

AMERICAN LIVES **Robert M. La Follette**
Rebellious Reformer

"[Some people urge] 'standing back of the President,' without inquiring whether the President is right or wrong. For myself, I have never subscribed to that doctrine and never shall."—Robert M. La Follette, Senate speech against a declaration of war (1917)

They called him “Fighting Bob.” From his first election to the end of his life, Robert M. La Follette (1855–1925) was a rebel who tried to reform government and end its control by business interests and party bosses.

La Follette, born on a Wisconsin farm, studied at the state university in Madison while working to help support his family. He developed a skill at public speaking and after college joined the Wisconsin bar.

In 1880, he ran for county district attorney against the wishes of the local Republican leader. Visiting every voter he could, he carried the election and won re-election two years later. He then served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. The 1890 election was a disaster for Republicans, though, and La Follette lost his seat. Back in Wisconsin, he broke with Philetus Sawyer, the power behind the state Republican party. He charged that Sawyer tried to bribe him to influence a judge in a case that Sawyer was arguing on behalf of a railroad. The exposure of corruption and the break with party leadership launched La Follette’s career as a reformer.

He tried several times to win the party’s nomination for governor of Wisconsin. Finally, in 1900, La Follette was nominated—and elected. In office he pushed his reform goals: ending party boss control by relying on direct primaries to nominate candidates, making state taxes more fair and equitable by closing business loopholes, and regulating railroad rates. He took his reform plans to the U.S. Senate in 1906.

In the Senate, La Follette again ran afoul of party leaders. He backed the progressive bills that Theodore Roosevelt introduced, but he did not believe the president to be a committed reformer. La Follette hoped to succeed Roosevelt in 1908 as the Republican nominee for president, but the nod, and subsequent election, went to William Howard Taft. As Taft’s term proceeded, La Follette grew increasingly critical. In 1911 he sought support for

a presidential run. Once in 1912, tired from overexertion, he delivered a rambling speech that was seen as sign of a nervous breakdown. La Follette’s supporters deserted him for Roosevelt and the latter’s Bull Moose Party. In the end, Democrat Woodrow Wilson won the election.

La Follette voted for Wilson’s progressive measures but resisted U.S. involvement in World War I. He voted against the declaration of war in 1917. He voted against bills creating a military draft and authorizing the use of borrowed money to meet war costs. Senators attacked him for disloyalty, and he was in danger of receiving censure. But the war ended, and Republicans needed his vote to control the Senate. As a result, the censure move died. After the war he opposed the Treaty of Versailles and League of Nations. He felt the treaty would lead only to “an unjust peace which could only lead to future wars.”

Conservatives took control of the Republican party in the 1920s, but the independent-minded La Follette continued to rebel. Appalled by corruption in the Harding administration, he led Senate investigations of the Teapot Dome scandal. Uniting the progressives from both parties, he ran for president on a third-party ticket in 1924. Though he spent just a fraction of the money spent by Republicans, he pulled in 5 million votes, one-sixth of the total. He won in Wisconsin and finished second in 11 other states. The next year, Republican Party regulars struck back. They stripped La Follette of his Senate committee assignments, ending his authority. La Follette died soon afterward at age 70.

Questions

1. Cite evidence you find in this biography that supports La Follette’s nickname “Fighting Bob.”
2. Which of La Follette’s reforms do you think had the most lasting impact on American government?
3. How was La Follette punished for rebelling against party leadership?