

La Follette vs. Roosevelt

NORRIS remained in Washington while McCarl, finding it impossible to live in Washington on the \$1,500 salary provided for congressmen's secretaries, stayed in McCook to organize and conduct the primary campaign. This arrangement cost Norris several hundred dollars each year for extra clerical help during especially busy periods.¹ At first it was complicated and cumbersome, but eventually it worked fairly well. In 1912 it proved a boon to Norris because it kept him out of the state and out of the bitter factional strife which ruined the chances of many hopeful candidates.

McCarl was well suited for his position. As a member of the executive committee of the Progressive League of Nebraska, he had a voice in policy determination. He knew the Nebraska political scene well and had directed two of Norris' previous campaigns. Able, hard-working, and pleasant, McCarl was liked and trusted by most political leaders. Norris had complete faith in McCarl's honesty, thoroughness, and efficiency.

This primary campaign, it was quickly decided, would be conducted apart from other campaigns. Norris refused, as always, to buy the support of any newspaper. He kept out of all statewide primary contests, claiming he would endorse the Republican nominees. He was committed, however, to the candidacy of La Follette, and intended to further his cause in Nebraska.²

At the end of 1911, the progressive Republicans in Nebraska were beginning to expand their activities. They supported La Follette and quickly endorsed Norris. While there was very little Taft sentiment in the state, La Follette leaders were worried lest the politicians supporting the administration promote a boom for Roosevelt to split the progressive forces. If this occurred, Taft might capture the Nebraska delegation. The situation was complicated by the fact that while the voters would express their presidential preference in the April primary, the law specifically did not commit the convention delegates to vote for the winning presidential candidate. La Follette leaders were

anxious to get their campaign underway and hoped that Norris could persuade the Wisconsin senator to visit Nebraska early in 1912.³

During this period Norris was sure that Roosevelt was not a candidate and that he was in sympathy with the La Follette movement. Norris was afraid, however, that some Taft people, realizing that the president's cause was hopeless in Nebraska, might organize under a Roosevelt banner "simply for the purpose of getting into the convention," where they would then support Taft. Thus Norris suggested that in every congressional district La Follette supporters seek to wrest control of the party organization from the standpatters.⁴

Unfortunately for La Follette supporters, the complications Norris and others feared actually occurred. On the morning of December 22, 1911, a petition was filed in the office of the secretary of state placing Roosevelt's name on the ticket, thereby causing a further split in Republican forces. The petition was filed by John O. Yeiser of Omaha, a member of the Advisory State Board of Pardons and an associate of Victor Rosewater, standpat National Committeeman from Nebraska. Under Nebraska law, no one could decline such a nomination, although the petition could be withdrawn. Roosevelt could have avoided the issue by requesting that his name not be placed on the petition.⁵

Norris still believing that the former president was not a candidate, wrote him explaining the situation. He asked Roosevelt either to avow his candidacy or to demand that his name not be printed on the official primary ballot. He concluded that if conditions arose making it necessary and expedient for the convention to nominate Roosevelt, "and if in such an emergency you could be prevailed upon to permit the use of your name as a candidate, all La Follette delegates would be then, as they are now, your enthusiastic supporters."⁶

On January 2, 1912, Roosevelt answered, saying, "No man has been authorized by me to put my name on any ballot, or to get up any petition in my interest, or to take any action on my behalf." Previously he had written to Yeiser that he did not wish to be a candidate and would not speak on his own behalf. However, Roosevelt made it clear that while he was not a candidate, he had said nothing about what he would do if tendered the nomination. He also refused to request the withdrawal of his name from the primary ballot on the grounds that such a withdrawal would probably hurt La Follette's candidacy far more than it would Taft's. Thus Roosevelt would neither authorize the use of his name nor request its withdrawal.⁷

Answering Roosevelt's letter, Norris noted, "If nothing is done to meet the predicament with which we are confronted in Nebraska, the

result, I fear, will be that the state and others similarly situated, will be carried by the Taft delegates, on account of the division in our ranks." To prevent this, he thought Roosevelt should either ask his friends to support La Follette delegates or request that his name not go on the ballot. If the nomination were then offered to Roosevelt because La Follette could not obtain it, all La Follette delegates would enthusiastically support the former president. In this way, Norris explained, progressive Republicans could campaign with united ranks and insure progressive delegations from states where primary laws were operative.⁸

Despite these developments, progressive Republican leaders were still optimistic. F. P. Corrick, secretary of the La Follette League (formerly the Progressive League), made an arrangement whereby both factions united on a common slate of delegates and agreed to endorse R. B. Howell over Rosewater for national committeeman. Thus anti-Taft men could support a set of progressive delegates who, if elected in the primary, would vote at the convention for the presidential candidate receiving a plurality of the Nebraska primary votes. This arrangement, while not satisfactory to the La Follette leaders who did most of the arduous organizational work, at least prevented chaos from dominating the progressive camp. It also assured Republican voters who were progressive in their sentiments that Taft men would not represent Nebraska at the national convention.⁹

Since Roosevelt did not issue a statement taking himself out of the Nebraska primary, Norris concluded that he wanted the nomination. Men who had spoken with the former president said he was "very emphatic and pronounced" against the renomination of Taft and did not want to eliminate himself for fear that he might be the only man who could beat Taft. Norris did not think it "square" for Roosevelt to allow the use of his name in Nebraska, and he hoped no quarreling would develop between Roosevelt and La Follette followers. He intended to continue supporting La Follette, and hoped to avoid controversy by stressing opposition to Taft rather than differences between the progressive factions.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Norris' application as a candidate for the Senate reached the secretary of state on January 19. At the time McCarl was spending three days in Lincoln "with good results." Visitors were on hand for a meeting of Taft men and a gathering of farmers. The Taft men chose a full set of convention delegates, presidential electors, and a candidate, Rosewater, for national committeeman. According to McCarl, most farmers favorably recalled Norris' position on reciprocity and Cannonism. Local politicians reported Norris sentiment. Every-

where Norris and Governor Aldrich were recognized as the progressive leaders.

McCarl also reported overwhelming Roosevelt sentiment; "It's my judgment that if he is a candidate he will secure the delegation from Nebraska, hands down." A La Follette manager reported Roosevelt sentiment in the towns, but the farmers were for La Follette. If Roosevelt were not a candidate, almost everyone agreed, La Follette would have most of his votes. The uncertainty as to the former president's intentions was making it difficult to organize a following for La Follette.¹¹

Aldrich's position, too, was uncertain. Ostensibly he was for La Follette, but, according to rumors, he had been "coquetting with the Taft fellows" to win their endorsement and thereby avoid a primary fight. Norris was concerned that the governor did nothing to silence Yeiser in his attempts to get a Roosevelt slate of delegates on the ticket instead of an accepted slate of progressive Republican delegates.¹²

Norris did very little on his own behalf during the primary campaign. Most of his correspondence concerned the over-all political situation and his support of La Follette. However, he assured friends that he was in the senatorial primary in good faith and wanted to be nominated and elected. Though rumor had it otherwise, Norris insisted he had not agreed with Senator Brown to remain in Washington throughout the primary campaign. The senator, like Norris, preferred to tend to his congressional duties. Brown relied on the Republican organization to push his candidacy. His bitter feud with Rosewater, however, indicated that harmony among the regular Republicans did not prevail when offices other than the presidency were at stake.¹³

At the end of January, in an effort to thwart the Roosevelt movement in Nebraska and restore harmony among progressive Republicans, Norris wrote a long letter to Yeiser calling on him to support La Follette. He insisted that he would be for Roosevelt only if and when La Follette were unable to obtain the nomination at the Chicago convention. If the delegates pledged themselves in this way, followers of both men could work in harmony for the progressive cause. Norris, in effect, told Yeiser that the proper thing for Roosevelt men to do was to support La Follette, lest they insure a Taft delegation to the Republican convention.¹⁴

Yeiser's reply indicated that harmony would not be easily restored. He informed Norris that he ought to get aboard the Roosevelt bandwagon, lest the Roosevelt followers find it necessary to choose a senatorial candidate committed to their man. Norris was led to believe

that Yeiser was motivated by the desire to attend the Chicago convention as a delegate at large and was using Roosevelt's candidacy as a way of doing so.¹⁵

The letters of Norris and Yeiser were published and stimulated much discussion throughout the state. Norris supporters began to feel that while fidelity and constancy to La Follette were noble qualities, caution and recognition of rising Roosevelt sentiment also had their value. In spite of Yeiser rather than because of him, Nebraska sentiment was crystallizing around Roosevelt, who was predicted to win the preference vote. La Follette did not appeal to large numbers of rank and file voters because it was believed that his progressivism was too radical. While most Americans favored reform and progress, few wanted it in "trainload lots." Therefore they found Roosevelt a more acceptable candidate, more respectable and moderate than La Follette. Such views were prevalent among a growing number of Nebraska Republicans, but Norris learned that in his congressional district voters were more in accord with his views. A Republican conference in Hastings on January 27 strongly endorsed both La Follette and Norris.¹⁶

Despite growing Roosevelt support, Norris had no intention of leaving La Follette and he so informed Yeiser early in February. He reiterated the view that the fight for La Follette was in no sense a fight against Roosevelt. Although Norris knew that Yeiser could make good his threat to enter another candidate in the senatorial primary against him, he refused to allow such tactics to affect his actions; "I can afford to be defeated, but I can not afford to be driven by a threat."¹⁷

Thus stood the situation between the two progressive Republican factions early in February when Louis Brandeis gave the La Follette League a boost by stumping the state. Launching his tour in Fremont, Brandeis spoke once or twice a day in favor of La Follette's candidacy. He also praised Norris for his work in Congress. A La Follette supporter reported that he made a "great impression." His speeches received wide press coverage. Shortly thereafter, Republican meetings at York and Fremont, where the Boston lawyer had spoken, adopted resolutions endorsing Norris for the Senate.¹⁸

Meanwhile, in Washington, Norris was calling for harmony between the Roosevelt and La Follette factions. R. B. Howell of Omaha, a candidate for national committeeman in the primary election, called on Norris after conferring with Roosevelt and likewise spoke for harmony among Nebraska progressives. Norris, thinking it useless to write any more letters to Yeiser, now wrote to Governor Aldrich requesting

him to provide leadership and prevent any split in the progressive ranks. On February 7, after a conference between Yeiser and Frank Harrison, a representative of the La Follette League, it was announced that there would be one primary ticket for La Follette and Roosevelt forces. While Norris was not directly instrumental in establishing party harmony, his numerous letters paved the way for it.¹⁹

Though Yeiser now was eliminated as a candidate for delegate-at-large, the Roosevelt forces won much by this announcement. At the time it was made Republicans in five of the state's six congressional districts had already named La Follette men as their delegates. The La Follette League, which had done the basic political spadework, agreed to give Roosevelt the chance of capitalizing on their efforts. The reported collapse of La Follette at the annual banquet of the Periodical Publishers' Association at Philadelphia on February 2 and the subsequent loss of many of his prominent supporters undoubtedly prompted the conference between Yeiser and Harrison. Uneasy Nebraska supporters of the Wisconsin senator welcomed its result since it gave them a chance to support Roosevelt without appearing disloyal to La Follette and the progressive cause. An uneasy harmony was restored to the ranks of Nebraska progressive Republicans, though Roosevelt officially was still not a candidate.²⁰

Norris reported that La Follette's breakdown had resulted in the cancellation of his meetings. He also reported that many La Follette men had now decided to come out openly for Roosevelt. Representative Lenroot had told Norris that La Follette's collapse would probably make it necessary for the senator to withdraw from the contest. While Norris understood that La Follette was in "a serious physical condition," he did not endorse Roosevelt. In his correspondence he still supported the Wisconsin senator, though he often repeated that he was not opposed to Roosevelt, who, according to Norris, was anxious for him to win the senatorial nomination.²¹

On February 12, progressive Republicans met in Lincoln to perfect their primary ticket. Norris received "a very cordial endorsement for Senator." Nevertheless, this was a tense and exciting meeting because Governor Aldrich, representing the Roosevelt forces, took a strong position against endorsing La Follette, while C. O. Whedon, a vice president of the La Follette League, was equally insistent upon an outright endorsement. After a strenuous session a set of resolutions satisfactory to both camps and a slate of progressive delegates were presented and unanimously accepted.

This meeting was significant because it put an end to controversy among progressives on all levels but that of presidential preference.

Both Roosevelt and La Follette would appear on the ballot, but the rest of the ticket would include only one name for each office. The sixteen delegates sent to the Chicago convention would vote for the candidate who won the preference vote. Controversy and animosity, however, continued over the matter of plurality versus majority. It had yet to be decided whether a clear plurality would have to be achieved by one of the three presidential candidates or whether the combined Roosevelt-La Follette vote would be sufficient to send the common slate of progressive delegates (fourteen of whom were devoted La Follette men) to the nominating convention.²²

In McCook, McCarl reported the situation to be "up in the air," as it was in other areas as well. Everybody seemed to be awaiting Roosevelt's speech in Columbus, Ohio, where it was believed he would accept the invitation of eight Republican governors, Aldrich among them, and announce his candidacy. McCarl thought that if Roosevelt accepted, he would probably defeat both La Follette and Taft in Nebraska. La Follette alone could defeat Taft in Nebraska, but Roosevelt alone could score a much more impressive primary victory—one which would aid other progressive candidates as well—because he could command not only La Follette supporters but many Taft men as well. Norris' candidacy would benefit more with Roosevelt on the ticket as the lone progressive Republican presidential aspirant.²³

Norris, however, was certain that both Roosevelt and La Follette would run in the Nebraska primary, and that further efforts to get either candidate to withdraw were worthless. There was no statute specifically requiring elected delegates to support the victorious primary candidate, but popular opinion on this matter was so strong that all delegate candidates quickly pledged themselves to abide by the popular vote. Thus, if one of the progressive candidates did not get more primary votes than Taft the president would receive the Nebraska votes at the convention.²⁴

Since Norris' name was endorsed by both progressive factions, his candidacy would not unduly suffer because of factional discord. If both Roosevelt and La Follette remained on the ticket, however, McCarl assured Norris, "Things will be in a bad shape." There was growing sentiment because no arrangement could be made whereby one candidate would withdraw, that both must be selfish and consider themselves more important than the progressive movement. If no withdrawal arrangement were forthcoming, observers felt that Nebraska progressive leaders should endorse one of the candidates, probably Roosevelt since he was more popular, in a final effort to stave off a Taft victory.²⁵

Bowing to the mounting pressure of public opinion and the example of prominent progressives, Norris began to shift his position on La Follette shortly before the former president officially announced his candidacy on February 21. Norris still favored La Follette, but recognized the practical necessity of backing Roosevelt to narrow the issue to a fight between "the Taft men and the progressive men." If La Follette would do likewise, Norris believed he would prove himself "the greatest man in the country," and "invincible four years from now."²⁶

Meanwhile the La Follette League in Nebraska, rent asunder by the same forces that impelled Norris to endorse Roosevelt, was deluged with letters urging it to boost Roosevelt. R. B. Howell, who never had shown any open preference for Roosevelt over La Follette, announced his shift and thought the league ought to do likewise. By the end of February, Nebraska progressives were stampeding to Roosevelt, and J. J. McCarthy, the president of the La Follette League, thought it impossible to check them. F. P. Corrick, the secretary of the organization, shifted to Roosevelt believing that the former president's candidacy would insure a progressive victory in Nebraska. But Frank A. Harrison, a diehard La Follette leader, remained loyal to the Wisconsin senator though he was not optimistic.²⁷

By the end of February the first phase of the Nebraska primary had come to an end. Though there were two progressive Republican presidential candidates, it was evident that Roosevelt was the more popular. The thorny problem of progressive delegates and the way they would vote at Chicago had been solved. As a senatorial candidate, Norris was scheduled to appear on both the La Follette and Roosevelt ballots, with hopes of getting votes from Taft men as well. Though animosity and bitterness remained, the issue had become more clearly defined. Much of the confusion was dispelled when Roosevelt announced, in Columbus, Ohio, "My hat is in the ring."

Now with less than two months before the April 19 primary, Norris, who was busy in Washington with legislative chores, had to perfect an organization and get his record before the voters. At the same time he had to avoid further involvement in the Roosevelt-La Follette controversy, lest diehard supporters of either candidate discharge their anger against him by voting for his opponent.