Searching For The Political Legacy of Thaddeus Stevens

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The search for the political legacy of Thaddeus Stevens begins in the four areas in which Stevens expended the greatest amount of political energy: the antimasonry crusade, public education in Pennsylvania, the abolition of slavery, and a flexible monetary policy for the nation. Stevens comes out batting .500. This in itself is a remarkable rate of success that many a politician then and now would be proud to claim. But I don’t want to carry a baseball analogy too far. What is more important is the significance of the issues in which Stevens played a major role during the course of his political career.

The antimasonry crusade, a hot topic in the 1830s, seems of far lesser importance in the light of history than such universal and compelling issues as public education and the abolition of slavery. The fourth issue, a flexible United States monetary policy, while of vital importance to the nation then and now, is more difficult to assign to Stevens’s legacy because the intricacies of monetary policy make it the work of many hands and minds.

To help put the legacy of Thaddeus Stevens in perspective it is necessary to explore the nature of the power he actually wielded. Was he the dictator some claimed him to be? Was he the most powerful man in the House of Representatives during the Civil War and the first part of Reconstruction? Did his power rival or exceed that of the President of the United States? To be remembered in history it seems our political leaders have to be controversial, powerful, or both. Even when these elements are clearly established a legacy can be an elusive thing that changes from generation to generation, or even to region, depending on the historical perception of persons not yet born when Stevens strode across the stage of American politics.

Stevens was indeed controversial and powerful. But he was not the dictator or tyrant that some historians have characterized him to be. His radical plans for Reconstruction, including confiscation of Southern land and redistribution of some of it to the freed slaves, were never implemented, even though the plans themselves struck fear in the hearts of the planter class of the South. Fifty years after the Civil War and long after Stevens’s death, he became the first feature-length
movie villain in D. W. Griffith's pro-Southern film, *Birth of a Nation*. Griffith's fictional Thaddeus Stevens, called Stoneman, singlehandedly directed Reconstruction policy, with the advice of his mulatto mistress, and the South was only saved from his radical plans by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. But that was Hollywood, not history.

The real Thaddeus Stevens did not have the clout to dictate national policy all by himself. But where he did appear to be in total control was on the floor of the House of Representatives, where members of Congress and outside observers alike were in awe of his aggressive parliamentary skills. As chairman of the Ways and Means Committee he had special floor privileges to bring up legislation from his committee according to his own schedule and to control the debate. He could be a ruthless parliamentarian, combining sarcastic wit with iron-fisted control. The Speaker of the House was no match for Stevens in this respect. Stevens led the House of Representatives during the Civil War and the early years of Reconstruction up until the time of his death in 1868.

Thaddeus Stevens's power and the manner in which he exercised it can best be understood as a reflection of the institution he served, the positions he held in that institution, and the times themselves. During most of the nineteenth century it was Congress, not the Executive branch, that was the locus of political power in the United States. Congress determined the national agenda. The Civil War strained and partly disrupted the hegemony of Congress in this respect. The tension between Congress and the Presidency increased after Lincoln's assassination, with the Southerner Andrew Johnson in the White House thwarting the plans of the Radical Republicans led by Thaddeus Stevens in the House. Stevens's last battle, which he lost by one vote, was to oust Andrew Johnson as president as the only way to restore congressional plans for Reconstruction.

As chairman of the Ways and Means Committee during the war, and then as first chairman of the newly created Appropriations Committee beginning in 1865, Thaddeus Stevens was at the fulcrum of national political power. The Ways and Means Committee during the Civil War was the undisputed center of the House committee system. At that time its powers to control the purse were unrivaled. Its jurisdiction ranged over all aspects of banking, taxes, tariffs, appropriations, and currency matters. The committee was in charge of the herculean task of financing the Civil War and averting a monetary crisis stemming from the burgeoning national debt. By 1865 the workload was so great in this committee that it was divided into three committees: Ways and Means, Appropriations, and Banking and Currency. Stevens followed the power of the purse and gave up the chairmanship
This portrait of Stevens, taken by an unknown photographer, was donated by Stevens to some Gettysburg friends when he returned to the town in 1865.
of Ways and Means to become the first chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, where he was able to influence spending related to Reconstruction.

What I find of greater interest than trying to measure the theoretical extent of Stevens's power is to understand how political power ebbs and flows within a constitutional system of separated or shared powers. Ultimately the question for us to answer is how he exercised the power he did have at the moment he had it. Furthermore, the very assumptions we often make when studying the exercise of political power in Congress are open to question. Political scientists try to quantify it, and historians, at least quite a few of them these days, tend to ignore it. Today, with positive public attitudes about politicians at a low ebb, it is hard for many citizens, including scholars, to think of politics as a noble profession. This present-minded attitude affects the way we perceive history. Given the current climate, it may be harder to attribute noble motives to the political actions of Thaddeus Stevens.

Traditionally, historians in this country have taken two basic approaches to politics and the exercises of political power. One is the broad general study of institutions, which was far more common fifty or a hundred years ago than it is today. The other is individual biography of political leaders. Both kinds of studies have an important place in our scholarly and popular literature. The general institutional studies tend to describe the structure of government and the constitutional opportunities and restraints on the exercise of power. Often this kind of study is devoid of personality as if all the characters on history's stage are interchangeable. In this kind of study, describing the system is more important than understanding personalities. Biography goes in the other direction by focusing on an individual and using the experiences of that individual to characterize the institutions they served, the issues they fought for, and the times in which they lived. The best examples of the art of political biography in recent times are heavily weighted toward the lives of presidents, where Congress is merely a foil or colorful backdrop to the main action at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. We even measure our history by presidential administrations.

Stevens is a particular enigma in this regard. He held the most important committee chairmanships in the House during a crucial time in history when Congress was the most powerful branch of government. Stevens's power at times did rival that of the president in terms of his impact on the national agenda, not to mention his effort to remove the president himself from office. But I cannot imagine anyone writing a book called the Age of Stevens. His service to his country
and his exercise of political power were conducted within an institution composed of 243 members, the size of the House following the 1860 census.

To better understand his role within the House of Representatives, his relationship with the Senate, and his dealings with the Executive and Judicial branches of government, we cannot rely alone on the model of individual biography, as important as biography can be in an overall evaluation of his life. Nor can we abstractly try to quantify all the bills approved by the Ways and Means Committee or the Appropriations Committee during his tenure as chairman and draw conclusions about his effectiveness as a leader and legislator. Such statistics, useful as they may be, do not account for the process of governing, the clash of personalities and ideas, the conflicting interests, the pressure of public opinion, and the nature of compromise that are hallmarks of the way Congress works.

We need to invent a new kind of study that puts people like Stevens into the context of the institution of the House of Representatives, Congress as a whole, the Executive branch, and the forces that were shaping the conduct of these individuals and institutions, not the least of which is the power of public opinion and the conventional wisdom of their time. One could argue that a good biography does these things, and I would agree that is true to some extent. I would never suggest that biography is not a valuable medium for understanding politics; it is, in fact, one of the best. But we will not fully understand how practical or how dictatorial Stevens was until we see him in operation in the context of his contemporaries in high places in government. How did he get along with his subcommittee chairmen? He gave them considerable autonomy. What were his relations with Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase and other members of the president’s cabinet? Abraham Lincoln spent no time at all developing financial and monetary policy, leaving the details and the policy development to Chase. Stevens practiced a similar policy in the House by delegating authority to his subcommittee chairmen. Stevens was more interested in pushing legislation through on the floor of the House and left to others the details of drafting the legislation.

One of the major bills that Stevens vigorously supported as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee was the Legal Tender Act of 1862. But the author of that bill was one of his subcommittee chairmen, fellow Republican Elbridge Gerry Spaulding of New York, who had served one term in Congress as a Whig from 1849 to 1851, and then served as a Republican for two terms from 1859 to 1863 before returning home to run his own bank in Buffalo. This unheralded congressman,
who earned his place in history as "the father of the greenback," played an important role in monetary policy during the Civil War and helped usher in a whole new system of national currency. The idea of issuing paper money backed only by the faith and credit of the U.S. Government and not by any other securities was an incredibly controversial subject that had many of the nation's bankers, Secretary Chase, and his advisers pitted against it. Thaddeus Stevens backed the bill, but the Committee on Ways and Means was sharply divided on the issue. The best champion the bill had was its author, Elbridge Spaulding.2

The passage of the Legal Tender Act came after earlier administration plans to sell war bonds failed when optimistic estimates of a short war rapidly turned sour. As war debt quickly mounted, something had to be done to secure the faith and credit of the U.S. Government. While Stevens played an important role in the bill's passage, he does not deserve the lion's share of the credit simply because he was chairman of the committee that introduced the bill. And, of course, the House of Representatives did not act alone. The role played by William Pitt Fessenden of Maine, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, went a long way toward assuring passage, with the Senate insisting on several important modifications to the bill. Fessenden was skeptical of paper money and thought it would do moral harm to the country. He reluctantly approved the final version of the bill, but not before he fought on the Senate floor against the idea that greenbacks should be legal tender under all circumstances. You can open your wallet and read the fine print on today's version of the greenback to see the echoes of this Civil War debate first hand.

One final observation about Thaddeus Stevens's legacy. Historians have to make do with the documentary record at our disposal. The records of the House of Representatives present a paradox. On the one hand we have vast quantities of official records, the records of debates, committee reports, newspaper accounts, and the like. In some cases we have ample documentation of the careers of individual members. But we do not have all that we might like to have. The records of individual members are scattered in archives all across the country. Some committee records are hopelessly inadequate and reveal little more than what can be found in published reports. Leadership records are incomplete. We have no equivalent for Congress of the modern Presidential Library System, where one stop can keep a scholar busy for years.

The career of Thaddeus Stevens is one that could benefit from better documentary sources. Stevens left no large corpus of personal letters or diaries. But the
written record of his achievements and his activities is considerable, if scattered. I applaud the launching of the Papers of Thaddeus Stevens Project under the editorship of Beverly Wilson Palmer. It will be very helpful to see scattered and somewhat fugitive material pulled together in one convenient resource. The edition will help us all to better understand the legacy of Thaddeus Stevens.

There is still a great deal we can learn about the history of Pennsylvania, the history of public education, the Civil War and Reconstruction, the House of Representatives, and about the exercise of political power by studying the career of Thaddeus Stevens. As each new generation of scholars revisits familiar ground and new sources alike, searching for new clues to the past, and asking new questions of old evidence, Thaddeus Stevens will remain in the thick of things. Perhaps this is the best indication of all of his significance to Pennsylvania history and to the history of the nation.

Notes

2. Ibid., 154-157.