dynasty to collapse. Through this tragic event, it is clear that Robert La Follette Jr was not only a politician who cared about his reputation, but a man deeply affected by his family life, so much so that he could not live with the notion that he had failed the ones he loved most.

In assessing the history of the La Follette family dynasty, historians and political scientists have, for decades, separated the personal and public lives of these political figures. This approach has resulted in both disciplines failing to develop a fuller understanding of how this political dynasty actually operated and advanced their liberal Progressive agenda. By extension,

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<sup>280</sup> "Young Bob," 2.

<sup>281</sup> "Young Bob," 3.



the separation of these two spheres makes it impossible to truly understand the role of *any* familial political dynasty of the 20th century. Through a close study of both the personal and political dynamics within the family, the La Follettes can provide a model to analyze how they and other 20th century enterprises' rise and decline are influenced by their interpersonal relationships.

In addition to providing a model to analyze political dynasties, the La Follettes also show historians how political dynasties can be analyzed as family businesses. In their decline, the La Follettes follow, rather precisely, the three-generational family business model.<sup>282</sup> The enterprise begins with a matriarch and a patriarch who appear larger than life to everyone around them. Robert La Follette Sr and Belle Case La Follette represent these two roles. They were tireless workers for the Progressive cause and revered by all politicians by the time of their deaths. Most importantly, their children, Fola, Bob Jr, Phil, and Mary all loved them dearly as parents even though they were strict. But the childrens' attempt to live up to their parents' expectations sparked rivalries between the siblings, Bob Jr and Phil in particular.<sup>283</sup> The two sons interpreted their family's legacy in very different ways and so they fought over a multitude of issues as their political careers progressed . Finally, Bob Jr and Phil isolated themselves from each other and the dynasty crumbled. The third generation of cousins were left with a very limited legacy and only Bob Jr's oldest son, Bronson Cutting La Follette, would go on to pursue a political career.

Through the tragedy of the La Follettes, historians can glimpse into how familial bonds can shape the vitality of a political dynasty and how American dynasties can be analyzed differently: as an dynastic enterprise rather than a unique family that happened to gain

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<sup>282</sup> *Sustaining a Family Dynasty*, 85.

<sup>283</sup> *The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America*, 306.

prominence. As Belle Case La Follette reflected in her last letter to her Wisconsin constituents, the La Follettes ran so well not only because they were talented politicians, but because everything they did were “Labors of love.”<sup>284</sup> When that love diminished, the dynasty declined.

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<sup>284</sup> *Belle*, 289.

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