

Thaddeus Stevens: Civil War Revolutionary, Fighter for Racial Justice

“The Danton, Robespierre, and Marat of America, all rolled into one”: A new biography of antislavery leader Thaddeus Stevens

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The name of Thaddeus Stevens is too little known today. Bruce Levine, professor emeritus at the University of Illinois, has provided a political biography of the leader of the Radical Republicans in Congress during the Civil War and the early years of Reconstruction that should help to bring this revolutionary figure broader recognition.

It is fitting that President Abraham Lincoln is remembered as the leader of the Second American Revolution that put an end to chattel slavery. But it was Stevens who, along with Frederick Douglass, best personified the uncompromising abolitionist struggle against slavery in the Civil War era, including the early years of Reconstruction after the defeat of the Confederacy.

What distinguished Stevens from his contemporaries was his implacable opposition to slavery and racism, and his fervent advocacy of the democratic principles spelled out in the Declaration of Independence. He was certainly among the most significant figures within the Radical Republicans—who constituted the left wing of American politics in the 1860s—and, within the framework of the bourgeois-democratic revolution, perhaps the staunchest advocate of egalitarianism.

Levine quotes Douglass’ assessment of Stevens: “There was in him the power of conviction, the power of will, the power of knowledge, and the power of conscious ability,” qualities that “at last made him more potent in Congress and in the country than even the president and cabinet combined.” Like Douglass, Stevens prodded President Lincoln to take more decisive action, even as Lincoln masterfully assessed the political situation, responded to demands from Stevens and others, but waited until he judged the time ripe.

Stevens refused to be bound by what was considered realistic or widely acceptable. He “created public opinion and molded public sentiment,” according to one political associate. As chairman of the House of Representatives’ Ways and Means Committee, Stevens played a critical role in the financing of the war. At the same time, he fought to articulate the political goals of the war and pointed the way forward to victory. Stevens was among the very first political figures to call for recruiting Southern slaves into the Union Army, and as early as 1863 he was demanding the measure that would follow two years later—the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, not only emancipating slaves in rebel

territory, but outlawing slavery forever within the United States.

Stevens’s intransigence won him many enemies, and not only within the Confederacy. “On the subject of Reconstruction,” the *New York Times* wrote, “Mr. Stevens must be considered the Evil Genius of the Republican Party.” The *New York Herald* added, in 1868, that Stevens could be compared to the leaders of the French Revolution, displaying “the boldness of Danton, the bitterness and hatred of Marat, and the unscrupulousness of Robespierre.” The newspaper did not intend a compliment. A British journalist concurred, calling Stevens “the Robespierre, Danton, and Marat of America, all rolled into one.”

Stevens was born in 1792 in Vermont, a separate “independent republic” for more than a decade, before it became the 14th state of the Union in 1791. The young man was shaped by a spirit of agrarian radicalism, the struggles and sometimes violent battles of small farmers. He graduated from Dartmouth College, next door in New Hampshire, and soon moved to Pennsylvania, his home state for the rest of his life.

This future leader of the Radical Republicans began his political career in the 1820s in Pennsylvania. He was active for several years in the Anti-Masonic Party, but by the mid-to-late 1830s had aligned himself with the newly formed Whigs, which became one of the two major political parties on a national level in the US until the early 1850s. The Whigs were bitterly divided on numerous issues, on none more irreconcilably than the burning question of slavery and its expansion.

Throughout his long career, Stevens was among the foremost champions of public education, or the “common schools” as they were called. Stevens’s hatred of aristocracy linked his advocacy for the right of education to his fight against slavery. In 1835, Stevens fought off an attempt to repeal legislation for public education in Pennsylvania. He said that any such effort should rightfully be called “An act for branding and marking the poor, so that they may be known from the rich and the proud.” Stevens went on:

When I reflect how apt hereditary wealth, hereditary influence, and perhaps as a consequence, hereditary pride, are to close the avenues and steel the heart against the wants and rights of the poor, I am induced to thank my Creator for having, from early life, bestowed upon me the blessing of poverty.

It was as a Whig that Stevens first went to Washington as a member of the House of Representatives, elected in 1848. Militant in his anti-slavery stance, he clashed with pro-slavery Whigs, as well as party leader Henry Clay, the key force behind the Compromise of 1850. Increasingly under fire from those who sought to conciliate the southern slaveholding aristocracy, he chose not to run for reelection to the House in 1852.

The Whigs collapsed over the slavery issue by 1854. Stevens briefly associated himself with the nativist and anti-Catholic Know-Nothing Party, apparently willing to overlook its reactionary views in his search for a political home that could challenge the hegemony of the pro-slavery Democratic Party. In 1855, however, he finally found this home when he joined the newly formed Republicans, the party whose presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln, would triumph only five years later.

As Levine writes, “History seemed to speed up after the 1856 election.” The irrepressible conflict over slavery was approaching, but few would then have predicted the bloody Civil War that would take the lives of roughly 750,000 Union and Confederate soldiers. Stevens, however, had long been preparing for a mortal struggle with slavery. He understood the significance of the Dred Scott decision of 1857, in which the US Supreme Court ruled essentially that Congress never had a right to limit slavery’s expansion. “By that standard,” as Levine writes, “the Northwest Ordinances of 1787 and 1789, the 1820 Missouri Compromise, and all territorial laws outlawing slavery had always been null and void.”

Two years later came John Brown’s famous raid at Harper’s Ferry. Stevens, who had been reelected to the House in 1858, now as a Republican, denounced the act of revolutionary terror, through which Brown hoped to spark a slave rebellion, but only on the grounds that it was doomed to failure. He called Brown “a hopeless fool,” but a week after Brown was sentenced to death, “Stevens was pressing for publication in booklet form of that man’s powerful last letters, statements, and interviews.” Stevens’s words on the subject of John Brown led his pro-slavery opponents to physically threaten him on the House floor.

The election of Lincoln in November 1860 was soon followed by the secession of the slave states of the Deep South. When the Civil War began in April 1861, Stevens was almost 70 years old, a generation older than Frederick Douglass, and at least a decade older than all of the prominent abolitionists, including William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, Harriet Tubman and others.

But Stevens displayed the energy and determination of a much younger man. Levine quotes a Republican Congressional colleague of Stevens: “To most men there comes, sooner or later, a period of inaction, inability for further progress. This is the period of conservatism, and usually comes with gray hairs and failing eye-sight. It converses with the past and distrusts the future. Its look is backward and not forward.” The congressman continued, “This period Mr. Stevens never reached. The slaveholders’ rebellion seemed to rejuvenate him and inspire him with superhuman strength.”

Stevens predicted a long and bloody war. His views became more and more radical. Twenty-five years earlier, he was, as the author notes, “[A] firm believer in the North’s free-labor capitalist society ... who opposed the stoking of hostilities among its social classes as unjustified and dangerous to prosperity, social order, and republican government.”

Stevens certainly remained a defender of capitalism and of the system of wage labor in opposition to slavery. His years of struggle had made him more sensitive to the struggle against inequality, however, and he revised his earlier hostility to the French Revolution. In 1862, writes Levine, “Stevens wished aloud that ‘the ardor which inspired the French revolution’ might find its like in the United States. The revolutionaries of France, like others elsewhere, he recalled with admiration, were ‘possessed and impelled by the glorious principles of freedom.’” This was required “to carry out to final perfection the principles of the Declaration of Independence.”

Stevens’s willingness to challenge the status quo of racism and oppression was demonstrated in other ways. In the 1860 election campaign, both Democratic and Republican Congressmen had called for stepped-up attacks on Native Americans near the Texas and New Mexico borders. Stevens declared in response that he “wish[ed] the Indians had newspapers of their own,” because “if they had, you would have horrible pictures of the cold-blooded murders of inoffensive Indians. You would have more terrible pictures than we have now revealed to us [of white casualties], and, I have no doubt, we would have the real reasons for these Indian troubles.”

When Republicans in California enacted measures against the Chinese immigrant population, Stevens denounced them and said the treatment had “disgraced the State of California.” “He reminded the House that ‘China has been much oppressed of late by the European nations,’ which had recently made war upon China because it refused ‘to consent to the importation of poisonous drugs that demoralize its society and destroy its people.’” He insisted on the rights of the Chinese migrants, adding, in words that are indeed appropriate today, long after the United States has become the leading world imperialist power, that the anti-Chinese legislation is “...a mockery of the boast that this land is the asylum of the oppressed of all climes.”

As noted above, Stevens fought for the recruitment of blacks into the Union Army, tirelessly insisting that the logic of the conflict required the mobilization of the freed and escaped slaves in the fight for their freedom, the policy eventually adopted by the president. Stevens went on to fight for the necessary two-thirds majority in the House for the 13th Amendment, achieved on January 31, 1865, after the first vote had fallen just short of that margin. Steven Spielberg’s *Lincoln* (2012) focused in part on the bargaining and political horse-trading that preceded this vote, but Levine explains that the Republican victory in the 1864 elections and the work of Stevens and his Radical Republican colleagues were also crucial to the victory.

Levine relates an anecdote that summarizes Stevens’s forthright defense of revolution. When an Ohio Democrat taunted the Republicans, demanding that they admit they were a revolutionary party, Stevens praised the “purifying fires of this revolution” and proudly acknowledged, “revolution it is.”

After the assassination of Lincoln, just days after the surrender at Appomattox that ended the war, Stevens forged ahead, now leading the struggle in the early years of Reconstruction. He secured the necessary approval for the 14th Amendment in 1866, although it fell well short of his original proposals, including full voting rights for the former slaves. He also fought for civil rights legislation in answer to the notorious Black Codes and horrific attacks on freed slaves in Memphis, New Orleans, and elsewhere. The 1866 civil rights bill and the 1867 Reconstruction Act were enacted after Congress overrode vetoes by President Andrew Johnson, who had quickly revealed himself as a racist sympathizer of the defeated slaveholders.

Another indication of Stevens’s radicalism in the early days of Reconstruction was his proposal to transfer land confiscated from the ex-Confederate aristocracy into the hands of the former slaves. This ambitious land reform proposal was resisted by the majority of his Republican colleagues. As the author points out, “Republicans also wondered nervously where—if they began redistributing landed property to exploited and impoverished people—that road would lead.” The *New York Times*, once again the rigid defender of the ruling elite, warned, “It is a question ... of the fundamental relation of industry to capital; and sooner or later, if begun at the South, it will find its way into the cities of the North.” Levine continues, quoting *Boston’s Daily Advertiser*: “... there are socialists who hold that any aristocracy is anathema.”

Stevens led the impeachment of Johnson in 1868, voted for overwhelmingly by the House. The president was acquitted by the Senate

by a margin of only one vote. However, in May of that year. Stevens was already gravely ill, and he died on August 11, 1868, at the age of 76. Five thousand mourners, both black and white, came to pay their respects in the Capitol Rotunda. A crowd of between 15,000 and 20,000, also completely integrated, attended his funeral in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Following Stevens's death, Ulysses S. Grant was the successful Republican candidate for president, and Reconstruction continued under the protection of the federal authorities. By the early 1870s, however, the top leaders of the Republican Party, representing increasingly powerful Northern industrial capitalism, were already preparing a retreat. The stage was set for the 1877 Compromise that resolved the bitterly disputed presidential election of the previous November by installing Republican Rutherford B. Hayes in the White House, while at the same time withdrawing federal troops from the South. This in turn set the stage for the system of rigid Jim Crow segregation, along with lynch mob terror and the political disenfranchisement of the black population that continued for almost a century.

At this point, posed with the need for an explanation of the end of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow segregation, a serious weakness in Levine's approach becomes clear. He laments that "the Second American Revolution was left unfinished"—in other words, that it did not complete its historical tasks.

What Levine has in mind is that the Civil War, despite its achievements, did not realize the world of racial equality that its most radical figures, including Stevens, envisioned. But this is to ask more of the past than was possible. Each one of the democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries was "unfinished," including the most progressive and liberating, such as the Great French Revolution and the Civil War. Their incapacity to fulfill the egalitarian promises on which they mobilized masses was a result of their class nature. The development of capitalism, which emerged out of these revolutions, could do no other than put on history's agenda a new class struggle, between capitalists and workers. And in that, the most fundamental sense, the Second American Revolution *was* completed. Destroying the economic system based on chattel slavery, it cleared the path for the development of capitalism.

Levine underlines his own confusion over Reconstruction when he states that the basic cause for the retreat from the goals of racial equality was the fact that "the Northern public, never firmly devoted to racial equality, tired of the seemingly endless struggle in the South."

The "public," however, is divided into classes. It was the ruling capitalist class, the commercial, manufacturing and financial interests, which turned away from the struggle. It had achieved its main aim of unifying the country on the basis of a free-labor economic system. The Northern victory gave a mighty impulse to the development of industrial capitalism. But with that came a new and existential challenge to bourgeois rule—the working class.

In this new context the Northern industrial bourgeoisie, including its most radical wing, quickly retreated from its headier egalitarian promises, including its commitment to voting rights and equal protection under the law for the freed slaves. Stevens did not live to see the full scope of this retreat, which eroded support within the Republican Party leadership for Grant and Reconstruction, culminating in the election Compromise of 1877 and the restoration of the southern Bourbons—not incidentally, the same year as the Great Uprising of American rail workers. The enemy, in other words, was no longer the former slaveholders, but the militant working class. The author's reference to the "public" obscures this class reality.

Levine's "unfinished revolution" thesis, which was first developed by historian Eric Foner, suggests that the great task of progressive forces in the US today is to complete it. It assumes that a more egalitarian society must be created under capitalism before there can be any talk of workers taking power. The task, however, is not to "perfect" capitalism, but to

destroy it. Only this will end social inequality and all the ideologies, such as racism, that have always been used to justify it.

In any case, capitalist reaction was not confined to the South, precisely because the ruling class was faced with the need to divide and weaken the growing working class. Although taking a different form in the rest of the country, discrimination and second-class citizenship replaced the progress that had been made in the Civil War and Reconstruction. This project was facilitated by the historical falsification of Stevens, who became the object of decades of calumny. As Levine points out, when the notoriously racist D.W. Griffith's epic motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation*, appeared in 1915, Stevens was depicted in obvious caricature as a monstrous villain.

The shift was reflected in Civil War historiography. W.E.B. Dubois, the author of *Black Reconstruction in America*, which was published in 1935, praised Stevens for his "grim and awful courage," but his account of this period was overwhelmed by vicious attacks on Reconstruction, which predominated in official histories from the turn of the 20th century onwards. Professor William Dunning of Columbia University, who called Stevens "vindictive, truculent and cynical," was instrumental in propagating the "Lost Cause" myth of the Confederacy as a struggle for states' rights

As late as 1955, future president John F. Kennedy could write, in his *Profiles in Courage*, in an assessment that reveals the racist pedigree of the Democratic Party, that Stevens was "the crippled, fanatical personification of the extremes of the Radical Republican movement." It was not until the 1960s, amid the mass civil rights movement and broader struggles of the working class, that historians such as James McPherson began to correct the record on the role of Stevens and his co-thinkers. It was precisely the growth and the increasing integration of the working class, especially in the wake of the Great Migration of African Americans to the North, the great labor struggles of the 1930s, and the experiences of World War II, that made possible the heroic struggles for racial equality in the post-World War II period.

Stevens and the Radical Republicans still make the ruling class nervous today, for fundamentally the same reasons as 150 years ago. Some have found a different way of minimizing Stevens, of even ignoring his role entirely, or defaming him. The advocates of "critical race theory," now increasingly dominant in the elite universities of the US, were promoted by the *New York Times* and its 1619 Project, which insisted that all American history must be seen as a racial conflict and as the manifestation of white supremacy, against which blacks fought back alone.

The life and struggle of Thaddeus Stevens are an irrefutable answer to this reactionary falsification of history. It is one more reason to welcome this new biography, despite its failure to fully explain the end of Reconstruction.

Speaking at the time of the passage of the 13th Amendment outlawing slavery, Stevens said, "I will be satisfied if my epitaph shall be written thus: 'Here lies one who never rose to any eminence'" and who harbored only "the low ambition to have it said that he had striven to ameliorate the condition of the poor, the lowly, the downtrodden of every race and language and color."

Stevens's legacy—a program of common struggle of the oppressed "of every race and language and color"—should be studied by all who seek to understand the past in preparation for new revolutionary struggles.



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