

Old 'Thad'

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In the years following the Civil War, questions over the future of the Union loomed in the government, state, press, and home. One thing, however, was for certain: the North had prevailed. The South, now in ruins, was left in the hands of the Union, entrusted with the responsibility of rebuilding the shattered nation. All three branches of government amalgamated in order to produce an effective and expedited method to restore the country. President Abraham Lincoln, a moderate Republican, proposed more lenient programs like the “Ten Percent Plan,” but his submissions for Reconstruction did not go unopposed in Congress.<sup>1</sup> The Radical Republicans, a minority faction of politicians, promoted harsher alternatives. They wanted to punish the Southerners who started the war and protect free blacks with further legislation. In the House of Representatives, Thaddeus Stevens led the Radical Republicans before and after the Civil War. Throughout his career, Thaddeus Stevens’ radical policies defined a political movement that was not always ready for reform, and his views were often too advanced for his moderate contemporaries.

By the time of his death in 1868, Stevens’ reputation in Congress was legendary. In July 1866, the journal, *Galaxy*, truthfully named him the “boldest and coarsest of the great managers of Congress.”<sup>2</sup> In the progression of seventy-six years, “Old ‘Thad,’” as he was affectionately called, had become a major contender in American politics. Thaddeus Stevens was born on April 4, 1792 to Joshua Stevens and Sarah Morrill. His father, a land surveyor and cobbler, abandoned the family when he was still a child.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> John Arthur Garraty, and Mark C. Carnes, *American National Biography*, vol. 20, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 714.

<sup>3</sup> Garraty, 711.

Stevens was born with a clubbed foot, which impaired his mobility for his entire life.<sup>4</sup> This defect forced Stevens to focus on his studies, and gave him a lifelong sympathy for the unfortunate. When he was fifteen years old, his mother moved the family to Peacham, Vermont.<sup>5</sup> Stevens would later reflect: “She worked day and night to educate me. I was feeble and lame in youth, and as I could not work on the farm, she concluded to give me an education.”<sup>6</sup> Stevens was clearly grateful for his mother’s sacrifice, as it was the stepping-stone for his later success. His mother also greatly influenced his moral example as a result of her devotion to the Baptist faith.

Growing up in Vermont also impressed upon the young Stevens the importance of self-improvement, solemnity, and social respect. This New English respectability was the cornerstone of his ideals. Throughout his life, these traits, combined with his “republican” civil principles, formed his unique social philosophy and directed many of his actions. These civil principles emphasized freedom, equality, and opposition to corruption. Thaddeus Stevens graduated from Dartmouth College in 1814 and moved to York, Pennsylvania where he passed the bar exam. He then moved to Gettysburg, where he was reelected five times to the Gettysburg Council, which marked his standing as a community leader.<sup>7</sup>

It was in Pennsylvania that Thaddeus Stevens formed his lifelong party associations and political ideals. Stevens quickly aligned himself with the Antimason party, a faction devoted to anticonspiracy and antiexclusivity. The Masons are a complex organization and the world’s oldest and largest fraternity, originating in the late 1600s. Many members of the government were Freemasons. Even President Andrew Jackson

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<sup>4</sup> "Old 'Thad' Stevens," The Washington Post, September 2, 1900, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Garraty, 711.

<sup>6</sup> Congressional Globe, 40<sup>th</sup> Congress, 3<sup>rd</sup> Session, 129-130

<sup>7</sup> Garraty, 712.

was the Grand Master of the Masonic Grand Lodge of Tennessee.<sup>8</sup> Objections to the Masons came to the forefront of American politics and to Stevens on September 12, 1826. William Morgan, a member of New York's Masonic order, vanished after he had threatened to expose Masonic secrets in a book he was writing. An investigation into his disappearance in the Niagara frontier began, but it was soon believed that Masons in politics were hindering efforts. This angered many politicians, like President John Quincy Adams, Chief Justice John Marshall, and Thaddeus Stevens. Morgan's disappearance hurtled many politicians into the developing party. Anti-Masons promoted reason, liberty, and the enlightenment—thus making the elusive Masonry a fakery and mystery to them.<sup>9</sup> Stevens' absorption with a disciplined society again has its roots in his strict upbringing and duel philosophy.

In 1833, Thaddeus Stevens was elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Politically, the Antimasons allied themselves with the Whig party, which shared their support for internal improvements, banking, and educational reform. In this role, he became known for his opposition to the nullification of the state's public education statute.<sup>10</sup> His support stemmed from his New England ideals and his mother's sacrifice to give him an education as a child. Vermont, his home state, was one of the first areas to open a schoolhouse. In one debate he wittingly declared, "If a bill had been brought in the House to improve the breed of *hogs*, there would have been no opposition, but when a measure was brought forward to improve the breed of *men*, the scales were

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<sup>8</sup> S. Brent Morris. The Complete Idiot's Guide to Freemasonry. (New York: Alpha Books, 2006), 318.

<sup>9</sup> Milton Meltzer. Thaddeus Stevens and the Fight for Negro Rights. (New York: Crowell, 1967), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Garraty, 712.

produced and the dollars were brought in.”<sup>11</sup> He could not understand why the Pennsylvanian government was against spending money to better society. Additionally, he chaired a zealous committee to probe “the evils of Masonry.” He proposed a bill to repress *all* secret societies. He subpoenaed eminent Masons to testify in hearings, but they refused to be sworn in because they felt that his committee was violating their constitutional rights.<sup>12</sup> As a result, even the press began to label him “the Arch Priest of Antimasonry.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, members of the Anti-Mason party began to feel he was taking the situation too far, and the House decided to drop the investigation and release the witnesses. Interestingly, he was attacking the society in order to make men more equal and denounce their lack of democracy, but he was pushing for legislation to counter their free association and free speech.<sup>14</sup> Once again, Thaddeus Stevens’ views proved too revolutionary for even his own associates when he confused probity with prejudice.

Although Stevens failed to get reelected to the legislature in 1836, he was a delegate to the Pennsylvania constitutional convention in 1837. It convened in response to demands for amendments to the Constitution.<sup>15</sup> One of the main goals of the convention was to change the “broad appointive powers of the governor.”<sup>16</sup> Thaddeus Stevens took this opportunity to support internal improvements and banking for the state.<sup>17</sup> Within a short period of time, he had become the designated leader of the meeting

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<sup>11</sup> Meltzer, 33.

<sup>12</sup> Meltzer, 30.

<sup>13</sup> Garraty, 712.

<sup>14</sup> Meltzer, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Pennsylvania State Archives. 16 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/DAM/rg/rg5.htm>>.

<sup>16</sup> Ann Liivak. "Pennsylvania's Constitutions and the Amendment Process." Jenkins. 27 Mar. 2000. 16 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.jenkinslaw.org/collection/researchguides/publications/ann-constitutions.php>>.

<sup>17</sup> Garraty, 712.

because of the combined votes from the Whigs and the Anti-Masons. He quickly undermined his authority, however, when he tried to restore an unpopular constitutional amendment that banned secret societies. He also proposed to cut the representation of cities to six in the House, but the majority of Whigs who supported him came from Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. He felt that the growing cities might dominate state politics. When he tried to undermine their power, the Whigs turned against him.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, he was abhorred by the Democrats' proposal to loosen voting qualifications and eliminate suffrage for Pennsylvania's free black population. Upon denouncing the Democrats, he also demanded further protections for the free black citizens against Southern slave hunters.<sup>19</sup> Some blacks could vote in select places in Pennsylvania, but many were fearful to do so. While the convention was in session, some Democratic candidates claimed they had lost their election because the African Americans voted for another candidate. In one court, a county judge decided that blacks could not vote because they were "inferior and degraded."<sup>20</sup> Politically, many delegates were opposed to granting blacks the right to vote. In one speech Thaddeus Stevens boomed, "I wish that I were the owner of every Southern slave, that I might cast off the shackles from their limbs, and witness the rapture which would excite them in the first dance of their freedom."<sup>21</sup> Stevens's views clearly stood out from those of other Pennsylvanians. To him, emancipation was not just a possibility—it was an obsession. He was also against granting suffrage to "propertyless" whites. This was surprising because he himself had risen from poverty, yet he was prejudiced against other less fortunate Americans. He felt that anyone could achieve wealth and position without government

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<sup>18</sup> Meltzer, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Garraty, 712.

<sup>20</sup> Meltzer, 57.

<sup>21</sup> Fawn Brodie. Thaddeus Stevens, Scourge of the South. (New York: Norton, 1959), 63.

aid. Naturally, he lost this fight as well as the others.<sup>22</sup> In the end, Stevens spurned the constitution because it explicitly denied blacks the right to vote.<sup>23</sup>

When the Antimason party dissolved from a lack of voter support, Thaddeus Stevens found himself in another personal struggle. As the issue of slavery was beginning to become a large topic of discussion, he discovered that his only logical alternative would be to join the Whig party. On the other hand, he felt that the Whig party was too conservative compared to his own principles. In the end, Stevens chose to join the Whigs, just in time for the 1848 elections, where he was voted into the United States House of Representatives.<sup>24</sup> Stevens' first two terms in Congress were preoccupied with his opposition to the "Slave Power," a phrase used to describe the political power of slaveholders in the South. He felt that these Southern politicians and slave owners wanted to bring slavery to the entire nation. He realized that prohibiting slavery from the new territories would help in eliminating slavery forever.

Because of these beliefs, Stevens was antagonistic to the Compromise of 1850. In concessions to the South, the Compromise allowed for a stricter Fugitive Slave Act, popular sovereignty in New Mexico and Utah, and kept slavery, but not the slave trade, in Washington, DC. Under popular sovereignty, the citizens of a territory could decide if it would become a slave territory. Stevens also was adamantly opposed to the Fugitive Slave Law, where any escaped slave would need to be returned to their rightful owner.<sup>25</sup> In one debate he argued, "It is a principle of the common law...that by the *general law*, man is not the subject of property...and that, wherever the slave is beyond the

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<sup>22</sup> Meltzer, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Garraty, 712.

<sup>24</sup> Garraty, 712.

<sup>25</sup> Steve Mount. "The Fugitive Slave Act." [USConstitution.net](http://www.usconstitution.net/fslave.html). 15 March 2006. 4 Dec 2007. <<http://www.usconstitution.net/fslave.html>>.

jurisdiction of such local law, no matter how he gets there, he is free.”<sup>26</sup> Stevens, like other Northern Republicans, strongly felt that slaves were not property and should not be tied to their master if they escaped to the North. In another speech, he asserted that, even though the Constitution gave Congress no authority over slavery, Congress could become involved in ending the “peculiar institution” if it would lead to the success and endurance of the Union. He argued that land developed by slaves was less productive because slaves were not able to reap what they sowed. He also insisted that Virginia was once the most prosperous state in the nation, but because of slavery, it was decaying in beauty and failed to grow. He was shocked to find that the North “has for half a century been tame and servile enough to submit to this arrogant rule,” and shamed the South for continually intimidating Congress. His speech was circulated in two hundred thousand pamphlets.

Thaddeus Stevens, however, gained limited support when, three days later, Daniel Webster gave a speech supporting the Compromise. Webster claimed that the climate of the territories was not conducive to slavery and claimed that even a peaceful secession would lead to a bloody civil war.<sup>27</sup> His reasoning was more appealing to the majority of the nation who wanted peace, versus Stevens’ radical revolution.

To show his disapproval, Stevens characteristically gave legal (and illegal) help to runaway slaves. In one famous instance, Stevens acted as the co-defense counsel after the 1852 Christiana Slave Riot. His clients were charged with killing a would-be captor and wounding two others, which amounted to treason for aiding an escaped slave. The defendants were acquitted, yet Stevens was denied nomination to Congress for the next

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<sup>26</sup> Congressional Globe, 31<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 766.

<sup>27</sup> Meltzer, 86-92.



term for his controversial actions.<sup>28</sup> His outward insubordination for the law angered many Southerners in the legislature.

During the 1852 elections, antislavery candidates began to get elected into the Senate. This trend was not widespread, however, as the newly elected Democrat President, Franklin Pierce, was devoted to the South's interests. Being sixty-one years old, Thaddeus Stevens decided to return home and go back to his law practice. At the same time, the Whig party was dying, split by the slavery issue and the latest elections. Many Whig followers, including Stevens, were now swept up in a new wave of native Americanism. The proponent of this movement was the Know-Nothing party, which wanted to impede new immigrants, like the Irish Catholics, from gaining political prominence. The party was a jumble of contradictory ideas formed out of racial and religious prejudice. The Know-Nothings often warped themselves, however, to promote antislavery ideals when some Free Soilers and Whigs were looking for a new faction to join. For unknown and confusing reasons, Thaddeus Stevens joined the Know-Nothing party for a brief stint in 1854.<sup>29</sup> Ironically, the party was charged with being racist and a secret society—the very things Stevens abhorred.<sup>30</sup>

When Stephen Douglas passed his Kansas-Nebraska bill, the country was in an uproar. The bill eradicated the Missouri Compromise line, and among other things, opened the West to slavery under the principle of popular sovereignty. The act's opponents felt that it marked a surrender to the Slave Power of the South. This was the opportunity Thaddeus Stevens and others had been looking for. Stevens disassociated himself with the Know-Nothing party in 1855, and helped to start the Republican Party.

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<sup>28</sup> Garraty, 712-713.

<sup>29</sup> Meltzer, 104-106.

<sup>30</sup> Garraty, 713.

The group was composed of Conscience Whigs, Northern Democrats, and Free Soilers who were all against the Slave Power and the spread of slavery. The party grew quickly in the North, strengthened by its idealism and anger.<sup>31</sup> As a result of the Kansas-Nebraska bill and the North's newfound unity against slavery, a war began in Kansas. Both Southerners and Northerners flocked to "Bleeding Kansas" in order to vote in the upcoming elections to determine how popular sovereignty would dictate the fate of the territory. The fight between these two groups foreshadowed the Civil War, in which the North and South fought over the question of slavery in the entire nation.

Under this faction's title, Stevens was reelected to Congress in the 1858 election. After the secession crisis of 1860-1861, Stevens became the Chair of the Ways and Means Committee. In this position, he controlled all budgetary proceedings and served as his party's floor supervisor. Stevens became a formidable character in the House of Representatives, where he was feared for his fierce wit and aggressive debate tactics.<sup>32</sup> In the committee, he was a domineering, protectionist voice on fiscal and budgetary matters. He often enlarged the Federal Government's role in the economy because of his support for paper money and internal improvements. There were a few, however, who did oppose Stevens in his new role. When it became common knowledge that he owned Stevens' Caledonia Ironworks, he was subjected to attacks from his opponents. They claimed that he supported higher protective tariffs for personal profit. In reality, his Ironworks continued to run deficits until his death.<sup>33</sup> A former employee recollected, "Mr. Stevens used to call it his sinking fund, and only kept it running to give the people work."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Meltzer, 106-107.

<sup>32</sup> Federic Bancroft, "Thaddeus Stevens," New York Times August 19, 1900, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Garraty, 713.

<sup>34</sup> Philadelphia Times, July 14, 1895.

Despite his many brutal characteristics, Thaddeus Stevens was a fair employer who refused to close his failing plant so he could continue to provide jobs for the townspeople.

When Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1861 and the Civil War began, Thaddeus Stevens was the leader of the Radical Republicans in the House of Representatives. The Radical Republicans pushed for harsher legislation against the South, denounced slavery, and wanted a biracial democracy for the South. Surprisingly, Stevens gave Lincoln the necessary Congressional support to the administration during the Civil War, even though he disagreed with Lincoln's plans for the war. He expedited the adoption of all the military appropriations bills, organized the legislation creating the greenback, and established the first Federal income tax. In addition, Stevens guided the passage of the conscription laws and supported Lincoln's suspensions of habeas corpus in the Border States.<sup>35</sup> He was one of the few that believed that "a protracted and bloody war" was under way, and decided to support Lincoln for the long haul.<sup>36</sup> Yet, he was upset by the slow pace of the war and Lincoln's reluctance to enact the revolutionary proposals. When President Lincoln proposed his "Ten Percent Plan," Stevens thought it was too lenient. The plan declared that a new state government could be established when ten percent of the state's voters took an oath of loyalty and recognized the end of slavery, but it did not grant the vote for Freedmen. Stevens wanted Lincoln to emancipate the slaves, recruit black soldiers, and extend civil rights to freed blacks. He defined civil rights, like other Radical Republicans, as unwavering equality under the law.

In retaliation, the Republicans proposed the stricter Wade-Davis bill. This required that at least fifty percent of the voters needed to take an oath of loyalty to the Union and those who were involved with the Confederacy were excluded in the

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<sup>35</sup> Garraty, 713.

<sup>36</sup> Meltzer, 125.

government. Lincoln pocket-vetoed the bill, which remained inactive until his assassination. Despite the elongated pace of the war effort, Stevens ferociously campaigned for Lincoln's reelection in 1864.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Thaddeus Stevens was so hostile to the South that he said, "If their whole country (the South) must be laid waste and made a desert, in order to save this Union from destruction, so be it."<sup>38</sup> Stevens would stop at nothing to abolish slavery and preserve the Union.

After Lincoln's death, Reconstruction began under the new President, Andrew Johnson. Radical Republicans like Stevens, felt that Johnson was unconcerned with the interests of blacks and instead promoted the interests of poorer whites. In May 1865, Johnson proposed his controversial Reconstruction Plan. This required whites to take an oath of allegiance in order to establish new state governments, declare secession illegal, repudiate the Confederacy, and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. Southern whites who had taxable property of \$20,000 or more and held offices in the Confederacy could not be a part of the Union without a presidential pardon. Johnson decided to give out his pardons indiscriminately. Soon, former Confederates and large landowners ran the new governments. These governments refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment and established the Black Codes, which tried to make black Freedmen politically insignificant using segregation. Andrew Johnson's defense of the Black Codes angered Thaddeus Stevens and the Radical Republicans. In December 1865, the Republican dominated congress refused to recognize these new governments.

In a new era of Reconstruction, the Republicans in Congress took over the faltering movement in the period known as Congressional Reconstruction. The Moderate

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<sup>37</sup> Garraty, 713.

<sup>38</sup> Benson J. Lossing, Pictorial History of the Civil War in the United States of America, (Kessinger, 1866), 29.

Republican majority wanted to protect the basic civil rights of blacks and get rid of the Black Codes. When Johnson vetoed both of the Moderates' measures, they allied with Stevens and the Radicals who overrode the vetoes. The Radical legislature invalidated the Black Codes, Johnson's Acts and governments, and other laws proposed up to that point. One of Stevens more contentious proposals was his Land Distribution Program. Its goal was to break the Slave Power's economic and political influence in order to create a free, black yeomanry. He plotted, "Strip the proud nobility of their bloated estates, reduce them to a level with plain republicans, send forth to labor, and teach their children to enter the workshops or handle the plow, and you will thus humble proud traitors."<sup>39</sup> The South was seen as the ultimate enemy, and now Stevens had the opportunity to enact the harsh policies that he had desperately tried to enforce throughout his lifetime. Instead, Stevens wants to reconstruct the South by reducing their power by educating the children to become self-sufficient. This vision originated in his youth and his earlier campaigns for public education. It is interesting to note, however, that as advanced as Thaddeus Stevens' ideals were, he still believed that the enfranchisement of Freedmen was a privilege and not a virtue. He felt that the socioeconomic restructuring of the South was temporarily more important than granting suffrage to Freedmen.<sup>40</sup>

In the months between 1866 and 1867, Thaddeus Stevens was caught in another moral dilemma. Being both the House leader and the Radical captain, he would often need to make the choice between compromise and principle. For example, when his Land Distribution Program was defeated in 1866, he accepted the party's alternative and more

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<sup>39</sup> "Thaddeus Stevens Quotes," BrainyQuote, 2007, 5 Dec. 2007

<[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/thaddeus\\_stevens.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/thaddeus_stevens.html)>.

<sup>40</sup> Garraty, 713.

moderate courses of action—the Freedmen’s Bureau and additional civil rights bills.<sup>41</sup>

These were the two Moderate measures that Johnson had previously vetoed. The Freedmen’s Bureau was to provide medical care, regulate labor, establish schools, distribute food, and manage abandoned or confiscated property. In hindsight, the Freedmen’s Bureau was not that effective. The Bureau gave 850,000 acres to Freedmen, but Andrew Johnson returned the land to its Confederate owners after he tried to veto the bill establishing the organization. This action angered Thaddeus Stevens and added to his long list of grievances against the President. In addition, the Bureau found work for the freedmen on plantations where harsh sharecropping and property agreements restored past animosities.<sup>42</sup>

In late 1866, Stevens, now a member of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, passed the Fourteenth Amendment, which he partly authored. In short, this Amendment granted citizenship to and protected the civil liberties of recently freed slaves. The only state that ratified the Amendment was Tennessee, and was presently readmitted. When Southern states refused these “moderate” terms, the Radical Republicans presently constructed the 1867 Reconstruction Acts. The first of these acts was the Military Reconstruction Act.<sup>43</sup> This act, associated with Stevens, divided Southern states into military districts until the regions created “republican” constitutions.<sup>44</sup> These regions needed to ratify the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. Later, the Fifteenth Amendment, which stated that the right to vote could not be denied because of color, race, or condition of servitude, was also required to be ratified in order to create a new

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<sup>41</sup> Garraty, 713.

<sup>42</sup> Jessica McElrath, "The Freedmen's Bureau," [About.com](http://afroamhistory.about.com/cs/reconstruction/a/freedmensbureau.htm), 2007, 9 Dec. 2007  
<<http://afroamhistory.about.com/cs/reconstruction/a/freedmensbureau.htm>>.

<sup>43</sup> John Simkin, [Spartacus Educational](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASreconstruction.htm), 7 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASreconstruction.htm>>.

<sup>44</sup> Garraty, 714.

state government. Although the act got mild approval from the Radical minority, Stevens navigated the bill through the House with characteristic style. Many in the government and in the South believed these measures to be too harsh, but the actual enforcement of the law was not intolerable.<sup>45</sup> President Andrew Johnson was outraged that Congress defied him, and tried to veto the act, which he said would “Africanize” the South.<sup>46</sup> Eventually, all former Confederate States returned to the Union and ratified the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.

These reforms signified a revolutionary social status upheaval that occurred at the optimal time; the North was invigorated with radical reform and the South’s conservatives were politically powerless after the War.<sup>47</sup> In Congress, Stevens always had his hand in the action. He would often rally his fellow Republicans to the breaking point, and would then fiercely work to clear moderate rulings past other wavering House members. Stevens did, however, know when to stop fighting. He would accept defeat and throw his full support behind other measures.<sup>48</sup>

By 1867, patience with President Johnson was running low. His stubborn opposition and reluctance to enforce Congressional measures signaled to Stevens that Johnson needed to be dealt with.<sup>49</sup> It was known that Johnson’s friends advised the use of military force to dissolve Congress. Congress voted to give itself the Presidential right to form a special session at any time. They feared that he would use the time between

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<sup>45</sup> Carl N. Degler, Out of Our Past, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 208-236.

<sup>46</sup> Meltzer, 196.

<sup>47</sup> Degler, 208-236.

<sup>48</sup> Garraty, 714.

<sup>49</sup> Additionally, Andrew Johnson was a known Mason, giving Stevens further grounds to dislike him (Morris, 318).

legislative sessions to disrupt their Reconstruction program. In addition, they forced Johnson to issue military orders through General Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>50</sup>

Aware that Johnson disliked the Secretary of War Stanton, the last cabinet member loyal to the Radical Republicans, Stevens drafted the Tenure of Office Act, which stated that the President could only remove officeholders with the Senate's approval. Finally, in a stunning act of defiance, Johnson fired his Secretary of War, clearly in violation of the Tenure of Office Act.<sup>51</sup> Immediately, Stevens and other Republicans began Impeachment proceedings against his "worst" enemy.<sup>52</sup> Once again, some Republicans in Congress felt that presidential removal would have disrupted the balance of power and denounced Stevens' adamant beliefs. With no Vice President to replace Johnson (he was Lincoln's Vice President and did not have a successor), the Radical Speaker of the House, Ben Wade, would have been next in line for the Presidency. If Wade took office, the Radical Republicans would have controlled the Presidency, the Senate, and the House, and could have passed any legislation they wanted. Wade was known for his profane demeanor and support for women's rights. Many thought it would be best to wait for the short remainder of Johnson's term before they gave him the Presidency. Those opposed to Johnson's possible impeachment feared that future Presidents could easily be removed from office if they disagreed with a majority in the Legislature on any disputed issue.<sup>53</sup>

In the preliminary debate, Thaddeus Stevens denied that the impeachment was solely for personal punishment, but was "intended as a remedy for malfeasance in office and to prevent the continuance thereof." He claimed that within three years, Johnson had

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<sup>50</sup> Meltzer, 194-198.

<sup>51</sup> Meltzer, 200.

<sup>52</sup> The Washington Post, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Meltzer, 203.



vetoed roughly twenty-four bills intended to help reconstruct the nation, and even after they were overridden, he tried to subvert Congress's actions. Stevens personally authored the eleventh article of impeachment, which wrapped up all allegations and charged the President of questioning the validity of Congress's acts. As the trial began, however, it was clear that the legal case against Johnson was becoming thin. Even Thaddeus Stevens, now frail and in his last months of life, could not sway the vote any longer.<sup>54</sup> The decision to convict and remove Andrew Johnson was short one vote of the two-thirds majority.

Although Thaddeus Stevens spent the remainder of his life disgraced, delirious, and desperate to indict Johnson, his lasting accomplishments cannot be forgotten.<sup>55</sup> Within three years, emancipation ended the two century long institution of slavery, largely thanks to Stevens' efforts. His Military Reconstruction Act managed to remove the Confederates in power in Johnson's governments, allowing Freedmen into politics and daily life. As a result of the Freedmen's Bureau, countless schools were established to teach freed slaves and give their children assistance in the new South. In their government role, blacks increased funding for public works, services, and schools. They even surprised white aristocrats and former slave owners when they asked Congress to return their voting and office-holding rights after the Radical Republicans had taken them away to prevent the Confederates from gaining any power.<sup>56</sup>

Despite these many advances, segregation, a damaging sharecropping system, and a Crop-Lien Economy began to reverse the goals of Thaddeus Stevens and Reconstruction. Dishonest whites drove blacks into debt, and vigilante groups, like the

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<sup>54</sup> Meltzer, 200-202.

<sup>55</sup> Garraty, 714.

<sup>56</sup> Meltzer, 206.

Ku Klux Klan, used violence and intimidation to influence the ballot box. The blacks in the government were now considered ignorant and useless. Although the government tried to stop the terror with legislation like the Enforcement Acts, the Supreme Court eventually rendered them unconstitutional. Even the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were later considered useless on the grounds that they only protected blacks from *governmental* restrictions of their civil rights. This decision led into the segregation and discrimination of the 1900s. The Republican Party began to decline in power as many of the Radicals began to die and it became apparent that the government could not force equality in the nation. In despair, Stevens said, "My life-long regret is that I have lived so long and so uselessly."<sup>57</sup>

Throughout his career, Thaddeus Steven's radical policies defined a political movement that was not always ready for reform, and his views often yielded to compromise. He was continually devoted to the hybrid social philosophy he learned in his youth. Self-improvement, social respect, freedom, and equality directed his moral compass. Stemming from this philosophy, Anti-Masonic beliefs often made him unpopular among his sympathetic peers. Although historians continue to evaluate the Reconstruction period, it is clear that, no matter how effective, Thaddeus Stevens' approach to healing the nation was concerned with equality for all, especially the downtrodden. Even though Stevens deemed his party's legislation too "moderate," he continued to hobble around the House of Representatives, trying to rebuild the nation. His support for the new Amendments, Reconstruction Acts, the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, and his advanced views of race made him a man before his time. He truly believed, however, that his life had ended in failure. Yet, without Stevens' guidance, it is

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<sup>57</sup> Meltzer, 217.

likely that Lincoln would not have received the needed support from Congress during the Civil War. In addition, it is unlikely that the slaves would have been granted limited access to a higher education and social status without Stevens crusading the way. Old 'Thad' died on August 11, 1868. He requested to be buried in a small, interracial cemetery in Lancaster, Pennsylvania where he spent the beginning of his political career voicing his concern for education and African American rights. Before he died, he personally wrote the inscription on his tombstone:

I repose in this quiet and secluded spot,  
not from any natural preference for solitude,  
But, finding other Cemeteries limited as to Race,  
by Charter Rules,  
I have chosen this that I might illustrate  
in my death,  
the Principles which I advocated  
Through a long life:  
EQUALITY OF MAN BEFORE HIS CREATOR.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Garraty, 714.

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