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JOHN PETER ALTGELD: PIONEER PROGRESSIVE

By CHARLES A. MADISON

JOHN PETER ALTGELD, the most abused and reviled man of his generation, was an infant of three months when his parents brought him here from Germany in the spring of 1848. The family settled on a farm near Mansfield, Ohio, and eked out a bare existence. Mr. Altgeld was a harsh and bigoted man and forced John Peter, his eldest son, to help him on the farm from early childhood. At the age of thirteen the boy was doing a man's share in the field and the chores of the farm as well. Notwithstanding his very little schooling, however, he early evidenced a marked eagerness for reading and pored over every book he could lay hands on. In 1864, when only sixteen, he enlisted as a substitute for one of the Ohio Home Guards. During his hundred days of service he contracted a fever which kept him at the field hospital for a fortnight and from which he was to suffer recurrently in later years.

Life on the farm now became increasingly irksome to him. He read a great deal, attended a term in high school and another in a nearby seminary, and then taught school for two years. At twenty-one he fell in love with Emma Ford, a fellow teacher. When her father objected to him because of his poverty he decided to go west in search of his fortune. After working his way along from farm to farm, and nearly dying from a virulent recurrence of fever, he reached Savannah, Missouri, where he quickly established himself as an able and ambitious youth. By 1871 he had learned enough law to be admitted to the bar, and two years later he was elected state attorney for the county on a combined Democrat-Granger ticket. In the campaign he first articulated his liberal views. But the work of public prosecutor did not prove congenial to him, and late in 1875 he resigned his office and left for Chicago.

Altgeld was twenty-eight when he arrived in the Illinois metropolis to begin his legal career anew. After several months of increasing hardship he began to get a few clients. In another year he was not only earning his expenses but saving money. He now again wooed Emma Ford,

this time successfully. The marriage proved highly felicitous, except for childlessness.

With Chicago growing fast, Altgeld was quick to perceive the possibilities of large profits in real estate manipulations. In 1879 he invested five hundred dollars in a lot. One advantageous deal led to others. Before long his farsighted and shrewd enterprise gained him considerable wealth. He thereupon turned his talents to the erection of office buildings. Each new structure gave him the pleasure of creative achievement—becoming to him a means of sublimating his strong parental craving.

Altgeld also resumed his interest in politics. His known liberal views and his knowledge of German made him a welcome speaker at labor rallies. In 1884 he ran for Congress, but lost because Illinois went Republican. Success came to him two years later, when he was elected as judge in the Cook County Superior Court with the open support of labor.

An important factor in his election was the publication in 1884 of his book, *Our Penal Machinery and Its Victims*. Here he was the earnest reformer, urging the removal of the causes of crime. He criticized the prevailing penal system as a tragic failure; pointed out that most criminals come from the poor with broken or no homes, and that the police furthered crime by their brutality and needless arrests; and condemned especially the indiscriminate imprisonment of young offenders. Among the reforms he advocated were a more intelligent system of fines, paid work for prisoners, indeterminate sentences, and the abolition of grand juries. His discussion of each proposed improvement was based on facts and figures gathered from many sources and buttressed by a humane and persuasive logic. The book was well received and brought him invitations to address gatherings of professional groups. It also gained him the devoted and lifelong friendship of George A. Schilling, a young Chicago labor leader.

Altgeld served as judge for five years. While on the bench he became known for his fair and fearless conduct and was highly respected by lawyers and litigants alike. In 1890 his colleagues honored him with the office of chief justice. The following year, however, he resigned. Court procedure had begun to irritate him; the judicial robes proved tawdry and confining. He had by now acquired assets worth around a million dollars and was eager to make the most of his wealth. Once free from his judicial duties, he decided to erect "the finest and best office building

on earth." He was very proud of this enterprise, which he named Unity Building, and spared no expense in its construction.

Despite his preoccupation with the rising Unity Building and his extensive law practice, Altgeld continued to participate in public affairs. He took his stand as a liberal each time, never forgetting his lowly origin and his devotion to Jeffersonian ideals. As early as 1886—the year of great labor unrest, capped by the Haymarket riot—he wrote in favor of the arbitration of strikes. He also advocated legislative reforms, the Australian ballot, the abolition of the sweatshop system, and the enactment of the eight-hour workday. In 1890 he published a number of his papers on these and other similar subjects in the first edition of *Live Questions*. Subsequently the volume was reissued to include his later addresses. The book at once established him as a vigorous and intelligent critic of current social maladjustments. The liberals in Chicago eagerly claimed him as their own, while the *Chicago Tribune* was the first to disparage him as a follower of Karl Marx.

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Early in 1892 the politicians in both major parties knew that they could not win in the coming election without the help of the rising Populist vote. Since the Republicans were generally regarded as the party of the large corporations and therefore inimical to the impoverished farmers, the Democrats tried to capitalize on their favorable opportunities by picking candidates able to win the allegiance of the aroused People's party. It was this political exigency which forced the Illinois Democrats to nominate John Peter Altgeld as its candidate for governor. An experienced and shrewd campaigner, Altgeld made his stand on a reform platform and won by a sizable majority.

Friends of Governor Altgeld assumed that one of his first official acts would be the pardon of the surviving Haymarket anarchists. Instead he busied himself with the replacement of Republican officeholders by deserving Democrats and able reformers. To Schilling and Clarence Darrow, who prodded him about the pardon, he said that he would act when he was ready and that he would do what he thought was right. On June 3 he condemned the lynching of a Negro in Decatur in an official proclamation that made a stir over the nation. Four days later he delivered his notable address to the graduating class of the University

of Illinois, in which he told the students, among other things, to think of justice realistically as "a struggling toward the right."

On June 26 Altgeld issued his famous 18,000-word pardon of the three Haymarket anarchists. Citing the record and many affidavits, which Schilling had obtained for him, he demonstrated that the jury was not chosen by chance as required by law but from a panel collected personally by a special bailiff who boasted that he had called only those men who "he believed would hang the defendants," and that Judge Joseph Gary had upheld the bailiff and had assisted in selecting the prejudiced jury. He showed further that much of the evidence was "a pure fabrication" on the part of the police officials who had terrorized and bribed witnesses; that it was Captain Bonfield's sadistic brutality which was chiefly responsible for the Haymarket riot. Finally he pointed out that "the State has never discovered who it was that threw the bomb that killed the policeman, and the evidence does not show any connection whatever between the defendants and the man who did throw it." Yet the record revealed "that every ruling throughout the long trial on any contested point was in favor of the State; and further, that page after page on the record contains insinuating remarks of the judge, made in the hearing of the jury, and with the evident intent of bringing the jury to his way of thinking."

Governor Altgeld knew the consequences of his outspoken condemnation of this judicial wrong. He knew also that he could have issued the pardon as a matter of mercy and received the plaudits of the public. But he refused to compromise with justice. A study of the record had convinced him that the anarchists had been wronged by a prejudiced judge and jury and his conscience impelled him to rectify this injustice done to the dead and living victims. Even more important to him was the need to expose and thus to nullify a judge-made precedent which would have deprived the people of a trial by a jury of their peers.

The expected happened. The storm broke with exceeding violence. With very few minor exceptions the newspapers of the country followed the lead of the *Chicago Tribune* in a protracted outpouring of personal vituperation. The very eminent citizens who had earlier petitioned him for the pardon now execrated him for impugning the sanctity of the courts. These men of wealth and power, unwilling to concede their unsavory part in the trial of the anarchists and finding Altgeld's legal

position impregnable, tried to hide their own guilt by denouncing him as the enemy of our hallowed legal system.

John "Pardon" Altgeld faced the storm without flinching. "It was the crowd on one side and John Peter Altgeld on the other," as he was to remark more than once. Armed with a clear conscience, he stood pat. When asked if he regretted the pardon, he quickly exclaimed: "Never! If I had the matter to act upon again tomorrow, I would do it over again." But he deeply resented the scurrilous invective which the gentlemen of the press and the clubs continued to publish against him—and his heart hardened against them. Instead of shrinking into obscurity, as his enemies had expected, he emerged from the slanderous onslaught firmly resolved to battle for the right as he saw it. Nelly Bly of the *New York World*, who had come to scoff, perceived the true Altgeld during her interview with him: "I am glad to say that I have met and talked with Governor Altgeld, who is going to do as he thinks right every time, if the whole world stands still."

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The deepening economic depression forced Governor Altgeld to act in a manner which nonplussed and irritated the heads of corporations and their vociferous mouthpieces. In June, 1893, strike riots in Lemont, causing the death of several workmen, made it necessary for him to send state troops to the scene of disorder. Unlike previous executives, however, he followed them at once to make sure that justice was done. In his report he put the blame for the killings on the employer. The following Labor Day he told Chicago workmen candidly that hard times were ahead and that while he as governor would not let them down, constitutional provisions would make it impossible for him to give them much assistance. He urged them to organize along lawful lines in an effort to help themselves. He also addressed the state militia to impress upon them their duty to keep law and order above all things and to kill only as a last resort.

Early in 1894 the soft coal miners went out on a nationwide strike. In sending militia to the Illinois strike scenes Governor Altgeld instructed the officers that "it is not the business of the soldiers to act as custodians or guards of private property." His readiness to send the militia promptly and his insistence on law and order helped to prevent bloodshed.

The Bourbon obstinacy and callous greed of George Pullman and his chief stockholder Marshall Field forced the aggrieved employees of

the Pullman factories to strike in May, 1894. Pullman was indignant at this ingratitude. "Why," he told reporters, "the average wage being earned is \$1.87 a day!" He made no mention however, of the reserve of \$4,000,000 which remained in the company's treasury from the profits of the previous year, or of the \$26,000,000 which it possessed in undivided profits. For more than a month the strike remained almost unnoticed in the excitement of more acute labor disturbances. Late in June, however, the American Railway Union, of which most of the Pullman strikers were members, began a boycott against trains containing Pullman cars. This action was taken after Pullman, despite the urging of business and political leaders, had flatly refused to arbitrate; it was voted also against the pleas of their president, Eugene V. Debs, who feared the consequences of a general strike. So effective was this boycott at first that few trains were in operation. The union appeared on the verge of victory.

At this point Attorney-General Richard Olney, intimately connected with the railroads, determined to break the strike. He knew the mind of Governor Altgeld and decided to act without him. In appointing Edwin Walker, also a railroad attorney, as his representative in Chicago, he advised him "to go into a court of equity and secure restraining orders which shall have the effect of preventing any attempt to commit the offense." Judges Grosscup and Woods helped Walker to prepare the sweeping injunction before granting it. Olney then ordered the Chicago marshal to engage several thousand deputies. These armed officers, who were paid by the railroads and whom the Chicago superintendent of police characterized as "thugs, thieves, and ex-convicts," at once acted to incite disorder and thus give Olney the excuse to call out federal troops.

All this time the state authorities were being deliberately and contemptuously disregarded, even though Governor Altgeld had earlier demonstrated his readiness to send the state militia at once wherever it was needed to preserve order. While he kept himself informed about conditions in Chicago and held several regiments in readiness, he could not legally interfere so long as the city remained relatively quiet. The arrival of the federal soldiers, however, quickly resulted in severe rioting and several deaths. At that point the mayor, largely at Altgeld's initiative, made the request for state troops. The militia arrived promptly and readily succeeded in restoring order.

Several days later Debs and three other union leaders were indicted for violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. It was the first prosecution under this four-year-old law—a law passed to curb not labor unions but monopolistic businesses like the Pullman Company and the large railroads. A week later, however, realizing that action under this law would result in a long-drawn-out legal battle, Olney was instrumental in having the four defendants rearrested for disobeying the federal injunction. Debs was sentenced to six months in jail and the others to three for contempt of court. Once they were safe in the penitentiary the Department of Justice conveniently dropped the earlier indictment. But by that time the strike was already lost.

Altgeld was deeply provoked by this brazen and unconstitutional interference with his duties as executive officer. He had been sending state troops to strike centers in other parts of Illinois at the slightest sign of disorder, although he knew that in most instances the trouble was fostered by the railroads who were unable to get crews to run their trains. Olney's machinations to break the strike at all costs appeared to him as the antithesis of democratic government. When the federal troops entered Chicago Altgeld sent a long telegram to President Cleveland protesting against the unwarranted and unconstitutional federal interference in the local affairs of the state of Illinois. He reminded him that the Constitution gave the President no right to send troops into a state unless there was obvious proof of need or unless requested by local officials. He further pointed out that the state of Illinois was able not only to look after its own obligations but to furnish help to the federal government.

President Cleveland's guarded reply briefly denied these allegations and insisted that the federal government had acted within its rights. His supercilious attitude only intensified Altgeld's concern for the fundamental principles of our democratic form of government. He immediately telegraphed his detailed accusation that the President was evading "the question at issue—that is, that the principle of local self-government is just as fundamental in our institutions as is that of Federal supremacy." Point by point he demonstrated that the action of the federal government served to undermine local self-government and encourage dictatorship. The President's second reply was curt and final. His dogmatic assertion of authority and his refusal to discuss the issue in question put an end to

the controversy—but not before Altgeld had stated fully and unequivocally the basic problems raised by Olney's methods of breaking the strike.

Again the press and the politicians resumed their campaign of calumny and imprecation against Governor Altgeld. Without bothering to ascertain the facts or to consider the principles involved, they attacked him with intensified ferocity and condemned him as a traitor and scoundrel. Again the *Chicago Tribune* led the pack at his heels: "This lying, hypocritical, demagogical, sniveling Governor of Illinois does not want the laws enforced. He is a sympathizer with riot, with violence, with lawlessness and with anarchy." The highly respectable *Nation* was equally abusive, calling him "boorish, impudent, ignorant," a "professional blatherskite." All these agents of public opinion, representing both major parties, lauded President Cleveland for his successful preservation of law and order. Yet the facts of the strike as stated by Colonel Carrol D. Wright, chairman of Cleveland's own investigating committee, vindicated not the federal government but Governor Altgeld. He and later investigators agreed that Altgeld was correct in his insistence that the newspaper accounts of violence before the arrival of federal troops were mostly either pure fabrications or wild exaggerations. Nor were Cleveland and Olney able to substantiate their claim that the strike had held up the mail trains—their chief excuse for interference. According to L. L. Troy, Superintendent of Mails, throughout the strike "the greatest delay to any outgoing or incoming mails probably did not exceed from eight to nine hours at any time."

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In 1894 Governor Altgeld's detractors gloated in their certainty of having killed him off politically for good and all. But they were thoroughly mistaken. They had merely kindled his righteous anger. Convinced that his cause was just, he was all the more determined to fight the greedy corporations and their henchmen in office. As governor he was in a position of power. He severely criticized the coal company at Spring Valley, whose cupidity had resulted in repeated strikes and bloodshed. "While we welcome," he stated, "every honest enterprise and industry, we cannot allow our State to become merely a forage ground for wolfish greed." In his detailed and acidulous review of the Pullman strike he lashed out against the malpractices of corporations and the "usurpation

of power” by the courts. The danger to the country, he declared, came not from the so-called anarchists but “from that corruption, usurpation, insolence, and oppression that go hand in hand with vast accumulation of wealth, wielded by unscrupulous men.” Symptomatic of this danger was the “new form of government” effected by the judiciary—“*government by injunction.*” The first state executive to bring the ominous issue into the open, he discussed the origin and effect of labor injunctions with incisive clarity, and stressed the dictatorial powers which the courts were wielding by this means. Eager for the force of his criticism to strike home, he added: “These injunctions are a very great convenience to corporations when they can be had for the asking by a corporation lawyer, and these were the processes of the court to enforce which the President sent the federal troops to Chicago!”

A few months later the Supreme Court fully validated Altgeld’s arraignment in its decisions against the income tax rider and the Debs petition. For many years a federal income tax had been regarded as legal by the courts. Such a tax helped greatly to finance the Civil War. In 1894 Congress restored a federal tax on incomes as a rider to the Wilson-Gorman tariff bill. The following year the eminent corporation lawyer Joseph H. Choate persuaded a majority of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice Fuller, who had been Marshall Field’s attorney, that a tax on incomes “is communistic in its purposes and tendencies and therefore unconstitutional.” This legalistic speciousness was criticized by Altgeld in a public statement charged with sarcastic scorn. He pointed out that the unexpected reversal would save millions of dollars to “the Standard Oil kings, the Wall Street people, as well as the rich mugwumps” at the expense of the producing classes.

In denying Debs’ appeal the Justices unanimously upheld not only the use of injunctions but also the employment of federal troops to enforce them. Altgeld’s comment on this decision was equally caustic. He observed that “for a number of years it has been marked that the decisions of the United States courts were nearly always in favor of corporations.” This power of capitalism has caused, among other evils, “that corrupt use of wealth, which is undermining our institutions, debauching public officials, shaping legislation and creating judges who do its bidding.” This denunciation of the rapacious rich and a reactionary court, while motivated as much by personal resentment as by crusading

zeal, made him widely known as the protagonist of the poor and the champion of the underdog.

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The Populist movement continued through the early 1890's to gain in strength and to center its attention upon the monetary problem. Altgeld, despite the persistent vilification in the public press, was too shrewd and sharp a judge of men not to take advantage of the logic of events. While not at first a strong "silver" man, he was quick to use this issue as a weapon against the Cleveland faction and the corrupt city bosses. Always the student, he applied himself to the subject of money with a thoroughness which soon familiarized him with its history and basic principles. His skilful use of facts, figures and financial logic made him the most formidable opponent of the eminent "goldbugs." At the same time his sagacity and drive in building up the silver forces brought him to the fore as their effective spokesman. At his instigation free-silver Democrats met at special state conferences in order to make known their views and to prepare for the national convention in 1896. The Illinois Democrats enthusiastically adopted his free-silver plank and made him chairman of the state delegation.

When the Democrats began to gather in Chicago for the national convention most of them turned to Governor Altgeld for leadership. His "no compromise" stand became their pillar of strength, and they clung to it as the rock of their salvation. The "gold" Democrats found themselves without influence. The delegates proceeded to adopt the most radical platform on record. The reform planks on labor, the courts, injunctions, civil and personal liberties, money and the income tax were Altgeld's to the letter; while he was not on the drafting committee, he dominated it by virtue of his towering political and intellectual stature. In the light of his Ishmaelite status two years earlier, his triumph was truly extraordinary. In the opinion of many observers he would certainly have received the nomination for President had he been born in this country. As it was, he helped to select William Jennings Bryan, whose "Cross of Gold" speech had won the hearts of the delegates.

The campaign was noted for its intense acrimony and violent passion. Mark Hanna, wealthy businessman and McKinley's manager, collected and spent millions of dollars to "educate" the voters concerning the merits

of his candidate. He cleverly avoided the main monetary question. Instead, he concentrated the attack on the radicalism of the Democratic platform and Bryan's "rattlepated" youthfulness. Governor Altgeld was assailed with intensified fury. All the Republican dailies and weeklies delineated him as the vicious and anarchistic boss of his party, with Bryan as his pliant dupe. Republican orators everywhere did their utmost to condemn the Democratic platform as a subversive and pernicious document fathered by a notorious anarchist.

Governor Altgeld, though ill and weary, fought back with leonine grit. He neglected his own campaign for re-election in order to devote himself to national issues. In speeches and interviews he argued for the liberalism of the Democratic platform with consummate cogency. He went to New York to present his side of the Pullman strike and to clarify the principles involved. He also presented the case for free silver with such common-sense forcefulness that none of his Republican opponents—not even the eminent Carl Schurz who was sent to Chicago for this purpose—succeeded in vitiating his premises. Yet the forces under Mark Hanna, aided by an endless supply of money, managed to attract enough voters to win at the polls.

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When Altgeld became governor in 1893 he was worth more than a million dollars and highly esteemed as a civic leader; when he ended his term four years later he was nearly penniless and one of the most abused men in the history of our country. Again the *Chicago Tribune* led in the gloating over his defeat and congratulated the citizens of Illinois on having rid themselves of the greatest threat to their welfare. The record, however, was otherwise. Handicapped by corrupt and antagonistic legislatures that fought his recommendations with every trick at their command, he nevertheless pushed through the following reforms: a civil service law, an inheritance tax law, laws providing for the indeterminate sentence, parole and probation of prisoners, regulating the sweatshop system and child labor, limiting the period of work for women to eight hours, as well as laws instaling factory inspection and a state board of arbitration for industrial disputes. He was untiring in his efforts to protect and promote the rights of the poor, to put an end to public corruption and to tax evasion on the part of rich corporations, to build up the Uni-

versity of Illinois and the Chicago park system, to further the ends of justice by tempering it with mercy—although he exercised his pardoning power very sparingly.

His use of the executive veto is best seen in his fight against public utility franchises, or the "Eternal Monopoly Bills," which the state legislature passed in 1895 after receiving the required graft from the interested companies. When these corporations learned of his attitude toward these bills, their agents tried to offer him upward of a half million dollars. And he might have let the bills become laws by default or even by vetoing them perfunctorily—as he badly needed the money. Instead, even as in the Haymarket case, he followed his crusading conscience. His vigorous veto exposed the evil of these measures, terming them "a flagrant attempt to increase the riches of some men at the expense of others by means of legislation." He also excoriated the corruption of the legislators and fought against the defeat of his veto—succeeding by the grace of one vote.

Altgeld left the governor's office an old man at forty-nine. The four years of intensive struggle for the right had sapped his strength and impaired his health. Nor were his troubles at an end. Bank failures involving men he had trusted, his impoverished condition, the illness of his wife, and the continued persecution in the press served further to depress his spirit. Moreover, after years of great political and intellectual exertion he could not get used to a relatively tame existence. Nor were his spirits lifted by the few speeches which he made during the next two years. He was still in this dark mood when his friends persuaded him to run for mayor of Chicago against the turncoat Carter Harrison in 1899. The latter had aligned himself with the reactionary Democratic bosses and was ready to scrap his 1896 platform. Since he was in control of the city political machine, it was necessary for Altgeld to place himself on an independent ticket. Lacking both the money and the physical energy to put up a strong campaign, the weary crusader failed to dislodge Harrison from office.

Defeat acted as a powerful prophylactic. The fear that his enemies were about to seize control of the Democratic party strengthened Altgeld's combative spirit. He began a strategic campaign that once more revealed his great skill as a politician and his uncompromising devotion to progressive reform. In speeches, interviews, and personal conferences he helped to acquaint the people with the designs of the scheming reactionaries.

The latter tried to choke his influence at the source by getting Harrison to keep him from being a delegate to the national convention. Altgeld, however, attended the gathering as a member of the party. The spontaneous cheers of the delegates made it possible for him to address them from the rostrum and subsequently to exert a major influence over the deliberations of their committees. In the end the 1896 platform was reaffirmed and Bryan was again the nominee for President. Altgeld's triumph was complete when his proposed plank against imperialism was adopted as "the paramount issue of the campaign."

Altgeld and Bryan fought strenuously and effectively, visiting many states and rousing the voters to a consideration of the important issues. But prosperity was over the land again and the "full dinner pail," for which the Republicans claimed full credit, was a more potent argument than any of those offered by the Democrats. McKinley's majority was even greater than in 1896.

Altgeld felt deeply the sting of defeat. Yet he continued to believe in the rightness of his principles and in the ultimate triumph of social justice. Shortly after the election he resumed the practice of law as a means of earning a living. His zeal was remarkable and his achievements in the courtroom renewed his reputation as a great lawyer. He did not, however, slacken his strong interest in public affairs and continued to address audiences on topics of timely importance.

On March 11, 1902, after a strenuous day in court defending a hackman's union against a strike injunction, he went to Joliet to speak in behalf of the Boers. He discoursed for about forty-five minutes, ending with the words, "Wrong may seem to triumph. Right may seem to be defeated. But the gravitation of eternal justice is toward the throne of God. Any political institution which is to endure must be plumb with that line of justice." He sat down and was applauded enthusiastically. Two minutes later, feeling dizzy, he left the stage and collapsed in the wings—the victim of a cerebral hemorrhage. Early the next morning he was dead. For once both friends and foes joined together in honoring his memory. Civic leaders and tens of thousands of common citizens stood for hours in the cold rain to pay their respects to the man who in Darrow's words "died as he had lived, fighting for freedom."

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THE ANTIOCH REVIEW

In the last year of his life Altgeld published a small book, *Oratory: Its Requirements and Rewards*. It was a clear, practical manual based on his own successful efforts as a public speaker. Its favorable reception pleased him deeply. To his friend H. D. Lloyd he wrote, "It is one of my children that the world is not frowning on."

For all his preoccupation with legal work and civic affairs, he was able to complete another short work immediately before his death, *The Cost of Something for Nothing*. Friends brought it out posthumously. Its thesis is well explained by the title. While each chapter dwells on a different topic, all of them concentrate on the admonition that in the long run one never gets something for nothing; "that a man cannot indulge in a mean trick, be it ever so small, without lowering his moral status." It is most severe on those who prized wealth and personal success above the rights of their fellows. Even the most affluent of them were in truth failures and victims of moral leprosy if their millions were tainted by injustice. However, it lavished praise on the honest and the upright—those who cherished true democracy and worked to make it prevail. It assured these lovers of justice that "to establish liberty for mankind is the highest mission on earth." No doubt thinking of his own agitated career and of the agony he had suffered over and over again, Altgeld asserted that "he who has deep down in his soul the knowledge that he has always fought for the right and that he never knowingly has wronged another, could not be unhappy though the whole world were arrayed against him."

The Cost of Something for Nothing is in a real sense Altgeld's last will and testament. For all its naive moralizing and vague mysticism, it truly expresses his distilled thoughts on the values and vices of human existence. One cannot read these didactic essays without being moved by their complete sincerity, their eloquent idealism, their prophetic nobility of spirit. In these pages the whole man emerges life-size. His career is clearly reflected in his ethical conclusions. His deep hatred of injustice and oppression bred in him the belief in moral retribution, and made him, in the words of Brand Whitlock, "one of the forerunners of the newer and better time of the moral awakening in America."