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Progressive Political Timeline

9/7/2012

February 2, 1912 –“ La Follette Collapses in Philly”

The leading Progressive Party candidate “Fighting Bob” Robert M. La Follette collapsed from exhaustion at midnight on Thursday February 2, 1912 after giving a campaign speech in Philadelphia to over 600 members of the Periodical Publishers’ Association.[[1]](#footnote-1) At the time Senator La Follette was the leading Progressive candidate to oppose President William Howard Taft for the 1912 Republican nomination. This setback allowed Theodore Roosevelt to take control of the Progressive candidacy and allowed him to run as a third party progressive under the “Bull Moose” party. Because of La Follette’s setback, Roosevelt gained third party candidacy which in turn split the Republican ticket in the 1912 presidential election between Republican candidate William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt.[[2]](#footnote-2) This split in Republican votes gave the Democratic Party, under candidate Woodrow Wilson, the boost in Electoral College votes it needed to win the election.

The possible reality behind La Follette’s collapse is that during his speech to the publishers he became quite frustrated and belligerent with them. La Follette became “ill,” not from sickness or ill health rather, “talked himself to death.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The publishers capitalized on his “health” and blew his sickness out of proportion in retaliation for the criticisms made that night in Philadelphia. *The New York Times* ran the headline “LA FOLLETTE ILL; MAKES NO EXCUSES: Friends Declare His Outbreak Against Newspapers Due to Mental Collapse." *The Baltimore Sun* published “LA FOLLETTE ILL, Wisconsin Senator Said to Be a Physical Wreck from Overwork, CANCELS ENGAGEMENTS, Will Drop Work and Rest for Two Weeks, COLLAPSE AT PHILADELPHIA, Hissed and Hooted for Denouncing American Press in a Rambling Speech Before Publishers."[[4]](#footnote-4) The following day papers ran stories depicting his “violent attack of nausea” that led to an inability to properly speak. In *The New York Times* General Felix Agnus voiced concern for La Follete saying, “’Poor La Follette! He has killed his chances. Indeed he will be fortunate if he carries his own state. I certainly believe he is suffering from a mental breakdown. The man should not be out making addresses, but should be home under treatment by a physician.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Candidate Roosevelt capitalized La Follette’s negative publicity and his followers deserted him after the questions of his mental instability.

Following the 1912 election, La Follette stayed relatively quiet as Wisconsin’s US Senator until WWI, when he openly opposed the US’s involvement in the war and in 1924 when La Follette ran again for president under an independent progressive party. He finished third with only 17% on the popular vote behind President Calvin Coolidge and John W. Davis. Shortly after his second run for presidency he died suddenly from a heart problem on June 18, 1925.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Synder, Gabriel. "Introducing Our 1912 Project; Something's is Wrong with La Follette." The Atlantic, February 6, 2012. http://www.theatlanticwire.com/politics/2012/02/introducing-our-1912-project-somethings-wrong-la-follette/48316/ (accessed September 23, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Unger, Nancy C. *Fighting Bob La Follette: The Righteous Reformer*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Synder. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Haynes, F. E. "La Follette and La Follettism." The Atlantic, October 1914. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1924/10/la-follette-and-la-follettism/306030/ (accessed September 23, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)