Robert G. INGERSOLL

PEORIA'S PAGAN POLITICIAN

By Mark A. Plummer
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Preface

The name Robert G. Ingersoll (1833-1899) evokes the image of the "great agnostic." Peoria evokes the image of political opinion in middle America. Ingersoll and Peoria came together between 1858 and 1877 when the great orator, lawyer, and politician became Peoria's most famous citizen. In 1876, Ingersoll burst upon the national scene, not as an agnostic, but as America's premier political orator. The purpose of my study is to describe Ingersoll's formative "Peoria years" with an emphasis upon his unfulfilled political ambitions whether as a Douglas Democrat, a Lincoln Republican, or a Radical Republican.

The study also enabled me to answer some old questions and, quite unexpectedly, to pose and answer some new ones as well. Included among the questions are: How was President Andrew Johnson's challenge to "look at Peoria" (the precursor to "played in Peoria") met by Ingersoll? Was Ingersoll denied the gubernatorial nomination in 1868 because of his agnosticism? Why did his "plumed knight" phrase in his presidential nomination of James G. Blaine become so prominent when it was not the intended climax of the 1876 speech? What were the Peoria antecedents for Ingersoll's famous "visions of war" campaign speech? What vengeance did he demand in his eulogy on the assassination of Lincoln?

Ingersoll's first "Pagan" lecture (the Gods) opened by perverting Alexander Pope's statement to read: "An honest God is the noblest work of man." So much has been written which either worships or damn's Ingersoll that I might have opened this monograph with: "An honest Ingersoll is the noblest work of man." In my search for the "honest (political) Ingersoll" I have relied largely upon original documents. My search for those original sources put me in contact with many helpful and dedicated persons. Roger Bridges, Cheryl Schnirring, and the late Paul Spence were especially helpful at the Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield. Wayne Temple and the staff of the Illinois State Archives went beyond duty for me. The newspaper file and the Ingersoll collection at the Peoria Public Library were useful and Alexander C. Crosman, Jr., the director, offered appropriate photographs. Garold Cole of the Illinois State University Library was, as always, an indefatigable searcher for sources. The staff of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress was efficient.

Thanks be to the National Endowment for the Humanities which provided a "travel to collections" grant and to Illinois State University which supported my research in various and sundry ways. My greatest debt is to my colleague, L. Moody Simms, who offered helpful (yet tactful) advice through each step of the process. Professor Emeritus, Dale B. Vetter, also read the entire manuscript and administered aid and comfort. Donald W. Griffin, as editor of the monograph series, graciously accepted and improved the manuscript. Despite their herculean efforts, errors may remain; if so, it is my responsibility because I was the last to tamper with their suggestions.

M. A. P.
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Douglas to Lincoln

Robert Green Ingersoll is best remembered as "Pagan Bob," or the "Great Infidel," or even as "Robert Godless Injuresoul," because of his many iconoclastic lectures. He is remembered for his "Plumed Knight" speech nominating James G. Blaine in 1876 and his "Visions of War" bloody shirt campaign speech the same year. His reputation as an attorney for government officials accused of fraud is also considerable. Although much of his notoriety came while he lived in Washington, D. C., and New York City during the last two decades of his life, he distinguished himself in philosophy, law, and politics while living in the city which has become identified as a symbol of America's heartland, Peoria, Illinois, between 1858 and 1877. His departure from Peoria did not come until he had established a national reputation as an agnostic (with the lecture "The Gods" in 1872), as a lawyer (with the Munn case in 1876), or as a politician (especially in political speaking). During his score of years in Peoria, politics was his vice, a vice which he could neither win at nor break. In 1865, he wrote: "If there is any life in the world that is absolutely devoid of everything like real happiness, I believe it is called a political life. A low dirty scramble, through misrepresentation, slander, falsehood, and filth, and success brings nothing but annoyance and fear of defeat next time, and yet if one gets started in that kind of business it is very hard to get out. I find myself planning and scheming all the time, thinking what I will try for, and calculating the chances."

Although he was consistently unsuccessful in his quest for elective office, it was not for want of "scheming" and "calculating." His ambitions for Congress (as a Democrat) in 1860, congressman-at-large (as a Republican) in 1864 and 1866, and for the Republican nomination for governor in 1868 were all thwarted. His attempts to obtain an appointive office were not much more successful. He failed in his attempts to obtain the position of U. S. district attorney in 1865 and 1869 and minister to Berlin in 1877. Success came in the form of one appointment (Illinois attorney-general, 1867-69) and in managing his brother's Fifth District congressional campaigns from 1864 to 1870. But while Ingersoll could do little to ensure his own success, he became the most coveted political stump speaker in America. It was only after success as a political speaker (especially in 1876) had propelled him into the national limelight that he left Peoria. Ingersoll's new recognition as a great orator enabled him to become wealthy and ensured an audience for his unorthodox views on religion. During his "Peoria Years," he developed his ideas and style and an aversion (mixed with envy) toward politicians. How Bob Ingersoll's politics played in Peoria makes an amusing, earthy, and sometimes profound story.

In the midst of his reluctant transition from Douglas Democrat to Lincoln Re-
publican, Ingersoll proclaimed: "I am neither a Democrat, a Republican, an Abolitionist or the other thing." But during his residency in Illinois he was all those and more. He would be characterized, in turn, as a Jacksonian Democrat, a Douglas Democrat, a War Democrat, a Lincoln Republican, an Abolitionist, and a Radical Republican. In following this pattern, Ingersoll was not unique; the American Civil War and Reconstruction period saw thousands of Northern Democrats take this path, traveling at various speeds. Born on August 11, 1833, in Dresden, New York, of a father who was a preacher, an abolitionist and a Democrat, Robert was the youngest of five children born of Mary Livingston Ingersoll, who died when Robert was two years old. The Reverend John Ingersoll seldom stayed in his Congregational or Presbyterian churches more than a few months. He moved to a dozen cities in New York, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Illinois, usually with the children and, in turn, with his two new wives. At age eighteen, Robert commented that "Father intends to see the whole world before many years."²

In spite of the Ingersoll family travels, Robert was introduced to literature. His father, who had studied Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, encouraged him and Robert briefly attended school in various cities, including an academy in Greenville, Illinois, where he studied under Socrates Smith. He read Gibbon, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Volney and, most important, Shakespeare and Robert Burns. (A wag later commented that the agnostic's epitaph would be "Robert burns.") Robert's photographic memory made learning easy and he was teaching school at age eighteen. While teaching in Waverly, Tennessee, he witnessed the sale of slaves. He wrote: "People here ask me . . . if I think slavery wrong and I tell them I do and that I believe it is wrong enough to damn the whole of them, and they take it in good part."³

Robert and his brother Ebon Clark Ingersoll were introduced to politics when they began to read law in the office of Democratic Congressman Willis Allen and Son in Marion, Illinois, in 1854. Ebon wrote: "For the last three months Roby & I have been applying ourselves to the study of law. . . . We were admitted to the bar 'ex gratia' in one month after we commenced studying. We have several cases . . . and have been successful in every one. . . ." Robert clerked in various federal, county, and circuit courts in southern Illinois as Ebon began his legislative career. Robert's older (by two years) brother Ebon was elected to the Illinois House of Representatives from the Fourth District (Gallatin and Saline counties) as a Douglas Democrat. After attending the legislative session which convened on January 5, 1857, Ebon married a Pennsylvania woman and chose not to return to Shawneetown. The brothers had some legal business with Peoria clients, and they chose to move to the Illinois River city which showed great promise for growth. Ebon apparently went first with his new bride. The February 19, 1858, Day Book entry reads: "Robt Ingersoll commenced boarding at the Peoria House at $15 per month."⁴

The brothers Ingersoll arrived in Peoria as Douglas Democrats, but the Civil War would convert them to Republicans. In 1858, the Democratic Party was split between Douglas and Buchanan Democrats. Ebon Clark Ingersoll was a delegate
to the Douglas Democratic State Convention which met in the house chambers in Springfield on April 21. The Buchanan Democrats met concurrently in the smaller senate chamber. In this year of the Lincoln-Douglas debates for the U.S. Senate, Ebon became the Douglas candidate for the General Assembly for the Forty-First District (Stark and Peoria counties), but he received very little publicity in either of the party newspapers. The Peoria Democratic Union was published by G. W. Raney, who wanted to be Peoria postmaster and favored anti-Douglas Democrats, including Sidney Breeze for U.S. Senator and a slate of representatives for the general assembly. The Republican candidates won when the Democratic vote was split between Ebon and the Buchanan Democrat. The Republican paper, the Daily Transcript, opposed Ebon on grounds that he was a stranger in town, "a man who has not been in the district long enough to make him legally eligible to the office of Representatives," and it also characterized him as a "Douglas worshiper." Although the Democrats polled a majority of the Peoria voters, the Transcript contended that the result was only accomplished because Douglas had come to town with his Catholic wife and a Bishop to attract the Irish voter.  

Robert Ingersoll's views on the 1858 campaign were expressed in a letter to his brother John: "In the political world of course it is here as with you nothing but Douglas and Lecompton. Most of the 'Democracy' are for Douglas except the district attorneys and the post-masters. I suppose they think 'there is no harm in holding the dish right side up when it rains porridge.' As for myself I think Douglas is right on the 'Great Bigger Boo' though I don't care one cent whether Kansas is a slave state or not." This letter also shows that the Ingersoll brothers were doing very well as lawyers in Peoria: "Clark and I are still getting more and more business and our prospects are as bright and flattering as we could ask. And think we already have the confidence of the substantial men, by substantial I mean those who have the spondoollicks, and of all men they are the men to have on your side. I wish you had studied law instead of medicine. I know you would have liked it better and made more money."  

The extraordinary oratorical talent of Robert G. Ingersoll came to the attention of the community on the Fourth of July, 1860, when the scheduled speaker was indisposed and Robert was called to give the major address with only a few hours notice. The Peoria Daily Democratic Union reported: "The oration by Robert G. Ingersoll . . . was pronounced the most perfect and patriotic affair of the kind that has been delivered in this city in many years." The Republican paper conceded that Ingersoll's speech was "quite creditable" especially when "he turned off . . . the limited range of his political vision" and uttered "free-soil" sentiments. But after the Democrats of the Fourth Congressional District nominated him as their candidate on August 2, 1860, the Transcript was not so flattering: "He was not nominated to be elected, but he was nominated to traverse the counties and create a laugh, tell stories, and please the 'boys.'" The Transcript noted that Ingersoll had a reputation as a wit but "... his wit is rather too deep. He dives so far that he brings up mud with it. It is almost invariably dirty."
The Transcript paraphrased Robert Ingersoll’s acceptance speech: "In speaking of the principles of the two parties he declared that the Republicans believe that Congress should act as a wet nurse and go over into the territories and bind diapers on the people." The Transcript added that the Democratic party was certainly qualified to go into the "diaper business." The Republican paper spoke of Ingersoll as the "diaper candidate" throughout the campaign. Ingersoll embarked upon a vigorous campaign in which he challenged the incumbent Republican congressman William Kellogg to a Lincoln-Douglas style series of debates. According to Clark Carr, Ingersoll surprised a mostly Republican audience in Galesburg by stating: "The Fugitive Slave Law is the most infamous enactment that ever disgraced a statute book." In Democratic Peoria, however, Ingersoll admitted that slavery was evil, but took the position that its extension was the exclusive concern of Kansans.

The Republican newspaper, which was edited by Enoch Emery, who would one day become Ingersoll’s chief supporter, accused him of being crude and profane—a drunk, a libertine, and a brawler. According to the Transcript, Ingersoll assaulted editor Emery on the streets a few days before the election. But the Democratic paper’s version of the incident published on November 1, 1860, is as follows: "The Transcript of yesterday devotes half a column to a sympathy-soliciting subject—the ‘talking to’ which Mr. Ingersoll gave the editor of that paper two or three days since. The low and villainous abuse of Ingersoll, by the Transcript, is notorious. Meeting its editor, Bob simply asked him ‘if he knew that he was a low-lived liar and a contemptible puppy?’ Editor began to open his jaws to answer. Bob told him he shouldn’t speak. Editor didn’t speak, but drew a small knife. Bob told editor to put it back, or he would knock editor’s head off. Editor put back knife. Bob gave his opinion of editor, but did not strike editor—he only told editor that if editor weighed fifty pounds more he would thrash ground with editor. Cowhide wasn’t in the scrape at all—Bob don’t use bouvène epidermis in any way—editor imagined that. Editor needn’t carry pistule any longer—Bob’s in the country. It is not true, as circulated round town, that Bob shook editor—editor shook himself—Bob only put his hand on editor’s shoulder to keep editor from going into ‘conniption fits’."  

Although the Transcript prepared a long list of the youthful Ingersoll’s sins, neither the Republican nor the Democratic Peoria papers introduced the subject of religion. The Galesburg Observer suggested, however, that it was being used by Ingersoll’s "unscrupulous enemies, who are ready to adopt any means, no matter how dishonorable to secure his defeat." The Democratic Union warned: "They will tell you he is irreligious. If this is true, we would that it were otherwise. . . . They tell you that Mr. Ingersoll is somewhat ‘wild!’ This may be in part correct." While seeming to acknowledge these weaknesses the paper contended that Robert Ingersoll was: "the brilliant orator, the profound reasoner, the keenest of all wits; Bob Ingersoll the wonder of the old, the idol of the young men, and the pet of the ladies. Our Bob—the Standard Bearer of the Democracy in this Congressional District. Gallant Bob—who never fails to drive the competition to
the wall by sound logic, historical argument, withering sarcasm and brilliant retort."  

In 1860, Lincoln led the Illinois Republicans to victory. Robert Ingersoll carried normally Democratic Peoria County by only about 200 votes while losing in the Fourth Congressional District by 4,500 votes. Robert’s reputation as a witty, sarcastic, and popular stump speaker, however, propelled him at the age of twenty-seven into the limelight among the city’s orators. After the election campaign, Robert continued to build his reputation for eloquence by giving lectures. Under the heading THE YOUNG MAN ELOQUENT, the Democratic Union announced Ingersoll’s lecture on “History” at Rouse’s Hall for February 26, 1861. Later the newspaper pronounced the oration as an “eloquent and scholarly . . . Social History” of the world, with which “every one was charmed.”  

When the Civil War began, the Ingersoll brothers instinctively took a strong pro-Union stand, as did their mentor, Stephen A. Douglas. Robert wired Republican Governor Richard Yates for permission to raise a volunteer regiment. At about the same time, Stephen A. Douglas appeared in Springfield to rally his party to the cause of the Union. “Do not allow the mortification . . . of defeat [in the recent election] to convert you to traitors,” he warned his fellow Democrats. While in Springfield he made arrangements with Republicans to ensure a united front against the South. Upon his return to Chicago, he proclaimed on May 1, 1861, that “there can be no neutrals in this war, only patriots or traitors.” Weakened by illness and overexertion, Douglas died on June 3, 1861, shortly after uttering his last words: “Tell them [his sons] to obey the laws and support the constitution of the United States.” The forty-eight year old leader was mourned in Peoria as he was across the North.  

Robert Ingersoll was called upon to be the Peoria funeral orator for Douglas, as he would be for Lincoln almost four years later. Eben took the lead in introducing resolutions in the circuit court and at the bar association instituting a period of mourning. He was also chosen to be in the small committee delegated to attend the Chicago funeral. One June 7, 1861, a great funeral parade proceeded to the Peoria Court House square where Rev. Mr. Hibben “invoked the Divine blessing upon the exercises . . . in a fervent and appropriate manner” and Robert Ingersoll was introduced as the orator of the day. The account in the Peoria Daily Democratic Union is short on quotations and long on praise for the speech. “It fully sustained the reputation which its author has won all over Illinois, as the ‘young man eloquent’,” it reported. “His inner-soul was inspired with his theme, and the eloquent sentences came gushing from his lips in those deep, heart-spoken utterances which sway hearts at will,” it continued. “As a eulogy upon the life and death of Judge Douglas, this oration will be long remembered by all who heard it,” the newspaper concluded.  

Following the “martyred” Douglas lead, Robert Ingersoll exhorted the Union cause. At the August 31, 1861, Peoria Democratic Caucus, he spoke in favor of supporting the government in the suppression of the rebellion. The Republican paper said his remarks were “proof positive that there was and need be no issues
between honest Union men, no matter how they previously have differed.” Ingersoll “accorded to President Lincoln, a pure and honest purpose” but “he didn’t believe there was ability enough in the cabinet to set a hen, or if there was there was so much dishonesty that they would suck eggs.” The Democratic County Convention declared “That the present civil war had been forced upon us by the disunionists of the southern states,” and resolved: “That we are in favor of prosecuting the present war with all the vigor and energy that a loyal people can summon to their aid, till rebellion is entirely crushed.”

Robert Ingersoll’s patriotism was expressed in words and deeds in September of 1861. His initial request to Governor Yates for permission to raise a regiment had been denied because of an over-abundance of such offers, but ex-Republican presidential candidate General John C. Fremont later authorized the recruitment. Judge B. D. Meek of Woodford County and R. G. Ingersoll were chosen to raise a cavalry regiment. The Democratic Union remarked that “They [Meek and Ingersoll] are made of the right stuff—particularly Bob—to lead a brave regiment to certain victory.” Bob certainly had the “right stuff” to recruit. Everywhere he spoke he aroused “a spirit of patriotism which will tell with good effect for the Union.” An observer warned the citizens of Eureka that Ingersoll would speak at a Union meeting there: “Look out for a full company of cavalry from Eureka, after Bob has been there. It’s a sure thing.” Robert was aided by a nonpartisan effort of both newspapers and by both Democratic and Republican politicians. Republican William Pitt Kellogg and E. C. Ingersoll sometimes addressed the same “rousing union meetings” in support of recruitments. Robert was mustered into service as a colonel for his Eleventh Illinois Cavalry in December of 1861. Before departing for Benton Barracks in St. Louis with his regiment, he joined another force as well. On February 13, 1862, he married Eva A. Parker of nearby Grove-land. She admired his Pekin “Progress” speech, his legal success, and his agnosticism.

The horrors of war made a great impression on Ingersoll. Even the camps were frightening because of the disease and death. He counted 1,500 graves in the camp cemetery in St. Louis. “Gen. Hospital is the most effective officer in the service,” he wrote. From the “Seat of War” he wrote on April 11, 1862, after the bloody battle of Shiloh, that an “awful Terrible battle, the most terrible I ever conceived of” had occurred. “War is horrid beyond the conception of man,” he asserted. He even invoked the protection of “My father’s God” for his men. He was also impatient with the officers such as Illinoisian General John Pope, who was defeated at Second Bull Run, and of Lincoln, who had appointed him and other “incompetents.” “To allow troops to be led by such a jackass is murder. When will Lincoln stop appointing idiots because they come from Ills. or are related to his charming wife,” he complained.

Robert Ingersoll’s disgust with the shortcomings of the generals and the administration were countered by his sense of loyalty and patriotism. Back in Peoria, his brother Ebon was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Democratic party’s lack of loyalty and patriotism. When the 1862 Democratic State Conven-
tion failed to adopt a series of "Loyal" resolutions, he began to advocate a rump meeting of the "War Democrats" to nominate loyal candidates. A number of Republicans suggested that Ebon be recruited into the (Republican) Union State Convention "because he has stood up manfully and battled successfully against all the old fossils of the Democratic Party." On September 24, 1862, the Republican convention nominated Ebon for congressman-at-large on the third ballot. Enoch Emery, the old Ingersoll nemesis, was a member of the convention and he apparently supported Ebon. Ebon Clark Ingersoll responded by giving a "rebel and copperhead" damning speech. He was happy to be in a convention where he saw no traitors as he implied he had in the Democratic convention. He was for emancipation and for punishing the rebels. He was against all those who were not unconditionally for the Union, and he wouldn't mind seeing a few traitors in Illinois, as in South Carolina, hanged if it would help crush the rebellion in a short time. Ebon continued to speak of himself as a "War Democrat" but as one who would not "be driven from principle and patriotism by the cry of abolitionism." He called on the friends of Stephen A. Douglas to carry out Douglas's admonition: "Let there be but two parties—patriots and traitors." 17

When Robert Ingersoll, who was with his regiment at Corinth, Mississippi, heard of Ebon's criticism of the Democrats, he applauded. On September 22, 1862, he wrote: "I glory in the position you have taken. . . . The present Democratic party are like the Jews under Moses. They are longing for the 'flesh pots' of slavery. . . . The effect of the Springfield (Democratic) Convention is to throw cold water upon the present enthusiasm of the North. It is a fire in the rear, it dampens the ardor of the army. . . . Slavery is unspeakable—detestable—destroy it." When Ebon received the nomination of the Republican Union ticket, Robert wrote: "I was considerably surprised when I first heard of your nomination. I am not surprised now. The Republicans were obliged to run a war Democrat. I am glad you were selected. . . . I glory in you much more than myself. I had rather see honors crown your head than mine. I believe you will be elected." 18

When Ebon allowed Robert's letter of September 22 condemning the Democrats for setting a "fire in the rear" to be published in the Republican newspaper, Robert was angered: "Today I saw the Transcript and was surprised to find a letter of mine. I suppose you knew my aversion to having anything of mine published that I never intended to have made public. I am sorry it appeared. I have been abused too much by religious fanatics to feel friendly toward them now. I certainly never wanted to see a word of mine in the Transcript. Of course they want & only want to abuse my old friends by pretending to praise me. Damn them and their praises. D--n their blame and everything they may ever do or say." 19

By election time in 1862 Ingersoll was profoundly discouraged with the war effort, with politicians, and with the prospect that his brother would be defeated. He wrote Ebon a letter meant to prepare him for the defeat; the letter also displays Ingersoll's misgivings about democracy. The November 1 letter was severely edited by Eva Wakefield, and it is therefore reproduced in full here. Words omitted by Wakefield are in italics. 20
Dear Bro. [Ebon]

Before this reaches you the election will probably have been decided. If you are defeated, take the disappointment with the best possible grace.

The Democracy will do all they can to embitter you, to make your defeat if possible more than a defeat—a humiliation.

You will have the consciousness of having done right, with that consciousness, a cross is more glorious than a crown.

For the mere matter of going to Congress—a collection of fools and knaves—I should care but little. It has ceased to be an honor even to be President of the Great Republic.

I believe that the life of the politician is one of misery. You have to be the friend of every booby—to put up with every indignity. You have to be the skillet of grease in which little hungry puppy editors sop their miserable crusts. As long as you are supposed to have plenty of bones, there will be plenty of dogs to follow you. Get out of bones, and down goes your meat house.

A popular man is like a bitch in [heat. Every?] pup is willing to [erased] "But every pup expects pay."

I believe a man is happier in his own individual business, to make his own bread and eat it with his family. To let the Government take care of itself, to let the dear people—the garlic-breathed—greasy capped and ragged arsed multitude go to the Devil.

When men like [William] O'Brien & [Enoch] Emery aspire to make laws for two millions of people, and the people are such asses as to allow either of them to do so, it proves that Democracy is a humbug. Free institutions won't work after that. Let us have Czars, an Emperor, a dictator or even a rotten tator. I hope however that just for the sake of success that you will be elected, but for your own sake & your own happiness and that of your wife and dear children defeat would be better. I am coming home whenever I can get the chance.

I send love to all, kiss noble little John. Today I hear that Mobile has been taken. I pray God that it may be true.

Love to yourself—dear dear brother.

Yours Robert

[on the top margin of page one Ingersoll wrote:] Did Capt—blast it I can't think of his name—send 30 dollars to you for me.

Robert’s pessimism with politics and war was more justified than he realized. Ebon was defeated in the November, 1862, election losing by 15,000 votes to a copperhead (peace Democrat), James C. Allen. A majority of the Illinois Democratic congressional candidates were elected, and both houses of the legislature came under Democratic control in a reaction to Lincoln’s preliminary emancipation proclamation and the lack of battlefield victories. On December 18, Robert
was captured near Lexington, Tennessee, by Confederate General Nathan B. Forrest. Ingersoll was outflanked and thirty of his men from his small detachment were killed or wounded. He later recalled: "I was the last to leave the guns. Away I went over field, and away they went after me. They shot at me it seemed hundreds of times. . . . I came to a high fence. I made my horse jump. It was too much for him. He jumped the fence clear and fine, but when he came down on the other side his knees gave way and he fell flat-Off I went, and surr [sir] Sesesh [Secessionists] bagged the aforesaid." Four days later Forrest paroled Ingersoll (later the legend grew that Forrest had sent him home because he was converting his staff to Unionism with his oratory). He was placed in command of a parole camp at Benton Barracks, St. Louis, but when an exchange of prisoners could not be arranged, he resigned his commission. On June 26, he wrote to Ebon: "I have seen enough of death and horror. . . . I have passed through days and nights enough filled with apprehension. I can go out now honorably, respected and I might say loved by every man & officer of the 11th Illinois. . . . I have been in rather poor health, having had the ague a couple of times and the flux all the time. Now I am all right again. . . . I shall spend the 4th 'day of Independence' with you."

Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg on July 3-4, 1863, raised the hope that the war was near an end, but when summer turned to autumn, a "peace without victory" movement began to gain strength in the North. Robert Ingersoll, the ex-Colonel, quickly joined the forces determined to see that the sacrifices of the soldiers should not have been in vain. In doing so, he began to move away from his party. On August 28, he spoke at a Union mass meeting in Smithville. The Transcript reported: "He was in good fighting condition, and for one hour and a half dealt such blows to traitors, copperheads, and the rebellion that the audience were perfectly carried away with him." At the beginning of his speech, he said that "he was responsible for no party, no party was responsible for him, I am in my own canoe." He declared: "I am neither a Democrat, a Republican, an Abolitionist or the other thing. . . . If there is any man here today who believes that slavery is right, that man ought to be a slave. . . . I am opposed to the Union as it was. . . . We tried to serve God and the devil at the same time and failed." Although he was strongly for emancipation, he wanted blacks "put in a territory by themselves." He continued: "I don't care for Abraham Lincoln, but I am with him when he attempts to make this country all free. . . . Were it not for northern copperheads, we should have had peace months ago. The southern people ask me to sustain slavery. I will see them dead first. . . . Hang them and they will be nearer heaven than they ever were before. . . . There are but two parties now, the pro-slavery party and the anti-slavery party. I am on the free side."

On September 3, a great Union rally was held in Springfield. Lincoln, realizing the desperate need to muster the Union to complete the job, wrote an effective letter to be read at the mass-meeting. It was widely reprinted and together with the Gettysburg Address, it may have helped turn the tide. In Springfield, Ebon gave a major address at one of the seven speakers' stands at the rally which was
attended by 50,000 people. The Springfield organ of the Republican party called Ebon’s speech "one of the best made" and recalled that he had been the Union candidate-at-large for Congress the preceding fall. Robert’s future political mentor, Richard J. Oglesby, spoke for three hours, appealing to the crowd to swear to pledge their lives to crushing the rebellion and "the people rose, and with uplifted hands, made oath to do so."

Both Robert and Ebon campaigned vigorously for the Union candidates in the November 3, 1863, county and circuit court campaigns. Each day they were a little more Republican than they had been the day before. On October 27, Robert maintained that he was as good a Douglas Democrat as ever and argued for colonization and "total separation of the white and black races." He claimed, as did many moderate Republicans, that making a Negro a soldier did not make him equal to a white man and that taking a Negro into the service did not qualify him to vote anymore than it "would a dog who helped fight off an attacker." Three days later he was still rationalizing Democratic party history and Douglas’s views to say that all must stand by the government, but he was also favoring "confiscation and emancipation as war measures." He separated himself from most Democrats by favoring arbitrary arrests which were "necessary to crush out this rebellion." "The law of self-preservation is first" he reasoned. By election eve he was demanding: "Call me abolitionist, call me negro equality man, amalgamationist—anything, so you don’t call me a Copperhead." He added: "So far as Abraham Lincoln is concerned, I do not agree with him in a great many things . . . [but] Before God, I believe the principle of that [emancipation] proclamation was right. . . . Abraham Lincoln is right on the main question, and that is enough for me." The Ingersoll brothers had almost completed their "metamorphosis" into the Republican party.

The depth of Ingersoll’s emotional commitment to abolition is illustrated by the incident of March 14, 1864. When Sheriff John Murray entered the Ingersoll brothers’ office on business, the talk soon turned to politics. Murray sympathized with the copperhead Chicago Times and the South, and charged that the Lincoln administration was carrying on the war solely for the liberation of the Negroes. "Col. Ingersoll replied that perhaps that was true, as the Negroes had undoubtedly as good a right to their freedom as the Sheriff or any other man."

"Ingersoll seized a chair and struck at him." Ingersoll pursued the sheriff into a corner where others present separated the two. According to the Republican paper, the two parties discussed the altercation and the sheriff agreed that it was a small matter, but he later changed his mind and filed a complaint with Justice Bailey charging assault and battery. According to the Democratic paper, Ingersoll broke the chair over the sheriff’s head. The constitutional right to a speedy trial was exercised and a jury trial was held the same day as the incident. Robert Ingersoll made rousing speeches before the jury and was loudly cheered by some in the gallery. Five jurors favored imposing a fine on Ingersoll while one held out against any punishment. A second trial was scheduled for the next day but "Ingersoll got rid of a due for assaulting Murray on a technicality [double jeopardy]."
On March 25, 1864, the abolitionist Congressman Owen Lovejoy died. In 1861, the state congressional districts had been reapportioned, and Peoria became part of the new Fifth District. The Peoria Daily Transcript, recalling Ebon Clark Ingersoll’s support for the Union ticket in 1862, began to advocate his nomination for the vacancy. The Republican nominating convention was held at Princeton on April 26, 1864, and Ebon was selected on the fifth ballot. Both Ebon and Robert made speeches there damning the copperheads. Ebon paid “eloquent and feeling tribute to the lamented Lovejoy” for which he was congratulated by “the old anti-slavery guard who pressed forward to greet the young and rising star.” According to the Transcript: Colonel Bob was “... if possible more severe on the copperheads than his brother.” Robert proclaimed: “This Nation has been one of idolators, worshiping slavery, now the image must be broken. Yes, I am an unconditional abolitionist. Copperheads may add damn if they wish.”

As a result of the May 7, 1864, special election, Ebon was elected over Judge H. M. Wead, Democrat of Peoria, to take the place of Lovejoy. Ebon traveled to Washington where he was seated on May 20. Robert kidded Ebon: “I saw in the Chicago papers that you had taken your seat, glad of it as you must have been tired standing since the 7th day of May.” Ebon called on President Lincoln on May 28. Lincoln, in turn, introduced him to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells with the following note: “This introduces Hon. Mr. Ingersoll, successor to our lamented friend Lovejoy. Please see him.” In Congress on June 20, Ingersoll made a speech favoring a constitutional amendment ending slavery. After praising his predecessor, “the lamented Lovejoy,” he asserted “... Destroy the mother and the child will die. Destroy the cause and the effect will disappear. Slavery has ever been the enemy of liberal principles.”

Despite his oft expressed repugnance for politics, Robert also aspired to be a congressman. He was elected as a Peoria delegate to the 1864 Republican State Nomination Convention where he was a candidate for congressman-at-large. He had failed as a Democrat in 1860; perhaps he thought he could win as a Republican in 1864. He polled 120 votes but S. W. Moulton was victorious with 363 votes. On May 27, Robert wrote Ebon from Peoria: “Well as I expected I failed to get the nomination. Had you not been in Congress or had you not have beaten Moulton two years ago I would have been.” He added: “I made a speech to the convention & laid them in the shade. Moulton would not speak, [Jackson] Grimshaw did and wished he hadn’t. I am satisfied. All there said I was the best stumper in the state.” Robert immediately set about working for Ebon’s renomination. He recommended that Ebon write or send something, anything, to his supporters: “There is a little lawyer in Toulon by the name of Hewitt. Send him Census or agricultural pictures of Bulls Bags etc. or a dissertation on tape worms. ...” The following letters, dated June 2, and 17, 1864, are transcribed in full because they have not been previously published and because they reveal much about the love and rivalry between the brothers and Robert’s view of Democrats.
Peoria June 2nd 1864

Dear Bro. [Ebon]

I just returned from Stark, *Penn township*. Had a large meeting. Three thousand at least were present. Everything went off in fine style, and every Union man was pleased to death with my speech.

You need not think that I am disheartened by the action of the state convention. I had no particular claims. You beat [S. W.] Moulton & [Jackson] Grimshaw two years ago. I suppose they thought it too bad to be beaten by the whole family.

I think I did myself great good at the convention. Everybody complimented my speech, and I was the real choice of the convention had there been no trading. When I see you I can explain all.

Instead of feeling down in the mouth I am perfectly satisfied. There is nothing of any interest happening in these parts. I am on the watch about your prospects for August. I think there is no danger. Knox & Peoria are certain. We must look after Bureau. Don't think I want your place. Hell I don't want to go to Congress. I had rather have you there a thousand times. I don't think that I could do half that you can. I know I could not. I am too impulsive to succeed as a politician with any certainty. You are where you ought to be & where I want you to stay till you get in the Senate. You can be the next senator I believe if you work your wires having that end in view. I don't know whether I shall go to Baltimore Con[vention] or not. [t] would cost something like 100$ I suppose, though the Springfield trip only cost me 14$. Temperance is cheap. Eva & baby well as can be. So are your wife & children.

I made hundreds of friends at Springfield. Oglesby was very sorry that I was not nominated, and said that he would feel much surer of his own election if I had been. You could have been nominated there without a struggle. I heard a thousand compliments for you from every part of the state, and many delegates said they would go for me because I was your brother. All spoke in the highest terms of your canvass in 62 & expressed great joy at your election. Well dear brother Goodbye. May God bless you forever. I love you better than I do myself.

Yours Robert

Peoria June 17, 1864

Dear Bro. [Ebon]

Tomorrow I will send you the names of all the delegates in the Princeton Convention, so that you can notice them all. Nothing is going on here very exciting. Most of the talk is about the Ohio martyr [Clement L. Vallandigham]. What will the Govt do? I believe it would be best to let him alone long enough for him either to divide the
Chicago [Democrat National] Convention or force them to adopt a peace platform. And if let alone that length of time he & his particular friends would become so emboldened by the lenity of the Govt, that they would commit treasonable acts. Then hang a few, and so end I mean rope's end, the matter.

I saw in the paper a condensation of your remarks on Constitutional Amendment questions. Your friends are pleased with what you said. They think it manly and outspoken. You have made many friends by a few words. I am proud of you dear brother. Take noble, grand, just, broad ground. Speak for liberty, progress, light, man & God.

Well goodbye. Eva sends her love. I write this letter at home.

All well Your aff Bro
Robert

Robert campaigned vigorously for Ebon's renomination while Ebon sat in Congress. So confident of victory were the brothers that Ebon went on vacation "by the sea" in July. Bob chided: "You are probably luxuriating in breezes from the sea. Neptune blows with distended cheeks upon your velvet hide." By contrast, Bob noted from Peoria: "The weather is perfectly scorching. . . . A wind envelops me. It comes from down the river, from the slop tubs [distilleries], from the droppings of cattle, from the hog victims of cholera . . . from under the arms of Irish butchers . . . from decaying horses, from the dirty under shirts of the lousy occupants of the city hall. . . . Pray for me poor miserable sinner." Ebon was renominated by acclamation when the Fifth Congressional Convention met in Peoria on September 6, 1864. Robert spoke over the state on behalf of gubernatorial candidate Richard Oglesby, and he came out "wholehog for Lincoln" and the Republican party. He spoke every day for Ebon during the last days of the campaign. The Republicans won impressive victories in Illinois. Ebon won by a 6,000 vote majority, although he failed to carry Peoria County which was Democratic territory. Robert Ingersoll's oratorical skills contributed much to the victory of President Lincoln, Governor Oglesby, and Congressman Ebon Ingersoll.32

But what of Robert's own political ambitions? If one Ingersoll in Washington was enough, perhaps there was an office in Illinois for another. Only a few days after Oglesby's election as governor, Robert wrote to him: "After Congratulating you, the State, the Country and the World upon the great victory won by Patriotism and Humanity, I wish to say, that I am anxious to be appointed U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Ills. . . ." Oglesby wished him success but the appointment was not forthcoming. Lincoln appointed Perkins Bass of Chicago instead, and Robert Ingersoll was returned to the drudgery of riding the circuit. On March 17, 1865, he wrote to brother John: "I have been busy for the last few months travelling all over the Country. I get nearly sick of this kind of life and sometimes wish that I was living in some quiet neighborhood on a small piece of land, with a horse & cow—a weekly newspaper and 'Weems' life of Washington." The birth of two daughters, Eva Robert on September 22, 1863,
and Maud Robert, on October 4, 1864, may have also contributed to his desire for domesticity.\textsuperscript{33}

Ingersoll was also looking forward to peace in the nation. News of Lee’s surrender to Grant, on April 9, 1865, soon reached Peoria. But a few days later news came of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Ingersoll saw the act as more than an assassination; it was a symbol of the South’s role in enslaving millions of people and starting an unspeakable war, for which they were utterly unrepentant. It stirred in him a demand for vengeance which propelled him quickly into the camp where most of his fellow veterans were heading—into the ranks of the Radical Republicans.
2

Look at Peoria

The process by which Robert Ingersoll became a Radical Republican (i.e. one who favored equal political rights for blacks and a controlled readmission of the Southern states) moved swiftly between the assassination in 1865 and the Johnson impeachment in 1868. The assassination of Lincoln and the revelation of the Andersonville prison atrocities did much to push Ingersoll toward radicalism. In 1866, most Americans were forced to choose between the lenient reconstruction policy of Andrew Johnson and the more stringent policy of Congress. It was in this setting that the Ingersolls accepted the president’s “Look at Peoria” challenge (from Johnson’s interview with the London Times) and demonstrated that Johnson’s policy would not “play in Peoria.” Robert’s political, personal, and philosophical friendship with Radical Republican Governor Richard Oglesby led to his appointment as Illinois Attorney-General in 1867. It was the only public office Robert ever held. Even that was too much for some later “Ingersollphobes” who invented the mystery of the “disappearing inscription” from the state house cornerstone.

Peoria was stunned and angered by the assassination of President Lincoln. In common with most American cities, “Solemnities” were prepared. On April 19, 1865, all the churches conducted special services at eleven in the morning. At 2:30 p.m. Spencer’s band began to play the mournful “death march” in the Court House Square and a crowd of 5,000 assembled. The Hon. Washington Cockle presided. He introduced, for brief remarks, the Rev. Mr. McLaren, who eulogized Lincoln and exclaimed: “Great God! can it be! Can it be that this great sacrifice of greatness and goodness was necessary in order to bring us out of bondage? Yes so it seems.” After asserting that Lincoln’s religion was “something better than Deism,” he gave vent to his (and the nation’s) need for vengeance: “Conciliation is good, Christlike but . . . You can’t tame a tiger . . . and there are those of our foes who are so much like tigers that they must be ground down into the dust by the iron heel of justice. Let there be no more sickly sentimentalism!” The speech was followed by a resolution (that contained many phrases similar to Ingersoll’s style) which viewed the assassination as a calamity and pledged to fight the “unholy rebellion.” “We should not parley with treason or compromise with Slavery,” they wrote. The resolution charged that “Human Slavery” was “directly responsible before God and man for this atrocious crime.” The writers of the resolution also charged that the president had been struck down by the same spirit that had “hunted man with blood hounds,” massacred black troops at Ft. Pillow, and “shot, froze, tortured and starved” 60,000 prisoners at Andersonville.

Robert Ingersoll’s major address had much in common with Rev. McLaren’s views on vengeance. He insisted that the assassination was no greater a crime than
others committed by the South and its Northern sympathizers. Firing on Fort Sumter was a crime which led to other crimes, including the Fort Pillow massacre and Andersonville. But, he rejected the idea that the assassination was providential: ‘‘Assassination is contrary to the will and the express command of the Most High, but he did not believe that the laws of the universe are such that no good can result from the evil-doer.’’ He argued that ‘‘the great Republic has been cemented by the blood of her patriots. Patriotism itself has been made sacred by the blood of heroes. Christ illustrated and endeared every virtue to the human heart by religion. We will think better of patriotism for the blood shed. Lincoln’s blood, smote down as he was, will cement the foundation of this government and the great principle of human liberty will be advanced. Human liberty is the basis of every great and good end itself.’’

Because the account by the Peoria Daily Transcript (April 20, 1865) is apparently the only extensive report of Ingersoll’s speech, it is published here in full.

**ROBERT INGERSOLL ORATION AT THE LINCOLN SOLEMNITIES IN PEORIA**

**APRIL 19, 1865**

Mr. Ingersoll was then introduced. Standing in the presence of death, on the threshold of the great unknown, it was fitting that he should declare that he believed he did not mourn for Lincoln any more than he did for any dead soldier of the Union. He did not. He did not sympathize with the widow of the President any more than he did for the widow who awaits her husband’s returning footsteps, and will await them until the earth closes over her form. The assassination of President Lincoln is among the least not the greatest crimes that slavery has committed.

Selling women, whipping them, robbing them, and heaping upon them every cruelty that can be imagined, is a greater crime than to assassinate a man.

It is a greater crime to uphold the perpetrators of such acts than it would be today to say ‘‘I believe Booth to have been right.’’ The Confederacy did a greater crime than this when she fired upon Sumter, because that act involved all that has followed. Every one of our friends who has been lost in this war has sacrificed just as much as Lincoln did when he breathed his last. The crimes of slavery are greater than those.

The man who went down South to defend the old flag, under which the Southern States had accumulated wealth and power, who having been taken prisoner has been starved until he becomes a driveling idiot, and yet hundreds and thousands of men up North defend the men who did this. The crimes of these men are greater than assassination. Some of these men live in Peoria. (I want no applause, the occasion is too solemn for it.) It has been said that this great crime is providential. He did not believe it. Assassination is contrary to the will and the express
command of the Most High, but he did not believe that the laws of the universe are such that no good can result to the evil-doer. Good may spring from evil, and ever will, but not to the perpetrator. It seems as if it always takes martyrdom to endear truth to the human heart. The great Republic has been cemented by the blood of her patriots. Patriotism itself has been made sacred by the blood of heroes. Christ illustrated and endea""""red every virtue to the human heart by religion. We will think better of patriotism for the blood shed. Lincoln's blood, smote down as he was, will cement the foundation of this Government, and the great principle of human liberty will be advanced. Human liberty is the basis of every great and good end itself. We do not fight to preserve this Government alone but fight to preserve this Government in order to preserve liberty. So we do not fight to preserve Lincoln's Government but to preserve liberty through the Government. Liberty is greater than all. The right or wrong of any man's life has not been able to influence the world for any great length of time. The principles of the Almighty are eternal—they govern the universe. These principles, in their onward march down the feeble voice of man, as the advancing wave engulphs [sic] all obstacles that seek to arrest its progress.

The speaker went on to say that we had nursed a viper in our bosom—the viper of slavery. It had raised its head and struck down the President of the United States, and as long as he had strength he was going to fight that viper. He was not going to eulogize Lincoln, there was a principal [sic] greater than he that assassinated him. When the war broke out he thought the President was too slow, but Lincoln had the sense to see that he couldn't lead thirty millions of people. Had some brilliant genius been in the chair he would have gone beyond the people into a despotism or foun dered the Ship of State forever; but Lincoln went right on, and all at once the armies of the enemy began to waver and fall. Grant and Sherman, Farragut and Sheridan, with Lincoln at their head marched on until Richmond is ours. He knew when he heard the bell toll in the Congregational Church, the other day, (and the bell of that church always tolls when there's a victory), that that old apostle of liberty, Mark M. Aiken, was at the bell rope, and the war was over at last. Lincoln had opened the door of reconciliation. What shall we do? Shall we still offer them the same terms? Forbid it, Almighty God! Shall we say come back, take the reins of the Government and run it as you did before. He was opposed to giving a rebellious State a vote on either side until they repent. He thought that the rebels were under our feet and wouldn't shake hands with them or with any of their friends in the North when they come around the coffin of Lincoln with their crocodile tears, he would receive them as foes. He thought that if they had been false foes they will not suddenly be true now. The men who have staid by Lincoln four years are abundantly able to put down the rest of the rebellion. He didn't want any one to come in at the eleventh hour unless they were going to stay the balance of the day. What should we say more of Lincoln unless it was that he
had always been true; that having as much power as any potentate ever had he had never abused that power; the master of guns and bayonets, he never had wronged the poorest but had always respected his rights. He did not believe that the same thing could be said of any other man that ever lived under the same circumstances, and yet he has been called a tyrant, and this idea had led to his assassination. The speaker declared it to be an established principle that we always admire men who do any good for the human race. He admired the men who obtained the Magna Charta, the men who brought about the French revolution and American revolution; but to him that day of September on which he issued his proclamation of emancipation was the sublimest day the sun ever looked down upon in America, and when the emancipation took effect; on the first day of January, he thought it the crowning point in Lincoln's history. Lincoln was, in his view, the Great Defender of the Republic, and the name of that defender he believed to be the first on the roll of fame. Washington was second. He went on to say that Washington had established the Country when it was weak, but Lincoln had saved it when it was the most powerful on the globe, and he had saved it, too, in accordance with the eternal principles of God. The President is to be buried in Illinois. Illinois that had been fortunate enough to produce a Grant, the ablest General in the world, and Lincoln, the emancipator and the sublime martyr to liberty. The audience were now going home to carry out the great principles, for which Lincoln had laid down his life. He hoped some lurid bolt of Heaven would dash into pieces any man who will defend the infamous system of slavery, whose evil is crime, murder, assassination. He ended in a burst of eloquence that cannot be reported with any degree of success. It could not be appreciated unless heard.

Soon after Lincoln's assassination the war ended and the regiments returned home one by one. Ingersoll began to develop the "bloody-shirt" technique as a means of attracting the ex-soldiers to the Republican party. When the Eighty-Sixth Illinois Regiment arrived home to a celebration, he could not forbear warning them that, although "this is not a political meeting," they should realize that the Copperheads (Democrats) had "laughed at your wounds, they sneered at your scars, they mocked the corpses of your comrades, they prophesied your defeat, . . . they despised the cause for which you were battling." When Ingersoll's own former regiment, the Eleventh Cavalry, arrived home on October 12, 1865, he warned that the Democrats would welcome them home but he said: "The impudence of the copperheads in giving this reception to the soldiers could only be equalled by Judas Iscariot getting up in Heaven on the last day and delivering an address of welcome to the rest of the apostles." The Women's National League sponsored a large reception for all of the returned soldiers on October 19. Governor Oglesby made a radical speech and Ingersoll followed by damning the South and the copperheads and praising the soldiers, including the blacks who fought "side by side with white soldiers." The soldier should "vote the same way he
Ingersoll's speech to his old regiment indicates that he was out in front of the public in his attitude toward Negro suffrage. Although he said he was not "what they call a Negro Equality man," yet he added, "so help him God he would never help put a disability upon him." He also argued that "This is the country of the Negro as much as it is that of the white man." Ingersoll's emphasis on the race question was based upon intelligence and learning. He asserted: "Freeing the Negro didn't make him more equal than he was before. It didn't give him a single additional idea, but it did give him an opportunity to acquire ideas, and become a man." A few months later Robert exhorted his congressman brother to adopt the public posture that Negroes "ought to have an equal opportunity with the white to become intelligent." He took the position that "intelligence cannot be dangerous . . . whether the intelligence is in a brain bound in white or black leather." He concluded that "a man's complexion certainly has no more to do with his sense than the binding of a book has with its contents."4

Governor Richard J. Oglesby was one of the close friends with whom Robert Ingersoll shared his private, unorthodox religious views. Oglesby had made a "Holy Land" tour in 1857 and he gave lectures on his experience throughout much of his life. He presented the lecture "Observations on Palestine" in Springfield on January 2, 1866. An enthusiastic listener from Chicago wrote a letter to the editor of a Chicago paper contending that Oglesby's lecture proved the reliability of the scriptures because the governor had said that leeks and onions, which were mentioned in the Bible, could be found in Egypt. From Washington D.C., where he was visiting his brother Ebon, Robert wrote the governor a good-natured letter agreeing that leeks and onions made a strong argument and chiding him for throwing his official position in favor of the Bible. The letter anticipates, by six years, Ingersoll's first "point-blank" atheistic lecture ("The Gods") and by thirteen years his "Some Mistakes of Moses" lecture, which is similar to the letter. Ingersoll's effort, which was apparently dashed off in great haste but without need of correction, is perhaps the most humorous private letter he ever wrote. It displays mastery of the stories of the Bible. The letter includes some mention of politics, especially his incredulity as to how Methuselah could have lived a thousand years without running for any office. A complete transcription of the letter, which is in the Illinois State Historical Library, follows.5

**ON LEEKS AND ONIONS IN THE HOLY LAND**

Washington Jan 22, 1866

My Dear Governor:

The within slip I cut from an Illinois paper a moment ago, and of course was greatly gratified to learn that you had thrown the weight of your official position in favor of the book of books—The Bible—by saying, that as a railroad guide through the Holy Land it had no equal.
If what Mr. Colton (the writer of the enclosed slip) says is true, you are the first man who has used in favor of the truth of the blessed Scriptures, an argument half as strong as either leeks or onions.

I used to doubt the truth of the story, that all the children of Israel (some three millions) assembled at a given place with only a notice of a few hours—when they were scattered over a vast territory with very limited means of communication.

It has also been very wonderful to me that after the Egyptians had murdered all the male children of the Jews—There were still as many boys as girls. But since it has come to light that there are leeks in the land of Goshen who can doubt?

Some hard hearted and bad men (instigated by the Devil) have refused to believe that walking sticks turned into Copperheads and went about swelling one another, in a manner that would have perfectly astonished “Signor Blitz.”

They say that it is not reasonable that God would have covered the land with lice without having furnished the antidote in the shape of fine tooth combs and mercurial ointment. But to what lousy shifts are these poor infidels driven! They even pretend that Moses could not turn all the water into blood, and at the same time leave some for the Egyptians to experiment on. They say that the great God of Heaven would not go about giving cows a murraín, and man[u]facturing frogs to croak over the misfortunes of Pharaoh. Vain men! to pretend to understand the inscrutable & senseless.

I think your onion argument if properly applied will bring tears to the eyes of the most hardened and profane.

My Dear Governor you do not know how delighted I am to learn, that you actually stood, on the identical spot where the manna fell.

How touching it is— to have the words of Moses verified by the Governor of Illinois.

Who in the name of Credulity will deny that God in his goodness sent millions of quails, broiled, buttered, on toast to satisfy the hunger of those patient, pious and honest people after it becomes generally known that your Excellency in the year 1856 or thereabouts saw in that same region of country, some of the very same kind of birds?

Put the three facts together—that you saw the leeks & onions—the quails and rode on a camel, and they prove beyond a doubt the story of Jericho and the horns—Jonah & the whale, Lots wife and a lump of salt, Sampson and the jaw bone—Balaam and the eloquent ass, and last but not least decide the great and important question as to whether the golden calf was a bull or a heifer.

I am astonished and thank God.

Was the bush burning when you rode by?

Did you cross that stream that gushed from a rock and followed the Jews through all their wanderings for forty years up hill and down? Since the days of Newton water has acquired the habit of running down.

When riding through the wilderness did you happen to see any of
the clothes worn by the Jews which "waxed not old"? How I should like to see a pair of breeches that would wear forty years, and still boast a rear unimpaired—knees unglazed and absolutely smell like new cloth.

These are things that modern tailors cannot comprehend. Even Andy Johnson thinks that no breeches could run forty years without adopting some plan of re-construction. Were you at the place where General Joshua stood when he stopped the sun & moon?

How wonderful to think that God stopped the whole Universe in order to give Joshua time to thrash a few wretches that he could have whipped just as well after dark.

But this was nothing to what was done in the time of Ahaz. Then the sun was absolutely made to go the wrong way in order that a man might be convinced that he would recover of the measles.

This happened however before the days of Kepler, LaPlace or Humboldt.

Did you while traveling through that terrible wilderness happen to find any of those little paddles which the Lord commanded every Jew to carry upon his "weapon" and that when he attended to a call of nature he should turn and cover it up? And the reason given is so consistent and striking—"For, says the Holy Book, "The Lord God walketh in the Camp at night."

The reference is that there was danger of soiling the divine mocca-sins.

You probably heard the story that when Long John Wentworth was elected Mayor of Chicago, he procured the passage of a law, making it a misdemeanor to hang a clothes line nearer to the ground than eight feet, and the law might also have ended by nearly quoting the passage of scripture just referred to, "For the Mayor Long John walketh in back yards at night."

I hope that you will not for a moment think that I am trying to make light of holy things. On the contrary I am a firm believer in the snake and apple story—that the first woman was made of a rib—and as a consequence women have been heavy on rib bone ever since. I would not have my faith shaken in the Tower of Babel for the world. If that story is untrue, how do you account for wild Irish & low Dutch?

And to show to you that I am perfectly orthodox I will add that the only reason that I have for believing the Bible is its improbability. Faith my dear Sir consists in believing the impossible. There certainly can be no merit in believing the reasonable.

I deplore the spread of knowledge—Science I abhor. Art is an abomination, because they deny the word of God, And therefore allow me to say in conclusion that I am rejoiced to learn that you are in favor of the good old times, when Moses was God's clerk and geologist, when Joshua was his General and Astronomer. When the Earth was flat. When the sky was a solid vault. When the stars moved in grooves and were boosted by Angels. When the sons of God came down and cohabited with the daughters of men. When children were born who grew to be Eight hundred feet high & refused to be weaned and abso-
lutely swallowed their mothers. When Methusalem [Methuselah] lived about a thousand years without having been a candidate for any office. When Noah was secretary of the Navy. When God himself came down and cut out and made Adam & Eve breeches & petticoats hoop skirt and a clawhammer coat. When jackasses made set speeches to angels that they met in the road. When people went to Heaven in an Omnibus office — horses to match — and dropped their ponchos to wondering crowds. When Ezekiel made sweet cake of cow dung. And that intrepid mariner Mr. Jonah finding himself in the belly of a whale — did not blubber. And although in the midst of the great and mysterious deep — without any compass, tracts, bibles, playing cards, or tobacuco. With nothing but fish balls to eat — the subject of a scaly trick — without knowing what country he was near — only knowing that he was in Finland — still had the presence of mind to thrust an oar out of the whales alimentary canal and pull himself triumphantly ashore.

In the name of Ancient Geography, Astronomy, Geology, and Navigation, I thank you again, and again.

And subscribe myself your convinced, concerted and most obedient servant.

Robert G. Ingersoll

Oglesby answered in the same light-hearted manner: "For many years I have been mysteriously beset with the constant inquiry—what shall I do to be saved . . . or what good can I do in the brief space of one short life to repay the [Being] who sent me here. I feel better now . . . since I have brought conviction and consolation to the inquiet mind of yourself. . . . I carefully schemed and counted every dollar spent in the Land of Leeks and Onions and the wilderness of Sin and wondered if time would ever repay the outlay. All is settled now, the account is squared. I see my way clear to the promised land. . . . Like all new currents there is a freshness in what you say truly elegant and irresistible. I do not know when I have read so good a letter. . . . You must not object to my reading it to my friends . . . I knew there was much virtue in an onion but never supposed [it would produce] such a letter. . . . Come by and see me on your way home." The "Leeks and Onions" letter was the beginning of a long correspondence between the two men on both religion and politics. Apparently, Ingersoll sent Oglesby a copy of Voltaire's *Philosopical Dictionary*. Oglesby wrote to Robert: "Wait [Oglesby's law partner] stole the Philosopical Dictionary and is entertaining the Reverend gentlemen of Decatur with it [but] I have not had a chance to read three pages of it." Oglesby also found Robert a useful medium for contacting Congressman Ebon Clark Ingersoll.⁶

The winter and spring of 1866 in Peoria was occupied with an editors meeting, a great revival, Ingersoll's "Progress" speech, and politics, including a city election. The editor of the *Geneseo Republican*, after attending an "editorial convention" in Peoria, wrote of the city: "This city is set on a hill, or principally, and
is one of the best mannered and liveliest burgs in all Illinois. It boasts of fine residences, tall business houses, broad streets, splendid sewerage, . . . handsome women, brave men and the meanest hotels this side of Kingdom Come, to say nothing of its whisky." Many Peoria citizens who thought whisky sinful became very involved with the revival meetings being conducted at Rouse's Hall and in some of the churches in March by a circuit rider, Rev. Mr. Hammond. The revival "awakened" Democrats, Sheriff O'Brien, publisher Raney, and judges Gale and Loucks who "made public acknowledgements of their repentance." Ingersoll's "Progress" oration was delivered after the revival season to the Women's National League as a benefit. This May 14 version of "Progress" was probably relatively tame and had more in common with the one given in Pekin in 1860 than the revised oration given in 1869. Editor Emery said it was an eloquent lecture "showing the successive steps up which humanity has climbed," and it reviewed the superstitions of "former years." Emery promised to publish the entire oration but he never did.7

Robert's letters to Ebon during 1866 and 1867 indicate that he was reviewing "the superstitions of former years" by reading the ancient philosophers and historians. He reported reading Eusebius, Polybius, Sallust, Herodotus, and Socrates. He also read Comte, Rabelais, and Milton, but he found the latter full of "Christian lies and pagan mythology." For one who had an encyclopedic mind, it is not surprising that he purchased the Encyclopedia Britannica (for $220) in 1866. One discovery was worth the price, on the day after Christmas, he wrote: "I say that it gave great pleasure to find that the Christians did not even know what time their God was born."8

As the April 2 township and April 9 Peoria city elections neared and the reconstruction fight between Congress and President Johnson heated up, it became difficult to separate religion from politics. To counter the National Democrat's partisan treatment of the "present religious awakening" in Peoria, the Transcript charged that many Democrats had "repented" to impress the voters. "Judge Loucks may be a Christian," Emery protested, "but we tell him that before he gets to heaven he has to rid himself of his Copperheadism." The Democrats swept the township election and the Democratic candidate for mayor, H. T. Baldwin, beat Republican McKinney 1,623 to 1,104 votes. The Transcript rationalized that Republicans were divided by local questions about Sunday laws and temperance. Meanwhile Congress had passed, on March 13, 1866, a civil rights bill intended to overcome President Johnson's objections to an earlier bill, but he vetoed it on March 27 to the consternation of many of the moderate Republicans. The Peoria Democrats under the leadership of W. T. Dowdall, the editor of the National Democrat, staged a "ratification" rally on April 2 to praise Johnson's veto. The Transcript commented that it was correct for the Democrats to praise Johnson: "The man who promised to be the Moses of the colored race, and at the first convenient opportunity became their Judas. The Copperheads can understand and appreciate Judas. They couldn't Moses."9

After Johnson's veto of the first civil rights bill, Dowdall had sent the president
a telegram dated February 26, stating that a resolution had been "unanimously adopted" at a Peoria rally: "Resolved that we telegraph the following message to the President of the U. S. Well done good & faithful servant, the defender of the constitution, the champion of the people & the savior of the country." On April 4, Dowdall again telegraphed to the president: "On the night of Feb. 24 [26] I had the honor of telegraphing you that Peoria, the second city in our state, in mass meeting, endorsed your veto message & policy with their voices & now sir I have the honor to inform you that the same people have endorsed your policy [with] their votes today. Our entire [township] ticket was elected by from one to three hundred (300) majority. Last year it went radical. Asking the blessing of an all wise deity upon you in your noble work, I am truly yours." The telegrams became the basis of Johnson's "Look at Peoria" interview of April 12, but the interview was not published in American papers until May 14. 10

President Johnson's veto of the first civil rights bill on February 19, 1866, and his tirade against the Republican Congress on Washington's birthday shocked and angered many Republicans. Most congressmen were not yet ready to break with the president, however, both because they hoped he might change his attitude and because he was in a position to remove their supporters from federal offices. But Robert was decisive and he urged Ebon to act on principle: "All the little questions about Collectors and Assessors sink into insignificance compared to the great & absorbing question of whether the Country and Liberty are to be preserved, or whether the Confederate army with ballots instead of bayonets with Genl. Andy Johnson at the head are to conquer at last. Stand by principle old boy. Let every office in the district go to pot. Stand firm by the idea that every vestige of slavery must perish before reconstruction is possible or even desirable." During the local political campaign, Robert first publicly "dissected and repudiated" Johnson and his reconstruction policy at a "Union" political rally on April 6. He argued that Johnson, once a Union man, "had gone over to the camp of the enemy." Ebon followed with his April 9 telegram to the Transcript announcing the House's over-ride of the president's veto of the civil rights bill. "Universal liberty and equality before the law has been vindicated. The People are greater than the President," he concluded.11

Johnson retaliated with what the historian Eric L. McKittrick called "some experimental tampering" and "erratic handling of patronage" in Illinois, especially in Ebon Ingersoll's congressional district. On April 18, Johnson nominated a replacement for Peoria postmaster Emery. Under the heading "GUILLOTINED" the editor Emery noted in the Transcript: "There is amnesty at the White House for traitors, but none for loyal men." Next the President tried to remove the Princeton Collector of Internal Revenue, another Ingersoll supporter. Replacements acceptable to Illinois Democrats were nominated by Johnson. Ebon Ingersoll's response was his "most radical and telling speech of the session," delivered on May 5. The speech attracted the attention of the London Times which described the "obscure" congressman's speech: "He was determined, he said, to unmask Mr. Johnson and reveal the deception which he had practiced upon the people.
Had the President shown more patriotism and less egotism there would have been no difficulty in reconstructing the Union, but he wanted to make himself conspicuous; he was ‘filled with the malaria of slavery’; he had betrayed the party which elected him and ‘given the lie’ to all his principles.”

The expression “Look at Peoria” is probably the earliest version of the famous “How does it play in Peoria” phrase, connoting Peoria as typical of political opinion in the great American heartland. On April 12, 1866, the American correspondent of the London Times interviewed Andrew Johnson. The president noted that although the radicals “have raised the cry of ‘mad dog’ at me. . . . They will understand me better by-and-by.” Referring to his policy of rapid [white] reconstruction, he insisted: “Yet there were signs that people were beginning to be alive to the truth. ‘Look at Peoria’-and he mentioned several other towns where meetings in support of the president’s policy have lately been held since the passage [and his veto] of the Civil Rights Bill. ‘It is like water trickling along the ground,’ said Mr. Johnson. ‘You can see the damp places here and there, and you know that it will gradually spread’. ” The meetings the president referred to were apparently those reported in Dowdall’s telegrams. The London Times story was datelined April 16 and it was published in London on May 1. The New York Times saw the story and reprinted it on May 14. The Transcript apparently noticed the interview on May 31, noting: “The allusion of President Johnson, in his conversation with the correspondent of the London Times, to our city, has given Peoria a rather unenviable notoriety.”

Ebon’s supporters were quick to realize that the “Look at Peoria” challenge could be used to gain his renomination. Ebon had considerable opposition because he was not a Civil War veteran and because other personalities and cities coveted the congressional seat. Fortunately for Ebon, he had followed Robert’s advice and had early become identified as a chief protagonist of Johnson. He could “out-radical” even the veterans such as General Thomas Henderson, who aspired to the office. On June 9, the Transcript approvingly reprinted a column from the Bureau County Republican which argued that E. C. Ingersoll should be reelected because: “The President in his interview with the London Times said exultingly, ‘Look at Peoria and you will see how the people support my policy’. . . . Now let a new man be taken up in place of Mr. Ingersoll, and there will be more proud pointing at Peoria as endorsing my [Johnson’s] policy.’ The strategy was used in the county conventions to perfection. In Peoria County, Bob debated Republican challenger Alexander McCoy, a state legislator and former district attorney, and McCoy soon withdrew. Colonel Ingersoll also spoke in Galesburg and Princeville on behalf of Ebon. After all challenges to Ebon were fought off in Henry County, the Transcript headed a story from the Henry County Chronicle: “LOOK AT PEORIA. Look at Peoria we repeat, and see the verdict she rendered fit her primary election.”

Robert found it exhilarating to instruct Ebon on his conduct in Washington (“wake up and say ‘I will be a little more radical today than I was yesterday’”) while standing in for him in his home congressional district. After the Peoria de-
bated with McCoy, he wrote to Ebon: "When I walked up to the platform the people cheered like Hell. I saw that I had him . . . suffice it to say that I did not leave a gut in him." After the Galesburg success, he wrote of the opposition: "I busted them wide open." Robert also used money to ensure Ebon's success. At the Peoria County Convention he "used $400 to get carriages & men to work." The "expenses" at Princeton were $500 and Toulon cost $830. White, of the Stark County newspaper, was given a $600 interest-free loan to ensure his support. "But d--n money so we can beat the pimps," he wrote. He added a postscript to assure Ebon: "I shall spend no more money, the goose hangs high enough." The next goose was General Thomas Henderson, who had been too slow to take a radical position. He withdrew and Robert could write: "What a splendid victory for you. You have a life lease upon the position, those who opposed you are dead."15

The "Look at Peoria" campaign had worked so well that Robert could afford to be magnanimous—selectively. The Ingersoll brothers had a letter which could incriminate one of their opponents, but Robert wrote to Ebon: "He has tried to hurt you; but has not succeeded & if I publish his letter it will hurt him greatly. He is married; has a family & is poor, so I will let him go. I think I had better give him the letter & tell him in the future to do you justice." But he was less forgiving to another opponent whose apparent opposition was religious. Recommending that he not be reappointed to his government position, Robert wrote: "D--n him. I don't understand him. I believe he is opposed to us because he thinks we are infidels."16

Robert's optimism about the campaign was justified. The Fifth Congressional District Convention was held in Peoria on July 18. Robert "addressed the Convention in an eloquent and telling speech" and the congressman was unanimously renominated. The Transcript crowed: "LOOK AT PEORIA. The compliments of the Union men of Illinois are presented to Moses Andy [Johnson] with the intimation that Peoria is one of the lovely places to look at. . . . The president advertised the World through the London Times of the conflict he intended to wage in Peoria. He also boasted that in the conflict the people were rallying to his support." Perhaps these "damp places" he professed to see had come from the copperheads, certainly not from the Republicans, the Transcript chided.17

The "critical year" congressional elections of 1866 were seen as a plebiscite to determine whether the voting public preferred the white supremacy policy of President Johnson or the more vindictive reconstruction policy of the Radical Republicans. Many moderate Republicans became radical Republicans during the summer of 1866 because they believed that the South had not accepted defeat. When some of the Southern states, acting under Johnson sanctioned governments adopted discriminatory "black laws," elected ex-Confederate officials to the U. S. Congress, and allowed hundreds of blacks to be killed in the Memphis and New Orleans riots, most Republicans rallied around Congress. In an attempt to unite Democrat and conservative Republican forces, Johnson called a National Union Convention for Philadelphia in August. He also decided to embark on a whistle stop "swing around the circle" to back his supporters. The ostensible purpose
of the August 28 to September 15 tour was to speak at the ground-breaking ceremony at the Stephen A. Douglas monument in Chicago.\(^{18}\)

Robert Ingersoll’s response to the Philadelphia convention was to charge that only rebels and copperheads would be there. If any real Republicans attended, he cautioned, they would have “to shake hands with those who starved our soldiers at Andersonville.” At the invitation of Indiana Governor Morton, Governor Oglesby and Colonel Ingersoll set off on a speaking tour through Indiana which lasted from August 22 to September 3. Ingersoll and Oglesby were perhaps the two best patriotic speakers in the West, and they became even closer friends during the tour. In Indianapolis they spoke before tens of thousands of people at a giant Republican rally. Their speeches were in enormous demand in Indiana. A Jackson-ville newspaper asserted that Ingersoll had become “the most powerful and attractive stump orator in America.” Governor Oglesby refused an invitation to hear the president speak at the Douglas monument ground-breaking and managed to be out of town when Johnson visited Springfield and Lincoln’s tomb. The Democrats of Peoria invited Johnson to Peoria, but Peoria was not included on his itinerary. The president met a largely hostile crowd as he traveled through Illinois.\(^{19}\)

Peoria and Ebon’s congressional district were important to the Republicans because Johnson had made “Looking at Peoria” an issue. The Republicans imported General Ben Butler from Massachusetts and George W. Julian from Indiana. Ebon and Robert returned to the Fifth District to conduct vigorous campaigns during the month before the election. The Democrats ran Silas Ramsey against Ebon while encouraging Republican defections from among veteran and the “anti-Ingersoll family” factions. Under pressure of events and party regularity, Ebon Clark Ingersoll won the most decisive victory of his career, beating Ramsey by 18,437 votes to 9,665. Illinois Republicans were victorious in twelve of fourteen congressional races and a radical Congress was seated in 1867. The president had failed to rally Peoria and the heartland and had been repudiated. “Now Look at Peoria,” the Radical Republicans demanded.\(^{20}\)

The strategy of supporting the incumbent congressmen who opposed President Andrew Johnson was effective, but it stifled Robert’s ambitions to be elected congressman-at-large. Robert understood this as early as March 1, 1866, when he wrote to Ebon, urging him to “stand by principle old boy” but noting that “the action of Johnson knocks all my aspirations for the state at large square in the head.” On July 5, in Galesburg, Robert was forced to disavow any intention of running. He explained to Ebon: “I told them that I was no candidate. You see I would not hurt your chances by saying I was because [incumbent congressman-at-large] Moulton has been radical . . . and if I want to beat him it would contradict the position that we have taken—that all members who have stood firm should be returned. You see we must carry this district or die. To be beat now would be political death to us both.” When Ebon’s nomination seemed certain, he urged Robert to run anyway. But Robert rationalized that he did not really want the office because redistricting would soon eliminate the at-large seat, his law business would suffer (“two years in Congress would ruin one in law”), and he would have
to "trim my little sails to catch the breath of the ignorant admiration & paid flat-
tery." Besides: "Hardly a great politician in this country has died great. Webster
died on his knees, asking to be president. Clay died, as he supposed in great hor-
or, because he had just finished a compromise for the purpose of giving slavery
a new lease on life. Douglas went away repeating a senseless prayer after an ignor-
ant priest. . . . I care very little for political preferment."21

The only public office Robert Ingersoll ever held was Illinois Attorney-Gen-
eral (February 28, 1867 to January 11, 1869). Governor Richard J. Oglesby ad-
mired Ingersoll for his oratory and his wit. Both declared the other the best stump-
speaker in the country. Their friendship started during the war and blossomed dur-
ing the election campaigns of 1864 and 1866. Both thought President Johnson a
traitor, and they toured Indiana together in August and September of 1866 in op-
position to his candidates. When the legislature re-created the position of attorney-
general in February of 1867 and made the first term appointive, Oglesby quickly
chose Ingersoll over several other friends. The Republican newspapers applauded
the appointment and characterized Ingersoll as a good lawyer and a great speaker.
No mention was made about his religious views in either the Chicago Republican
or the Tribune. Ingersoll wrote exuberantly to Ebon that the position would pay
$3,500 per annum (the governor's salary was $1,500), and it would only require
his attention part-time. "My rivals were Milton Hay and Lawrence Weldon. I had
no electioneering to do. The Governor told me before the bill passed that I should
have the place as against the world," Robert exclaimed. Ebon wrote to Oglesby
to send "... deepest and most heart felt thanks . . . for your kind and generous
act in appointing one who is dearer to me than my own life. . . . You can hardly
imagine how deeply this good and noble action of yours touched my heart, the
more deeply because it was so freely and disinterestedly done." Robert later con-
fessed that he was "never so well situated, and so happy," as during his term
as attorney-general.22

Ingersoll was indeed "well situated" as attorney-general and it was all the
more fortuitous because he had not had to "electioneer." Ingersoll apparently per-
formed well but without excessive effort. Among his assignments were to appear
regularly as the state's representative before the Illinois Supreme Court, to lobby
in Washington, D. C., for improvement of Illinois canals and rivers, "to look a
little after the (Joliet convict's) labor contracts," and to defend the constituional-
ity of the county equalization laws. He won special note for his success in the Cook
County tax equalization case. Yet, Ingersoll was seldom required to be in
Springfield and he continued his lucrative private law practice. He was hired by
El Paso to help gain the Woodford County seat (he failed). He excused himself
to the governor by writing: "I would like to attend to the Woodford affair as it
would put money in my purse. Governor, I want you always when you want me
to telegraph. I am at your disposal and want to be of use to you. I never want you
to regret the great favor you did me a greater one than any other man ever did."23
Although he continued to try dozens of private cases around the circuit, even after
having lost his law partner, Sabin Puterbaugh (Ingersoll helped him be elected
Oglesby’s impatience with his attorney-general’s long absences from Springfield may have been mitigated by Ingersoll’s frequent witty letters. They were filled with excuses for not coming (‘the heat and dust stopped me ... I pray thee send Lazarus’), reports on his work, concerns for the ill Mrs. Oglesby, greeting from daughters Eva and Maud to the Oglesby children, Olie and Robin, and his sarcastic observations about public figures and policies. When the old abolitionist editor, Horace Greeley posted bail for Jefferson Davis, Ingersoll wrote: ‘Poor Horace, his jig is danced.’ When planning a Chicago trip, Ingersoll excused himself by noting: ‘As soon as I heard the martyrs widow [Mary Todd Lincoln] was at Hyde Park House, I concluded I would save my hide by staying home.’ On anticipating the impeachment of President Johnson, he wrote: ‘I think our friend Johnson has at last got his foot or rather both feet, fairly in it—and Congress will now be able to get his stern out of it.’ When commenting on the scarcity of money, he wrote: ‘Times are getting hard ... and consequently our party getting a little shaky. There must be an expansion of the currency. Men will never act good unless times are good. When a man has his pocket full of money he feels like a gentleman and when a man feels like a gentleman he votes our ticket. But when his pocket is empty, and his shirt tail out he naturally slides over to the Democracy.’

Robert Ingersoll also liked to entertain his brother Ebon with his witty letters. On visiting Mt. Vernon, Illinois, his former residence, Robert wrote from ‘this ancient & decaying town’ that he felt he was again in a heathen land. ‘A little while ago, I saw the house where I used to live. May God spare me a second sight.’ He also included a paragraph which used the ‘a vision rises before me’ technique as if it were an ‘in-joke’ between the two. In 1870 Robert would use the ‘vision’ device in a classic Decoration Day speech, and he became famous in 1876 when he repeated much of the 1870 oration to the Veteran Soldiers of the Rebellion in Indianapolis as ‘A Vision of War’ (see chapters 4 & 5). But in Robert’s June 6, 1867, letter to Ebon Clark Ingersoll the technique was used in derision: ‘A vision rises before me—I see shapeless felt hats, surmounting heads covered with long lenk ‘yaller’ hair ... I see dogs ‘follering,’ I see women in sun bonnets, and home spun dresses, I see sore eyes, and long, flabby breasts, hanging down upon leathery bellies ... I see people without education, without thought—without ambition.’ The derision and the ‘vision’ technique continued in his New Years letter in which he described a score of their Peoria friends in unflattering terms. Included was William Reynolds about whom Robert’s vision was of his ‘expressing anxiety about my ‘supposed’ soul.’

Ebon Ingersoll partially repaid Oglesby for Robert’s appointment during the congressional debate on the impeachment of President Johnson. On February 22, 1868, Oglesby sent a telegram demanding impeachment and labeling Johnson a ‘presumptuous demagogue.’ Illinois Democrat Congressman Albert Burr rose to attack Oglesby as ‘a drunkard.’ Ebon ‘called him to order’ and characterized
the governor as a "sober, patriotic, high-minded and honorable man," who "carries in his body minie balls fired from rebel muskets." Oglesby wrote to Ebon to thank him for his able defense and to suggest that his Burr must be some relation to the traitor Aaron Burr. Robert wrote to Ebon: "I was highly pleased with your defense of Oglesby. Burr must be a perfect puppy to assail Oglesby in such a beastly manner."

The 1867 legislative session which created Ingersoll’s attorney-general position also authorized the construction of the new state capitol. Sometime in the early twentieth century a myth was created that the cornerstone, which had contained the names of all the 1868 state officials, including that of Robert G. Ingersoll, had been wiped clean or secretly removed because of Ingersoll’s religious heresy. Actually, the engraved cornerstone was dedicated in an elaborate ceremony presided over by the Masonic fraternity on October 5, 1868. The November 23, 1870, Illinois State Journal reported that the immense stone, however, "worked very poorly, and owing to splits and cracks . . . [and] it was found to be unworthy to be retained or built upon." It was "removed from the wall and buried in the ground in front of the corner and on yesterday a new (Joliet quarry) corner-stone was placed in position . . . No ceremonies whatever took place . . . No inscription has yet been placed upon it." The myth of the "disappearing inscription" persisted until the state historians clarified the facts in 1937 and again in 1944 in the Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society. The original inscribed stone was unearthed in 1944 and it has since been placed on the northeast corner of the building, adjacent to the replacement stone. Had Ingersoll’s ambitions been realized, the replacement cornerstone might have listed him as governor.
3
Lost Nomination

Under the old Illinois Constitution, Richard J. Oglesby was not eligible to succeed himself as governor in 1868. It was widely assumed that General John M. Palmer, one of the founders of the Republican party in Illinois, would be his successor. As a result, most of the aspiring politicians looked elsewhere for office. Palmer, however, had doubts about serving. He had a very large family and the job did not pay much. By February of 1868, stories were circulating that he would not be a candidate but most of the politicians were skeptical, thinking he wished to be drafted. Palmer’s denials, however, created some speculation as to who would be nominated by the Republicans if Palmer was serious about declining. Shelby Cullom and John A. Logan, both of whom were destined to become powerful political leaders and members of the U.S. Senate, were mentioned, but held back. Robert G. Ingersoll, not yet thirty-five years old, believed Palmer’s denials, perhaps because Palmer personally assured Ingersoll that he would not run. Ingersoll’s political ambition began to churn and he soon convinced himself that he could win. The Peoria Republican Nominating Convention of 1868 was a turning point for Ingersoll for if beaten, it might, as he confided to his brother, “end me politically.”

If his political career were thwarted, where would he turn for gratification?

On February 29, the Peoria Grant Club met and endorsed Ingersoll for governor and urgently requested that he allow his name to be announced for the office. Two days later, Ingersoll wrote brother Ebon a long letter about the congressman’s course on the Johnson impeachment. Finally, on the fourth page, he confided: “The ‘Grant Club’ of this place had a meeting last Saturday night and resolved . . . that I was their choice for Govr. What effect would my running for gov. have on your prospects in this district? I don’t think it would hurt. Tell me your ideas.”

The next day he again wrote to Ebon: “Write quick or I shall be on the track . . . All our friends here are nearly crazy to have me run for governor.” On the same day Robert wrote Governor Oglesby: “I have been thinking for a few days that maybe I would announce myself as a candidate for governor. I want your honest square advice.” He added flatteringly if not entirely truthfully: “Under any and all circumstances I would prefer you to any one (not excepting myself) politically.” Impatient to hear Oglesby’s reply, Ingersoll went to Springfield where Oglesby gave Robert his blessing on March 5 or 6. On the sixth, Ingersoll returned to Peoria where he probably conferred with Enoch Emery of the Transcript.

If the National Democrat is to be believed, a letter was found on the courthouse yard which was an embarrassment to the Ingersolls. It was dated March 9 and was addressed to Friend [Ebon] Ingersoll and signed by E. E. [Enoch Emery of the Transcript]. The letter contained Emery’s assessment of the political situa-
tion in regard to Ebon's renomination as congressman and Robert's nomination as governor. "Your case now being a fixed fact [because certain newspapers had been paid and Ebon had promised a new district court], we are looking to Bob's interest for Governor, and if he would only follow your plan, he would go in like a flash, but he says he will see the churches and church going people in h--l and the fire kindled by newspapermen, before he will knuckle to the former or buy the latter." Emery allegedly added: "Now you know that will do well enough to talk quietly to ourselves, but it won't win in our party. But the convention being here, we may succeed anyhow.""3

On March 9, 1868, the Transcript endorsed Ingersoll for governor. Emery asserted that Palmer could have the governorship if he would take it, but since he "positively declines to run," Ingersoll should be endorsed quickly to avoid the selection of some fourth- or fifth-rate man. "On the stump, he [Ingersoll] has no superior anywhere," the Transcript declared. "As the field now stands, Col. Ingersoll can walk over the course without opposition, and we earnestly hope he will allow his name to be used . . .," Emery concluded. The next day the Democratic paper of William T. Dowdall answered with a sarcastic headline: "DON'T WANT TO BE GOVERNOR." In Dowdall's view, the Ingersoll family already held the best offices. He contended that the Ingersoll brothers left the Democratic party about three days after it would no longer cater to them. Since joining the Republican party, they "cling to the teats of the government like barnacles to the ship bottom and with about the same effect.""4

Meanwhile, Ingersoll had journeyed to Chicago. On March 13, he wrote to Ebon: "I have been here all week, looking about and calculating my chances for Govr. . . . I have not talked with a single man in this town that is not for me. The [Chicago] Journal and Wilson [the owner] says he is for me over all competitors. If I fail, of course I will not care a cent, but would a little rather succeed." The Chicago Tribune wrote that if nominated, Ingersoll "would make a brilliant canvass." The Tribune also listed ten newspapers which had expressed a preference for Ingersoll. The good press, Oglesby's blessing, and the apparently supportive statements which he had begun receiving from politicians over the state, made Ingersoll exuberant about his political future. "If I get the nomination, I will bet my ears that I break into the senate in 1871," he wrote to Ebon on March 24, 1868."5

On March 26, Ingersoll made a stirring speech to the Springfield Young Men's Republican Club in the Hall of Representatives. He contended that the Republican party was the "grandest that ever existed beneath the stars." He argued that the party had "saved a nation, enfranchised a people, dedicated a continent to freedom, and given a new and grander impulse to civilization." He piously declared that "school masters and missionaries" had replaced bloodhounds in the South and that "the auction-block" had been replaced by the pulpit. He asserted that the issue in the 1868 election was whether or not slavery would be reestablished. He conceded that whites might be superior to blacks, but, as Lincoln, he believed they should have an equal chance to succeed. "Honor for those who get ahead--
kindness for those who fall behind, and justice for all’’ was his motto.6

The state Democratic party organ, the Springfield Register, was not slow to charge Ingersoll with being a hypocrite and an infidel. It charged that the ex-Democrat had uttered mostly ‘‘clap-trap’’ when he spoke to the Young Men’s Republican Club (the ‘‘radical club’’). It also implied a religious hypocrisy when it wrote: ‘‘The speaker had a great deal to say about the ‘almighty,’ and a stranger would have thought that he was a regular minister in one of our churches. But he is the same who shocked some of his old acquaintances, who witnessed his performance a short time since at the Opera House in this city, when on that occasion, it is reported, he declared openly that he was an infidel, and he did not care a G-d d-n who knew it.’’ Two days later, the Register’s Democratic counterpart in Peoria picked up the same theme by charging the Peoria Republican editor with holding up ‘‘as the Apollo of the party’’ the ‘‘brawling Atheist Bob’’ and forcing ‘‘all sound Republicans’’ to fall down and worship him.7

Undeterred by the infidel charge or anything the Democrats might say, Ingersoll made his candidacy official by answering the Peoria Grant Club’s request that he run. On March 28, he wrote ‘‘. . . I have concluded to allow the use of my name’’ in connection with the candidacy for governor.8

Once in the race, Ingersoll was determined to win. He peppered Ebon with letters asking him to try to gain support from the Illinois congressmen, including the powerful John A. Logan. Although he was ‘‘naturally for Oglesby,’’ he urged Ebon to make any necessary combinations to protect his and Ebon’s interest and promised to abide by them. But it was a delicate matter to protect the interests of the brothers equally. Soon the Tribune was praising Robert but damning Ebon for serving the ‘‘corrupt ring of distillers’’ in the Peoria area. Robert wrote to Oglesby that he had written Joseph Medill of the Tribune objecting to his treatment of Ebon Clark. ‘‘This may play hell with me in the Tribune. I don’t care whether it does or not. God D—n them. They can’t put me on the back and abuse Clark.’’ Robert told Ebon that he had written to Medill objecting to the charges and asserting that he would stand or fall with his brother. He wrote: ‘‘Medill will likely be against me. God damn him! Let him howl. I can beat him at his own game.’’ On receiving a copy of the letter to Medill, Ebon wrote: ‘‘There is not another brother in the world that has the heart or the pluck . . . to write such a letter. We will sink or swim together.’’9

There were other clouds on the horizon. The Tribune of March 30 quoted Palmer as having acknowledged a debt to the Republican party which would oblige him to run for governor if drafted. Ingersoll rushed off to Chicago to confront the situation, remarking that ‘‘Barkis [the David Copperfield character] is willing after all.’’ Ingersoll’s strategy was to smoke Palmer out. On April 3, from Chicago, he wired Palmer: ‘‘I most respectfully ask that you . . . answer by telegram, and state explicitly, whether you are a candidate for Governor or will accept the nomination.’’ Palmer answered the next day: ‘‘I am not and do not intend to be a candidate for Governor.’’ Ebon congratulated Robert for having ‘‘undertaken to smoke the rabbit out.’’ He added, however, an ominous warning from
Robert G. Ingersoll

Washington: "There is not a member of Congress . . . who can do you any good and if there was he would not dare to. They are each and all looking anxiously for the bull's bag to drop. I hardly dare trust Logan and shall let him rest for the present." Logan was fast becoming the most powerful politician in the state and as an aspirant for next available U.S. Senate seat, he could ill afford to support Ingersoll, who was regarded as a friend of a rival for that seat, Richard Oglesby.

Some of Logan's supporters thought the Ingersoll threat was so serious that Logan would have to run for governor in order "to break up a combination" which was deemed hostile. But Logan apparently felt that his chances for a senate seat were better as congressman-at-large than as governor and he refused. D. H. Phillips, one of his chief lieutenants, replied that his suggestion that Logan run had been "in harmony with my wishes to defeat at all hazzards, Bob Ingersoll. You could do that. But as you prefer your present position, I am for you for that and so for any other place. I am for you for the Senate. You have earned it." S. W. Moulton had solicited Logan's support for governor in February, promising "there is no other office I desire." Logan apparently did not answer. He wrote on the back of Moulton's letter: "S.W. Moulton wants to be governor needs no reply." Logan probably preferred to force Palmer's hand so that he would have two years left on his term as governor when the senatorial election of 1871 occurred, but Moulton was probably more acceptable than Ingersoll.

Many Illinois politicians were puzzled about Palmer's intentions. He was a popular figure and few wanted to oppose him. But, J.D. Ward, an important Chicago politician, wrote to Oglesby that Palmer had treated his friends rather badly, if he secretly intended to run. Ward preferred Ingersoll, "but I don't want to get into a fight for him which will do no good and perhaps injure all," he concluded. To others who asked Oglesby for his view of Ingersoll, the governor wrote that Palmer could have the position if he wanted it and he would gladly support him, but, as he apparently intended to decline, he would support Ingersoll. For those unacquainted with Ingersoll (most knew only of his oratory), Oglesby noted that, although he was only thirty-four, he is "sound and earnest . . . naturally anti-slavery" [even though a former Democrat] and would be a good governor. No questions were raised or answered in Oglesby's correspondence concerning Ingersoll's religious views.

Unfortunately for Ingersoll, Oglesby was in the lame duck portion of his term and Palmer and Logan were becoming the real political powers. Also, Oglesby's wife was gravely ill and he would not be able to attend the state convention in Peoria. Ingersoll's popularity was built on his reputation as a speaker, but his power base was not much broader than Ebon's Fifth Congressional District and there was a revolt going on there. There were several available politicians who had more power than Ingersoll, but they were unwilling to announce as long as the possibility existed that Palmer could be drafted, thus leaving them vulnerable. By default, Ingersoll appeared to be the strongest of those willing to run.

But Palmer's home area newspaper, the Carlinville Democrat, kept the idea alive that Palmer was still available. The Chicago politicians, under A.C. Hesing,
seemed to share the same view, but the Transcript explained it as an ‘operation of a set of men who have an ax to grind and want Gen. Palmer to run the stone.’" The Peoria National Union, however, suggested that Ingersoll’s chances were growing ‘‘small by degrees and beautifully less’’ because ‘‘We hear it whispered by some of the wise ones of the [Republican] party that the disposition of ‘the [Ingersoll] family’ to monopolize all the offices they can get, as well as the ‘habits’ of the ‘Brothers,’ have something to do with Palmer’s being a candidate.”13 The bad ‘‘habits’’ were intemperance, vulgarity, and irreligion.

Robert was deflated about the turn of events. He wrote to Ebon on April 29, 1868, from Chicago: ‘‘It looks as though Palmer really wants to be Governor after all. He will likely beat me; but I am going to fight it out to the bitter end. If he allows himself to run, he will simply prove himself a dirty dog. To be beaten now I think will end me Politically. I can’t afford to run any more for anything, I will then have been whipped too often.’’ He complained: ‘‘I don’t think people know me. My friends are enthusiastic when I am helping them, but when I want anything they generally prefer another man. This may be the experience of everybody. I am pretty nearly sick of the whole thing. After the Convention is over I will settle down to the practice of that miserable profession known as law, and bid goodbye to all political aspirations. Heartily disgusted—knowing that I have been throwing pearls before swine—that my party has not the sense to understand me.’’ Ingersoll’s pessimism was well founded. The next day the Cook County convention voted to instruct its delegates for Palmer. A.C. Hesing, who introduced the resolution in favor of Palmer, argued that Ingersoll was a ‘‘bar-room politician’’ who was not the man for the most important office in the state.14

A Republican rally was held on convention eve at Rouse’s Hall. It would be Robert Ingersoll’s last opportunity to influence the public and the delegates with his most potent weapon, his speech-making ability. Earlier in the day, Ebon Clark Ingersoll had won renomination for Congress at the Galesburg convention. Robert could take comfort that he had not jeopardized his brother’s renomination and that Ebon was back in Peoria to aid him. At the rally, Spencer’s band played and delegates from around the state arose to make short speeches, praising various candidates, the party principles, and thanking Peoria for its hospitality even though its Metropolitan Hotel had burned on March 1. Soon the hometown candidate was called for and he rose to make a short speech. To the surprise of many, rather than displaying his extraordinary oratorical skills with generalities and his usual wit and charm, he seriously insisted that the party should boldly support racial equality. ‘‘If you believe in giving all men the same privileges, say so. If you do not believe it, join the Democratic party,’’ was his unsettling advice. ‘‘You have got to put it in your platform,’’ he argued. He also advocated repaying the government bonds in gold.15 Both unqualified racial equality and gold payments were unpopular with some Republicans and most Democrats.

Ingersoll’s convention-eve speech apparently unknowingly impressed one religious person with interesting results. Robert wrote to Ebon after the convention: ‘‘I learned a pretty good thing about myself. You know I told you about the
Methodist conference pups sending down a letter against me. It turns out in evidence now that the man who brought the afd [aforesaid] letter heard me speak on the evening before the convention & was so well pleased with the speech that he never showed his letter—kept it in his pocket & used his influence for me. That's pretty good."

The Illinois State Nominating Convention met in Peoria at noon on May 6, 1868. Reverend Johnson of Peoria opened with a prayer. Committees were duly appointed and after a brief adjournment the convention proceeded to an informal ballot for governor. John M. Palmer, Robert Ingersoll, and S.W. Moulton were nominated. The friends of Anson Miller said that he would not be a candidate if Palmer was a candidate. General Richard Rowett of Macoupin declared that Palmer was his friend; but he stated that a dispatch had recently been sent to General Palmer asking if he would accept the nomination. Palmer's reply was: "Do not permit me to be nominated. I cannot accept the nomination." This statement caused great confusion in the hall, and Robert V. Chelsey of Vermillion County moved to nominate Ingersoll by acclamation. The Tribune account said the motion was met with laughter. A neighbor of Palmer who said he was convinced that the general was not available spoke in favor of S.W. Moulton. Jesse Dubois, a perpetual candidate, was also nominated. The result of the informal ballot was: Palmer 263 (a majority). Ingersoll 117, Moulton 82, and Dubois 42. E.A. Eastman of Chicago, then read a letter dated April 11, addressed to Horace White, "stating that if nominated, he (Palmer) would be governed by the duty of the hour." The convention proceeded to a formal vote which showed: Palmer 317, Ingersoll 118, Moulton 52, and Dubois 17. As the Transcript reported "the convention was predetermined to nominate Gen. Palmer for Governor whether he wanted the office or not."

There remained the question of whether Palmer would accept the nomination. A committee, which included John H. Addams, his nominator, was instructed to wire Gen. Palmer the results of the convention. "A delegate from Macoupin stated that now that Gen. Palmer had been vindicated before the people from the charge of seeking the office, he thought he would take it." Palmer, however, had no opportunity to refuse while the convention was in session because a great thunderstorm and flood knocked out the telegraph lines from Peoria. Palmer, who had made much of his obligation to the Republican party, could hardly decline after the convention had adjourned. Actually four of the seven positions at Peoria were filled by "noncandidates" for state office. The Tribune noted: "Col. Ingersoll had remarked that he would beat any man for the office of Governor who was not a candidate. He was mistaken, but the terseness of the observation as well as the drollery of the result will save his friends from mortification in view of his failure to accomplish an impossibility." "

Various biographers, including Cameron Rogers, Edward Garstin Smith, Herman Kittredge, and Ingersoll's granddaughter, Eva Ingersoll Wakefield, have asserted that Ingersoll lost the nomination because of his agnostic views. These biographers rely heavily upon a dramatic account given by one Edward Fox to
the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (October 26, 1889) which was reprinted in the *Peoria Daily Transcript* (October 27, 1889) and in the *Weekly Transcript* (October 31, 1889). The clipping is also in the Ingersoll Collection at the Library of Congress. According to Fox, when asked by a committee of Republican delegates to suppress his religious views during the campaign, Ingersoll had answered: "I have in my composition that which I have declared to the world as my views on religion. My position I would not, under any circumstances, not even for my life, seem to renounce. I would rather refuse to be President of the United States than to do so. My religious belief is my own. It belongs to me, not to the State of Illinois." The validity of the Fox story can better be judged by examining the internal evidence in the article. None of the biographers have quoted the article in full. Eva Wakefield quoted most of it but her omissions are interesting. The complete text as taken from the *Peoria Daily Transcript* of October 27, 1889, appears below. Material omitted by Wakefield is in italics.  

BOB AND HIS BELIEF

AN INTERESTING RECITAL OF THE REASON WHY INGERSOLL HAS NEVER BEEN HONORED WITH PUBLIC OFFICE. [*St. Louis Globe Democrat*]

Robert G. Ingersoll's political career turned on the Illinois State Convention of 1868. That convention was held at Ingersoll's home—Peoria. Before the delegates came together it was known that the brilliant orator was the first choice of five-sixths of them for Governor. Other candidates were scarcely canvassed. Yet Ingersoll was not nominated, and from that day to this he has never held office, elective or appointive. The Republican party has frequently drawn upon Ingersoll's powers as a campaign speaker, but it has never tendered him official recognition in return.

Ingersoll had worked up no boom. He had done nothing to enhance his position as a candidate. The almost unanimous association of his name with the nomination for Governor was purely spontaneous. Ingersoll had been a cavalry colonel during the latter part of the war. He had Loyally Championed the cause of his brother, Ebon C., who was older and a member of Congress. He had made speeches in various parts of the state. But he had asked nothing for himself. Unpledged and uninstructed, but anxious to put Ingersoll at the head of the ticket, the delegates arrived at Peoria. What happened constitutes one of the strangest incidents in American politics.

Edward P. Fox of St. Louis, tells the story. He was not only a delegate to the convention, but he was a member of the Committee which acted as pallbearers at the burial of Ingersoll's political ambition. Mr. Fox's home at that time was in Jacksonville.

"That Convention at Peoria," said Mr. Fox, "stood toward Mr. Ingersoll as the Convention at Chicago last year stood toward Mr. Blaine. Five-sixths of our delegates were for Ingersoll, as five-sixths of those delegates were for Mr. Blaine. There was but one obstacle in
the way. At Chicago it was Mr. Blaine's consent. At Peoria it was Mr. Ingersoll's views on religion. After he came back from the war Mr. Ingersoll began his attacks on the orthodox creeds. In 1868 he was receiving a good deal more attention from the ministers than he does now. When the delegates came together the question was raised as to the possible effect of religion being Dragged Into the Campaign. We wanted to nominate Ingersoll, but we were afraid of that kind of campaign.

"The Convention met and organized. Mr. Ingersoll's name was presented. Some one, a known friend of the eloquent Peorian, arose and moved the appointment of a committee to wait on Mr. Ingersoll. I don't remember that the precise reason for this committee was mentioned, but everybody understood what was meant. We felt that unless we could have beforehand such an understanding with our nominee as would keep religious discussions out of the campaign it would not do to put him at the head of the ticket. Morgan County was one of the strong Republican counties, and, furthermore, Jacksonville was known as "The City of Churches." Perhaps for that reason the Chairman selected me as one of the eight or ten members of the committee. The Convention took a recess until after dinner. The members of the committee got together immediately and consulted. Then we went across the street to the law office of the Ingersolls. I remember as well as if it was only yesterday the reply which Mr. Ingersoll made, and I remember, too, just how he said it. Our chairman said to him:

"Mr. Ingersoll, this Convention wants to nominate you for Governor. There is a point raised as to your religious convictions, and the possible effects they may have upon the campaign if they are discussed. It is a question with the Convention whether it will be wise to nominate a man who has the Pronounced Views Which You Have.

This committee has been appointed to wait upon you and see whether you are willing to ignore these issues and keep them out of the campaign. We do not ask that you renounce your convictions, but we wish to have clear understanding with you, so that we may report to the Convention.

"You see," continued Mr. Fox, "we were unwilling to give up the idea of nominating him. Yet we felt that we must muzzle him in advance on the religious question, or it would not do to go into the campaign with him. Mr. Ingersoll drew himself and replied:

"'Gentlemen, I am not asking to be Governor of Illinois, and it is a grave question with me whether I would accept this nomination if offered. I have in my composition that which I have declared to the world as my views upon religion. My position I would not, under any circumstances, not even for my life, seem to renounce. I would rather refuse to be President of the United States than to do so. My religious belief is my own. It belongs to me, not to the state of Illinois. While I believe in the right of every man to think as he pleases, yet I have the moral honesty to Declare from the Housestops My Convictions. I feel deeply the interests of the Republican party, yet, gentlemen, I must
say to you again my belief is my own. I renounce nothing. I promise nothing. I ask nothing of the convention. *But rest assured that no matter whom the Republican party nominates, you can depend upon Bob Ingersoll to take off his coat and work for him.*""

""The committee retired and consulted. It was evident to all of us that if we nominated Mr. Ingersoll we should have his views upon religion injected into the campaign within a week. He had no idea of allowing himself to be muzzled on that topic which was dearest to him. The very first attack would set him going. Very reluctantly we decided that the party could not afford to take such chances. Our Chairman was authorized to report to the convention. He stated that the committee had waited upon Mr. Ingersoll. After a frank interchange of opinion it had seemed best to the committee to recommend that Mr. Ingersoll's Name Be Dropped from consideration for the nomination. Without any discussion the convention adopted the report, although it went against the grain of many a warm admirer of the man. Within half an hour we had nominated Gen. John M. Palmer. *The convention adjourned about 5 o'clock.* That evening from the top of a dry goods box in the public square of Peoria Bob Ingersoll made what I shall always say was the finest speech of his life. There was not the slightest reference in it to religion or to his personal relations to the convention. But it was full of patriotic sentiment and of devotion to the Republican party.

The article is incorrect in several of its assertions of fact. Ingersoll was a Colonel in the Cavalry early, not late, in the war; he was not receiving "more attention from the ministers than he does now" [1889]; and he did not "take off his coat and work for him [Palmer] in the general election." Wakefield deleted these assertions, perhaps because they would reduce the credibility of the rest of the story, while Rogers embellished the story. Contemporary lists of delegates from Morgan County (Jacksonville) specify twelve names but Fox is not among them. The available Jacksonville city directories show no Edward Fox among the residents in 1866 and 1871.21 Although there was an adjournment sometime between noon and two o'clock, there is no report concerning the selection of a special committee to call on Ingersoll. If any special information was wanted, it concerned Palmer's availability, but no special committee was reported in the press. Had such an incident occurred, it seems likely that either the opposition press or Ingersoll or one of his friends would have revealed it in either the election post-mortems or in their memoirs of Ingersoll. Nor was Ingersoll accustomed to shouting his unorthodox religious views from the housetops. His developing views were largely expressed to his close friends with only an occasional public outburst. His speeches were about patriotism, not religion, and he sometimes clothed his orations with biblical references.

E. F. Baldwin, writing in 1876 (he repeated some of the story at the unveiling of the Ingersoll statue in Peoria in 1911), also tended toward the dramatic explanation for Ingersoll's political failure in 1868. According to Baldwin, Ingersoll's
friends tried to persuade him to avoid a confrontation with Horace White and the *Chicago Tribune* over its attack on Ebon. It was also implied that if Robert would allow the Chicago politician A.C. Hesing to manage his appointments, Ingersoll could be governor. Ingersoll proudly replied, according to Baldwin that "no man, Hesing, nor White, nor Medill, nor any body else could run him," and that he would rather "let the Governorship go rather than recede from his position [protecting Ebon] though at that time it seemed to him to be ruin of all his political hopes." Baldwin's story is more credible than Fox's because he had been a local editor of the *Transcript* when the events were transpiring and because there is ample evidence that a confrontation occurred between Robert and the *Tribune* managers. White, however, was not powerful enough to single-handedly side-track Ingersoll and the *Tribune* oftentimes praised his candidacy. Ingersoll may have wanted to believe that the *Tribune* managers were responsible for his defeat because such an explanation would prove his great love for his brother.22

There is one credible contemporary account which revolves around Ingersoll's views of religion. The *New York Times* correspondent filed a story from Peoria on May 7, 1868, concerning the state convention: "Gen. Palmer absolutely did not want the nomination, and if the convention could have been secured without a doubt for either Moulton or [Anson] Miller, he would have positively withdrawn. Moulton was his favorite. But there were many objections to the nomination of Col. Ingersoll, based chiefly on his well-known religious views. As the friends of Gen. Palmer were not positive of carrying the convention for Moulton against Ingersoll, the General consented to be a candidate; and, another thing, the people wanted Gen. Palmer and were determined to have him." The *New York Tribune* editorialized on the religious issue being injected into the Illinois campaign by insisting that "we feel impelled to insist that they (Ingersoll's religious views) nowise affect his fitness for a political office, and should have had no influence one way or another upon his nomination." Soon after the convention, Ingersoll was reported to have quipped that he was defeated "owing . . . to the fact that he was not right on infant baptism." Years later (in 1882) he remembered: "The truth is, that a good many people did object to me because I was an infidel, and the probability is, that if I had denied being an infidel, I might have obtained the office."23

Had there been no concern about Ingersoll's religious views, he *might* have been elected governor in 1868 but such a result appears unlikely. Although Ingersoll was greatly admired for his oratory and his patriotism, he had no real base of political power. He had never been elected to anything and he had no executive experience. Oglesby had appointed him attorney general and what little political clout Robert had was through Oglesby and his brother Ebon. But Oglesby was a lame duck governor, and Ebon kept adding enemies until he was defeated for congress in 1870. Robert was too young, too recently a Democrat, too minor a war hero, and too mercurial to be a likely candidate. Those attributes and his extraordinary speaking talent could be put to good use on behalf of some other candidate, but they could not easily be utilized for his own political ambitions. The real
power, in 1868, lay with politician-generals. John Logan, lately the best of the volunteer generals and incumbent Illinois congressman-at-large, could have had the position, but he was involved in the presidential impeachment trial and he was more anxious to have the senate seat (it was rumored that Senator Yates was about to resign after his alcoholism was exposed). Logan could ill afford to have an Oglesby-sponsored man in the governor’s seat because Oglesby would be a senatorial candidate. Palmer, for reasons of family, finance, and politics, was reluctant to campaign, but he was unwilling to have just anyone become governor, especially someone from the “sinful” city of Peoria who had the reputation of being a sometimes inebriated, indiscreet, inexperienced, inexorable, and perhaps infidelic young man.

Three days after Robert Ingersoll’s defeat in the 1868 Republican convention, he lamented to his brother who had returned to Washington after his congressional renomination: “I feel lonely today and a little as though the world was against me.” A few days later he wrote that he would probably not attend the national Republican convention in Chicago: “I am sick of the whole thing, I am thinking of bidding a long farewell to all my greatness.” But he could not let his “greatness” go without reflecting: “You are the luckiest fellow in the world from the fact that all your enemies are d——d fools. Mine are pretty smart.” Perhaps they should both quit politics; “I wish we were both in [New?] York practicing law without any hankering for politics,” he opined. But his ego was revived by an invitation by James G. Blaine to take part in the Maine campaign in September. Robert reported that after his speech in Augusta, Maine: “As soon as I concluded, [Senator William Pitt] Fessenden came to me, took me by both hands and said ‘That is the best speech I ever heard. There never was a better speech made in this world.’ [Senator and future Vice-President Henry] Wilson said substantially the same thing. . . . Blaine told me that it was incomparably the greatest speech he ever heard.”

Reinspired by his reception in Maine and Indiana, Robert joined Ebon at home in making an effective canvass of Ebon’s Fifth District. During the last two weeks of the campaign, Robert spoke every day except Sundays. Although Ebon was accused of being a drunk, a debaucher, and a nonresident (he maintained no home in Peoria and his children attended school in Washington, D.C.), the Democrats had little chance to stem the Republican tide with their congressional candidate, Dr. John N. Nigias, a former Peoria coroner. Although there was much talk of Republican defections, most voters were unwilling to bolt the party of the Union. Robert jested by reporting that a Peorian at a state Sunday school convention had “asserted that Peoria county was emphatically for Jesus and would go for him this fall.” If “aforesaid J. C. is running for Congress . . . there is one consolation. . . . The republicans of this county or district can’t support Jesus without bolting the regular nominee,” he allowed. Ebon defeated Nigias by a 7,300 majority.

With Ebon safely reelected, perhaps there would be something for Robert as a reward for his political campaigning for Grant and the Republican party. Perhaps it was time for a change of scene as well. On November 22, 1868, Robert Ingersoll
wrote to Governor Oglesby: "I am again on the hunt for an office. I have made up my mind to leave Peoria and also to go to Chicago. My mind is also made up to keep out of politics as far as possible. I am in favor of making some money. I have therefore concluded to get if possible appointed U. S. District Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois." On January 15, 1869, he sent recommendations from the Illinois house and senate to Ebon. "It seems to me that my appointment is now pretty certain," he wrote, but he instructed Ebon to tell John Logan he was not pledged to Oglesby for the Senate. He continued: "I am beginning to feel a little anxious to get away from this small and pinched-up town. The fact is there is but very little to do here. The fees are small. The whole practice of law here is simply arduous to me. . . . A great many men in Chicago seem anxious for me to come to Chicago. I know that I can get a large practice there outside my dist atty business if I get that place." On March 6, he sent his own letter to Grant to be delivered with others, including Oglesby's recommendations. He asked Ebon to push Henry Wilson to influence Attorney-General E. R. Hoar, on his behalf. But no appointment was forthcoming. He would have to be content with his office at number 47 Main Street in Peoria, in partnership with his brother-in-law, Eugene McCune. On April 1, he wrote to Ebon: "Illusions of childhood have vanished . . . and the future is daily losing its brightness and beauty. . . . I constantly ask 'Is this all? Is there nothing more than I have seen'?"26
Lost Nomination

Gubernatorial Aspirant, 1868.
The Ingersoll statue in Peoria's Glen Oak Park, unveiled on October 28, 1911.
4

Patriot Infidel

As Robert Ingersoll’s disillusionment with politics increased, the cloak of patriotism began to open slowly to reveal his agnosticism (he called it "infidelity"). Ingersoll believed that the Republican party, in emancipating the slaves, had freed the body-politic physically. But he also wanted the mind freed from institutions, especially the church. As a popular Fourth of July and Decoration Day speaker, he often linked freedom to his attack on superstition in a manner which was acceptable to the community. Until Ebon Ingersoll was defeated for re-election in 1870, Robert was restrained in presenting his agnostic views, but beginning with "The Gods’" lecture in January of 1872, he eschewed politics and proclaimed his philosophy. Patriotism would pull him back into politics in 1876, but during the 1868-75 period his chief interests were philosophy and law.

On Decoration Day, May 30, 1868, Ingersoll delivered the "Eulogy" in honor of Peoria’s Civil War "fallen heroes," thirty-four of whom were buried in the Springdale Cemetery. His oration was delivered in the Courthouse Square before a "large assembly." In his attempt to be epical he sometimes became lyrical, as when he spoke of the "relentless rushes roaring raging round the ragged rocks." Although patriotism was the theme, his evolving religious views were subtly introduced. "Progress is the religion in which I believe," he asserted. But he coupled the statement with, "Liberty is forever, tyranny but for a time. Liberty is the condition precedent to all progress." Ingersoll did allow that "If there is beyond this life a better and nobler, these men are in Paradise." The complete text of the speech as reported in the Peoria Daily Transcript is as follows:

DECORATION DAY EULOGY, MAY 30, 1868

Again we have assembled to honor the heroic dead, and to consecrate ourselves anew to the great cause for which they sacrificed all. To their sacred memory this monument rises, and for their dear sakes it is again covered with flowers and the air filled with perfume. There is no more sacred duty than to honor the ashes of the grand dead. These men, whose names are upon this marble, were the defenders of more than their country—of more than the Union. They were the defenders of Humanity, Liberty, and Progress. With their strong arms they leveled to the dust as many prejudices as enemies. In the name of the Future, they slew the monsters of the Past. They destroyed the false, but they established the true.

They abolished the infinitely infamous institution of slavery. They established the first, and the only free government in the world. They finished what the Revolutionary fathers commenced. They took the flag where it fell from their august hands and carried it to a sublimer
victory. They dedicated our country to Freedom. They laid the foundations of the great Temple in which future generations will perform the grand rites of the religion of Humanity. They rolled the stone from the sepulcher of Progress, and found therein two angels, clad in shining garments, Liberty and Union, who said to them, Progress is risen. With their blood, they purified the flag. Their victories allowed us to tear from the statute books, laws made in the interest of robbers. Their achievements made it possible for courts to do justice. They took a living coal from the altar of Progress, touched the lips of the people, and all over our fair land men speak for, and are willing to die for the rights of men.

They broke the shackles from four million bodies and from thirty million souls. Your country was in danger, your institutions had been attacked: armies were in the field endeavoring to destroy you. Some one had to go, or the United States would be erased from the map of the world—some one had to go or the old flag would be torn forever from the heavens—some one had to go, or the experiment of free government was an eternal failure—some one had to go, or liberty was in danger of perishing from among men; and these heroic men whose names are on this monument went.

To defeat the enemy some one had to die. In order that the splendid eagle of victory might alight on our standard, some one had to die, and these men died.

They met death everywhere, and in every form—upon the weary march—on guard in darkness and in the storm—on the deadly skirmish line—amid the roar of battle—in the infinite excitement of the charge—where victory was achieved—in defeat and disaster—in the hospital filled with pain—in the prisons of the South, face to face with famine—upon the treacherous waves of the inconstant sea—everywhere where honor called they laid down their lives, dying nobly, grandly, sublimely for the right. Dismay they never knew. Fear was a stranger. Grander than the Greek, braver than the Roman were these soldiers of liberty, attacking the strongholds of treason. Man after man, company after company, regiment after regiment sprang to the conflict, scaled heights, laughing at shot and shell, shouting defiance in the very face of death, sweeping to victory as wave on wave of the great sea, by some wild storm in apelled [sic], relentless rushes roaring raging round the ragged rocks.

These men we cannot honor. We can honor ourselves, by defending the principles for which they died, by endeavoring to pay the debt of gratitude we owe them, by reciting to others the deeds they did, and keeping their dear memory in our hearts forever.

These men gave victory to our country—victory to humanity, to progress. Had it not been for them and their comrades, we should have been a miserable and disgraced people today. But thanks to their achievements.

America is still the first nation of the world.

We praise them because they fought for man—we remember them
because they destroyed the barbarism of our century, and left our flag without a stain. As the earth sweeping through the constellations shall bring again this day—again the graves of all the glorious dead will be garlanded—again and again will be told their shining deeds—again and again will they be tearfully thanked in the name of all that is dear to the heart of man. Men will become truly free. Civil and religious liberty will be the birthright of all. Slavery in all its forms of caste, prejudice, superstition, and robbery will have fled the earth.

We are for more liberty now than ever before. We are more in favor of education. We have more respect for the rights and feelings of others, and so it is all over the world. Everywhere we hear the mutterings of the coming storm that will level thrones with the earth. We feel the tremblings of the earthquake that will finally devour the wretches who are robbing and oppressing the people in the name of law, government, and security, and even in the name of God. Tyranny is as insecure the world over as snow on the lips of a volcano.

Prejudices are dying—man is becoming splendid—Liberty is beginning to abide with us. We can now speak for the right. During the war the moral atmosphere was purified by the roar of cannon as the material air is purified by the artillery of heaven. Men grew grand then, and they are growing grander still.

We have concluded to give to others all the right we claim for ourselves. We say to all, you shall own your own labor—you shall own your own soul, and you shall be protected in these sacred rights wherever the flag floats and the eagle flies.

It is unnecessary for me to say anything of the issues of today. Every man knows how he stood during the war—whether he was for or against his country—whether he honors the dead who died for the country, or not. I shall judge no one. But here, by this monument covered with immortal names, I thank all who were on the side of Liberty—all who were in favor of preserving the nation, that freedom might be given to all.

And now that the fearful struggle is over, I am willing to forgive even those who fought on the other side the moment they are in favor of liberty for all men—the moment they from their hearts are in favor of doing justice to all, that moment I am willing to take them by the hand and forget the past.

In a little while we go to our homes. Let us consecrate ourselves again to the cause of Liberty. Human Liberty is the shrine at which I worship. Progress is the religion in which I believe. Liberty is forever, tyranny but for a time. Liberty is the condition precedent to all progress. Let us talk for liberty, work for liberty and all are free. The people have eyes—give them light. They have lungs—give them air. They have souls—give them liberty.

Do not forget the debt we owe to these dead soldiers whose graves you have adorned today.

If there is beyond this life a better and nobler, these men are in Paradise. If after the storms of this world, there is rest, these men are
at peace. If it is given to the departed to know of the affairs of earth, these men are looking upon us filled with unutterable joy that their sacrifices were not made in vain.

To their comrades now living we render again and again our more than thanks—the love of our hearts.

The dead—the immortal dead, whose bodies rest beneath the flowers—we leave clasped in the loving arms of the Infinite forever.

On August 3, 1868, Ingersoll addressed "'The Colored People's Celebration'" at the Peoria Fairgrounds. In celebration of the end of slavery in the West Indies, Ingersoll told the blacks (he was unique at that time in using the term) that slavery had been supported by the government and the church. He argued that John Brown was the greatest of men but he concluded: "'You owe no great debt to the whites. The Truth is we had to give you your liberty.'"²

Ingersoll ventured further in using a mixture of patriotism and agnosticism when he addressed the German societies on the Fourth of July, 1869. Because it was a Sunday, most Protestants refused to attend. But Ingersoll argued that it was a holiday "'not because it is the sabbath but because it is the day on which we celebrate the great cause of human liberty.'" "'I propose,'" he continued, "'to say something about the tyranny of thrones and the superstition of churches.'" The church and the throne had done much to resist freedom: "'Every man that stood up for liberty of the human soul has been denounced. They have been called infidels, philosophers, free thinkers, and mathematicians,'" he concluded.³

Meanwhile, Ingersoll had taken a more systematic version of his emerging religious views on the road. On March 11, 1869, he delivered an expanded version of his lecture "'Progress'" in Bloomington. Ingersoll lived up to the promise of the promoters who warned that "'.... old fogies who .... are afraid of the free spirit of the Nineteenth Century .... had better stay away, as the Colonel is a thorough believer in Progress.'" Ingersoll criticized the lack of religious toleration in "'a masterly and eloquent and sometimes exceedingly humorous manner,'" the Bloomington Pantagraph reported. The main thrust of the lecture was: "'Reason is the only safe guide to all things.'" When the same lecture was given in Decatur two weeks later, however, the local newspaper was not so magnanimous. "'Does the gentleman mean to teach that there is no God but law,'" the editor queried. "'The doctrine is not point blank Atheism, but it is practically so,'" he concluded. Back in Peoria, Ingersoll more subtly aired his views on the occasion of his speech, "'Delivered at Peoria, Illinois at the Unveiling of a Statue of Humboldt on September 14, 1869.'" The main theme was that "'The Universe is Governed by Law.'"⁴

The minds of Peorians seem to have been in unusual ferment in the winter of 1870. Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, John Wesley Powell of Grand Canyon fame, and a host of minstrels came to town. Beginning in January a revivalist movement began to capture the attention of most Peorians. No less than seven churches scheduled noon prayer sessions and "'hell-fire preaching'" every eve-
ning. Visiting committees canvassed the city to pray with families and went "through distilleries, saloons, houses of ill-fame . . . trying to win them by the simple story of the Cross. . . ." Ingersoll warned that baptism was the fashion and that "little boys that can't swim will have to stand back." Ingersoll confided to Governor Oglesby that he liked "'mythology better than theology.'" After reading a version of Rig-Veda Sanhita, which filled his mind with "'ghostly embraces, heavenly adulteries and divine fornications,'" he was ready to "'bid adieu to the cold religions of the North.'"5

On March 15, 1870, a women's suffrage convention was held at Rouse's Hall where Susan B. Anthony spoke in favor of equal rights for women. Colonel Ingersoll was placed in nomination for a seat on the resolutions committee, but he protested that "'he was neither a politician nor a woman'" and should not serve. He spoke, however, in favor of a constitutional amendment for equal rights. He argued, in an eloquent speech, that voting should not be a privilege but a right. "'The world was beginning to be governed by thought, and the women had as much of that as man had . . .,'" he contended. Interestingly, W. T. Dowdall, the editor of the opposition Democrat newspaper, joined Ingersoll in demanding women's rights. This led Enoch Emery of the Republican Transcript to snipe: "'Dowdall made an energetic speech, showing his readiness to shake hands, feet and toe nails with Colonel Ingersoll.'"6

The women's suffrage movement in Peoria was concurrent with the debate being carried on in Springfield at the state constitutional convention. Emery gave prominent coverage to the opposition under the heading "'AGAINST WOMAN SUFFRAGE, LECTURE BY MRS. W. G. WHEATON OF MICHIGAN.'" Mrs. Wheaton was fresh from a well-received, anti-suffrage lecture at the convention site. On March 31, Professor Hewitt of Illinois State Normal University debated Susan Anthony on the suffrage issue before "'a slim audience assembled, at Rouse's Hall.'" The capstone of the debate may have been Robert Ingersoll's April 29, 1870, address at the meeting called to select delegates to a National Suffrage Convention. Emery headed his report: "'WOMAN SUFFRAGE CONVENTION POOR ATTENDANCE AND LACK OF ENTHUSIASM INGERSOLL ON SUFFRAGE, but he offered a fair summary of the speech. The speech is revealing as it combines references to religion, slavery, and women's suffrage. On May 6, 1870, the Illinois Constitutional Convention voted to strike the article providing for woman suffrage, but Ingersoll had spoken out, perhaps to the detriment of his career, and by implication, his brother's political future. The following is the complete text of Ingersoll's suffrage speech as reported by the Peoria Daily Transcript on April 30, 1870.7

PEORIA WOMAN SUFFRAGE SPEECH, APRIL 29, 1870

The evening session was mainly occupied by an address by Col. R. G. Ingersoll. The speaker announced at the outset that neither the ladies' suffrage association nor anyone else was responsible for what he was going to say. He had some dear friends who differed entirely
from him in political and religious opinions. It was the sheerest cowardice not to grant others the privilege of believing as they deem best. If he were either an atheist or a religious enthusiast, he would boldly declare what he believed. America was full of the most abject moral cowardice. It was time that we had more individuality. It was time that someone dared to disregard the tenets of either churches or political parties if he chose. This zoological garden system was about worn out. It was time to quit making an inventory of human beings as so many millions of one sect or denomination, and so many millions of another, and to find those who utterly disregarded public sentiment and dared to believe what they chose, and to agree with themselves at least. He chose to regard woman as a reasoning, responsible human being, and his equal at least. The history of woman was the history of slavery. In early times the wife was such, only at the pleasure of the husband, and females were only the subjects of bargain and sale. Early religious people have been responsible for holding women as much inferior to men as men are inferior to the Deity. Early theologians used to hold that all the evils of life grew out of the sin of woman in eating the apple, and that a cannon ball would not have killed, nor water drowned, had not woman been guilty of that crime. Celibacy was regarded as the highest type of excellence, and marriage only a sin and snare, indulged in by the giddy and thoughtless. Women were not allowed to be heard in public, they were commanded to keep their veils down, and mouths shut, and were simply the slaves of slaves. We are indebted to the ancient Hindoos for the beautiful sentiment that he who strikes a woman, even with a flower, is guilty of the basest crime. There men were restricted to one wife each, and were allowed at least a brief courtship. In free America, a man may beat the face of his dying wife, and generally pays, seldom more and never less than three dollars in cash, while he goes to prison for three years for stealing a worthless horse. Among the Spartans, affection had nothing to do with the subject of matrimony. Among the Chinese and Mohammedans the candidate for matrimony is kept closely veiled, except for examination, and had nothing to say in the choice of a husband. It is only in the higher stages of civilization that woman has been recognized as the equal of man.

In the late debate in this city it was claimed that if women were to vote, society would become corrupt and immoral. If the argument means anything, it means that woman’s virtue is dependent upon privation of liberty; make a woman dependent and she will be honest and virtuous, make her free and she will become bad. If that be true, those who enjoy freedom and independence are necessarily corrupt. Politics are indispensable to the management of the government, and if necessarily degrading, then those who toil for popular liberty are inevitably base and vicious. Virtue depends upon no such basis. Politics never can degrade. Bad people may make them bad. Good people can make them pure, and if woman would not elevate the political affairs, it only shows a disbelief and want of confidence in the natural purity and virtue of woman.
The opponents of female suffrage say that woman ought not to vote unless she can shoulder a musket and defend the country. We already have vast numbers who vote, but do not go to the front and fight, but whose offices and efforts are just as valuable to safety of the country, as those who do. The offices of woman in raising the soldier and in furnishing hospital supplies, are just as valuable as those of the soldier and just as worthy of being represented at the ballot-box.

One of the bug-bears of the opponents of suffrage is that women, if they vote, must be elected constables and serve on juries. Men over sixty years of age vote now, yet cannot serve on juries according to the laws of this state. Whether or not women would serve on juries would be entirely a matter of legislative enactment. Another fear is that women’s rights tend to free love. He would have no marriage made permanent, where the wife was forced to marry as the only means of getting bread, and where courtship ceased at the altar and love ceased at the threshold of married life. If McFarland was kind to his wife he ought to be acquitted for killing Richardson. If cruel and abusive to her, he ought to be hung for killing the man who rescued her from his grasp. He would have an end of tying together permanently the Killkenny cats, and would have an end of offspring born of hatred and disgust. Another fear was that the families would suffer from want and neglect, if mothers went to vote. Now, if women voted, they would be called upon to do so once or twice a year only, and we may with equal solicitude ask, what becomes of babies when mothers attend church fifty-two times a year? He would have woman neither an inferior nor a superior, but an equal and a companion.

The Ingersoll brothers may also have been injured politically by their sponsorship of “probably the first colored appointee of the federal government in the state” in the person of Civil War veteran W. L. Barnes of Peoria to the office of the revenue storekeeper. Robert had a reputation for befriending blacks including Frederick Douglass, the most prominent Negro leader of the era. In his autobiography, Douglass describes an incident in Peoria in which he was welcomed by the “infidel” when Christian ministers had been less solicitous. Douglass, fearing that he would not be allowed to stay in any Peoria hotel, had expressed his concerns to a friend in a nearby town. The friend had assured him that Ingersoll “would gladly open his doors to you,” that he was a man “who will receive you in any weather... at midnight or at cockcrow.” Douglass was accommodated in a Peoria hotel, but he called on Ingersoll the next day and “received a welcome from Mr. Ingersoll and his family which would have been a cordial to the bruised heart of any proscribed and storm-beaten stranger, and one which I can never forget or fail to appreciate.”

Robert Ingersoll’s Decoration Day, 1870, address at the dedication of the soldier monument in Springdale Cemetery was more patriotic and less agnostic than his 1868 Decoration Day oration, but it was no less epical. Interestingly, it con-
tains almost the entire "A Vision of War" section of the speech for which Ingersoll became famous six years later. The speech "Delivered to the Veteran Soldiers of the Rebellion" in Indianapolis on September 20, 1876, is the most quoted of Ingersoll's political speeches. Known both as the "Bloody-Shirt" and as the "Vision of War" speech, it was in fact two speeches, one damning the Democrats for disloyalty and praising the Republicans and another repeating verbatim about half of his 1870 address. Ingersoll did not publish the 1870 oration in his twelve volume Works, perhaps because it would have made the Indianapolis speech appear less original. It is published here as it appeared in the Peoria Daily Transcript (May 31, 1870). The material which is verbatim from the 1870 speech in the 1876 speech is in italics. Words that were added or changed for the Indianapolis speech are in brackets.9

**COLONEL INGERSOLL'S DECORATION DAY ORATION**

**MAY 30, 1870**

Again, we have assembled to honor our heroic dead—to scatter flowers upon their silent homes—to again thank them that we have a nation—that we are free, and they the sky still blossoms with the flag. Again, we thank them, and with them, all the heroes of the world, living and dead. All that we have, all that we are, we owe to them, and to-day our hearts go out and scatter flowers upon them all. Those who lingered and languished in prisons that we might be free—those who wore shackles that we might be chainless, we thank again, and again, and again.

And not only do we honor those who have broken the chains of political slavery, but also those who have given us intellectual freedom—the grave thinkers who have groped their way into the dreary prisons of ignorance—the damp and dropping dungeons—the dark and silent cells of Fear, where the souls of men were chained to floors of stone—greeted them like a ray of light—like the song of a bird—like the murmur of a stream—took the poor souls gradually into the blessed light of day—let them see again the happy fields, the sweet green earth, and hear the everlasting music of the waves—wiped the dust from their swollen knees, the tears from their blanched and furrowed faces—reaved the heavens of insatiate monsters, and wrote upon the eternal dome, glittering with stars, the sacred word, "Liberty."

To-day we honor all the heroes. They who have unbound the martyr from the stake—they who have broken all the chains in our native land—they who have quenched the fires of civil war, stayed the sword of the fanatic, put out the flames of perdition with the sweet tears of pity—they who have made us truly, grandly free, and have torn the bloody hands of superstition and slavery from the white throat of Progress.

These men upon whose graves we have scattered flowers were the founders of the first and only free government of the world—the first to rise above the vile prejudice of caste, the ignorant hatred of color, and to declare humanity sacred everywhere and forever. They were the
first to make men equal before the sublime bar of justice. They were
the saviors of a nation, the founders of a new and purer republic, and
above all, they were the defenders of universal freedom. There is no
liberty except in the new world, under our flag, and in the land made
sacred by these graves.

The liberty of Europe is a delusion and a fraud. There, the political
power is lodged with noble robbers and titled thieves, and in the church
Judas Iscariot has complete control of the other eleven. Infallibility and
Divine Right are the watch-words of retrogression, brutality and cun-
ingen. Here, and only here, man at last is free. Here the tree watered
by all the sacred blood first bloomed, and the first fruit fell upon these
graves.

As we look upon this monument and read the names by which it
is adorned, the past rises like a dream before us. Again we are in the
great struggle for national life. We hear the sounds of preparation—the
music of the boisterous drums—the silver voices of heroic bugles. We
see thousands of assemblages, and hear the appeals of the orators; we
see the pale cheeks of women, and the flushed faces of men; and in
those assemblages we see all the dead whose dust we have covered with
flowers. We lose sight of them no more. We are with them when they
enlist in the great army of freedom. We see them part with those they
love. Some are walking for the last time in quiet woody places with the
maidens they adore. We hear the whisperings and the sweet vows of
eternal love as they lingeringly part forever. Others are bending over
cradles, kissing babes that are asleep. Some are receiving the bles-
sings of old men. Some are parting with mothers who hold them, and
press them to their hearts again and again, and say nothing, [Kisses
and tears, tears and kisses—mingling of agony and love!] and some are
talking with wives, and endeavoring with grave words spoken in the
old tones to drive from their hearts the awful fear. We see then part.
We see the wife standing in the door with the babe in her arms—standing
in the sunlight sobbing—at the turn of the road a handkerchief waves—
she answers by holding high in her loving hands [arms] the child. He
is gone, and forever.

We see them all as they march proudly away under the flaunting
flags, keeping time to the wild grand music of war—marching down the
streets of the great cities—through the towns and across the prairies—
down to the fields of glory, to do, and to die for the eternal right.

We go with them one and all. We are by their side on all the gory
fields—in all the hospitals of pain—on all the weary marches. We stand
guard with them in the wild storm, and under the quiet stars. We are
with them in ravines running with blood—in the furrows of old fields.
We are with them between contending hosts, unable to move, wild with
thirst, the life ebbing slowly away among the withered leaves. We see
them pierced by balls and torn with shells in the trenches by forts, and
in the whirlwind of the charge, where men become iron, with nerves
of steel.
We are with them in the prisons of hatred and famine; but human speech can never tell what they endured.

We are at home when the news comes that they are dead. We see the maiden in the shadow of her first sorrow. We see the silvered head of the old man bowed with the last great grief. We see the white face of the wife as she thinks in her broken heart, There is no God, while the babes laugh and prattle as before.

We see orphans clinging to the torn and faded dresses of the poor.

The past rises before us, and we see four millions of human beings governed by the lash—we see them bound hand and foot—we hear the strokes of cruel whips—we see the hounds tracking women through tangled swamps. We see babes sold from the breasts of mothers. Cruelty unspeakable! Outrage infinite!

Four million bodies in chains—four million souls in fetters. All the sacred relations of wife, mother, father and child, trampled beneath the brutal feet of MIGHT. And all this was done under our own beautiful banner of the stars.

The past rises before us. We hear the roar and shriek of the bursting shell. The broken fetters fall. These heroes whom we honor this day—died. We look. Instead of slaves, we see men, and women and children. The wand of progress touches the auction block, the slave-pen, the whipping post, and we see homes and fire sides, and school houses and books, and where all was want and crime, and cruelty and fear, we see the happy faces of the FREE!

[These heroes are dead. They died for liberty—they died for us. They are at rest.]

Peace came with justice—eternal security with liberty.

The forts are crumbling away. The hatreds engendered by war are dying out of the hearts of men, and over the broken cannon clamber the roses of joy.

We are the heirs of all the heroes. We have the fruits of all the victories. All the homes have been made desolate—the widows have wept—the children have been fatherless—the whole earth has been red with blood and covered with brave dead, for us and for our children forever. Down the ages yet to be will flow blessings from these graves, and the children of the future will be grander far than we. We have passed midnight in the world’s history, and the morning of freedom blushes over the earth. A few more years—a few more revolutions—a few more heroes dead—a few more graves like these—and men, and women, too, will be truly free. Justice will sit in the courts, and wisdom in the councils of the world. Charity will take the place of greed, and industry, guided by the holy light of science, will feed and clothe mankind. For all this we thank the heroes, living and dead.

The human race must progress. The heart of man will not always be stained with crime—beggars will not always ask for bread—prisons will not always scar the earth. The shadow of the gallows will not always curse the ground. Children will not always be deformed by labor,
and misery will not abide with man forever. The human race must progress.

The prophecies of the grand and good must be fulfilled—the dreams of the enthusiast must become real, and joy must clothe the earth as with a garment.

The visions fade away—the thunders of conflict die in the far distance, and over us all are the wings of Peace.

Again, we must bid our brave dead—Farewell. They have passed from us, and forever. They need nothing that we can give. We need them. Liberty draws inspiration from these graves, and new life from these dead. They have been gathered home by the Universal Mother. They sleep in the land they made free—under the flag they rendered stainless—under the solemn pines—the sad hemlocks—the tearful willows, and the embracing vines. They sleep beneath the shadows of the clouds, careless alike of sunshine or of storm, each in the windowless palace of Rest. Earth may run red with other wars. They are at peace. In the midst of battle—in the roar of conflict they found the serenity of death. [I have one sentiment for soldiers living and dead: cheers for the living; tears for the dead.] While gratitude has memory, these men can never be forgotten. When we are dust, other voices will tell their deeds and recount their sacrifices, and as long as flowers bloom, other hands will lovingly adorn these graves.

Soldiers and Saviours of the Great Republic Farewell.

Robert Ingersoll’s views on women, blacks, and “progress” account only in part for Ebon Clark Ingersoll’s failure to gain reelection as the Fifth District congressman in 1870. Trouble had been brewing within the party since Ebon’s first election in place of the deceased abolitionist Owen Lovejoy in 1864. As a late convert to the Republican party and a nonveteran, Ebon met opposition from certain segments in the party. But events, and Ebon’s popular radicalism (plus Robert’s skillful management and powerful patriotic speeches) kept him in office through 1870. Enoch Emery, as the Peoria party leader, Republican newspaper editor, and federal officeholder, also contributed to Ebon’s tenure, but he too gradually gained enemies from other cities within the district. Powerful aspirants for the congressional seat included John H. Bryant of Princeton, the brother of the distinguished editor of the New York Evening Post, Clark Carr, postmaster of Galesburg and editor of the Galesburg Republican, and General Thomas Henderson, who had challenged Ebon in previous contests. When an anti-Ingersoll rump convention supported General Henderson for the nomination, the Ingersoll forces cleverly instituted the new primary election system which gave the nomination to Ebon.10

The dissident Republicans were not satisfied and they ran B. N. Stevens of Tiskilwa as an independent. The Democrats did not nominate Stevens as their candidate but they “recommended” him to the voters. Democratic and other opposition presses made the most of Ebon’s nonresidence, his recent trip to Europe, his
connection with the Whiskey Ring, his Greenbackerism (for which the Chicago Tribune also opposed him) and, most of all, his alleged profanity, intemperance, and atheism. A statement making these charges was circulated by numerous pastors and temperance men on the eve of the election. Between Ebon’s absence during much of the campaign and Robert’s less spirited (in both the physical and religious sense) campaign, the Ingersoll “clique” was defeated by a 1,500 vote majority (compared to Ebon’s 7,000 vote majority in 1868). A few days after the election, Robert wrote to Gov. Oglesby: “You have probably heard something drop over in the 5th district. Well! Goodbye politics, I have had all I want. From this day henceforth and forever I am out of the business. Hoping you will succeed in being the Senator to represent the d-----d fools.” Unfortunately for Robert, Oglesby was defeated for the Senate, and his brother Ebon shook the Peoria dust off his boots and returned to Washington to resume his already flourishing law practice.

With the defeat of his beloved brother for Congress and his benefactor Oglesby for the Senate in 1870-71, all restraint concerning the public airing of Ingersoll’s religious views was removed. He wrote to Oglesby: “I am busy as a bee, having nothing to do with politics—don’t care a d--n what party succeeds—feel no interest in anything but infidelity and law—the first gratifies my mind—the second feeds and clothes my body and the bodies of those I love.” Between 1870 and 1876 Ingersoll’s talents were channeled away from politics into the law and philosophy. His oratorical skills gave him instant gratification and made it easy to forget past political failures. On January 30, 1871, Ingersoll and about twenty of his Peoria friends took a train to nearby Fairbury to join in the celebration of the 134th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Paine. Ingersoll made an oration on Thomas Paine which was pronounced by his friends as superior even to his Humboldt lecture. About 600 people attended and a banquet followed. A group of “free-thinkers” who had migrated from New England had built a hall for such occasions.

The next Tom Paine Celebration in Fairbury on January 29, 1872, was the occasion for Ingersoll’s first “point-blank” assault on religion. A month earlier, Robert had written Ebon that he was preparing a lecture on “The Gods” and he promised to send a copy “to get your idea as to the propriety of its publication.” Several of Ingersoll’s friends chartered a special railroad coach and the Peorians were joined by others en route. Some 600 ladies and gentlemen filled the hall in the evening to hear Parker Pillsbury speak on Paine for one and one-half hours and Colonel Ingersoll speak on “The Gods” for two and one-half hours. After the speeches, there was a “splendid supper” followed by “dancing and social enjoyment.” The special train did not return until eight o’clock the next morning. Word soon circulated around Peoria about the address and Ingersoll was persuaded to repeat his performance at Rouse’s Hall on February 23, 1872. Soon the preachers and Enoch Emery of the Transcript were answering Ingersoll’s irreligious arguments with considerable verve. But Robert received the praise he most wanted when Ebon wrote: “You are the bravest and most heroic thinker and talker of this or any other age.”

Robert G. Ingersoll
"The Gods" opened: "An honest God is the noblest work of Man." Ingersoll then proceeded to ridicule the gods, making it clear that he included the Judeo-Christian God. He charged that the gods, because they were created by ignorant people, "are woefully deficient in geology and astronomy." Ingersoll could not keep his political views out of the oration completely. "As a rule, they [the Gods] were miserable legislators, and as executives, they were far inferior to the average of American presidents," he dead-panned. Ingersoll continued with his rapier wit to destroy with overstated criticism his unseen enemies while defending his views as rational. He could not abide a god which was wrathful, ignorant, and above all, one which condoned slavery of the body or the mind. The god of the old-testament or the Calvinist god of his father, the Rev. John Ingersoll, was little better than the other "pagan" gods which superstitious people the world over had created. Ingersoll concluded that a better future would only come when "REASON, throned upon the world's brain, shall be the King of Kings, and the God of Gods." 

Henry Ward Beecher took note in the Christian Union (May 15, 1872) that people in Illinois were "much exercised by one of the utterances of a lawyer, Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, who has the temerity to pervert the words of (not the) Pope, and says: 'An honest God is the noblest work of man.' It strikes us as a very ingenious parody, and a very sensible remark." The Beecher quotation was reprinted in many newspapers and Robert Ingersoll began to claim a bit of fame. But it was infamy in the eyes of most people and Ingersoll's "God is the noblest work of man" became the straw man which most preachers were obliged to knock down well into the twentieth century. Ingersoll followed, in 1873, with a new lecture, "Individuality." He argued that institutions and customs as well as orthodox theology inhibited "individuality and mental freedom." The lecture, "Heretics and Heresies," given in Chicago at the invitation of the Free Religious Society on Sunday, May 3, 1874, was Ingersoll's next effort. He reveled in being called a heretic because, as he saw it, men who were individualistic and honest were, by orthodox definition, heretics. "The Bible burned heretics, built dungeons, founded the Inquisition, and trampled upon the liberties of men. How long, Oh how long will mankind worship a book," he asked. The Transcript called the lecture "Another Ingersollian Fulmination." In June of 1874, Ingersoll published "The Gods," "Humboldt," "Thomas Paine," "Individuality," and "Heretics and Heresies," in book form. The Gods received favorable notices from most Chicago and St. Louis newspapers. The publisher anticipated sales of 25,000 copies.

Although Robert Ingersoll's religious views were an anathema to most citizens of Peoria, including editor Emery, they enjoyed his company. Soon after he delivered "The Gods" in Peoria, "a large number of respectable and influential citizens, of all shades of politics and religion—probably those of the colonel's peculiar views predominating," gathered at Ingersoll's "capacious drawing rooms" in his home and presented him with a silver service valued at $375. Enoch Emery, on behalf of the donors, made the presentation, "not on account of any particular
act, expression of sentiment of yours, but it is out of their regard for you as a fellow citizen, a neighbor and a friend." While they did not altogether agree with the colonel, "politically and otherwise, yet they admire your intellect, your generous disposition, your honesty of sentiment and your fearless independence of character and expression in all that appertains to life and the civil and religious views and questions that grow out of life." The presentation was made on the assumption that even though a man "who goes honestly about his business, acting as he thinks is honorable and right," may enjoy a "serenity and peace of mind" based upon his own judgment, yet "there is a little additional zest given to his happiness by the fact... that he possesses the approval and esteem of his fellow citizens." Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll responded, perhaps more pointedly than they had anticipated: 16

RESPONSE TO FRIENDS IN PEORIA, MARCH 27, 1872

Gentlemen: To say that I am gratified and proud, so far as expressing my real feelings is concerned, is about the same as saying nothing. A hundred years ago, in any country where Christians had the power, a man, for the expression of my sentiments, would probably have been burned as Calvin burned Servetus, with a slow fire, fed with green wood, while people who prayed for their enemies would have made mouths at his heroism, or jeeringly imitated his cries of pain.

For the expression of my sentiments, fifty years ago, even in this republic, a man would have been mobbed and imprisoned by Christians who carried out the fugitive slave law and made a whipping-post of the cross of Christ.

Thanks to the brave men of the past, we are at last beginning to be free, and now we can express our real thoughts without the fear of lash or chain.

It is our good fortune to live in a better and grander age, and when thinking of what we now enjoy it is impossible to forget the sufferings endured by the pioneers in the sacred cause of freedom.

To-night I can see Galileo in his cell. I see the flames creeping around the grand Bruno. Through the smoke I see his white, intrepid face. I am looking at Savonarola, and I hear the shouts of the christian mob when the fire reaches his serene eyes. I see Wightman at the stake. I see pious people piling fagots about him and I see ministers of God trample upon his charred remains. I see Leighton pursued, whipped, mutilated and imprisoned—I see him, by christian outrage, driven to insanity and tortured to death while a maniac. I see LaBarre burned to ashes for an indignity offered to a statue. I see thousands of infidels in prison. I see their families in want. I see courts tearing children from fathers and mothers in the name of religion, and everywhere, I see the friends of intellectual liberty despised, ostracised and insulted; and I can hear even ministers slandering the defenseless dead. But the world is better now, and we are reaping the priceless harvest of the heroic acts of all the ages.
To-night, I thank every man who has expressed his honest thoughts. And, gentlemen, I thank you, and through you, every one who has in the least contributed towards this splendid testimonial, not only for your friendship and kindness to me, but for your courage and for your devotion to principle.

Most of all, I thank you for being the friends of mental freedom. I have no idea that you agree with me in many of my religious, or rather irreligious opinions; but I know that you believe in liberty of thought and speech, and for that you have my thanks and respect.

Although the intrinsic value of your gift is great, still that is as nothing, when compared with the reason for which you give it. That renders it priceless to me. And to-night I pledge myself to you, that while I live the sentiments I entertain shall be expressed.

Again and again, gentlemen, I thank you for this magnificent gift.

Robert Ingersoll’s disgust with the Republican party coincided with the Liberal Republican movement of 1872. Both the regular Republicans and the Liberal Republicans vied to recruit the great stump speaker, but Ingersoll’s disdain for both parties and his general weariness of politics caused him to sit out the 1872 presidential campaign. Ingersoll’s dislike for Grant was fed by the president’s failure to appoint him U.S. attorney and by the Republican party’s acceptance of Congressman Stevens who, as an independent, had beaten Ebon in 1870. When it was rumored that Oglesby was being urged to run for governor again in order to help the party, Ingersoll wrote to his friend: “I will not support Grant and am very sorry to see you pocket the insults of years and again give your time and talents for the purpose of putting small and mean men into responsible positions.” Ingersoll’s assessment was that Oglesby and, by implication, Ingersoll, was being courted because: “The party needs you to carry the state and the moment the party does need a man he begins to be treated decently. I wish you would keep out of politics this campaign and let Grant and his d----d minions run things alone.”

Enoch Emery approached Oglesby to contact President Grant through Indiana Senator Oliver Morton with an eye to “getting a mutual friend, Col. Ingersoll again on the Republican track.” Emery suggested that Ingersoll might speak against the president if some accommodation was not made. Oglesby returned from a meeting with Morton with assurances that Grant had “feelings of utmost kindness and respect” for Ingersoll and that he regretted that he had not been able to fill Ingersoll’s patronage recommendations. Oglesby asked Ingersoll to help out with Grant’s campaign but finally concluded: “If you cannot do so I will heartily excuse you and go on alone.”

Jesse Fell, who was active in the Liberal Republican party, asked Ingersoll to attend their Cincinnati National Convention to speak for candidate David Davis of Bloomington. Ingersoll replied: “You must not expect me to make a speech at Cincinnati. I am done. . . . If ever in this world a man was thoroughly sick of political speaking, I am that man. . . . I am going to take no active part for any body.” Ingersoll did support his old Republican friend Oglesby for governor.
He also hosted and introduced Senator Morton at a Peoria Republican rally, but Ingersoll was silent on Grant. If Ingersoll was tempted to join Grant’s opponents, the urge was quelled by the knowledge that most of his old enemies, especially John M. Palmer and Lyman Trumbull, had joined the Liberal Republican party. Ingersoll’s retirement from politics held until 1876.19

Without politics, Ingersoll had only his philosophy and the law to fuel personal ambitions. For the moment, his philosophy paid no monetary dividends but his law practice was lucrative. On June 17, 1874, the Peoria Transcript reported: “Col. Bob Ingersoll’s long silence on all the leading religious questions of the day was explained on yesterday by two hugh volumes,” which he filed in the United States courts concerning the foreclosure on a $6,200,000 mortgage on the Toledo, Peoria, and Warsaw Railroad.20

At various times Ingersoll represented the Illinois Central and the Peoria and Rock Island railroads; and he was elected president of the P. & R.I. in 1876. He also served as prosecutor and defense attorney in various cases involving fraud. At various times during his twenty-year career in Peoria, he was in partnership with his brother Ebon, J. J. Weed, George and Sabin Puterbaugh, and his brother-in-law, Eugene McCune. The firm advertised that it served “Peoria, Tazewell, Woodford, Stark and Mason counties and in the Federal and Supreme Courts.” Ingersoll made local partners in various counties as well. The firm had offices at 45 Main Street, then 46 Main Street and—in 1874—in the Second National Bank building at Main and Washington streets.21

Although the Colonel sustained certain losses of business because of the Chicago Fire of 1871 and the Panic of 1873, he prospered. The law provided him with gratification and money, but he usually contended that he was only involved because it “feeds and clothes my body and the bodies of those I love.” It apparently fed them well. In 1874, he wrote that he weighed 221, his wife 178, daughters Eva Robert (named for her mother and father) age eleven, 100, and Maud Robert, age nine, 97. “So you see we are not Dwarfs,” he wrote, adding: “We are all good Infidels, and believe in no nonsense.” Before leaving Peoria, they lived in a mansion at 201 North Jefferson. They also had the leisure time to make a grand tour of Europe in 1875.22

Ingersoll had become a big fish in a small puddle. When Peoria dedicated its new chamber of commerce by inviting guests from the nation’s major cities to attend a banquet, the Chicago Times reported: “The governor and state officers favored the dedication with their presence; the theological anarch, Ingersoll, (who heaps residential honor on the locality) made loud laughter by quaint remarks to the festal occurrence.” But greater “festal occurrences” were in store for Ingersoll in 1876 as a lawyer, political speaker, and “theological anarchist.”23
5

Plumed Knight

In 1876, Ingersoll burst upon the national scene. His oratorical skills brought him prominence as a trial lawyer and as a political speaker. His nomination speech for James G. Blaine at the Republican National Convention thrust his name into the limelight. Blaine, for whom Ingersoll coined the phrase “the Plumed Knight” in his nomination speech, faltered but Ingersoll’s fame was assured thereafter. The “Plumed Knight” appellation fit Ingersoll better than it suited Blaine. Ingersoll, the orator, was prepared to charge off on a crusade to save the nation from the Democrats and the people from the churches. The reputation he had gained in accomplishing the former helped him gain a nationwide audience for the latter after the election. During the centennial year, Ingersoll won the Munn case, delivered an eloquent centennial oration on the Fourth of July, nominated Blaine, and gave dozens of campaign speeches, including the famous “Bloody Shirt” address to the veteran soldiers. His campaigning brought no political rewards but after the election campaign, he delivered “Ghosts” and “The Liberty of Man, Woman, and Child,” in dozens of cities at very substantial fees. By late 1877, Ingersoll had outgrown Peoria and he accepted his brother Ebon’s oft-repeated invitation to join him in Washington, D.C.

In the early months of 1876, there were no indications that Robert Ingersoll was considering a return to politics, a return which would propel him into national fame. When the Republican County Convention met on May 13 to select delegates to the state convention, Ingersoll was neither present, nor was he selected as a delegate or an alternate. But, without politics, Ingersoll was far from idle. On March 14, he was elected president of the Peoria and Rock Island Railroad. On May 2, he gave a benefit lecture for the Peoria Women’s Centennial Fund. He traced the history of the United States from the colonial period and, although he refrained from partisan themes, he was quoted as saying: “I would rather they would sell traderships than human bodies and human souls,” referring to the charges of corruption in the Grant administration. He was also concerned about his mother-in-law who had fallen and broken her arm on March 1. A few weeks later her husband Benjamin Parker died. Ingersoll gave a moving eulogy at Springdale Cemetery. The Democrat reported that he was so overcome with emotion that his words were “inaudible,” but the oration has been preserved in Ingersoll’s Works. During the same period he was often in Chicago representing Daniel W. Munn, who had been charged with corruption.

Munn, a deputy supervisor of internal revenue, was accused of defrauding the government of large sums of money due on the whiskey tax. The prosecution’s chief witness was Jacob Rehm, who was involved in the fraud and had turned state’s evidence. The Transcript quoted Ingersoll’s speech to the jury: “There was
no one in the jury box who could, without shame, go to the old father, the invalid wife, or the child of Daniel Munn, and say, I sent your son, your husband, your father to the penitentiary on the testimony of Jacob Rehm.'" Ingersoll argued that Rehm was an admitted perjurer and a thief and that Munn was an honest man. On May 24, the jury agreed with Ingersoll and found Munn not guilty. The result led a dubious Chicago Post and Mail editor to remark that "an honest Munn is the noblest work of Ingersoll." Ingersoll’s victory brought him national attention and a future as an attorney for officials accused of defrauding the government.

On the same day that Ingersoll won the "not guilty" verdict in the Munn trial, James G. Blaine was protesting his innocence before a sub-committee of the Judicial Committee of the House of Representatives. Blaine had made a large profit by selling some railroad bonds under questionable circumstances and the Democratic majority on the committee intended to expose the potential Republican presidential candidate. The Illinois State Republican Convention was also meeting on that day (May 24). Most of the delegates were Blaine supporters. Without public discussion, they inserted the name of Robert G. Ingersoll as a delegate to the national convention. The Transcript reported: "When Hon. R. G. Ingersoll’s name was read out as one of the delegates at large to Cincinnati, it was received with prolonged applause."

In Cincinnati, the Blaine forces worked to capture the maximum number of Illinois delegates. The Illinois delegation caucused on June 13 and gave Blaine thirty-four votes. Benjamin Bristow received four votes and there was a scattering of votes for other candidates. Senator John Logan then urged the delegates to support Blaine in a "harmonious and unanimous" way. Col. Ingersoll followed with "an eloquent and effective plea" for Blaine. He argued that "Blaine was a man wounded by the enemy while serving the Republican party, and for that party to desert him now, would damn it forever." At the end of the speech the delegates again caucused and Blaine’s vote rose to forty while Bristow’s vote declined to two. An earlier report had asserted that Congressman William P. Frye, of Maine, would nominate Blaine at the national convention. The report added: "Col. Bob Ingersoll of Illinois will be called upon to second the motion of Blaine and, of course, will make the biggest speech of the day." The information was half right; a June 15 dispatch reported that "Col. R. G. Ingersoll of Illinois, is now nominating Blaine in a strain of unusual eloquence."

According to Charles A. Church in his History of the Republican Party in Illinois, Blaine told Illinois Congressman Stephen A. Hurlbut that he wished to have an Illinois man nominate him in order to strengthen his patriotic and national image. Hurlbut told Blaine that Ingersoll was a great orator, who if he would "quit his nonsense long enough," would be ideal. Blaine had heard an Ingersoll speech in Maine in 1868 and had told Ingersoll that "it was incomparably the greatest speech he ever heard." Perhaps Blaine could strengthen himself with a critical delegation and obtain the services of a great speaker with one stroke. Hurlbut was apparently dispatched to approach Ingersoll and arrange it with the Illinois state convention. Hurlbut and Ingersoll shared an admiration for Blaine because he had
denounced the "Southern brigadier generals" who had returned to Congress. Blaine also opposed amnesty for Jefferson Davis and held him responsible for the Andersonville atrocities. Ingersoll believed that the Democrats intended to oppress blacks in the South once again and he wanted a knight who would stop them. Blaine was such a warrior, he believed. Of course such a speech would also give Ingersoll the prominence of a national platform from which he could display his extraordinary oratorical skills.  

According to Ingersoll's granddaughter, Robert Ingersoll did not write his "Plumed Knight" speech until the early morning hours before the afternoon presentation on June 15, 1876. The story is that Ebon, sharing a room on June 14, insisted that he write the speech, but Robert, ever nonchalant, retired without completing it. Robert woke up about 3:00 a.m. and quickly wrote out the ten-minute speech which he read to Ebon after breakfast much to his brother's delight. The speakers who preceded Ingersoll were those who had put the name of the reformer Benjamin Bristow in nomination. R. H. Dana praised Bristow's unblemished record and attested to his loyalty. He also argued that only Bristow could carry Massachusetts.  

Ingersoll altered his prepared speech by adding a few sentences at the beginning to deal with Dana's assertions. "Massachusetts may be satisfied with the loyalty of Benjamin H. Bristow; so am I; but if any man nominated by this convention can not carry the State of Massachusetts, I am not satisfied with the loyalty of that State," he countered. The issue was thus quickly shifted to loyalty. Ingersoll linked loyalty to opposition to ex-confederates who, he asserted, were trying to take over the government to the detriment of the blacks of the South and the loyal people of the North. Certainly "a man whose political reputation is spotless as a star" is needed, he conceded, but the candidate need not have "a certificate of moral character signed by a Confederate congress." Eighteen seventy-six was a "grand year" he continued, "a year in which the sons of freedom will drink from the fountains of enthusiasm, a year in which the people call for the man who has preserved in Congress what our soldiers won upon the field." Blaine was the man who had "torn from the throat of treason the tongue of slander," and he was the man who had "snatched the mask of Democracy from the hideous face of rebellion." Next, came one of the most famous sentences in the history of nomination speeches: "Like an armed warrior, like a plumed knight, James G. Blaine marched down the halls of the American Congress and threw his shining lance full and fair against the brazen foreheads of the defamers of his country and the maligners of his honor." At this point, the convention broke into prolonged cheering and Ingersoll's allotted time expired.  

The "plumed knight" sentence may not have been Ingersoll's intended climax. Because Ingersoll had inserted material at the beginning of his speech, his ten-minute time limit expired as he completed the sentence. The chairman interceded to inquire if it was the will of the convention that the speaker's time be extended, and the colonel was allowed to continue with his final paragraph which was apparently intended to be the memorable part of the speech. "In the name
of the Republic, the only Republic that ever existed upon this earth . . . in the name of all soldiers living . . . dead . . . and in the name of those who perished in the skeleton clutch of famine at Andersonville," he concluded, "Illinois nominates the next President of this country, the prince of parliamentarians—that leader of leaders—James G. Blaine." Perhaps the unplanned pause after the "plumed knight" sentence burned the epithet into the delegates' vocabularies and Blaine was labeled forever, not the "prince of parliamentarians" but the "plumed knight."  

The complete text is as follows:

SPEECH AT CINCINNATI
Nominating James G. Blaine for the President, June, 1876.
By Robert G. Ingersoll

Massachusetts may be satisfied with the loyalty of Benjamin H. Bristow; so am I; but if any man nominated by this convention can not carry the State of Massachusetts, I am not satisfied with the loyalty of that State. If the nominee of this convention can not carry the grand old Commonwealth of Massachusetts by seventy-five thousand majority, I would advise them to sell out Fanueil Hall as a Democratic headquarters. I would advise them to take from Bunker Hill that old monument of glory.

The Republicans of the United States demand as their leader in the great contest of 1876 a man of intelligence, a man of integrity, a man of well-known and approved political opinion. They demand a statesman; they demand a reformer after as well as before the election. They demand a politician in the highest, broadest and best sense—a man of superb moral courage. They demand a man acquainted with public affairs—with the wants of the people; with not only the requirements of the hour, but with the demands of the future. They demand a man broad enough to comprehend the relations of this government to the other nations of the earth. They demand a man well versed in the powers, duties, and prerogatives of each and every department of this government. They demand a man who will sacrdly preserve the financial honor of the United States; one who knows enough to know that the national debt must be paid through the prosperity of this people; one who knows enough to know that all the financial theories in the world can not redeem a single dollar; one who knows enough to know that all the money must be made, not by law, but by labor; one who knows enough to know that the people of the United States have the industry to make the money, and the honor to pay it over just as fast as they make it.

The Republicans of the United States demand a man who knows that prosperity and resumption, when they come, must come together; that when they come, they will come hand in hand through the golden harvest fields; hand in hand by the whirling spindles and the turning wheels; hand in hand past the open furnace doors; hand in hand by the
flaming forges; hand in hand by the chimneys filled with eager fire, greeted and grasped by the countless sons of toil.

This money has to be dug out of the earth. You can not make it by passing resolutions in a political convention.

The Republicans of the United States want a man who knows that this government should protect every citizen, at home and abroad; who knows that any government that will not defend its defenders, and protect its protectors, is a disgrace to the map of the world. They demand a man who believes in the eternal separation and divvorce of church and school. They demand a man whose political reputation is spotless as a star; but they do not demand that their candidate shall have a certificate of moral character signed by a confederate congress. The man who has, in full, heaped and rounded measure, all these splendid qualifications is the present grand and gallant leader of the Republican party—James G. Blaine.

Our country, crowned with the vast and marvelous achievements of its first century, asks for a man worthy of the past, and prophetic of her future; asks for a man who has the audacity of genius; asks for a man who is the grandest combination of heart, conscience and brain beneath her flag—such a man is James G. Blaine.

For a Republican host, led by this intrepid man, there can be no defeat.

This is a grand year—a year filled with the recollections of the Revolution; filled with proud and tender memories of the past; with the sacred legends of liberty—a year in which the sons of freedom will drink from the fountains of enthusiasm; a year in which the people call for a man who has preserved in Congress what our soldiers won upon the field; a year in which they call for a man who has torn from the throat of treason the tongue of slander—for the man who has snatched the mask of Democracy from the hideous face of rebellion; for the man who, like an intellectual athlete, has stood in the arena of debate and challenged all corners, and who is still a total stranger to defeat.

Like an armed warrior, like a plumed knight, James G. Blaine marched down the halls of the American Congress and threw his shining lance full and fair against the brazen foreheads of the defamers of his country and the maligners of his honor. For the Republican party to desert this gallant leader now, is as though an army should desert their general upon the field of battle.

James G. Blaine is now and has been for years the bearer of the sacred standard of the Republican party. I call it sacred, because no human being can stand beneath its folds without becoming and without remaining free.

Gentlemen of the convention, in the name of the great Republic, the only Republic that ever existed upon this earth; in the name of all her defenders and of all her supporters; in the name of all her soldiers living; in the name of all her soldiers dead upon the field of battle, and in the name of those who perished in the skeleton clutch of famine at Andersonville and Libby, whose sufferings he so vividly remembers,
Illinois-Illinois nominates for the next President of this country, that prince of parliamentarians—that leader of leaders—James G. Blaine.

Ingersoll’s speech created such enthusiasm for Blaine that many observers believed he would have been nominated if the roll call would have begun the same day. But nomination speeches for Roscoe Conkling, Rutherford B. Hayes, and J. F. Hartranft continued until dusk. Blaine’s floor manager asked that the hall be lighted but was informed that the gas lights could not safely be lit. When the balloting opened the next morning, Blaine led with 285 of the 378 votes needed for nomination. Eventually, most of the candidates were withdrawn in favor of a dark horse candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio, who was nominated on the seventh ballot. Blaine’s vote had gone up to 351 but Hayes had increased from 113 to 384 votes. Ingersoll was quoted by the Peoria Democratic paper as complaining “the only mortifying thing is the fact of having been defeated by a d--n fool.”

Ingersoll returned to Peoria a few days after the convention. The National Democrat noted: “Col. Ingersoll is now at home and is taking his defeat like a little man.” But, although Blaine may have lost, Ingersoll became a household word across the nation. The Republican newspapers, and a few Democrat papers as well, were filled with superlatives about his speech. The Illinois State Journal noted that “Every sentence of Col. Ingersoll’s speech was as clean cut and brilliant as a new American coin, and called out a succession of ringing cheers from the audience.” The Chicago Times called the speech “impassioned, artful, brilliant, and persuasive.” Much of the Eastern press made similar compliments. The Springfield paper noted that the Peoria Transcript had found it difficult: “to copy all the complimentary things said of Bob Ingersoll’s speech at the Cincinnati convention. If it means to succeed it will be compelled to enlarge.” Inevitably, however, the joke was that “An honest Blaine is the noblest work of Bob.”

Blaine’s defeat may have convinced Ingersoll, temporarily, that he had been right to stay out of politics for the last eight years. On June 17, the Democrat noted: “The band engaged to serenade Col. Ingersoll on his return from Cincinnati have been notified that they are not needed as Robert desires it understood that he is not in politics.” Whether he was in politics or not, the people of Peoria were anticipating his Fourth of July centennial speech. The celebration was perhaps the biggest ever in Peoria. There were parades, decorations, and seven divisions in a procession to a grove for the speaking. The Star Spangled Banner was played, a prayer was given, and the Declaration of Independence was read before the chairman introduced Ingersoll as “the greatest orator east or west of the Allegheny mountains.” The colonel spoke “in his majestic way of the signing of the declaration.” He characterized the Declaration of Independence as the “grandest, the bravest, and the profoundest political document that was ever signed.” He also gave an exposition on religious toleration which he clothed in patriotism. “Our fathers founded the first secular government,” he asserted. He called for “a declaration of individual independence” which would ensure even greater progress dur-
ing the next hundred years. After a benediction by another minister, there followed a regatta, fireworks, flag presentations, and many "accidents, burglaries and robberies."11

When the Republican county convention met on August 3 to select delegates to the congressional convention, it was clear that Peoria's Bob was back in politics. He was elected as a delegate from Peoria's Fifth Ward. The delegates elected him president of the convention and demanded one of his famous speeches. He obliged with an hour and a half effort, "replete with wit and wisdom," including the damning of the Democratic presidential candidate, Samuel J. Tilden. Asked why he was taking more interest than usual in the campaign, he answered: "I will tell you, and tell you honestly. It is because I tremble for the future of the colored people of the south if a democratic president is elected." The Transcript commented that the colonel's return to politics "was hailed with gladness by the friends of true progress and reform everywhere." The newspaper also predicted that he would "make a few speeches during the campaign, at such times and in such places as will not interfere with his professional duties."12

Actually, Ingersoll was about to be consumed by the national campaign. On August 8, 1876, Hayes wrote to him noting that Blaine had doubts about the Republicans carrying Maine and thought it would be well to invite Ingersoll to help out. Hayes wrote: "... as Maine is the first contested State to hold an election ... I have taken the liberty to write to you to say that if it is possible for you to make a few speeches in Maine, you will do the cause much service. ..." Ingersoll accepted the pious Methodist's request and set off for a whirlwind tour of Maine which whipped up great enthusiasm. The New York Tribune pronounced Ingersoll's August 21 speech in Lewiston, Maine, "the most powerful yet made in the canvass." The Transcript added that Illinois has furnished a Lincoln "in time of extremist peril," a Grant "to lead our armies to victory," and an Ingersoll "when it comes to a discussion of political questions." The Portland Press declared that Ingersoll's speech of August 22 was "one of the most brilliant stump speeches ever made" in that city. It added: "The Colonel is posted for speeches in Maine every night up to the 7th of September." The Bangor speech of August 24 is the best remembered of the Maine campaign. Ingersoll opened: "I have the honor to belong to the Republican party; the grandest, the sublimest party in the history of the world. This grand party is not only in favor of the liberty of the body, but also the liberty of the soul." He then damned the Democrats for their disloyalty. As the Bangor Whig and Courier put it, Ingersoll swayed the audience alternately "from enthusiasm for the grand principles advocated, to indignation at the crimes of the Democracy, as the record of that party was scorched with his invective."13

At Cooper Union, in New York City, Ingersoll opened by reading a telegram from Blaine announcing that the Republicans had won a large victory in Maine. Ingersoll charged that the Democratic presidential candidate, Samuel J. Tilden was a "little dried up old bachelor," who "... belongs to the Democratic party of the city of New York, the worst party ever organized in any civilized country."
The city machine, as Ingersoll saw it, had "but two objects—grand and petit larceny." The colonel followed with similar speeches at Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Columbus, and Indianapolis. He wrote to his family: "I have had a continual and continuous ovation." The old politico, Chauncey Depew, called the Cooper Union oration the "greatest speech he had ever heard." When the Democrats complained that Ingersoll was anti-Christian, the colonel would customarily answer, "I have made the Democratic party use what time they could spare between drinks in quoting Scripture." He thought making the Democratic party a pious party was, "certainly a miracle." He added: "Let every man do his own thinking, let every man have a brain of his own. Let every man have a heart and a conscience of his own." 

It is ironic that Ingersoll's tour inadvertently motivated the writing of *Ben Hur*. According to Lew Wallace, a fellow Union officer with Ingersoll, the two met on the train from Crawfordsville to Indianapolis where they were to attend a great rally. Colonel Ingersoll wanted company and General Wallace asked him about his religious views. Wallace remembered: "I sat spellbound, listening to a medley of argument, eloquence, wit, satire, audacity, irreverence, poetry, brilliant antitheses, and pungent excoriations of believers in God, Christ, and Heaven, the like of which I had never heard." Ingersoll's diatribe, Wallace maintained, shocked him out of his "absolute indifference" and forced him to study. The result for Wallace was, "first, the book *Ben Hur*, and second, a conviction amounting to absolute belief in God and the divinity of Christ." 

On September 20, in Indianapolis, Ingersoll delivered one of the most famous speeches in the annals of political history to the "Veteran Soldiers of the Rebellion." In classic "Bloody Shirt" style, he claimed that the Republican party was the party of liberty, while "every Union soldier that has a scar upon his body today carries with him a souvenir of the Democratic party." Ingersoll charged that John Wilkes Booth "was a Democrat." The Indianapolis speech is also the source of "a poetic flight of oratory" known as "A Vision of War." Ingersoll’s vision recalled the atrocities of slavery when "Four million bodies" were in chains. The "Vision of War" section of the speech is mostly verbatim from the Decoration Day address Ingersoll gave in Peoria in 1870 (see Chapter 4). A month after the speech the *Transcript* was reporting that "Colonel Ingersoll’s brilliant apostrophe to the soldiers . . . seems destined to immortality in the schoolboys’ speaking books. It has already been introduced among the selections of some of the popular elocutionists . . ." 

Amid reports from the East about his triumphant tour, Ingersoll returned to Peoria on September 22, 1876. Before the day was over, Peorians were demanding "some little taste of the feast which he has . . . been so freely bestowing upon others." Centennial Hall was quickly booked and filled; a band led a number of citizens to his residence and then the colonel accompanied them to the hall. After assuring Peorians that "I have seen nowhere a city so beautiful as Peoria," he damned the Democrats in his usual "Bloody-Shirt" fashion. A few days later he was back on the campaign trail in Ohio and Indiana, the "October states," where
critical elections were to be held on October 10. Ingersoll not only spoke every
night before tens of thousands of voters but his fame was such that he could not
even change trains without being called out for a speech on the depot platform.\(^7\)

Ingersoll returned to Peoria to another political rally in Centennial Hall on Oc-
tober 12. He expressed pride in the Republican party in Ohio and Indiana for hav-
ing made gains in their state elections. Before a crowd of 3,000 people, he re-
peated his explanation that he cared about the election only because he feared that
a Democratic victory would deprive men of their rights. On October 21, he spoke
at Rock Island. An extra train was run from Peoria for those who wanted to follow
Ingersoll. The high point of his Illinois tour came at Chicago on October 20. The
Tribune reported that he spoke “at the Exposition Building to the largest audience
ever drawn by one man in Chicago.” The Tribune claimed 50,000 persons—some
on the roof peering through the skylight, some in the organ-loft, some “every-
where that a human being could sit, stand or hang”—were there to hear the orator.
Once again he eulogized the Republican party and damned the Democrats for their
role in the Civil War. To the cry of “Let bygones be bygones,” he reminded the
audience of the story of the young man who was convicted of the murder of his
father and mother but asked the judge to take pity because he was a poor orphan.\(^8\)

Peorian Republicans were flattered by the national attention they were given
when James G. Blaine and his wife came to stay with the Ingersoll family. Blaine
agreed to speak on October 25. Even the Democrats took a certain pride that “Our
Bob” had made an honest man of the corrupt Blaine. A commerical advertisement
in the Democratic paper was headed: “BLAINE AND INGERSOLL may draw
large houses,” but their store would draw larger crowds by “offering to the public
500 white blankets at great savings.” According to the Republican paper, Blaine
addressed 10,000 citizens; the Democratic paper said 3,000. The Transcript re-
ported that Blaine’s made “one of the soundest, most forcible and argumentative
addresses ever heard here.” Yet it added that “Mr. Blaine has not the wonderful
elocution of our own Ingersoll.” After Blaine’s speech, Ingersoll immediately
resumed his Illinois and Wisconsin swing and finished the campaign on election
eve in Davenport, Iowa. The Transcript commented: “He has now been on the
stump almost constantly for three months, and it is not too much to say that to
him more than any other man, will be due the success which the Republican party
will achieve on the 7th of November.” The National Democrat observed sarcas-
tically that “Col. Ingersoll is the idol of the Peoria Republicans. Without him they
could scarcely breath or move or have their being. They drink from the fountain
of his fertile tongue as the nectar of the gods... His epigrams are to them the
edicts of political omniscience.”\(^9\)

While basking in the limelight as the most powerful orator in the country, In-
gersoll may have had thoughts of using his “political omniscience” to gain a Sen-
ate seat. As a reformed addict, however, he was afraid of the needle. In response
to a preacher friend who was considering running for the legislature, Ingersoll
warned, on August 5, that politics “will make your ordinary everyday life dull,
and you will get an appetite for political excitement, and the first thing you know
you will be as one of the wicked.'” Ingersoll concluded: “Politics is a mean low business—a business where lying and bribery and slander constitute the principal stock in trade—a business that I wish I had never engaged in for a single hour.” But the *New York Tribune* reported that there was a good deal of talk about Ingersoll as the next senator from Illinois if Logan faltered. “Like Senator Logan, he has a magnificent voice, but unlike him, he has something behind it,” the *Tribune* opined. When Thomas Cratty, Republican candidate for the state legislature, introduced Ingersoll at the “ratification” meeting in Peoria on October 12, he promised to vote for him for the Senate. Ingersoll responded that he was not a candidate “for any political position in the gift of the people.” He said “‘he would not surrender one billionth part of his independence to be emperor of the whole world.’”

A week after the election it was clear that neither the Democrats nor Logan, the incumbent senator, would have a majority of the Illinois legislature. Perhaps a new face was necessary. Andrew Shuman, lieutenant governor elect and editor of the powerful *Chicago Evening Journal*, thought Ingersoll was the ideal person for senator and then president. His enthusiastic letter is published here for the first time:

*Chicago, Nov. 14, 1876*

Dear Ingersoll:

I hope you appreciate your position as a public man in this country at the present time. I hope you appreciate your own self—your powers, your elements of greatness, your peculiar qualities as a leader. I hope you appreciate the fact that you would be the giant of the National Senate. I hope you appreciate the fact that at the end of four years in the Senate, you would—could, be promoted to the Chief Magistracy of the Republic. I hope you will authorize your friends to do that which is best for you and for all of us. *Say the word!* “Young America”—free and independent in mind and body—will be the future ruling power of this country and “Young America,” in his impulses, aspirations, convictions, tendencies, is in majority with Robert G. Ingersoll. Don’t doubt that.

I wanted to see you. Friend Gilbert will tell you what all this is about.

Thine, right heartily,
Andrew Shuman²¹

Ingersoll probably could have been drafted for the Senate seat, but he was not as unrealistic in his appraisal of the situation as was Shuman. His economic views were too orthodox and his religious views too unorthodox to make him a viable independent candidate. On January 12, 1877, Shuman’s *Journal* was forced to concede that “he has earned the right to do as he pleases . . . and his preference is for private life. That is the reason he is not in the field.” On January 25, 1877,
after forty ballots in the Illinois legislature, Supreme Court Justice David Davis was elected to the Senate seat by a coalition of Democrats and Independents. The situation in Washington was even more confused. Neither presidential candidate had a clear-cut majority in the electoral college because certain states had sent in conflicting sets of returns. Ingersoll apparently had some role as “an efficient and valued counsellor in the peculiar scenes which resulted in the accession of President Hayes,” according to the Transcript. Some months later in his “Eight to Seven Address” in Boston, Ingersoll alluded to his presence in Washington when the “Commission” which settled the election was being negotiated. The great orator had opposed the idea of a commission at that time, but he liked the final result. He asserted “that if the Democratic party had swept into power, it would have been the end of progress, and the end of what I consider human liberty beneath our flag.”22 Considerable time would have to pass before Ingersoll would come to realize that the “redemption” of the South was inevitable, even if the Republican party held on to power. The blacks of the South, whom he wanted so desperately to protect, would be driven from participation in government.

After the election there was no decrease in the demand for Ingersoll’s oratorical performances whether as political observer, lawyer, or philosopher. “There is no person whose words command greater attention than Col. Ingersoll,” the Transcript crowed. His political observations were in great demand as attested by his performance at Steinway Hall in New York on March 14, 1877. As an attorney, he often conducted business before the Supreme Court and had undertaken the defense of another government official accused of corruption, William H. Harper, a grain inspector in Chicago. As philosopher, he found time to write and deliver “Ghosts,” “My Reviewers Reviewed,” and “The Liberty of Man, Woman, and Child” in 1877. The addresses, which were even more outspoken in their opposition to religion than before were made to immense paying audiences in such cities as Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco. “Col. Ingersoll is bringing Peoria into notice more than any other of her citizens, and we doubt not that his friends, among whom are men of all parties and creeds, will be glad to read the accounts of his enthusiastic progress,” the Transcript wrote.23

But Ingersoll’s “enthusiastic progress” was taking him out of Peoria more frequently. The demand for his speeches was so great and the remuneration so high that he could choose his place and price. In 1877, he was away from Peoria more than he was at home. Already in 1876 he had ceased to include his usual “business card” in the newspaper directory. In the city directory for 1877, only his residence was listed as an office. He was outgrowing Peoria. As early as June 16, 1875, Ebon, upon the dedication of his new office in Washington, D. C. was beckoning his brother: “Although it is much the most comfortable and most elegant office I have ever had, it is lonesome and dreary without you.” Ebon continued: “The day cannot and must not be far distant when we shall again be together. Life would be so much more hopeful and charming could we work, live and love in the light of each other’s eyes!” Ingersoll did make a final major address at the Central Il-
Illinois Fair on September 13, 1877. The topic was "About Farming in Illinois," about which he knew little, but he later included the address in his published works. Enoch Emery of the Transcript, irritated because Ingersoll furnished the manuscript to a rival, small circulation paper, suggested it might have been because "The Colonel concluded to send it where it would reach the least number of farmers." 24

Perhaps Ingersoll had delayed making a decision about joining Ebon while there was a possibility that he might receive an appointment from a grateful president. Ingersoll had been mentioned for attorney-general and for ambassador to France, but others were chosen. On November 1, 1877, Ingersoll's old friend, Senator Richard Oglesby wired: "Our Republican delegation unanimously desire to present your name for the Mission to Berlin . . . If nominated by the President will you be willing to accept." The news created great excitement in Peoria. Ingersoll answered: "The idea of accepting anything had long ago paid its bill and left my mind. To tell you the truth, my better judgement tells me not to have anything more to do with politics in any form." He added: "At the same time I would like to know how the President feels. I am disposed . . . to give him an opportunity of expressing himself in regard to me. I suppose the religious people, or rather the people who wish to be considered extremely pious, will have but little hesitation about expressing their views." 25

While Ingersoll was traveling to Washington, the pious were not reluctant to express their opinions. They joked that he would not be acceptable in Berlin because he could not say Mein Gott. It turned out that Secretary of State William M. Evarts had only suggested that Illinois could have a major diplomatic appointment, without agreeing on a person. The Illinois congressional delegation had offered the defeated Senator John A. Logan the recommendation, but he had promptly refused. They then agreed on Ingersoll. Apparently, Evarts was even more opposed to Ingersoll than was the president who had developed a friendship with the great orator. However, Ingersoll wrote to his family: "I do not believe Hayes dare appoint me. He is afraid of the religious world. I must be and am perfectly willing to pay for the privilege of saying what I think." When it was clear that the appointment was not forthcoming, Ingersoll wrote to Oglesby asking that his name not be considered. On November 19, the two called on Secretary Evarts to inform him that Ingersoll did not wish the position. The Transcript expressed a bitterness that may have been shared by Ingersoll. It noted that Ingersoll had "largely assisted in placing" men in power who were so busy "conciliating enemies" [Southern ex-confederates] that they have forgotten their friends. Ingersoll passed it off by saying he had come to Washington to practice law, not to seek a foreign appointment. Ebon's offer to renew a partnership in Washington, D. C., was accepted and Ingersoll left his political ambitions in Peoria. Thereafter, he would be only a "visitor" in politics and in Peoria. 26

When Robert Ingersoll moved to Washington, D. C., at age forty-five, his reputation as a trial lawyer, lecturer, and political speaker was already well established. His career in Washington (to 1885) and in New York (until his death in
1899) reflected the beliefs and techniques already well developed in Illinois. Because of his prominence, the demand for his services escalated. As a lawyer he became more famous by successfully defending certain Republicans implicated in the “star route” fraud cases in 1882-83. He became wealthy through his success in New York in corporation and estate cases. He also continued to write and deliver (to large paying audiences) his rationalist and biographical lectures. Typical of his agnostic lectures were: “Some Mistakes of Moses” (1879); “What Must We do to Be Saved” (1880); “The Great Infidels” (1881); “Myth and Miracle” (1885); “About the Holy Bible” (1894); “Why I Am an Agnostic” (1896); “Superstition” (1898); and “The Devil” (1899). He wrote biographical “appreciations” about Robert Burns (1878), Shakespeare (1891), Walt Whitman (1891), and Lincoln (1894).27

Although Ingersoll became friends with presidents (Rutherford B. Hayes and James A. Garfield) and lived on Lafayette Square near the White House, his political ambitions were buried in Peoria where his “Paganism” was revealed. He continued, however, to speak out effectively on behalf of “orthodox” Republican candidates concerning monetary and patriotic issues. If Ingersoll had further political ambitions, he was destined to be disappointed. Nor was he destined to gain the satisfaction of working with his beloved brother Ebon in Washington, D. C. Soon after Robert’s return from a tour of Europe, Ebon died in 1879. Robert found solace in his family and his new friends. His “wit and wisdom” attracted individuals as diverse as Mark Twain, Andrew Carnegie, and Walt Whitman as friends and admirers.28

When death came to Robert Green Ingersoll at his summer home at Dobbs Ferry, New York, on July 21, 1899, the Chicago Inter-Ocean devoted an entire page to his obituary. It noted that “Look at Peoria” was an expression Peorians had adopted to express their pride in the development of the city. But the Inter-Ocean contended that while Peorians had many reasons to be proud, “the fact that she was the home of Bob Ingersoll” was their greatest source of pride: “Every Peorian loved and honored Ingersoll, and shared in the glory that he gained for himself and his home.” Although Peorians were (and are) divided about “honoring” Ingersoll, they did take a certain pride in his notoriety. In 1911, they erected the only monument to him in Glen Oak Park. Over the years, this endangered statue has been threatened by vandals and wartime patriots who wanted to melt it down for scrap. Nevertheless, the statue of Robert G. Ingersoll still stands defiantly on its pedestal, a symbol of the diversity that “played in Peoria.”29
Notes

1. Douglas to Lincoln

1 Robert G. Ingersoll (hereafter RGI) to John L. Ingersoll, 17 Mar. 1865, in Ingersoll Papers, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield (hereafter ISHL).

2 RGI to John L. Ingersoll, 30 May 1852, Ingersoll Papers, ISHL.


8 Peoria Daily Transcript, 3 Aug. 1860, p. 2, col. 3; 1 Oct. 1860, p. 2, col. 2. I have been unable to find any contemporary account which verifies Carr’s story in My Day and Generation (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1908), pp. 335-36. While Carr’s version may be correct, it was written almost half a century after the event. Many biographers rely too heavily on this account to prove that Ingersoll was an abolitionist early in his political career.


10 Clipping from the Galesburg Observer, 23 Oct. 1860, found in Ingersoll Scrapbook, Library of Congress (hereafter LC).

11 Peoria Daily Democratic Union, 22 Feb. 1860, p. 4, col. 2 and 27 Feb. 1860, p. 4, col. 2. According to Cameron Rogers, Colonel Bob Ingersoll (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927), p. 114, Ingersoll gave his “first anti-theological lecture,” entitled “Progress” in Pekin, Illinois, in 1860. I have been unable to find any contemporary evidence to support this assertion. “Progress” was written or rewritten in 1866 and 1869.

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18 RGI to Ebon, 22 Sept. 1862 and 29 Sept. 1862, Ingersoll Papers, ISHL. Both letters are quoted in Wakefield, *Letters*, pp. 124-28. In the September 29 letter, Robert criticizes Lincoln's suspension of *habeas corpus* even though Ebon was justifying it during the campaign.

19 RGI to Ebon, 7 Oct. 1862, Ingersoll Papers, ISHL.

20 RGI to Ebon, 1 Nov. 1862, Ingersoll Papers, ISHL. Compare to Wakefield, *Letters*, pp. 130-31. Wakefield did not indicate any deletions by the use of ellipses.

21 Wakefield omitted this sentence from her transcript of the letter. Someone apparently tried, with some success, to erase the sentence from the original letter, which is at the Illinois State Historical Library.

22 RGI to John L. Ingersoll, 16 Mar. 1863; RGI to Ebon, 26 June 1863, both in Ingersoll Papers, ISHL.

23 *Peoria Daily Transcript*, 1 Sept. 1863, p. 2, cols. 3-4.


26 *Peoria Daily Transcript*, 15 Mar. 1864, p. 4, col. 2; *Peoria Morning Mail*, 15 Mar. 1864, p. 4, col. 1; 16 Mar. 1864, p. 4, col. 1; 16 Mar. 1864, p. 4, col. 1; 18 Mar. 1864, p. 4, col. 1. Michael Richardson called my attention to this incident when he sent me a copy of C. L. Dancey's column in the *Peoria Journal-Star*, 5 May 1983, and his letter to the editor.

2 May 1864, p. 2, col. 3.


29 *Illinois State Journal*, 29 May 1864, p. 2, col. 5, RGI to Ebon, 27 May 1864 and 3 June 1864, Ingersoll Papers, ISHL.

30 RGI to Ebon, 2 June 1864 and 17 June 1864, Ingersoll Papers, ISHL.

31 The House of Representatives voted on the proposed thirteenth amendment to the constitution on 15 June 1864. Ebon and his party failed to muster the necessary two-thirds vote. It passed the House, however, on 31 Jan. 1865. The amendment to end slavery was put in force on 18 Dec. 1865. See J. G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1961), p. 396.


2. Look at Peoria


2 Ibid.


5 I published this letter for the first time under the title, "'Robert G. Ingersoll on Leeks and Onions in the Holy Land,'" *Illinois Quarterly*, 43 (1980), 5-10. It is reprinted here because the *Illinois Quarterly* has ceased publication and its back issues are not readily available.


8 RGI to Ebon, 5 May 1866, 14 July 1866, 25 July 1866, 26 Dec. 1866, 25 Jan. 1867 and 2 June 1867, Ingersoll Collection, LC.


10 Telegrams, W. T. Dowdall to Andrew Johnson, 26 Feb. 1866 and 4 Apr. 1866, Andrew Johnson Presidential Papers, Microfilm reel 41; *The Times* (London) 1 May 1866,


14 *Peoria Daily Transcript*, 9 June 1866, p. 2, col. 4; 23 June 1866, p. 2, col. 2; 6 July 1866, p. 2, col. 2; 9 July 1866, p. 2, col. 3.

15 RGI to Ebon, 27 June 1866, 6 July 1866, 8 July 1866, Ingersoll Collection, LC.

16 RGI to Ebon, 6 July 1866, 16 July 1866, Ingersoll Collection, LC.


21 RGI to Ebon, 1 Mar. 1866, 6 July 1866, 14 July 1866, Ingersoll Collection, LC.


23 RGI to Ebon, 27 Feb. 1867, Ingersoll Collection, LC; Oglesby to RGI, 6 Mar. 1867, Oglesby Collection, ISHL; RGI to Oglesby, 15 Mar. 1867, Governor Oglesby Papers, Illinois State Archives, Springfield; RGI to Oglesby, 7 Aug. 1867, Oglesby Collection, ISHL; *Peoria Daily Transcript*, 11 Feb. 1868, p. 2, col. 1; RGI to Oglesby, 8 July 1867, Oglesby Collection, ISHL; RGI to Ebon, 6 June 1867, Ingersoll Collection, LC; RGI to Oglesby, 10 July 1867, Oglesby Collection, ISHL.


25 RGI to Ebon, 6 June 1867; 1 Jan. 1868, Ingersoll Collection, LC.
3. Lost Nomination

1 Peoria Daily Transcript, 3 Feb. 1868, p. 3, col. 1. The editor quotes “a private letter from Springfield from a gentleman worthy of implicit confidence,” as saying: “Palmer has signified his intention of not being a candidate for the nomination of Governor. I know, because the General told me so.” Ingersoll may have been the “worthy gentleman.” The “end me politically” quotation is from Robert G. Ingersoll (hereafter RGI) to Ebón Clark Ingersoll (hereafter Ebon), 29 Apr. 1868, Ingersoll Collection, Library of Congress (hereafter LC); also transcribed in Eva Ingersoll Wakefield, The Letters of Robert G. Ingersoll (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), pp. 149-50 (hereafter Wakefield, Letters).

2 Peoria Daily Transcript, 2 Mar. 1868, p. 2, col. 1; RGI to Ebon, 2 Mar. 1868, Ingersoll Collection, LC; RGI to Ebon, 3 Mar. 1868, Ingersoll Papers, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield (hereafter ISHL); RGI to Oglesby, 3 Mar. 1868, Oglesby Collection, ISHL. On 24 March 1868, at the height of his confidence, RGI wrote to Ebon: “If I get the nomination, I will bet my ears that I break into the Senate in 1871.” (Ingersoll Collection, LC) Oglesby aspired to the same seat. On the back of Ingersoll’s 3 Mar. 1868 letter, Oglesby wrote: “I made no reply as I met him and talked the subject over.” See my “Goodbye dear Governor,” Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, 73 (1980), 99, ff. 67. RGI reported to Ebon on 6 Mar. 1868 that he had gone to Springfield on March 5, Ingersoll Collection, LC.


5 RGI to Ebon, 13 Mar. 1868 and 24 Mar. 1868, Ingersoll Collection, LC. The Tribune was quoted in the Peoria Daily Transcript, 21 Mar. 1868, p. 2, col. 2.

6 Decatur (weekly) Republican, 2 Apr. 1868, p. 2, cols. 4-5; From Washington, D.C., Ebon wrote to RGI, 6 Apr. 1868, Ingersoll papers, ISHL: “You are the greatest talkist.” Ebon wrote after having read RGI’s Springfield speech.


9 RGI to Ebon, 29 Mar. 1868, Ingersoll Collection, LC: Chicago Tribune quoted in Peoria Daily Transcript, 21 Mar. 1868, p. 2, col. 2; Chicago Tribune (damning Ebon), 27 Mar. 1868, p. 2, col. 3; RGI to Oglesby, 1 Apr. 1868, in “Goodbye dear Governor,” 100; RGI to Ebon, 9 Apr. 1868, Ingersoll Collection, LC; Ebon to RGI, 16 Apr. 1868, Ingersoll Papers, ISHL.
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10 Chicago Tribune, 30 Mar. 1868, p. 1, col. 5. The exchange with Palmer was quoted in the Illinois State Journal, 7 Apr. 1868, p. 2, col. 3; Ebon to RGI, 6 Apr. 1868, Ingersoll Papers, ISHL. The Illinois State Register, 4 Apr. 1868, p. 1, col. 3, remarked that Ingersoll’s nomination would put “Oglesby’s peg ahead in the senatorial contest.”

11 D. L. Phillips, Springfield [to John Logan], 20 Apr. 1868; Moulton to Logan, 9 Feb. 1868 and 17 Feb. 1868, all in Logan Collection, LC.

12 J. D. Ward, Chicago, to Oglesby, 8 Apr. 1868; Oglesby to W. R. Rowley, 14 Apr. 1868; both in Oglesby Collection, ISHL.


14 RGI to Ebon, 29 Apr. 1868, Ingersoll Collection, LC; Peoria Daily Transcript, 2 May 1868, p. 2, col. 5. Years later, E. F. Baldwin remembered that Hesing had been rebuffed by RGI, see Bloomington Daily Pantagraph, 7 Oct. 1876, p. 2, col. 3.


16 RGI to Ebon, 11 June 1868, Ingersoll Collection, LC.

17 This account is based principally on the account in the Illinois State Journal, 8 May 1868, p. 1, cols. 1-2; Chicago Tribune, 7 May 1868, p. 1, cols. 1-2; Tazewell Republican, 15 May 1868, p. 2, col. 4; Peoria Daily National Democrat, 7 May 1868, p. 3, col. 3; and Peoria Daily Transcript, 7 May 1868, p. 2, col. 1. The accounts vary as to the number of votes each candidate received.


20 The original article in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, 26 Oct. 1889, p. 4, col. 5, was headed: “A POLITICAL REMINISCENCE. Burial of Bob Ingersoll’s Ambition for Office—The Story Told by One of the Pall-Bearers.” The Peoria papers copied the story verbatim except for the headings.

21 Peoria Daily Transcript, 6 May 1868, p. 2, col. 5; Sangamon County Gazeteer Together with 1866 City Directories of Springfield and Jacksonville (Springfield: John C. W. Bailey, 1866); Holland’s Jacksonville City Directory, for 1871-72 Containing a Complete List of all the Residents (Chicago: Western Publishing Co., 1871).

22 Bloomington Daily Pantagraph, 7 Oct. 1876, p. 3, cols. 3-4. See also “Address of
E. F. Baldwin” at the “Unveiling of the Statue of Robert G. Ingersoll at Glen Oak Park, Peoria, Illinois, Saturday, Oct. 28, 1911 at 2 P.M.,” p. 8 (copy at Peoria Public Library). On 14 May 1868, RGI wrote to Ebon: “If there is a meaner paper than the Tribune I have never seen it.” From Ingersoll Collection, LC.


24 RGI to Ebon, 9 May 1868, 14 May 1868, 19 June 1868, 20 June 1868, 7 Sept. 1868, Ingersoll Collection, LC. Robert did attend the Chicago Convention. He wrote to Ebon, 29 May 1868, Ibid.: “I was at the Chicago convention. Saw John there . . . he came down to visit father’s grave.”

25 RGI to Ebon, 13 June 1868, Ingersoll Collection, LC; Peoria Daily Transcript, 13 Nov. 1868, p. 2, col. 1.

26 RGI to Oglesby, 22 Nov. 1868, 14 Jan. 1869, and 3 Mar. 1869, Oglesby Collection, ISHL; RGI to Ebon, 15 Jan. 1869, 6 Mar. 1869, 1 Apr. 1869, Ingersoll Collection, LC.

4. Patriot Infidel

1 Peoria Daily Transcript, 1 June 1868, p. 2, cols. 3-4; also in Peoria Weekly Transcript, 4 June 1868, p. 2, cols. 6-7. Ebon Clark Ingersoll apparently thought the Decoration Day speech was his brother’s best, but Robert replied: “I hardly see why you think my little oration my best. I don’t think it equal to the address I delivered before the 86th Ills.” Robert G. Ingersoll (hereafter RGI) to Ebon Clark Ingersoll (hereafter Ebon), 23 June 1868, Ingersoll Collection, Library of Congress (hereafter LC). Robert’s speech to the 86th Illinois Regiment was delivered 12 Oct. 1865.


3 Peoria Daily Transcript, 5 July 1869, p. 2, cols. 3-5.

4 Bloomington Daily Pantagraph, 11 Mar. 1869, p. 4, col. 3; 12 Mar. 1869, p. 4, col. 2; Decatur (weekly) Republican, 1 Apr. 1869, p. 6, col. 1; Works, Vol. 1, pp. 93-117.


7 Ibid., 27 Apr. 1870, p. 3, col. 3; 1 Apr. 1870, p. 3, cols. 3-4; 30 Apr. 1870, p. 3, cols. 3-4; 7 May 1870, p. 2, col. 4.


9 See Works, Vol. 9, pp. 157-87 for the text of the Indianapolis speech. An editorial note on page 167 designates the beginning thus: “This poetic flight of oratory has since
become universally known as ‘A Vision of War’.” The “Vision” section ends on page 170.


16 Peoria Daily Transcript, 28 Mar. 1872, p. 4, col. 3.

17 RGI to Oglesby, 23 Mar. 1872, Oglesby Collection, ISHL.

18 E. Emery to Oglesby, 25 June and 27 June 1872; Oglesby to RGI, 6 Aug. 1872, Oglesby Collection, ISHL.

19 RGI to Jesse Fell, 6 Apr. 1872, Wakefield, Letters, pp. 159-60; Peoria Daily Transcript, 21 Aug. 1872, p. 4, cols 1 and 3.

20 Peoria Daily Transcript, 17 June 1874, p. 1, col. 3.


22 RGI to Candice Sykes, 18 Jan. 1874, quoted in Wakefield, Letters, p. 517.

23 The Chicago Times article was cited in the Peoria Daily Transcript, 17 Dec. 1875, p. 1, col. 2.

5. Plumed Knight

1 Peoria Daily Transcript, 17 May 1876, p. 2, col. 2; 14 Mar. 1876, p. 4, col. 2; 3 May 1876, p. 4, col. 3; 2 Mar. 1876, p. 4, col. 3; Peoria Daily National Democrat, 25

2 Peoria Daily Transcript, 23 May 1876, p. 1, col. 4; Chicago Post and Mail as cited in ibid., 27 May 1876, p. 2, col. 1.


7 Works, Vol. 9, pp. 55-60.

8 New York Times, 16 June 1876, p. 3, col. 1; New York Tribune, 16 June 1876, p. 5, col. 5; Illinois State Journal, 16 June 1876, p. 1, col. 5. These three accounts show that the break and call for extended time came after the “Plumed Knight” sentence. See the authorized text in Works, Vol. 9, pp. 55-60, which indicates no break in the speech.


12 Peoria Daily Transcript, 4 Aug. 1876, p. 4, cols. 2-3 and p. 2, col. 2.


17 Ibid., 23 Sept. 1876, p. 4, cols. 4-8 and p. 4, col. 3; 2 Oct. 1876, p. 2, col. 1.


21 Andrew Shuman to RGI, 14 Nov. 1876, Ingersoll Papers, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield. Gilbert may have been Alvin Gilbert, Vermillion County, who was elected to the state legislature in 1876.


28 Cramer, Royal Bob, pp. 179-266.

29 The Chicago Inter-Ocean, as quoted in the Peoria Star, 22 July 1899.