

THADDEUS STEVENS

*Militant Democrat
and fighter
for Negro rights*

ELIZABETH LAWSON



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THADDEUS STEVENS

IN the poorer district of the town of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is a secluded cemetery which holds the grave of one of our greatest—and hitherto least honored—of democrats and progressives, Thaddeus Stevens. This was the man who, in the day of America's death-grapple with slavery, won for himself the title of the Great Commoner. The inscription on the tombstone was written by Stevens himself:

*I repose in this quiet and secluded spot,
Not from any natural preference for solitude,
But finding other cemeteries
Limited by charter rules as to race,
I have chosen this that I might illustrate in death
The principles which I advocated through a long life,
Equality of man before his Creator.*

Thaddeus Stevens was of the stature of Tom Paine; he was one of those rare figures in the history of bourgeois revolutions—a thoroughly consistent democrat, who scorned to circumscribe or limit democracy. Too many other leaders of the era hesitated and compromised, frightened by the intensity of the storm they had called forth. But Stevens rejoiced to unleash a whirlwind that would sweep America clean of human bondage. His enemies have called him Jacobin¹—a proud name, even when flung as a taunt.

By almost unanimous consent of historians, Thaddeus Stevens has become the arch-villain of American history. Writers who find ready palliation for Aaron Burr and Benedict Arnold cannot forgive the man who fought in the cause of free education, emancipation of the slaves, universal suffrage, equality under the

law. The measure in which they repudiate Stevens is the measure of their disdain for the Negro people.

Slanders Against Stevens

To James Truslow Adams, for example, Stevens is "perhaps the most despicable, malevolent, and morally deformed character who has ever risen to high power in America."² To David Muzzey, he is the "harsh, cynical, vindictive septuagenarian."³ A text-book written by Samuel Morison and Henry Steele Commager declares Stevens to be "one of the most unpleasant characters in American history...with no redeeming spark of magnanimity."⁴ Stevens has been slandered on the screen in that most chauvinist of films, *The Birth of a Nation*. And there are historians who explain away Stevens' long crusade for the oppressed as the outcome of his physical defect, a club foot—as if love of freedom could be only the intellectual counterpart of bodily deformity!

The period of Stevens' great achievements, the middle years of the nineteenth century, was an era of sweeping reforms and revolutions. With the growth of industry, with expansion to the West, there grew in numbers and in consciousness the classes that were the bearers of progress in that day—the manufacturers, the industrial workers, the independent farmers and frontiersmen, the Negro people.

In these years, industrial capitalism—the manufacturing capital which in America began rapid development with the war of 1812—was preparing to seize national power from the hands of the reactionary slaveholders, bankers, and merchants. That struggle was brilliantly consummated in the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The workers were building their early craft unions, their first labor parties; they demanded the right to organize, the ten-hour day, the abolition of slavery, public schools, free land for homesteads.

From the West, the region of small independent producers, came strength for all democratic innovations and power for the

anti-slavery movement. The West bred Abraham Lincoln. The West gave first impetus to the formation of the Republican Party when it was a new and daring political organization, born in revolutionary crisis.

The Negro people brought their vast abilities to the Abolition cause. They contributed to it its outstanding leader, Frederick Douglass. They conceived and carried through more than two hundred and fifty slave insurrections. They were tireless in the secret tasks of the Underground Railroad. They were indispensable in the Civil War and were the shock troops of Reconstruction.

The immigrants were a leaven in the political ferment of America. To the United States came the despised, the persecuted, the oppressed, the downtrodden of the old world. Some, like Joseph Weydemeyer, were already Marxists. To Abolition and to the labor movement, they brought numbers, experience, and clarity.

From all these groups came the call for nineteenth-century progress and reform: the abolition of slavery, the rights of labor, civil liberties, free education, free land, woman suffrage. The most pressing and immediate of these was the abolition of slavery. Upon the outcome of this demand depended the fate of all the others.

Thaddeus Stevens caught this revolutionary current at its full tide.

Because Stevens' tasks were so well done; because in a later day they were in part undone and must now be shouldered once more; because all that he stood for is today menaced by fascism—for these reasons the story of Thaddeus Stevens must be told again. To a generation that has heard of him little but vilification, defamation, and slander, he must be portrayed as he was, that he may take, in the estimate of sincere democrats, a place alongside Jefferson, Franklin, Paine, Jackson, and Lincoln.

Fighter for Free Schools

Thaddeus Stevens was born on April 14, 1792, in Danville, Vermont, the son of a shoemaker.⁵ He studied law, and in 1816

began his practice in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. In 1833 he was elected to the state legislature; there he became a pioneer in the movement for popular education, and in the fight against slavery.

The demand for universal free education was then embraced only by "extremists." Free schooling was not granted to the American people as a willing gift; it was the outcome of a long and bitter struggle, in which the driving forces were the frontier farmers, the early trade unions, and liberals like Horace Mann, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Thaddeus Stevens. The arguments which reactionaries now marshal against all measures of social security were in that day leveled against free public schools. Schools would increase taxes, destroy initiative, weaken moral fiber, give the poor ideas above their station, and render them unfit for work. They would still further separate church and state.

By supporting this movement for universal free education Stevens placed himself at once and irrevocably in the camp of the radicals. At meetings it was his custom to propose a toast: "Education—may the film be removed from the eyes of Pennsylvania and she learn to dread ignorance more than taxation."

The struggle over Pennsylvania's public school system came to a head in 1835. The previous legislature had passed an act establishing public schools for all; the wealthier taxpayers now organized a campaign of pressure and intimidation, demanding that the act be repealed. So overwhelming did legislative sentiment against free schooling now become that even its friends and supporters decided in conference that it was useless to oppose the repealer.

Stevens was absent from Harrisburg when the question came up, and could easily have evaded the issue. Characteristically, he hurried back to take his seat. Then, fully understanding that this action might end his political career, he rose in the legislature and courageously defended the principle of public schooling. He rejected the theory that the child's place is in industry, excoriated those who looked upon children "in no other light than as instruments of gain...valuable only in proportion to their annual earnings." He poured out his scorn upon the "hereditary wealth,

hereditary influence, and hereditary pride" which were indifferent to the needs of the masses for education.

Such was the power of Stevens' speech that the repealer was defeated. Instead, the legislature approved an amendment of precisely opposite intent, proposed by Stevens, actually increasing aid to the schools. The speech stands as a great oration in an era of great orators and brought Stevens the title of "Father of the Common School System of Pennsylvania."

Abolition Leader

It was the contest with slavery, and with its shadow of Jim-Crowism, that claimed the major share of Stevens' enormous and untiring energies.

It needed half a century of struggle and a four years' war to unseat the slaveholders in America. In the decades which separated Jackson from Lincoln, the slave power made and unmade Presidents, appointed foreign diplomats, packed the Supreme Court, and held the Senate in the hollow of its hand. It wrote the nation's laws, choked the development of industry, seized fresh lands for slavery by legislation, bribery, terrorism, and war. It kept four million Negro slaves in a status which Karl Marx described as "the meanest and most shameless form of man's enslaving recorded in the annals of history."⁶ It degraded the majority of eight million whites in the South to a condition only one degree removed from chattel bondage. The slavocracy robbed the American workers and farmers of as much of the frontier lands as it could steal, debased their incomes and working conditions by slave competition, stifled their organizations, obstructed the exercise of their most ordinary civil liberties. With open cynicism and disdain it threw into the discard every cherished principle of the American revolution. One of its foremost spokesmen and allies, Rufus Choate, a member of the banking aristocracy, sneered openly at the "glittering generalities" of the Declaration of Independence.

The slave-owning class was shrewd, ruthless, and resourceful. It persecuted its political opponents with ostracism, with prison,

and, on no few occasions, with death. A powerful mass movement, competent and courageous leaders, were needed to combat it.

For many decades this movement, these leaders, were little less maltreated in the North than in the South. It was in Boston that William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, was dragged through the streets with a rope about his body. It was in Alton, Illinois, that Elijah Lovejoy, another anti-slavery editor, was murdered. For industrial capitalism, the opponent and ultimately the destroyer of slavery, was only beginning the struggle that would lead it to dominance in the nation; as yet it exercised almost as little power in the governments of Northern states as it wielded in Washington or Richmond. It was the merchants, the bankers, the shippers—allies of slavery—who ruled Northern politics. And the consciences of these men were padded with Southern cotton.

Attorney for Fugitive Slaves

Stevens' first blows against the slave power were struck in defense of Negroes struggling in the net of the Fugitive-Slave Law of 1793. He never refused to act as attorney for escaped slaves, and he served them without compensation. It was seldom that he lost a case; but when he did, he bought his client's freedom from his own pocket.

A Pennsylvania convention met in 1835 to amend the state constitution. Here Stevens fought, against majority opposition, for the rights of the Negro people. He forced postponement of a motion which would have prevented the immigration of free Negroes into the state. At the end, he dissociated himself from the work of the convention because it had so altered the constitution as to restrict the suffrage to white men.

An Abolition preacher, the Reverend Jonathan Blanchard, was sent to Gettysburg in 1837 as a speaker for the American Anti-Slavery Society. Hearing that local advocates of slavery had cut the meeting short, Stevens sped from the state capital to Gettysburg and arranged a second meeting. He appealed to the right of free speech. To a judge who said: "We have no slaves. Why come

here to disturb our borough with a discussion of slavery?" Stevens replied with scorn: "So then human liberty is become a local question, and must be discussed only in particular localities!"⁷

Stevens moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1842. It was here that he was first nominated for Congress by the state Whigs, pledging himself to work for the exclusion of slavery from the new territories—a measure which was to be the keystone of the Republican platform in the following decade. He promised also to support the abolition of slavery wherever Congress had jurisdiction; this meant, in practice, in the newly acquired lands of the West and in the District of Columbia.

Stevens entered the House of Representatives in 1849, when the question of slavery had become the crux of the nation's life. Hitherto, Northern men in Congress, with few exceptions, cringed before the slaveholders. If on occasion they opposed a pro-slavery measure, they did so hesitantly, half-heartedly, apologetically. The slave power had thus arrogantly pressed forward from advantage to advantage, constantly encouraged by appeasement from the North. It had gained vast new lands through the Missouri Compromise,⁸ the annexation of Texas,⁹ the Mexican War.¹⁰ It was reaching out for infinitely more—for Mexico,¹¹ for Central America,¹² for Cuba.¹³

A New Voice in Congress

In his maiden speech to the House, on February 20, 1850, Stevens threw aside timidity and caution, moved to the offensive, and boldly denounced chattel slavery as an evil corrupting the entire nation. He exposed its ruinous effect upon the South's industrial development, her commerce, shipping, and agriculture; her standard of living, her education. He vowed that he would fight further concessions. He branded as "dough-faces" those Northern men—representatives of the commercial, shipping, and banking aristocracy—who willingly did the slaveholders' bidding. He closed by predicting that the day of domination by the slavery and its Northern tools was drawing to a close.¹⁴

In a broad sense, Stevens' speech marked the coming of age

of the new, revolutionary coalition of forces—industrial capitalists, workers, independent farmers, Negro people—which was to drive chattel slavery from the United States. The speech was printed in pamphlet form and circulated throughout the country. It made Stevens unquestioned commander of the anti-slavery forces in the House.

Soon afterwards Stevens' voice was heard again, this time on behalf of a free California. California was part of the territory wrested from Mexico by the slave-owners' war of 1846. It seemed destined for a slave state. Then came the accidental discovery of gold, and the great migration which populated the territory with workers, farmers, small businessmen. These vigorous migrants had no taste for the plantation system that would reduce them to the level of Southern poor whites. They voted overwhelmingly for a constitution prohibiting slavery and sought admission as a free state. Stevens pleaded California's cause.

He turned next to an attack on the proposed Fugitive-Slave Bill. As an able attorney as well as a fiery Abolitionist, he laid bare the illegality of its provisions. A Negro not yet proved to be a fugitive was to be denied *habeas corpus*, trial by jury, the right to testify in his own behalf and to summon witnesses. Stevens predicted that if the bill passed, the people of the North would render it unenforceable by disdaining to obey the provisions that made of them informers and slave-catchers.

It was in the course of this speech that Stevens effectively riddled a common pro-slavery argument:

"I was stating that gentlemen on this floor had repeatedly, during this discussion, asserted that slavery was a moral, political, and personal blessing; that the slave was free from care, contented, happy, fat and sleek. Comparisons have been instituted between slaves and laboring men, much to the advantage of the condition of slavery.... Well, if this be so, let us give all a chance to enjoy this blessing. Let the slaves who choose go free; and the free who choose, become slaves. If these gentlemen believe there is a word of truth in what they preach, the slaveholder need be under no apprehension that he will lack bondsmen."¹⁵

California was admitted as a free state, but the Fugitive-Slave Bill became law—a part of the Compromise of 1850. Stevens' prediction that the Fugitive-Slave Law would be nullified by mass resistance was brilliantly fulfilled. The Underground Railroad defiantly redoubled its activities, leading new thousands out of bondage. Efforts to enforce the law with Federal troops and bayonets turned casual, curious bystanders into shocked and angry converts to Abolition. Out of indignation against that law was born, in 1852, the most powerful of all anti-slavery writings, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The 'fifties were years of rapid-fire climaxes; the issue of slavery was nearing explosion and solution in war. Emboldened by the appeasement of 1850, the slave-owners' Congress, in 1854, passed the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which opened all territories to slave settlement under the deceitful slogan of "squatters' sovereignty."¹⁰ Then, in 1857, to assure the right of the slavocracy to unhindered expansion, Chief Justice Taney handed down the shameful Dred Scott decision, declaring that the Negro "had no rights that the white man was bound to respect," and wiping out as unconstitutional the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had set a territorial limit to slavery. There could be no distinction, said Justice Taney, between property in a slave and any other kind of property, and no one could be hindered from taking his property into any territory of the United States. Hereafter every foot of new land could be legally claimed as a slave plantation.

A New Political Party

But anti-slavery, too, was marching. With the West threatened, a swift realignment took place in political parties. The Whigs, torn between their pro-slavery and their anti-slavery following, attempted to evade the issue—and vanished from the scene. The Democratic Party became the perfected instrument of the slaveholders. A new party appeared, the Republican, organized in struggle against the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, and dedicated to the slogan: "No new foot of slave soil." The party sprang up simul-

taneously in a hundred farm communities, towns, and cities. Limiting its anti-slavery demand to a free West, it united on a common platform all who opposed the further encroachment of the plantation. The enforcement of that demand would spell the doom of the slave power. For the Southern landowner, his holdings quickly exhausted by slave cultivation, did no more than scratch the surface of the soil—and move on. The very nature of slavery prohibits the intensive cultivation which calls for trained labor and complex machinery. The slave system must expand or die.

Immediately upon passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, the slaveholders organized ruffian bands to invade Kansas and “elect” a pro-slavery government and constitution. To meet this aggression, Northern anti-slavery groups arranged for the emigration of freemen to the disputed territory. The soil of Kansas became a battleground on which slavery and freedom met for the first time in armed conflict.

Out in Illinois, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, contesting the Congressional election of 1858, engaged in debates which were followed with passionate interest far beyond the confines of the state; Lincoln was hammering out the national principles and platform of Republicanism.

Then, in 1859, John Brown, with a band of twenty-one men, tried to capture the Federal arsenal and armory at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, and begin the work of emancipation of the slaves. The raid failed; Brown and his men were captured and hanged; but the attempt stirred the conscience of the world.

Three days after the execution of John Brown, Stevens took his seat once more in the House of Representatives, in an atmosphere of almost unbearable tension. He had thrown in his lot unhesitatingly with the new Republican Party. Quick to sense the need for the political expression of anti-slavery, he was among seventeen persons who met in Lancaster, in 1855, to launch the local Republican organization. He was a delegate to the party’s first nominating convention in 1856, which put forward John C. Frémont for President. Stevens had left Congress in 1853; he returned to it in 1859, to remain until his death.

The Revolution of 1860

The year 1860 brought an event of world-wide revolutionary significance: the new Republican Party elected its Presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln. The slave power had lost its control over the national government and the destiny of the country. It turned to armed counter-revolution—to secession. It would retake power in the nation on its own terms and establish in the Western hemisphere a slave empire.

One of the first to measure the true aims and the vast implications of the secession movement was Thaddeus Stevens.

“Those who suppose,” he said satirically in Congress, “that the [Southern] leaders were actuated by a desire to redress grievances, either real or fancied, greatly mistake the real object of the traitors. They have rebelled...to establish a slave oligarchy which would repudiate the odious doctrine of the Declaration of Independence, and justify the establishment of an empire admitting the principle of king, lords, and slaves... So long as the reins of Government could be held by Southern hands, and the influence of the administration be given to perpetuate and extend human bondage, they deemed it prudent to remain in the Union, receive its benefits, and hold its offices. But they saw that the regular march of civilization, wealth, and population was fast wresting power from the South and giving it to the North. They diligently prepared themselves for rebellion against the Constitution when they could no longer rule under it.”¹⁷

In the four months between Lincoln's election on November 6, 1860, and the shot on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, with the Confederacy in rapid formation and the nation on the verge of war, the “dough-faces” continued to draft compromises. Northern Senators and Representatives proposed that the Constitution be so amended as to secure slavery forever in the states where it existed; they proposed that no amendment regarding slavery become part of the Constitution unless every state ratified it; they proposed a yet more stringent Fugitive-Slave Law.

In the President's seat, completing the last months of his term, was the pliant James Buchanan, who had secretly connived with the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott decision,¹⁸ and who was now secretly conniving with the Confederacy, abetting its treason from the White House.

"It became evident," Stevens said later, "that Mr. Buchanan was to be the last of Southern Presidents, and his Cabinet being almost wholly devoted to the interests of slavery, set themselves boldly at work to weaken the North and strengthen the South. They transferred most of the best weapons of war from the North, where they were manufactured, to the South, where they could be readily seized. They plunged the nation into a heavy debt in time of peace. When the Treasury was bare of cash they robbed it of millions of bonds, and whatever else they could lay hands on. . . . They had reduced our Navy to an un-serviceable condition, or dispersed it to the furthest oceans. Our little Army was on the Pacific coast [or] sequestered in Utah."¹⁹

Against Appeasement

Against the cowardly offers of new appeasement and betrayal, two political figures stood out above all: Abraham Lincoln and Thaddeus Stevens. President-elect Lincoln wrote his managers in Chicago: "Entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the extension of slavery." Later he said: "There is one point . . . I can never surrender—that which was the main issue of the Presidential canvass and decided at the late election, concerning the extension of slavery in the Territories."²⁰

Stevens, now the acknowledged leader of the Republicans in the House, declared:

"I have no hope that concession, humiliation, and compromise can have any effect whatever. . . . The North has taken from them [the slaveholders] the power of the Government, which they have held so long. According to the strictest forms and principles of the Constitution, they have elected the man

of their choice President of the United States. No violence was used, no malpractice is charged; but the American people dared to disobey the commands of slavery; and this is proclaimed as just cause of secession and civil war. Sir, has it come to this? Cannot the people of the United States choose whom they please President, without stirring up rebellion, and requiring humiliation, concessions and compromises to appease the insurgents? Sir, I would take no steps to propitiate such a feeling. Rather than show repentance for the election of Mr. Lincoln, let me cease to exist."²¹

Stevens called for the immediate and forcible suppression of the traitors; he demanded that the national government collect the Federal revenue from the South as usual, and hold the Federal fortifications; all vessels should be prevented from leaving or entering the Southern ports, to keep the South from laying in supplies.

Lincoln took office. What would be his course? The answer came at once: Lincoln would stand by the Republican platform, bar the way to the extension of slavery, hold and retake the Federal forts in the South. To the distress of the appeasers, he sent aid to the besieged garrison at Fort Sumter. The slave-owners knew at last that compromise was at an end. They fired the shot that opened the Civil War.

On July 4, 1861, Congress met in extraordinary session. Stevens became chairman of the most important House body, the Ways and Means Committee. Brushing aside hair-splitting and technicalities, designed only to delay action and pave the way for the counter-revolution, Stevens guided through Congress the necessary measures to supply Lincoln with men and money. He ridiculed the faint-hearted; denounced and exposed the traitors, the Copperheads,²² the "fifth column" of the Civil War.

Towards Emancipation

From the outset of the conflict, Stevens thundered emancipation. He called on the nation to free the slaves and arm them

against their masters. As early as December, 1861—more than a year before the Emancipation Proclamation—Stevens introduced into Congress a resolution requesting the President to declare the slaves free if they would leave their masters.

“When you have rescued an oppressed people,” he pleaded in Congress, “from the oppression of the enemy, by what principle of the law of nations, by what principle of philanthropy, can you return him to the bondage from which you have delivered him, and rivet again the chains you have once broken? ... I do not believe that the free people of the North will stand by and see their sons slaughtered by thousands and tens of thousands by rebels, with arms in their hands, and forbear to call upon their enemies, to be our friends, and help us in subduing them.”²³

Months later he continued his plea:

“Although the black man never lifts a weapon, he is really the mainstay of the war. ... Prejudice may be shocked, weak nerves may tremble, but they must hear and adopt it. Those who now furnish the means of war, but who are the natural enemies of slaveholders, must be made our allies. Universal emancipation must be proclaimed to all. ... The sympathizer with treason would raise an outcry about the horrors of servile insurrection. ... Which is more to be abhorred, a rebellion of slaves fighting for their liberty, or a rebellion of freemen fighting to murder the nation? ... What sickly loyalty and inconsistency is that which would allow lawless insurgents to murder a hundred thousand freemen, rather than liberate an oppressed people to prevent it? ... We have put a sword into one hand of our generals and shackles into the other. Freemen are not inspired by such mingled music. Let the people know that this Government is fighting not only to enforce a sacred compact, but to carry out to final perfection the principles of the Declaration of Independence ... and the blood of every freeman would boil with enthusiasm, and his nerves be strengthened in this holy warfare. Give him the sword in one hand, and the book

of freedom in the other, and he will soon sweep despotism and rebellion from every corner of this continent. . . . The occasion is forced upon us, and the invitation presented to strike the chains from four millions of human beings, and create them *men*; to extinguish slavery on this whole continent.”²⁴

Slowly this urging was heeded. The fervor of Stevens, Douglass, Garrison, Phillips, Sumner, and scores of other Negro and white leaders; the irresistible pressure of a fast-growing and increasingly articulate popular movement; the hopes and support of the peoples abroad; the stark necessities of war for man-power and for morale—these overpowered in the end the pleading of Copperheads and appeasers. With the first hesitant steps taken, the pace quickened. In the space of a year, Congress made into law a dozen measures, which a decade before had seemed to most a pious but vain wish. First, Congress put an end to slavery in the District of Columbia. It forbade the army to return fugitives to their masters, thus repudiating the policy of General George B. McClellan, who represented Copperheadism on the field of battle; it declared free the slaves of rebels coming into government territory. Slavery was abolished in all territories and future territories of the United States, expunging the shame of the Dred Scott decision. The independent Negro republics of Haiti and Liberia were recognized. Steps were taken which at long last wiped out the illegal but none the less flourishing international slave trade. Congress authorized the President to receive Negroes into the armed forces—and two hundred thousand black soldiers came forward. And finally, on September 22, Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that on January 1, 1863, “all persons held as slaves . . . shall be then, thenceforward and forever free.”

Fighting the Profiteers

As Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, which then bore also the functions now delegated to the Appropriations Committee, Stevens was charged with the task of raising the immense

funds needed to carry on the war. He was intensely concerned lest the burden be shifted to those sections of the people least able to carry it. Here, however, he encountered the pro-slavery sentiments of the bankers, who had opposed the war from the beginning, had little faith in the outcome, and were determined to take no risks for the Union. The majority of manufacturers, also, though in sympathy with the war, were bent on lining their pockets through army contracts and through the rising cost of living. The war profiteers—J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt and others— withheld the necessities of life from the people and the necessities of war from the government until they were satisfied with the profits. Huge fortunes were amassed by selling to the army and navy unseaworthy ships, useless rifles, crippled horses, shoddy uniforms and blankets, car-loads of sugar that were half sand.²⁵ During the war, living costs rose by more than 100 per cent, with wages lagging so far behind that real wages fell to two-thirds of the 1860 level.

To meet its war needs, the government issued \$400,000,000 of greenbacks. It was Stevens' proposal that this money be made legal tender for all purposes. At once a powerful bankers' lobby descended on Washington to force the presentation of an amendment: that the greenbacks be legal tender for every purpose *except* the payment to bankers of interest on government loans. Soldiers could be paid with greenbacks; bankers must have gold. As Stevens expressed it: "...a doleful sound came up from the caverns of bullion brokers, and from the saloons of the associated banks."²⁶ He contemptuously exposed the selfishness of the proposal:

"Gentlemen are clamorous in favor of those who have debts due them, lest the debtor should the more easily pay his debt. I do not much sympathize with such importunate money-lenders...but while these men have agonized bowels for the rich man's case, they have no pity for the poor widow, the suffering soldier, the wounded martyr to his country's good, who must receive these notes without legal tender, or nothing; and who must give half of it to the Shylocks to get the neces-

saries of life. Sir, I wish no injury to any . . . but if any must lose, let it not be the soldier, the mechanic, the laborer, and the farmer." 27

On this occasion Stevens fought a losing battle. The bankers' amendment passed, making the government notes receivable for "all claims and demands against the United States of whatever kind except for interest on bonds and notes, which shall be paid in coin."

The Tasks of Reconstruction

With the armed struggle ended, there remained the task of reconstructing the former slave states as democracies and Stevens ceaselessly pursued this democratic aim. He has been charged with harshness towards the leading Confederates, but it was only the harshness which revolution must apply to counter-revolution. He knew well what changes must be achieved in the South if the plantation owners were not to steal back into power: there must be full democratic rights for the masses, complete democracy for the Negro people, disfranchisement of leading Confederates, division of the great estates among the tillers of the soil.

In 1865, Lincoln had been assassinated, the assassination a carefully matured plot of Southern slaveholders and Northern Copperheads. In the Presidential chair sat a new-found friend of the Bourbons, Andrew Johnson. Johnson represented sections of the petty-bourgeoisie now beginning their struggle with big capital. This petty-bourgeoisie sought allies that it might prolong its own political life and found them in the ex-slaveholders, the enemy of its enemy. Johnson became the tool of the defeated aristocracy of the South.²⁸

The President's first step was to grant amnesty and pardon to almost all Confederates, with restoration of all rights of property except in slaves. But this meant to restore to the plantation owners their vast lands. Some of these lands had already been divided among the freedmen, who had begun to work the fields, had

instituted a system of schools and self-government. Once in possession of the plantations, the former slave-owners would find ways to restore slavery in all but name.

A second Presidential decree ordered that state conventions be held in the South. Those persons might vote who had been eligible for the suffrage by the laws of 1860. But to whom had the South granted the ballot in 1860? Certainly not to the Negroes. Certainly, also, not to the majority of the poorer whites.

Reaction in the South

The state conventions passed the shameful "black codes," forbidding Negroes to own land, to change their place of work, to testify against whites, to intermarry, to carry arms. Stringent vagrancy and apprenticeship laws were framed to bind the freedmen to forced labor on the plantations. A series of "sedition" acts were directed against joint action by Negroes and whites.²⁹ Jim-Crow assembly and transportation laws were enacted. Mississippi refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, and showed the full intent of the "black codes" by declaring all laws of chattel slavery again in full force "except so far as the mode and manner of trial and punishment has been changed or altered by law."

The Bourbon South sent as its representatives to the Senate and the House, in December, 1865, the vice-president of the Confederacy, four Confederate generals, five Confederate colonels, six Confederate cabinet officers, and 58 Confederate Congressmen. Many a delegate to the Southern state conventions sat through the proceedings in rebel uniform.

The Ku Klux Klan, armed terrorist band of the counter-revolution, rode through the South to intimidate, to burn, to cripple, and to murder in the cause of the plantation masters.

The revolution, achieved in four years of battles, was being brazenly undone in the legislative halls. The decisions of war were being impudently reversed. If the people's victory was to be saved, it was imperative that the direction of Reconstruction be taken from the ex-slaveholders and from President Johnson, and

placed in the hands of the Radical Republicans in Congress, the Negro people, and the masses of whites.

Stevens moved the appointment of a Joint Committee of fifteen members, nine from the House, six from the Senate, to deal with all problems involving the reconstruction of the former Confederate states. Congress approved and Stevens became House chairman of the committee. In speeches and in legislation, he made known his policy. He declared that the United States was not, as some would have it, a white man's government.

"The whole Copperhead party," he said, "pandering to the lowest prejudices of the ignorant, repeat the cuckoo cry, 'This is the white man's Government.' Demagogues of all parties, even some high in authority, gravely shout, 'This is the white man's Government.' What is implied by this? That one race of men are to have the exclusive right forever to rule this nation, and to exercise all sovereignty, while all other races and nations and colors are to be their subjects, and have no voice in making the laws and choosing the rulers by whom they are to be governed. Wherein does this differ from slavery except in degree? Does not this contradict all the distinctive principles of the Declaration of Independence? ... Our fathers repudiated the whole doctrine of the legal superiority of families or races and proclaimed the equality of man before the law.... They were prevented by slavery from perfecting the superstructure whose foundation they had thus broadly laid... they consented to wait, but never relinquished the idea of its final completion.... It is our duty to complete their work.... This is not a 'white man's Government.'... To say so is political blasphemy, for it violates the fundamental principles of our gospel of liberty. This is man's Government, the Government of all men alike. ... Equal rights to all the privileges of the Government is innate in every immortal being, no matter what the shape or color of the tabernacle which it inhabits."³⁰

The Negro masses were moving swiftly to the same purpose. In the summer and fall of 1865, Negro people's conventions, calling for a halt to Johnsonian reaction, met in every Southern state;

they demanded land, education, full civil and political rights, the abolition of Jim-Crowism, and repeal of the "black codes." A delegation led by Frederick Douglass met with Johnson, who evaded the issue. The delegation appealed to the country.

The Negroes knew their allies in Congress. The North Carolina Freedmen's Convention, meeting in Raleigh in September, 1865, pledged its support to Stevens and his colleagues in "their efforts to obtain equal political rights for all men."

The Fight for Negro Suffrage

To secure the suffrage for the Negro people was a battle with which Stevens occupied his last years. "They must have the ballot," he said, "or they will continue virtually to be slaves." The Constitution provided that representation in the House be based on population. In the era of slavery, the Southern states counted three-fifths of their slaves in the apportionment, basing themselves on one of the pro-slavery compromises in the original federal Constitution.³¹ Even after emancipation, the rebel states lost nothing of representation though they disfranchised large sections of the people. Rather the opposite. Precisely because the slaves had been freed, the number of Southern representatives would now be increased rather than decreased; not three-fifths, but now five-fifths of the Negroes could be counted.

Stevens proposed to make voters rather than population the basis of House representation. Had this proposal been adopted, it would have aided the struggle for enfranchisement not only of the Negro people, but of other sections of the population as well, some of whom still lack the ballot: soldiers and sailors, migratory workers, poor whites of the South, Orientals.

But in this, Stevens was unsuccessful. The Fourteenth Amendment was a compromise. It declared, first, that all persons born or naturalized in the United States are citizens of the state and of the nation; as such they are entitled to all the privileges and immunities of citizens; no state may deprive them of life, liberty, or property without due process of law. The second section of

the amendment apportioned representatives among the states according to numbers, as before, but provided a decrease in representation for disfranchisement of male citizens.²²

The Amendment, ratified in 1868, was a partial victory. Its provisions—when backed by organization and pressure—have helped in freeing the Scottsboro boys, Angelo Herndon, and scores of others. Were its second section adhered to, the Southern states would have lost, in 1940, sixty-five of their seventy-eight Congressmen. Poll taxes, “literacy” tests, lily-white primaries, and ungloved terror still disfranchise three-fifths of the Southern people.

In the Congressional elections of 1866, the voters were aware that they were to choose between two divergent paths of Reconstruction—the progressive plan associated with Stevens, and the reactionary plan of President Johnson and the former slaveholders. They sent to the House and Senate an overwhelming majority of “Stevens men.” In such a Congress, Johnson’s veto would be powerless.

With this clear mandate from the people, Stevens, now very old and sick, pressed rapidly ahead with his measures. He summarized the tasks accomplished and the vast program still to be achieved.

“We have broken the shackles of four million slaves,” he said. “We have imposed upon them the privilege of fighting our battles, of dying in defense of freedom, of bearing their equal portion of taxes, but where have we given them the privilege of ever participating in the formation of the laws of the Government of their native land? By what civil weapon have we enabled them to defend themselves against oppression and injustice? Call you this liberty? Call you this a Republic, where four millions are subjects, but not citizens? Then Persia with her kings and satraps was free; then Turkey is free! Their subjects had liberty of motion and of labor, but the laws were made without and against their will.... Think not I would slander my native land: I would reform it. Twenty years ago

I denounced it as a despotism. Then, twenty million white men enchained four million black men. I pronounce it no nearer a true republic now when twenty-five million of a privileged class exclude five million from all participation in the rights of government.”³³

Reconstruction Acts of Congress

On February 6, 1867, Stevens reported out of his committee a bill he had drafted, providing for martial law in the South to sweep away the usurpations of the ex-slaveholders. The bill disregarded state lines and divided the territory of the Confederacy into five military districts, under command of the Union army. The Southern states were to call new constitutional conventions; no state constitution would be approved “which denies to any citizen any rights, privileges or immunities which are granted to any other citizens in the States. All laws shall be impartial.”

Johnson vetoed the bill; the House overrode the veto by 136 to 43.

A Federal Civil Rights Act, introduced by Senator Trumbull and pressed through the House by Stevens, was also passed. This act declared that “there shall be no discrimination in the civil rights or immunities among the citizens of any State or Territory of the United States, on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude; but the inhabitant of every race and color shall have the same right to make and enforce contracts, to sue . . . give evidence, to inherit, hold and convey real and personal property, and to full and equal benefits of all laws.” Johnson vetoed this bill too—the Johnsonian veto had by now become almost automatic—and again Congress overrode the veto.

Stevens had hoped to embody universal suffrage in the Constitution; the compromise of the Fourteenth Amendment failed to satisfy him. He now made another effort and submitted a resolution which later became the basis for the Fifteenth Amendment, prohibiting disfranchisement by the United States or the states because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. That amendment, also, awaits enforcement.

The Land-Division Bill

Stevens was realist enough to know that civil and political rights meant little without jobs, land, bread, and shelter. He introduced into Congress in March, 1867, a bill to confiscate the great landed estates of the leading Confederates and divide them among the tillers of the soil. Each freedman would receive forty acres and \$50 for a homestead. Holdings under two hundred acres would remain untouched.

"It is revolutionary, they say," remarked Stevens in explaining his land-division scheme to a meeting in Lancaster. "This plan would, no doubt, work a radical reorganization in Southern institutions, habits, and manners. It is intended to revolutionize their principles and feelings. This may startle feeble minds and shake weak nerves. So do all great improvements in the political and moral world.... The Southern states have been despotisms, not governments of the people. It is impossible that any practical equality of rights can exist where a few thousand men monopolize the whole landed property.... How can republican institutions, free schools, free churches, free social intercourse, exist in a mingled community of nabobs and serfs, of the owners of twenty-thousand acre manors with lordly palaces, and the occupants of narrow huts?"²⁴

The slogan of "forty acres" became the rallying cry of the Negro people of the Black Belt in their revolutionary struggle against Bourbon restoration. But Stevens' plan did not carry; and because it did not, because the plantation system lived on, the black man was sentenced to the semi-slavery of share-cropping and peonage.

Meanwhile, Johnson had continued his policy of assisting the slaveholders to reverse the outcome of the war. He not only vetoed every legislative act designed to enforce democracy in the South; he went further and removed officials who sympathized with the program of Congress. To curb him, Stevens succeeded in having Congress pass a Tenure-of-Office Act, which forbade the President to remove office-holders unless the Senate agreed.

In spite of the Act, Johnson suspended Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War, a member of the Radical group.

Impeachment of Johnson

Then, for the first time in the country's history, impeachment was invoked in the House. The impeachment articles were brought to the Senate for trial, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court presiding. The case opened on March 13, 1867.

By a majority of one vote, the President was acquitted. Six months later came the Presidential elections. Johnson was not a candidate and Grant was elected to carry out the Radical Republican policy. There followed the era of Radical Reconstruction, in which Negro and white legislatures—the so-called "Black Parliaments"—brought to the South for the first time universal manhood suffrage, free public education, and equal political, civil, and legal rights for all citizens.

But Stevens did not live to see even this brief era of democracy in the South. He died on August 11, 1868, just before his labors bore their finest fruit.

The death of the Old Commoner brought a tremendous outpouring of Negro and white to do him homage. Negro soldiers mounted guard over his coffin, and the body was carried to the capitol by five Negro and three white pall-bearers. He was buried in Lancaster, in Schreiner's Cemetery—an unpretentious place open to all. Shortly before his death, Stevens had discovered that the burial plot he had at first chosen drew the color line, and he disposed of it. His will, endowing a home for orphans, stipulated that "no preference shall be shown on account of race or color in admission or treatment. . . . All the inmates shall be educated in the same classes and fed at the same table."

Stevens was famed for his wit; he made of it a political weapon that his enemies learned to dread. Of a treatise in praise of slavery, written by a college professor, Stevens remarked that it contained "a very glowing eulogy on the Honorable Daniel Webster and rather a faint one on the Bible."³⁵ When the Fugitive-Slave Bill of 1850 was to be voted, many timid Northern Congressmen

absented themselves; they feared the wrath of their constituents if they favored the bill, and the wrath of the omnipotent slave power if they opposed it. After the result was announced, Stevens drily suggested that the speaker send a page to notify Northern members the Fugitive-Slave Bill had been disposed of and they might now come back into the hall.

Once Stevens, in a discussion with Lincoln, pointed out that Simon Cameron, Secretary of War, was making of his department a center of corruption and swindling for war-contractors. "Why, Mr. Stevens," said Lincoln, "you don't think the Secretary would steal, do you?" Stevens answered: "Well, Mr. President, I don't think he would steal a red-hot stove." Cameron heard the story and was angered. Stevens went promptly to Lincoln, and announced that he had heard Cameron wanted him to retract. "I will now do so," stated Stevens. "I believe I told you that I didn't think he would steal a red-hot stove. I now take that back."³⁶

Internationalist

In every field in which he labored, Stevens was a bold pioneer. To a woman suffrage delegation which visited him in the summer of 1867, he gave encouragement and urged the women to complete their work. He denounced angrily the efforts of manufacturers to reduce wages to the level of Europe. Thus in 1852 he spoke vigorously against the demand:

"...to strike off from the price paid American operatives the difference between what they now receive, and what is paid in Europe to similar laborers. Let us for a moment," he said, "look at its effect. The common price paid laborers in Europe is one shilling sterling a day... I find wages on the Continent are eight cents. In order to get cheap labor, they employ women as well as men in the most laborious work... In consequence of low prices, the laboring classes have scarcely enough to feed and clothe them. They live on poor fare, are meanly clad, and have nothing to bestow on the education of their children."³⁷

Stevens' foreign policy matched his crusade for democracy at home, for he was sincerely an internationalist. Thus he was one of the first Americans to welcome publicly the liberation of the serfs in Russia in 1861. He gave consistent encouragement to the republican forces in Mexico under the leadership of Benito Juarez. In 1866, when the Juarez government was still contending against the forces of the usurper Maximilian, puppet of Napoleon III, Stevens offered a resolution in the House of Representatives "that the Committee on Foreign Affairs inquire into the propriety of a loan to the republic of Mexico of twenty million dollars to enable the said republic to prevent the overthrow of its government and the establishment of a monarchical government on the continent of North America." Speaking for the resolution, he then said:

"It is very clear that without such foreign aid, republicanism in Mexico must be crushed out and a monarchy established. Juarez has persevered with a courage and fortitude unparalleled in modern history. But . . . the resources of that distracted country must become exhausted. . . . Unless a foreign loan can be procured, I do not see how any respectable army can be kept on foot. . . . If it should provoke a war with Maximilian, I suppose no one would be much alarmed; it would give the great Republic an opportunity to vindicate her honor."³⁸

Stevens' whole life was a resolute and unwavering crusade for democracy. With monotonous uniformity historians have called him fanatic. One of Stevens' own statements is the answer to that charge: "There can be no fanaticism, however high the enthusiasm, however warm the zeal, in the cause of rational, universal liberty."³⁹

In an impromptu speech to his Lancaster constituents in the fall of 1866, the Great Commoner summed up his life's aim: "The Goddess of Liberty is represented in ancient statues as a very nice little goddess, but very small. I want her to grow—to put on the habiliments of mature age—until she can embrace within her folds every nation and every tribe and every human being within God's canopy."⁴⁰

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6. *New York Daily Tribune*, Nov. 7, 1861. (See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, p. 24, International Publishers, New York, 1927.)
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8. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 provided for the admission of Missouri with slavery, of Maine without slavery, and prohibited slavery in other states that might be carved from the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, wherever these states lay north of latitude $36^{\circ} 30'$. By this compromise, the slave power gained three additional slave states—Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana. That portion of the compromise prohibiting slavery north of $36^{\circ} 30'$ was later abrogated by the Kansas-Nebraska Bill and by the Dred Scott decision.
9. Texas was detached from Mexico by a slave-owners' revolt engineered in 1836, after a period in which Americans had established slavery illegally in considerable Texas territory, contrary to the provisions of the Mexican constitution. The incident which led to the revolt was Mexico's attempt to collect her customs duties in Texas. Texas was annexed to the United States in 1845.
10. In order to gain still more territory from Mexico after the annexation of Texas, the Polk administration in 1846 picked a boundary dispute and entered upon a two-years war, resulting in the cession from Mexico of eight hundred thousand square miles of land.
11. In the late 1850's, emigrant aid societies were established in order to settle portions of Mexico, with a view to ultimate absorption of all

- or a part of the country. President Buchanan, in 1858, recommended to Congress that the United States assume a temporary protectorate over Sonora and Chihuahua.
12. The 1850's witnessed filibustering expeditions against Nicaragua, with the aim of providing slavery with new lands. One of the filibusterers, William Walker, made himself master of Granada and legalized slavery there, but his rule was overthrown in 1857 by a coalition of Central American states.
 13. An effort to obtain Cuba for the United States was made in 1854, when the American ambassadors to Spain, France, and England—all pro-slavery men—met in Ostend and issued the document which became known as the Ostend Manifesto. This manifesto offered to purchase Cuba from Spain, but threatened to seize the island forcibly in case Spain refused to sell it.
 14. *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, Feb. 20, 1850, pp. 141-43.
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 18. Confidential letters which have since come to light show that the Southern members of the court were in constant communication, in 1856 and 1857, with the, then, incoming President, Buchanan, on the progress of the Dred Scott case; that the more aggressive of the pro-slavery justices used the president-elect to whip up their colleagues. Buchanan's pretense, in his inaugural address, that he was ignorant of the nature of the forthcoming decision, was a lie uttered in the first hour of his administration.
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