

Altgeld, the Liberator (March 18, 1902)

John Peter Altgeld has joined Abraham Lincoln in the realm of the immortals.¹ His career was tempestuous and heroic, and the end tragic and sublime. The gods must have set the stage for the last earthly act of the intrepid warrior and most nobly did he fill the leading role. When the last word of his impassioned plea for liberty died upon his eloquent lips the climax came and the curtain fell upon another martyr in the great drama of humanity.

John Altgeld was born in the throes of revolt. A thousand years of feudal tyranny were culminating. The fateful year of 1848 had a violent temper. It rocked the cradle of the babe that was destined to become the tribune of the people.

The leader, now fallen, never took a backward step, never subordinated principle to policy, never sacrificed conviction to attain his end. He was fearless, he was determined, and he was incorruptible.

John P. Altgeld was in the highest sense a statesman, he was a daring leader and a fiery and intense orator whose eloquent and lofty appeals inspired the multitude.

His noblest and therefore greatest official act was the opening of dungeon doors to liberate innocent victims of corporate tyranny. If the gods have to do with politics they ordained the election of John P. Altgeld for this incomparable service to humanity.

Through the rain of fire he walked with steady step to the hideous bastille's doors, nor faltered once until the captives walked forth men; his official robes turned to ashes in the ordeal, but lo! the flame of calumny to which our hero bared his head is even now become the aureole of his fame.

The robbers of the people, the stranglers of liberty, the foes of humanity feared and hated him; the fawning sycophants of wealth, the timeserving mercenaries of power slandered him; this was the measure of his greatness.

The few honest men who knew John P. Altgeld loved him. He was genuine; he was true; he could look God and man straight in the eye.

In the railroad strikes in 1894 he expanded to his true proportions. There he proved to be the fearless champion of the people. He stood upon the boundary line of Illinois and protested against the military usurpation of the President, and though overwhelmed, he proudly vindicated his high honor, and he, more than any other man, retired Grover Cleveland and his pirate crew from American politics.

Altgeld was too great to become President; he will be remembered long after most Presidents are forgotten.

How glorious the final scene! See him summon all his wasted strength. Note the transfiguration in the last superhuman effort — the light of liberty in his eye, the flush of dawn upon his brow as he defiantly exclaimed:

Again to the battle, Achaians!
Our hearts bid the tyrants defiance!
Our land — the first garden of Liberty's tree —
It has been, and shall yet be, the land of the free;²

Workingmen and workingwomen never had a truer friend; he yearned to see them happy, and consecrated all he had to make them free.

He paid the penalty of all the earth's redeemers. Socrates was poisoned, Christ crucified, John Brown strangled, Lincoln assassinated, and Altgeld stabbed by a million venomous tongues.

The grandchildren of his slayers will seek his works for knowledge and inspiration, and to the coming generations he will speak forever.

Published in *The Toiler* [Terre Haute, IN], March 21, 1902, unspecified page. Reprinted as "Tribute to Altgeld" in *Social Democratic Herald*, March 29, 1902. Copy of original preserved in Papers of Eugene V. Debs microfilm edition, reel 9.

¹ John Peter Altgeld (1847-1902), Governor of Illinois best remembered for having pardoned the imprisoned Haymarket anarchists, died on March 12, a few days before this piece was written by Debs for the local socialist newspaper.

² Opening lines of the poem "Song of the Greeks" (1821), by Thomas Campbell (1777-1844).