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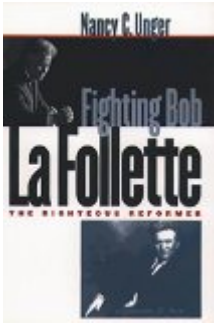
Nancy Unger. *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xiii + 393 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2545-7.



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Righteous Perfection

What Nancy Unger offers in this fine biography of Robert Marion La Follette is a study of the famous politician's personal and political life. In this case, however, it is La Follette's personality that determines his political character and, ultimately, his political course of action.

The political story told here is fairly straightforward. Work as a lawyer quickly opened the door to public office first as a district attorney, then as a U.S. Congressman, Governor of Wisconsin, and U.S. Senator. La Follette emerges as a champion of returning power to the people and as a relentless antagonist of special privilege and corrupt wealth. His political career is a model of personal courage and fearlessness; perseverance and dedication to purpose; and, integrity and tenacity that made the nickname "Fighting Bob" well-deserved. The issues he championed such as direct democracy, campaign finance reform, equitable taxation, consumer protection, women's suffrage, protective labor legislation, and civil rights are clearly presented and assume a timelessness in light of current political debates. La Follette emerges as a "radical" progressive (although the author finds the term "insurgent" more confusing than clarifying). He pushed reforms before they became popular, stood as the leader of a small group of U.S. Senators who resisted involvement in World War I, and broke from his party to run as an independent reform candidate for president in 1924.

Unger balances La Follette's political triumphs with his political failures. Victories as governor included railroad and utility regulation, anti-lobbying, corrupt practices and direct primary laws, conservation programs, and tax reforms. As popularizer of the Wisconsin Idea, La Follette emphasized the theme of government in the public interest and relied heavily on university faculty such as Richard T. Ely and Frederick Jackson Turner to design and administer reform laws. As U.S. Senator, La Follette played a major role in the passage of measures involving the income tax, the physical evaluation of railroads, the rights and treatment of seamen, and the vote for women. His defeats were just as numerous. He failed in his bid for the presidency. He was unable to establish

a lasting and powerful progressive coalition in Congress. His irreconcilable political beliefs made it impossible for him to accept or support what he regarded as flawed or imperfect legislation. His unwillingness to delegate responsibility often resulted in wasted, misdirected energy. He was too temperamental and bore a political suspiciousness that bordered on paranoia. In the extreme, his need to defend his sense of moral superiority jeopardized his political career.

The author is willing to challenge other biographers of La Follette on key points. For instance, she takes issue with historian David Thelen's[1] explanation of La Follette's and other progressive governors' weaknesses, failings that "resulted from the middle ground those governors held between old ethnic, job-oriented politics and the new issue-oriented politics." Unable to cast off old ways of thinking, these governors viewed their elections as the "basic reform" and did not adequately mobilize public opinion behind actual legislation. As a result, they failed to secure the radical reforms implied in their rhetoric (p. 137). Unger agrees that La Follette's achievements as governor fell short of his rhetoric, but offers only an underdeveloped explanation that "rather than holding a middle ground between job-oriented politics and issue-oriented politics, La Follette used the former to create the latter" (p. 137).

The real contribution of this biography to the literature, however, lies in its psychological analysis of La Follette and the impact of complex psychological and emotional factors on his career and family relationships. The author argues that La Follette's personal strengths and weaknesses date to his earliest childhood beginnings in Primrose, Wisconsin. "La Follette always acted," says Unger, "within the confines of his life as shaped by the emotional casualties of childhood. What appear to be political reversals and inconsistencies are actually quite consistent in view of La Follette's emotional needs" (p. 4). In response to his mother's directives to emulate and please his dead father by doing "right", La Follette spent his entire life seeking approval and acceptance that manifested itself politically as "righteous perfection" (p. 17). Unger suggests that it was La Follette's self-righteousness that strained his relationship with Theodore Roosevelt, "a man who had achieved all that La Follette coveted: power, mass love, approval, and a stable and high sense of self-esteem" (p. 149). Shared "messianic self-perceptions" also made long-term cooperation between La Follette and Woodrow Wilson impossible (p. 225).

Psychological drives affected La Follette's relationship with members of his immediate family. He depended on the advice and counsel of his wife, Belle. She set specific goals for him and offered the approval that "assured him of his significance and importance" (p. 47). Ironically, La Follette's own psychological demons affected his children, especially his oldest son, Bobbie. All the children were subject to incredibly high parental expectations and a strong degree of parental domination. The discussion involving the psychological impact of this parent-son/daughter relationship on Robert La Follette Jr. is one of the more intriguing chapters in the book. Moreover, La Follette's frequent illnesses were tied up in this dynamic as well. "Genuine physical illness, in short, was an emotional necessity. While ill, La Follette could relax his desperate attempts to be all-knowing, all-powerful, all 'right'" (p. 82). Illness became, for La Follette, an escape from anxiety and depression. "As an adult, he did not feign illness but, by his actions and lifestyle, often induced it, ultimately recreating those warm, comforting childhood feelings" (p. 84).

In the end, it was the psychological that dictated the political. His self-righteousness often prevented him from cooperating even with those who shared his views. His refusal to compromise alienated many and repeatedly limited his political effectiveness. But that same self-righteousness drove him to an impressive list of accomplish-

ments and to a place in the political culture as an icon.

Note

[1]. David Thelen, ***The Early Life of Robert M. La Follette, 1855-1884*** (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1966); ***The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885-1900*** (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972); ***Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit*** (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976).