

Thaddeus Stevens and the Imperfect Republic

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Two hundred years after his birth, Thaddeus Stevens remains one of the most controversial and enigmatic individuals in the history of American politics. Students of the Civil War era have found him a baffling figure, whose unusual complexity of motivations and unique blend of idealism with political pragmatism make him almost impossible to categorize. Thanks to a generation of revisionist scholarship, an older interpretation of Stevens and other Radicals as men motivated by an irrational hatred of the South who cynically used the votes of blacks to establish the Republican party's national ascendancy, has been irrevocably laid to rest. But in many ways, our understanding of Stevens is still in its infancy. To some extent, this is because of the paucity of first-rate scholarly writing about him. Existing biographies tend either toward uncritical adulation, unabashed denunciation, or dubious psychological theories that treat Stevens as a curiosity rather than a figure of central importance to his time. No edition of Stevens' writings has yet been published, a situation that will soon be remedied thanks to the labors of Professor Beverly Wilson Palmer. Until then, apart from his remarks in Congress, Stevens's speeches, letters, and legal papers will remain scattered in far-flung archival collections and obscure newspapers.

Today's conference is a welcome step toward rescuing Stevens from obscurity, subjecting him to critical analysis, and placing his career fully in the context of the era he did so much to shape. Born in 1792 during the Presidency of George Washington, Stevens died on the eve of Ulysses S. Grant's election. He witnessed, and his life in many ways reflected, the profound changes that swept over American society during his 76 years—the westward movement (born in Vermont, Stevens moved as a young man to Pennsylvania), early industrialization (he was a pioneer in iron manufacturing and an avid supporter of state-sponsored economic development), and the rise and fall of the second party system (he held office, successively, as an anti-Mason, Whig, and Republican). In these opening remarks, I do not intend to trace in detail the chronology of his career, a task rendered impossible, at any rate, by his longevity and the range of important issues with which he was involved. Rather, I want to give some sense of his personality, political style, rhetoric, and basic beliefs. I hope to remind the scholars in this audience,

and explore for those less familiar with Stevens, why he was important, by looking at his role in two of the great reforms of the era—the establishment of free public education, and the emergence of the principle of equality before the law for all Americans, regardless of race. These issues will form a good part of the discussion at this conference. In Stevens's career, they were logically interconnected. Underlying both campaigns lay one of Stevens' fundamental beliefs—that rigid class and racial distinctions were incompatible with republicanism, and that government had a responsibility to breathe substantive meaning into the ideal of equal citizenship.

Most of my attention will be directed to Stevens's role in Reconstruction, when he exerted the greatest influence on the course of national events. But I will begin many years before then, when he was serving as a member of Pennsylvania's legislature. Today, when large numbers of middle class families have abandoned the public school system and a chief executive who styles himself the "education president" seeks to channel public funds to private and parochial schools, it may be difficult to remember that in the early nineteenth century the expansion of public education was viewed as a triumph of reform principles, an essential underpinning of democratic government. Stevens played a critical role in this development. As a young man, he himself enjoyed far greater educational opportunities than most of his contemporaries. In an age when only a tiny fraction of Americans went to college, Stevens attended Dartmouth, graduating in 1814. He worked briefly as a teacher before moving to Pennsylvania, where he established himself as a lawyer. His law practice prospered, and by 1830, Stevens had become one of Adams County's wealthiest residents. His success fueled not a sense of distance from his less fortunate neighbors, but a passionate belief in equal opportunity for all.

Like Horace Mann and other educational reformers of the era, including the fledgling labor movement of Jacksonian America, Stevens saw public education as a guarantor of social mobility, a kind of internal safety valve that (like emigration to the West) would prevent the emergence of rigid class distinctions by enabling the humblest American to rise on the social scale. Like Mann, Stevens viewed education as a leveller of class distinctions, "the great equalizer of the conditions of men." As a member of Pennsylvania's legislature, Stevens strongly supported the Free Public School Act of 1834, which established a statewide system of tax-supported common schools. But his greatest service came in the following year, when irate citizens who feared that public education meant rising taxes flooded the legislature

with petitions for repeal. This would mean a return to the older system in which pupils could only receive a free education if they were designated as paupers by local authorities.

In defending the new education system, Stevens drew on themes that would recur again and again in his public speaking. The repealing act, he declared, should be called "An Act for Branding and Marking the Poor, so that they may be known from the Rich and Proud," for it would institutionalize and make permanent social distinctions founded on income and property, "an aristocracy of wealth and pride." "I know," he went on, "how large a portion of the community can scarcely feel any sympathy with, or understand the necessities of the poor; or appreciate the exquisite feelings which they enjoy, when they see their children receiving the book of education, and rising in intellectual superiority above the clogs which hereditary poverty has cast upon them." But such education, he insisted, must be enjoyed as a public right, not a form of charity. To those, such as childless citizens, or Pennsylvanians who sent their children to private or religious schools, who complained of paying taxes to benefit others, Stevens replied with a broad vision of a common public responsibility for social improvement. Stevens' speech in opposition to repeal was credited by his contemporaries with helping to save Pennsylvania's fledgling school system. He later described it as his life's "crowning utility."

In defending free public education, Stevens reflected broad currents sweeping northern society in the 1830s and 1840s. In his efforts to extend the principle of equal rights to the North's tiny, despised black population, he stood all but alone. Earlier generations of scholars accused Radical Republicans like Stevens of supporting black suffrage during Reconstruction purely for partisan gain. Yet Stevens, and, it should be noted, many other Radicals, had defended the rights of the North's black population long before they could expect any conceivable political benefit. At the 1837 Pennsylvania constitutional convention, over Stevens's strenuous objections, the state's free black population was deprived of the right to vote. In disenfranchising blacks, the delegates were fully in tune with their time, since democracy in the North had increasingly taken on a racial definition. At the time of the American Revolution, property and gender, not race, determined who could vote. But between 1800 and 1860, every free state that entered the Union except Maine restricted voting to white men. Moreover, even as property qualifications for whites waned, the political rights of blacks were more and more restricted. New York in 1821 eliminated property tests for white voters but raised the qualification

for blacks to a prohibitive \$250. Pennsylvania in 1837 disenfranchised altogether its articulate, economically successful black community. When Stevens refused to sign the 1837 constitution because of its voting provision, he announced his commitment to a non-racial definition of American citizenship to which he would adhere for the remainder of his life.

As the sectional conflict accelerated in the 1840s and 1850s, Stevens emerged as a leading Northern critic of slavery. Elected to Congress as a Whig in 1848, Stevens opposed the Compromise of 1850, because it allowed slavery to expand into additional territories, and contained the infamous fugitive slave law. The compromise, he predicted, would become "the fruitful mother of future rebellion, disunion, and war." He pledged to continue to "strive by every lawful means to abolish slavery throughout the land." In 1851, Stevens defended in court fugitive slaves who had resisted recapture in the so-called Christiana riot, and partly as a result, did not seek reelection in 1852. Like Abraham Lincoln, another former antislavery Whig Congressman for whom the established party system did not seem to have a place, Stevens for a time abandoned politics and devoted himself to his law practice. And like Lincoln, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the rise of the Republican party offered Stevens a chance to revive his political career. Elected once again to Congress in 1858, Stevens served continuously until his death a decade later.

Stevens was one of the most outspoken members of the new party's Radical wing, a group vehemently opposed to slavery expansion before the war, and to compromise with the South in the secession winter of 1860-61. Once war began, Stevens, as chairman of the House Committee on Ways and Means, became one of the most influential members of Congress. He shepherded many war measures through the House, while at the same time demanding that the Lincoln administration move toward emancipation and the enlistment of black soldiers in the Union army. He was one of only two Congressmen who, in July 1861, voted against the Crittenden Resolution declaring that the war was being fought solely to preserve the Union. It was pointless, he recognized, to fight to preserve an antebellum status quo that had caused the war in the first place. "So long as [slavery] exists," Stevens declared, "we cannot have a solid Union," and he insisted that secession had abrogated the constitutional guarantees that had previously protected slavery.

While Lincoln declared his conviction that the Civil War must not degenerate into "a violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle," Stevens saw that this was precisely what it must become. He wondered, in 1862, whether the Union would find "anybody with a sufficient grasp of mind, and sufficient moral courage, to

treat this as a radical revolution, and remodel our institutions.” Stevens was also one of the most fervent nationalists in Congress, fully embracing the expansion of central authority and national loyalties spawned by the war. For example, while many Republicans supported the issuance of legal tender paper money by the federal government only as an unavoidable means of financing the conflict, Stevens saw the greenbacks as a badge of national authority and a bond of national unity. Instead of the dual currency adopted by Congress—paper greenbacks for most transactions, supplemented by gold payments for customs duties and interest on the national debt—Stevens urged that nation should have a unitary currency. After the war, Stevens outraged respectable Republican opinion by supporting the plan of Ohio’s Democratic Senator George H. Pendleton, to repay the principal of federal bonds in greenbacks. To have one currency for bankers and importers and another for everybody else would institutionalize class distinctions in the law. On the same grounds, Stevens opposed the provision exempting anyone who could pay \$300 from the draft. Toward the end of the war, Stevens played a major role in guiding to passage the Thirteenth Amendment, which irrevocably abolished slavery.

It was during Reconstruction that Stevens’s influence reached its height. To some observers, he was the dictator of the House, a fiery revolutionary bent on remaking American institutions. A British journalist called him “the Robespierre, Danton, and Marat of America, all rolled into one.” It would be far from the truth, however, to suggest that Stevens consistently bent the House to his will, as older studies claimed. “No man was oftener outvoted,” one newspaper noted, and recent scholars have made clear that moderate Republicans, not Radicals, generally commanded a majority in Congress. Nonetheless, it would be a serious mistake to underestimate Stevens’s power. Influence in Congress should be measured not simply by winning votes, but by setting agendas, establishing the terms of debate. Steven’s power rested partly on the fact that he and other Radicals had a long history of staking out unpopular positions—uncompromising hostility to slavery’s extension, the arming of black troops—only to see the mainstream of their party eventually adopt them. At a time of political crisis, and intense ideological crisis, only Radicals like Stevens appeared to have a coherent sense of purpose.

Personal qualities also enhanced Stevens’s influence. Stevens was a master of Congressional infighting, parliamentary tactics, and blunt speaking. He loved the rough and tumble of Congressional debate. “Old Thad,” one contemporary remarked, “is a perfect political brigand who is never so happy as in a fight; he has no fancy for . . . baskets of flowers, rainbows, or sunshine, but likes the rough sea,

the midnight darkness, the storm, the thunder and lightning. He is a rude jousting in political and personal warfare." His quick tongue and sarcastic wit were legendary. "I would sooner get into trouble with a porcupine," one Congressman remarked. During House debates, Stevens as Republican floor leader often controlled the allocation of speaking time. He was given to prefacing Democratic contributions with comments like: "I now yield the floor to the honorable gentleman . . . who will make a few feeble remarks."

During the Congressional debates of 1850, Stevens presented a wicked satire of the pro-slavery argument:

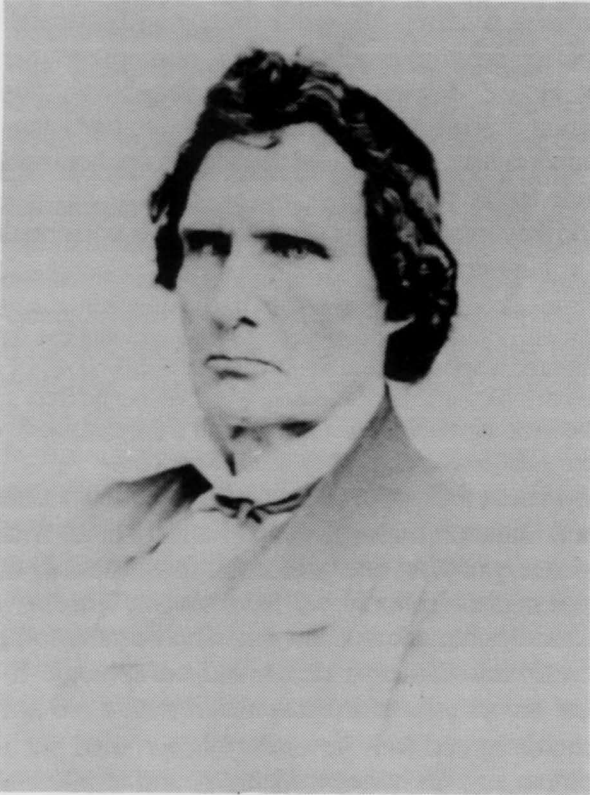
Gentlemen on this floor, and in the Senate have repeatedly . . . asserted that slavery was a moral, political, and personal blessing, and that the slave was free from care, contented, happy, fat, and sleek. . . . Well, if this be so, let us give all a chance to enjoy this blessing. Let the slaves, who choose, go free; and the free, who choose, become slaves. We will not complain if they establish societies . . . for that purpose—abolition societies to abolish freedom.

There is a story that at the outset of the Civil War, Lincoln asked Stevens about the honesty of Simon Cameron, Stevens's Pennsylvania political rival who was about to be appointed Secretary of War (one of Lincoln's less felicitous Cabinet choices). "Cameron would not steal a red-hot stove," said Stevens. Lincoln, who appreciated a good joke, repeated the remark to Cameron, who became indignant. Later, the president told Stevens that Cameron demanded an apology. To which Stevens replied: "I withdraw my remark—Cameron *would* steal a red-hot stove."

Even those who disagreed with Stevens's policies could not avoid a grudging admiration for the man and his honesty, idealism, and indifference to praise and criticism. "He bluntly avowed his purposes," Carl Schurz later recalled. "There was no hypocrisy, no cant in his utterances." Moreover, at a time when manliness was a much-admired trait among political leaders (a situation enhanced by four years of warfare), Stevens played upon his own image of masculinity. This may be one reason he refused to comment on, and perhaps encouraged, rumors that his black housekeeper, Lydia Smith, was also his mistress. ("I never deny anything," was, supposedly, Stevens's motto.) "A manlier man never sat in the House," said the *Nation*, which disagreed with Stevens on almost everything. By the same token, Stevens was a master at suggesting that his opponents were not simply misguided but effeminate. "When it was first proposed to free the slaves and arm the blacks, did not half the nation tremble," he said in 1865. "The prim conservatives, the snobs, and the male waiting maids in Congress were in hysterics."

But Stevens's influence during Reconstruction rested not simply on the power

Courtesy of R. Lee Weaver and the Lancaster County Historical Society.



Portrait of Thaddeus Stevens taken in 1866 by Charles Eberman of Lancaster.

of his rhetoric and personality, but on the power of his ideas. The North's victory in the Civil War, and the concomitant destruction of slavery, unleashed revolutionary changes in the nature of American government and society. How far should the second American Revolution proceed? To Stevens, Reconstruction offered an opportunity to create a "perfect republic" purged of the legacy of slavery and racism, to breathe full meaning into the promise of equality by bringing blacks within the realm of American freedom. Yet, as recent scholars have emphasized, the definition of freedom was itself a terrain of conflict during Reconstruction. Many Republicans, including a number of Stevens' colleagues in the Radical camp, had by now adopted a modern, liberal definition of freedom, which equated

liberty with civil equality and the right to compete for social advancement in the marketplace. As a vehicle for breaking down the civil and political barriers to equal citizenship for the former slaves, this definition of freedom as competitive equality proved a powerful weapon. It failed, however, to address the economic legacy of slavery.

Stevens, by contrast, harked back to an older definition of freedom, one associated with the republicanism of the revolutionary generation, which identified freedom with economic independence. In this view, ownership of productive property was the hallmark of the autonomous, free citizen. "The system of labor for wages," fellow Radical William D. Kelley said of Stevens, "is not the freedom of which he dreamed." A product of a society in which economic production was centered in the household and wage labor was relatively rare, this older definition of freedom had, in effect, been rendered obsolete by the expansion of capitalism in nineteenth century America. But the ideal of economic autonomy underpinned the widespread aspirations of former slaves for economic independence. And it animated the proposal that is most closely associated with Stevens' Reconstruction career—the idea of distributing the land of disloyal planters to the former slaves.

Stevens first outlined his plan of confiscation to the Republican state convention at Lancaster in September 1865. The speech deserves careful attention, because it detailed Stevens' view of Reconstruction as a social revolution, his profound insight into the reality of class power in the postwar South, and his conviction that land distribution would serve two interrelated purposes—equipping the freedpeople to be independent, productive citizens, and destroying the power of the South's planter class. He began by discussing prevailing debates over the constitutional bases of Reconstruction. Was the South in or out of the Union? Lincoln, always the pragmatist, in the last speech before his assassination had described this question as "practically immaterial" and downright "mischievous." To Lincoln, the aim of Reconstruction was to get the Southern states back to a proper relation to the Union, not to worry about their constitutional status during the war. Stevens was equally pragmatic, but to him, it was essential that Republicans accept the reality that the Southern states had left the Union and were now being held as conquered provinces. This was a question not of vindictiveness (Stevens, like other Radical leaders, opposed prosecuting Confederate leaders for treason), but of social change:

In reconstruction, . . . no reform can be effected in the Southern states if they never left the Union. But reformation *must* be effected; the foundation of their

institutions, both political, municipal, and social *must* be broken up and *relaid*, or all our blood and treasure have been spent in vain. This can only be done by treating and holding them as a conquered people.

The majority of Republicans never did adopt Stevens' constitutional reasoning, but in the Reconstruction Act of 1867, it went a long way toward embracing his position that the Southern states could be held in a territorial status, to be readmitted to the Union on conditions determined by Congress.

Stevens then went on to outline his plan for land distribution. It would apply only to Confederate supporters whose estates were valued at more than \$10,000 or who owned more than 200 acres of land. Their holdings, he estimated, amounted to some 400 million acres. Each adult former slave, male and female, would receive 40 acres—a total of 40 million in all. The remaining 350 million acres—the vast majority of the total—would be sold in small units to help pay off the national debt, compensate Unionists, North and South, for losses during the war, and finance pensions for Union veterans.

Clearly, Stevens was hoping to create a far broader base of support for land distribution than simply the former slaves. The plan combined idealism, expediency, and Northern self-interest. But his basic appeal was not to the practical benefits, but to the ideal of remaking Southern society:

This plan, would, no doubt, work a radical radical reorganization in southern institutions, habits and manners. It is intended to revolutionize their principles and feelings. . . . The whole fabric of southern society *must* be changed, and never can it be done if this opportunity is lost. . . . 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 inhabited by 'low white trash'? If the South is ever to be made a safe republic, let her lands be cultivated by the toil of the owners or the free labor of intelligent citizens. This must be done even though it drive the nobility into exile. . . . If we do not make [Southern] institutions fit to last through generations of free men [Stevens concluded], a heavy curse will be on us.

Like many Northern Republicans, Stevens believed the South should be remade in the image of an idealized vision of the free labor North, and governed by a Republican party resting on the votes of men of economic independence, both black and white. The alternative, he insisted, would be political and

economic disaster—turning the South politically back into the hands of Confederate leaders, and the freedpeople back into the hands of their former masters. Without land, Stevens later warned, the former slaves would never be “independent of their old masters” but would “be compelled to work for them upon unfair terms.” Moreover, Stevens utterly rejected racist arguments that the freedpeople, whether because of hereditary deficiencies or a dysfunctional culture inherited from slavery, could not be expected to work productively. Like all people, their character was shaped by circumstances: “Nothing is so likely to make a man a good citizen as to make him a freeholder. Nothing will so multiply the productions of the South as to divide it into small farms. Nothing will make men so industrious and moral as to let them feel they are above want.” This was classic Jeffersonianism. The only difference was that, unlike Jefferson, Stevens wanted to apply republican principles to blacks as well as whites.

Confiscation and land distribution was the centerpiece of Stevens’s Reconstruction policy, but were hardly his only concerns. Between 1865 and his death, Stevens also pushed aggressively for recognition of the former slaves’ equal civil and political rights. “We are not now merely expounding a government,” he told the House in 1868. “We are making a nation.” And the political foundation of the new nation must be equality before the law. Initially, Stevens considered immediate black suffrage less important than equality before the law and land distribution. Soon after Congress assembled in December 1865, Stevens denounced the doctrine of “a white man’s Government,” a rallying cry of the Democratic party. It was, he said, “as atrocious as the infamous sentiment [that blacks had no rights a white man was bound to respect] that damned the late Chief Justice [Taney] to everlasting fame; and, I fear, to everlasting fire.” Yet at this time, he was ready to see black suffrage postponed for a decade, until land had been distributed and education diffused, and he initially proposed that representation in Congress be based on the number of voters determined by each state, thus offering the white South a choice between enfranchising blacks or seeing its political power reduced. But he soon moved to the position that universal manhood suffrage for blacks was crucial to Reconstruction. “They will give the suffrage to their menials, their house servants, those they can control, and elect whom they please to make our laws,” he warned. “That is not the kind of suffrage I want.” Rather, all loyal men deserved the right to vote, not simply as an act of justice, but to prevent the return to power of the old Confederates, and to ensure the continued dominance of the Republican party. With characteristic candor, Stevens acknowledged the partisan motives that

comingled with his desire for racial justice—and denied that any contradiction existed between them. “Another good reason is, it would ensure the ascendancy of the Union party. Do you avow the party purpose? exclaims some horror-stricken demagogue. I do. For I believe, on my conscience, that on the continued ascendancy of that party depends the safety of this great nation.”

Simultaneously, Stevens favored temporarily disenfranchising Confederate supporters, so as to allow new governments resting on the votes of blacks and loyal whites to consolidate their hold on power. This position was ardently supported by white Unionists in the South, although the former slaves, themselves attempting to establish the principle of universal manhood suffrage, were far less enthusiastic. In debates over the Fourteenth Amendment, Stevens supported the original third clause, barring Confederates from voting in national elections until 1870; this, he said, was “the mildest of punishments ever inflicted on traitors. In 1867, he proposed to deny them citizenship rights for five years. Indeed, because of Stevens’ efforts to humble the planter class and exclude “rebels” from political power, he was viewed as the particular champion in Congress of the South’s beleaguered wartime Unionists. To be sure, postwar conventions of the freedmen praised Stevens as a “beacon light of our race.” But blacks seeking advice or demanding their rights were more likely to write to Stevens’s colleague in the Senate. Charles Sumner, while Stevens’ papers at the Library of Congress are filled with letters from the South’s white Unionists complaining of “rebel rule,” and asking that steps be taken to oust former Confederates from power.

Like many other Radicals, Stevens was not entirely satisfied with the Fourteenth Amendment, because it did nothing to limit the states’ right to restrict the suffrage because of race, and because in its final form it did not deprive any Confederates of the right to vote. Interestingly, he also opposed the use of the word “male” in the Amendment’s representation clause, the first time a distinction of gender had been placed in the Constitutions. Unlike some Radicals, Stevens was not an advocate of women’s suffrage; his objection here was to the idea of institutionalizing distinctions among American citizens. “Why,” he asked, make a crusade against women in the Constitution of the nation?” But despite his misgivings, he shepherded the Amendment to passage in the House. The Amendment reflected the intersection of two products of the Civil War ardently embraced by Stevens—the newly empowered national state, and the idea of a national citizenry enjoying equality before the law. In establishing the primacy of a national citizenship whose common rights the states could not abridge, and empowering the fed-

To The Memory of
Thaddeus Stevens.

Ah, Alas, Alas.

The
 Great Unchained

Chained ^{at last.}

In Gen. Allan

April 30. 1872.

The above inscription was found in a copy of Memorial Addresses on the Life and Character of Thaddeus Stevens, Delivered in the House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., December 17, 1868 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1869). It may be found in the collections of the Adams County Historical Society.

eral government to take action against states that denied any American the "equal protection of the laws," the Amendment fundamentally redefined the antebellum principle of federalism. Stevens saw the Amendment, despite its limitations, as a major accomplishment. His speech just before passage, in June 1866, was an eloquent statement of his political creed, and a revealing illustration of his charac-

teristic combination of idealism and pragmatism. It was addressed not only to Northern public opinion, but to Radicals like Wendell Phillips who denounced the Amendment as unworthy of passage:

In my youth, in my manhood, in my old age, I had fondly dreamed that when any fortunate chance should have broken up for awhile the foundation of our institutions, and released us from obligations the most tyrannical than ever man imposed in the name of freedom, that the intelligent, pure and just men of this Republic . . . would have so remodeled all our institutions as to have freed them from every vestige of human oppression of inequality of rights, of the recognized degradation of the poor, and the superior caste of the rich. . . . This bright dream has vanished [quoting Shakespeare's "The Tempest"] 'like the baseless fabric of a dream.' I find that we shall be obliged to be content with patching up the worst portions of the ancient edifice, and leaving it, in many of its parts, to be swept through by the storms of despotism.

Do you inquire why, holding these views and possessing some will of my own, I accept so imperfect a proposition? I answer, because I live among men and not among angels.

When Stevens died in 1868, much that he had fought to achieve had been accomplished. The Constitution had been rewritten to establish the principle of equality before the law for all citizens, regardless of race, and, as a result of the Reconstruction Act of 1867, the Republican party, resting on the votes of black men and a portion of Southern whites, was in the process of coming to power throughout the South. But the planter class remained in possession of its lands, and the former slaves remained landless and economically dependent. The "perfect republic" of which Stevens had dreamed—one of political *and* economic equality, was not created during Reconstruction.

Stevens's death produced a public expression of grief second only to the funeral of Lincoln. He was buried here in Lancaster in an integrated cemetery. His epitaph, which he had written himself, is probably familiar to many in this audience, but nonetheless bears repeating:

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.

Two centuries after his birth, and a century and a quarter after his death, Stevens' legacy continues to challenge us to live up to our professed ideals, rise above our prejudices, and continue to think, as he did, about the contested meanings of freedom in American society.