

# Forum: La Follette's Wisconsin in Perspective

**Editor's Note:** The essays in this section are revised versions of a roundtable discussion at the Organization of American Historians meeting in Washington in April 2010. The forum was conceived in the weeks after the 2008 general election. At that time, various commentators were using the word *progressive* to describe the tone and content of the winning coalition and not simply as a stand-in for *liberal*, a word despised by its enemies and abandoned by its friends. The session's organizers felt that they could explore the possible ongoing applicability of progressivism through a discussion of Robert M. La Follette, the figure who most clearly represented the original progressives' attempt to fuse moral fervor, democratic methods, and substantive policy. By the time the forum took place in 2010, the tone of national discussion had changed in ways one could not anticipate in November 2008.



Senator Robert M. La Follette Sr., 1906. Courtesy of *The Progressive*.

With appalling regularity, commentators in the press and on television—several of whom should have known better—wielded *progressive* as an epithet as they had hitherto done with *liberal*. When making what passed for historical references, they misrepresented the original progressives as complacent statisticians and technocrats. Every reader of this journal should know that progressives wrestled with the role of the state and the problem of technocracy, often in more sophisticated ways than recent generations have. For the most part, progressives treated government and expertise as tools, but not unambiguous ones. It was precisely the effort to balance mechanisms of popular engagement and control against systems for developing and implementing complex policies that made La Follette's Wisconsin Idea a model for progressives throughout the country.

The essayists have made no attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of La Follette's career and meaning, because that has been done in more depth by the authors elsewhere. In an overview essay, Glen Gendzel discusses the public sector and government intervention as unifying principles for progressives, who, as is well known, regularly embraced contradictory or tangential agendas. Jørn Brøndal recalls how the progressive focus on the challenge of corporate industrialism, along with the progressive search for a transcendent public interest, tended to turn even this most liberal- and democratic-minded of progressives away from confrontation with racial oppression and ethnic division. Nancy C. Unger, La Follette's most recent biographer, examines the politician's autobiography, which met a deservedly ambiguous reception when published in 1913. The latter chapters of the autobiography inadvertently revealed the defects of the democratic righteousness that La Follette embodied, but the bulk of the book offered a vivid trip through the circumstances that generated La Follette's form of progressivism and the sentiments and principles that animated La Follette and his followers. Matthew Rothschild, current editor of the *Progressive*, the magazine that La Follette founded as his organ, reminds people of the immediacy and intensity that infused La Follette's writing and speaking and that explained much of his appeal. To carry on this institution identified with La Follette, Rothschild makes clear, does not mean sticking to the particular priorities or proposals that concerned the politician a century ago; for Rothschild this means applying his spirit and principles to what is immediately important now.