

# The Altgeld Temperament

Written for *The Public* by Nicholas Vachel Lindsay

**Nicholas Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931)**

[Published in *The Public: A National Journal of Fundamental Democracy & A Weekly Narrative of History in the Making* 15 (May 24, 1912), pp. 494-496: online at Google Books. Edited by Louis F[reeland] Post, with his wife Alice Thacher Post serving as Managing Editor, the Chicago-based *Public* was a liberal, militant, weekly magazine popular with socialists, unionists, and anti-imperialists. It was an important mouthpiece of the Progressive Era. Louis Post (1849-1928) was one of the few whites who helped to found the NAACP in 1909. He served as Assistant Secretary of Labor from 1913 to 1921 in the Woodrow Wilson administration, leaving *The Public* under the guidance of a new editorial board. The magazine ended its run in 1919. "The Altgeld Temperament" follows a copy of VL's poem "The Eagle That Is Forgotten," reprinted from Springfield's *Illinois State Register* newspaper: see my edition *The Poetry of Vachel Lindsay*, pp. 136-137. VL's poem will have added meaning AFTER this essay is read, and I have included a copy at the end of the "Notes." Finally, Post's wife and managing editor, Alice (born 1853), was a Thacher; her name is often misspelled "Thatcher." Dennis Camp, Ed.]

From the *Chicago Record-Herald* of Thursday, March 13, 1902:

Throughout Mr. Altgeld's public career, and every moment of it was beset by bitter criticism, no one seriously questioned his honesty as a public official, doubted his courage to do what he believed to be right, or impugned the sincerity of his advocacy of any cause. He proved the contrary whenever there was a chance. In the 1895 session of the legislature, for example, franchise corporation bills were passed, very like those which made the session of 1897 a reproach. Mr. Altgeld could have made a million, and probably millions, by letting them become laws. But they were vetoed. . . . Mr. Altgeld died poor.



It happens to be my good fortune to have been born in the house where I live today, a house on an embankment that looks out on the Governor's yard and mansion. From the earliest years I have stepped across the street to processions, speeches and the like. I have witnessed the political pageants of Deneen, Yates and Tanner, of Altgeld, Fifer and Oglesby. [Note 1]

Once upon a time I was in the Governor's yard when an escort of the Illinois National Guard arrived for Altgeld, the then chief executive. He was a shaky invalid, and

would have been excused for riding in a carriage. His black horse threw him, and rolled upon him, but the Governor refused help and managed to climb back into the saddle. He went through it all with a sort of Spartan quietness. I can this moment recall the grim, mesmeric face, the lack-luster eye, and the unstable frame. I well remember the ease with which he led the procession, emphatically the Governor of Illinois, the horse still snorting, his conceit still vexed that this creature with the feeble knees should somehow ride him.

When Altgeld was in his prime, about the time he was riding that black horse, brainy radicalism was unknown, so far as big party policies went. Roosevelt was a “gold standard” Republican, and Debs was in jail, meditating. The widespread, amiable radicalism that pervades the upper middle class had not come. As for brash revolt, not even the crude Hearst had raised his head. The principal function of a magazine was to exploit C. D. Gibson. The principal function of a lecture course was to talk about life’s noble lessons. Most of the men who, a little later, voted for Bryan in his first, the 1896 campaign, were people of a stand-pat turn of mind who had under temporary exasperation clothed themselves in rebellious words. The insurance companies were still immaculate in the land. Hughes had not yet investigated. Big Business was assumed to be automatically on the square. The “Pittsburgh Survey” had not yet appeared. No man had read after Ray Stannard Baker, Ida Tarbell or Lincoln Steffens. Brand Whitlock and Judge Lindsey had not yet emerged. [Note 2]

Altgeld anticipated the enthusiasms of these writers and leaders and was as studious as any of them. He received upon his devoted head the opposition now pleasantly distributed among many reformers, some of them governors. The Corporate powers cannot completely pulverize the chief executive of California, because the chief executive of New Jersey is exhibiting streaks of courage. But once there was only one Governor, John P. Altgeld, called the Wire-haired Anarchist of the Plains, caricatured as Guiteau the assassin. [Note 3]

Under the surface of his dramatic public life Altgeld’s spirit worked subtly to make the forces that champion the underdog permanent in America, as Richelieu worked to buttress monarchy in France. He set himself tasks that took a lion’s courage and a martyr’s heart. He planned each step of his immolation amid a stupid people. He threw his reputation and health into the furnace every hour. It is a wonder that some of the men he thwarted did not die of apoplexy. And as for his ostensible friends, there must have been a sad humor in his heart when he made his appeals to the thick-necked, in convention assembled, Illinois Democrats, but none the less, little Mark Hannas. He used to speak in this wise: “Respond to the call of the age! Respond to the cry of humanity, and you can write your names against the skies in letters of glory, and win the blessing of all generations to come!” They wept at this eloquence, but little they cared. [Note 4]

In 1896 Altgeld controlled the Chicago convention, nominated William Jennings Bryan as a mild representative of the sort of a thing he championed, and wrote the Chicago platform, a document something more aggressive than Bryan has ever been. As I conceive the Governor, he admitted the 16 to 1 proposition as bait to get the rest of it down the throats of a somewhat frightened national party. [Note 5]

O present-day reformer, with your picture in every magazine, consider your debt to this man with never a magazine to back him up! Was not the opening for your career made possible, in part, by Altgeld's courage? Does not some thread of your glib and fashionable radicalism go back to that gritty Chicago platform, to what was in it beside the silver plank? Does not a great deal still in the future, depend upon the fact that Altgeld forced the sloppy, mushy Democratic party to be absolutely uncompromising for once?

Dodge it if you will, O follower of William Howard Taft, or of Theodore Roosevelt, or Robert M. La Follette, or Victor Berger, your idol owes his present relations on the chessboard to the forgotten player. In some fashion or manner Altgeld's voice speaks through every faction now. They may not like it, they may champ the bit, but that strange Richelieu is in the saddle. Aspiring young souls may not know it, but they spread their wings easily because he aspired at fearful cost, not only the death of his body, but the death of his name. [Note 6]

What I say of him might be asserted, from a different point of view, concerning one or two other figures of his time. But Altgeld was my idol, my particular idol among public men, and I can not help saying why.

I have before me a collection of discussions of the Governor the day after his death. The paragraphers eat their own words. He would have been immortalized, if the memorial notices had been printed as many days in succession as the lifetime attacks. They were careful not to praise him till quite sure of his demise. They chronicle with literary sobs how twelve thousand of the unfortunate filed past his coffin that lay in state in the Chicago public library. The procession continued long after dark. Some estimated that twenty-five thousand went by.

The death notices reviewed with full justice all his doings but one. It received such casual mention as is indicated by the clipping which begins this article. It was set down more elaborately by Louis F. Post in *The Public* for March 22, 1902, as follows:

One of Altgeld's acts as Governor was never openly criticized. It is briefly told by the Chicago Record-Herald, a Republican paper, from which we quote:

In the 1895 session of the Legislature . . . franchise corporation bills were passed very like those which made the session of 1897 a reproach. Mr. Altgeld could have made a million and probably millions, by letting them become laws, the they were vetoed.

The truth is that one million dollars in cash had been placed at Altgeld's disposal, under circumstances which would have enabled him to appropriate it with absolute safety to himself. The sole condition was that he should sign those bills. But he vetoed the bills.

At that time Altgeld's pecuniary difficulties were pressing. From a rich man he had become comparatively poor, through no fault of his own but chiefly because he refused to join any of the respectable rings that make money for themselves and squeeze money out of others by means of predatory laws. The legislature had been bribed to enact the corporation bills in question. They were

so thoroughly bribed that the Senate passed them even over Altgeld's veto, and in the House only a few votes of the necessary two-thirds were lacking. The latter body remained in session long past its hour for sine die adjournment, turning back the official clock for the sake of appearances, to allow the corporation lobbyists time to buy their goods. Altgeld's veto stood, in spite of the Democratic leader on the floor, in spite of the Republican speaker in the chair, in spite of the lobbyists all over the House, and in spite of as fine an aggregation of respectable gentlemen at Chicago furnishing the funds as one could wish to meet.

Yet all this might have been avoided. Nothing was needed but another respectable gentleman of the same marauding type in the Governor's chair. Had Altgeld signed those bills he might have retrieved his broken fortunes, have grown as rich as the richest, have been honored by a debased press and fawned upon by the sycophants, might have gone to associate and conspire with other such characters in the Federal Senate, and instead of being denounced as a reactionary demagogue been lauded as a progressive statesman. But he was too able to be beguiled and too honest to betray his trust. He held the mercenary plotters back, knowing full well that the rich and influential ones among them would punish him without mercy. And they did. They plotted against this able and honest Governor until even this wreckage of his fortune had disappeared. Yet, through it all he defied them and went his way—impoverished, lonely, but faithful. [Note 7]

## Notes

[*Uncle Boy*, referred to in two notes below, is my ongoing biography of Vachel Lindsay, available online at: [www.VachelLindsayHome.org](http://www.VachelLindsayHome.org) ]

[Note 1] Illinois Governors named: Charles S[amuel] Deneen (Republican, 1905-1913); Richard Yates (Republican, 1901-1905); John R[iley] Tanner (Republican, 1897-1901); John Peter Altgeld (Democrat, 1893-1897); Joseph W[ilson] Fifer (Republican, 1889-1893); Richard J[ames] Oglesby (Republican, 1885-1889).

[Note 2] Republican Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt (1858-1919), the twenty-sixth President of the United States (1901-1909), was noted for many achievements, but VL has in mind Roosevelt's leadership during the Progressive Movement. The so-called Progressive Era in the United States lasted roughly thirty years (1890-1920). The main goals were (1) purification and (2) modernization of government—from the national to the local level. Women's suffrage echoed the purification cause, with backers claiming they wanted to introduce a “purer” female perspective into United States politics.

Eugene V[ictor] Debs (1855-1926) was an American union leader, a founding member of the International Labor Union and the Industrial Workers of the World. He was the Socialist Party candidate for President in 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920 (this last time while in jail!). In 1894, during Altgeld's administration, Debs was involved in the Pullman Strike and arrested by President Grover Cleveland's administration. He was found guilty of contempt of court and jailed in the Woodstock (Illinois) federal prison, where he read the works of Victor Berger and decided to become a Socialist (see Note 6 below).

Newspaperman William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951) was achieving significant political influence about the time John Peter Altgeld ended his tenure as Governor. Hearst purchased the ailing *New York Morning Journal* in 1895, and his epic circulation war with Joseph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New York World*, began soon afterward. Hearst's paper was the only major Eastern newspaper to support Democrat William Jennings Bryan and bimetallism in 1896. The paper's sensationalism, in its efforts to best Pulitzer, is often referred to as "yellow journalism."

Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944), the graphic artist who created the "Gibson Girl," published his famous drawings in all major periodicals for over thirty years. In VL's mind, Gibson's work appealed to—and portrayed—shallow materialism.

Lawyer and Republican politician Charles Evans Hughes (1862-1948) was the Governor of New York State from 1907 to 1910, defeating Democrat Hearst in the 1906 election. As Governor, Hughes won public acclaim for exposing the malpractices of the insurance industry. Hughes resigned as Governor to accept William Howard Taft's appointment as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court (1910-1916). Hughes narrowly lost the 1916 election to President Woodrow Wilson.

*The Pittsburgh Survey* (1909), a sociological study of the city of Pittsburgh, was funded by the Russell Sage Foundation. Philanthropist Margaret Olivia Slocum Sage (1828-1918) established the Foundation in New York City in 1907, in order to improve, in the words of its charter, "social and living conditions in the United States." *The Pittsburgh Survey* (published in six volumes) is generally described as a landmark of the Progressive Era. When VL was writing this Altgeld essay, many of his liberal friends were advocating a Russell Sage survey for Springfield. To VL's delight, *The Springfield Survey* finally got underway in early 1914. See VL's essay "Father Springfield in the Mirror," *The Survey* 33 (December 19, 1914): 316-318 (available online at Google Books).

Ray Stannard Baker (1870-1946), Lincoln Steffens (1866-1936), and Ida Tarbell (1857-1954) were prominent "muckrakers"—that is, reform-minded, investigative journalists with a flair for dramatic reporting—and closely associated with Progressive Era politics.

[Joseph] Brand Whitlock (1869-1934) was a Chicago journalist who accepted the position of Chief Clerkship in the Secretary of State's Office in the Altgeld administration. At the time of VL's essay, Whitlock had returned to his home state and had been elected the Mayor of Toledo, Ohio. He was also the author of several books, including *The Thirteenth District* (1902) and *The Turn of the Balance* (1907), two books that VL recommended to his friends during the summer, 1910. See *Uncle Boy*, Chapter 23, p. 17.

Judge Benjamin Barr "Ben" Lindsey (1869-1943) was a social reformer and presiding judge of the juvenile court system in Denver, Colorado, at the time of VL's essay. Lindsey's court was often cited as a model for juvenile justice, and the Judge was famous for introducing and supporting legislation focused on abolishing child labor. Like most of the figures VL names in this paragraph, Judge Ben Lindsey was a significant leader during the Progressive Era.

[Note 3] American lawyer Charles J[ulius] Guiteau (1841-1882) shot President James A[braham] Garfield (1831-1881) on July 2, 1881. When Garfield died on September 19, Guiteau was tried for murder, convicted, and executed by hanging (June 30). Guiteau's

was the first high-profile American trial to consider the insanity defense, obviously without success.

[Note 4] Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642) was not only prominent in the Catholic Church but also in the government of King Louis XIII, where he served as chief minister from 1624 until his death.

Marcus Alonzo “Mark” Hanna (1837-1904), American industrialist and Republican politician, famously (or, in VL’s opinion, infamously) managed the successful campaign of President William McKinley in 1896, when McKinley defeated VL’s idol, William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925).

Altgeld’s words are quoted from a Springfield speech delivered to the Democratic State Convention on July 12, 1878. The speech is entitled, “How the State Is Being Plundered by Republican Administration” See John Peter Altgeld, *Live Questions*, Part 2 (Chicago, 1899), p. 826. Available online at:

[www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

See also *Uncle Boy*, Chapter 15, pp. 12, 32.

[Note 5] The Democratic Party Platform adopted in Chicago on July 9, 1896—the so-called “Silver Platform”—is online at:

<http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/chicagoplatform.html>

[Note 6] Robert M[arion] “Fighting Bob” La Follette, Sr. (1855-1925) was initially a Wisconsin Republican politician and later a Progressive. At the time of VL’s essay, La Follette was U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, vehemently opposed to trusts, monopolies, and corporations that aspired to control government. In 1957, a Senate committee recognized La Follette as one of the five great U.S. Senators, along with Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, and Robert Taft.

Victor L[uitpold] Berger (1860-1929) was a founding father of the Socialist Party of America and an influential journalist. Eugene Debs (see Note 2) read Berger’s writing while incarcerated in the Woodstock prison, and Debs credited Berger with converting him to the Socialist cause. At the time of VL’s essay, Berger was editor-publisher of the *Social-Democratic Herald* and the *Milwaukee Leader*.

[Note 7] The unusual ending of VL’s essay is a long quotation from Louis F. Post’s editorial, “John Peter Altgeld,” first published in *The Public* 4 (March 22, 1902): 786-791. The elegiac editorial is available online at Google Books.

## **The Eagle That Is Forgotten**

(John P. Altgeld, Governor of Illinois and my next-door neighbor,  
1893-1897. Born December 30, 1847; died March 12, 1902.)

Sleep softly . . . eagle forgotten . . . under the stone.  
Time has its way with you there, and the clay has its own.

“We have buried him now,” thought your foes, and in secret rejoiced.  
They made a brave show of their mourning, their hatred unvoiced.  
They had snarled at you, barked at you, foamed at you day after day.

Now you were ended. They praised you . . . and laid you away.

The others that mourned you in silence and terror and truth,  
The widow bereft of her crust, and the boy without youth,  
The mocked and the scorned and the wounded, the lame and the poor  
That should have remembered forever . . . remember no more.

Where are those lovers of yours, on what name do they call,  
The lost, that in armies wept over your funeral pall?  
They call on the names of a hundred high-valiant ones,  
A hundred white eagles have risen, the sons of your sons,  
The zeal in their wings is a zeal that your dreaming began  
The valor that wore out your soul in the service of man.

Sleep softly . . . eagle forgotten . . . under the stone,  
Time has its way with you there, and the clay has its own.  
Sleep on, O brave-hearted, O wise man, that kindled the flame—  
To live in mankind is far more than to live in a name,  
To live in mankind, far, far more . . . than to live in a name.

Nicholas Vachel Lindsay