

Theodore Huebener

John Peter Altgeld: The Forgotten Eagle

A German-American statesman who fearlessly upheld the basic ideals of America and became a martyr in his fight for the right was John Peter Altgeld of Illinois. His political career was a distinguished one in the 1880s and 1890s, yet he is barely mentioned in history texts and the average American is ignorant of him. He was a noble character, like that other champion of freedom, Carl Schurz. Denounced and maligned because of his fearless defense of the hapless German workmen accused of being anarchists, he was rejected and forgotten. One of the few who recognized his greatness was the poet Vachel Lindsay, who wrote of him:

Sleep softly, eagle forgotten . . . under the stone,
Time has its ways with you there, and the clay has its own.
Sleep on, O brave-hearted, O wise man, that kindled the flame. . . .

John Peter Altgeld, born in a small town in Nassau, Germany, on December 30, 1847, was brought to America when he was three months old. His father, a wagon-maker and a man of little education, settled near Mansfield in northern Ohio, where he went into farming. The family was poor and John Peter's childhood was hard. At fourteen he was hired out as a farmhand. His schooling was very meager. During three winters he attended an English district school and a class in German. Borrowing books from neighbors, he read omnivorously, thus making up for his lack of a formal education.

In 1864, at the age of sixteen, he enlisted in the Ohio Home Guard in response to President Lincoln's call for volunteers. He received a bounty of one hundred dollars, of which he gave ninety to his father. As he described it later, he "carried a gun around in the swamps below Richmond." He served briefly but faithfully. After his short career in the army, he worked on the farm and on the railroad. He also taught school for a while. Finally he went to Savannah, Missouri, where he worked as a laborer by day and studied law at night.¹ In 1871, at the age of twenty-

four, he was admitted to the bar. Active in politics, he was elected city attorney in 1872. After four years in Savannah, he went to Chicago with a hundred dollars in his pocket. Industrious and competent, he acquired a large practice in a short time.

He had planned to get into the building business but politics still attracted him. He made rapid headway, being elected in 1886 to the Cook County Superior Court on the Democratic ticket. Four years later he was chosen chief justice and in 1892 he was elected governor of Illinois. He was the first German and the first citizen of foreign birth to attain that office.

During the first year of his administration the World's Columbia Exposition was held in Chicago. His political future seemed bright. He was a power in the party; he had risen to the highest office in the state. If he had been an ordinary politician, his success would have been assured. But he was a man of noble character and tender conscience who could not keep silent in the face of injustice. That had tragic consequences for him.²

He had gained power and prosperity but he never forgot his early poverty and hardship. As judge in Chicago and as governor in Springfield, he always identified himself with the poor and the downtrodden. He defended them and fought for them in speeches, articles and books.

As governor he introduced unprecedented reforms, among them parole and probation for prisoners, regulation of sweat shops and child labor, factory inspection and the limitation of working time for women to eight hours a day.

He pardoned the unjustly condemned anarchists and protested an attempt at federal strike-breaking in Chicago. These acts stirred up such a furor of rage against him that it devastated his political career. He ran for a second term as governor in 1896, but was defeated by a Republican machine-nominated candidate. A half dozen years later he died dramatically.

Altgeld was deeply interested in humanitarian causes. Knowing from personal experience how hard and cruel life may be for the poor and unfortunate, his sympathy went out to them. He was especially eager to provide justice for them in the courts, pointing out how often the rich and powerful escaped punishment. In 1884 he published a book entitled *Our Penal Machinery and Its Victims*, in which he exposed police brutality and the ineffectiveness of the penal system, which, he argued, only bred more criminals. He succeeded in improving conditions in the prisons and established a number of reformatory institutions.

Altgeld's abiding concern with questions of justice and police behavior explains his involvement in the famous, or notorious, Haymarket case.³ This was one of the most unsavory episodes in American history. On May 3, 1886, during a labor meeting in Haymarket Square, Chicago, where speakers were protesting police brutality, a bomb exploded, killing one policeman and wounding several others. Amid vast public indignation, whipped up by the press, eight persons known to be anarchists were arrested, tried and condemned. The hysteria was

so great that the trial took place, to quote a historian, in an atmosphere "more like that of a battlefield than a court room."

No proof of specific guilt was required or asked for.⁴ The defendants were guilty, presiding judge Joseph E. Gary said, not because they had committed a crime, but because they were anarchists. Seven of them were sentenced to death and one to life imprisonment. Four were hanged; one committed suicide in jail.

Three were still in prison when Altgeld became governor. Appeals for clemency were made to him. On his making a careful study of the records of the trial, he was horrified by what appeared to be a gross miscarriage of justice. He pardoned the three surviving anarchists—Fielden, Neebe and Schwab. In a pardon message of sixty pages, issued June 26, 1893, the governor presented documentary evidence to reveal the brutality of the police and the dishonesty of the court proceedings. He concluded, "Such ferocity . . . is without parallel in history."

A storm of vituperation descended on Altgeld. Caricatures of him appeared in the papers depicting him as a wild-eyed anarchist with a bomb in each hand and a dagger in his teeth. Since the pardoned anarchists bore German names, Altgeld was termed "an alien enemy of America." Even Theodore Roosevelt denounced him.

One year later the maligned governor was involved in another stormy episode.⁵ It came about through the strike of the American Railway Union against the Pullman Palace Car Company in June, 1894. Although violence and looting occurred in Chicago, Governor Altgeld was sure it could be controlled by the militia. This view was not shared by President Cleveland, who ordered federal troops to Chicago. The outraged governor sent sharp telegrams to the president. He pointed out that under the constitution the federal government could interfere in the affairs of a state only if the governor requested it. He, Altgeld, had not asked for federal troops. Legally, he was in the right.

The intervention of the federal troops broke the strike. Altgeld was portrayed in newspapers and magazines as a dangerous radical who supported mob-violence. During the year 1894 a tornado of defamation struck him.

At the end of his term as governor, Altgeld returned to private life. He resumed his law practice with a younger partner, Clarence Darrow, who was to become famous later.

Altgeld continued to speak and write in defense of liberal issues. On March 12, 1902, he delivered a speech at Joliet, Illinois, pleading the cause of women and children kept in British concentration camps during the Boer War in South Africa. At the close of his address he said, "I am not discouraged. Things will right themselves. The pendulum swings one way and then another. . . . Wrong may seem to triumph, Right may seem to be defeated. But the gravitation of eternal justice is toward the throne of God."

These were his last public words. Suddenly, while his audience still cheered, he staggered off the stage and collapsed. Within a few hours he was dead of a cerebral hemorrhage. The brave man died as he had lived, fighting for justice and rectitude to the very end.

Altgeld was one of the noblest historic figures of the past century—fearless, uncompromising, compassionate. America can be proud of him.

Columbia University
New York, New York

Notes

¹ Stewart H. Holbrook, *Dreamers of the American Dream* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1957).

² Albert B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States* (New York: Steuben Society, 1927), p. 176.

³ Richard O'Connor, *The German Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1968), p. 330.

⁴ Samuel E. Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 769-70.

⁵ O'Connor, p. 333.