

MAKING NO DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN RICH  
AND POOR: THADDEUS STEVENS AND  
CLASS EQUALITY

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He was beloved by former slaves who viewed him as champion of their cause for freedom and equal rights. The South despised him as the instigator of the radical Reconstruction policies that plagued the region for more than a decade; Southern author Thomas Dixon even based his character Austin Stoneman on him in his work, *The Clansman*, which became the basis for D.W. Griffith's infamous film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915.<sup>1</sup> During the Civil War and Reconstruction eras of U.S. history, few men garnered as much power in Congress as Pennsylvania Republican Thaddeus Stevens. He was instrumental in matters such as financing the war, bringing the infant Republican Party to dominance in national politics, prosecuting Andrew Johnson's impeachment trial in 1868, and fashioning many pieces of civil rights legislation that helped African Americans commence their new freedom with the support of the federal government.

Since his death in 1868, historians have offered various interpretations of this controversial figure. Those who viewed

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Stevens positively labeled him as a “commoner,” a person intent on implementing political and economic equality all through the country. In 1882 E. B. Callender subtitled his biography on Thaddeus Stevens “Commoner,” stating that his mission in life “was the equality of all men” and to help “the sick and poor.” In his book Alphonse B. Miller acknowledged Stevens’s “fervor for equality,” as well as pointing to the inscription on his tombstone, “Equality of Man Before His Creator,” as definitive proof that even in death Stevens “insisted on fighting the battle of egalitarianism.” Likewise, Fawn M. Brodie noted in *Thaddeus Stevens: Scourge of the South* that most of his legislation was egalitarian in nature, while Hans L. Trefousse subtitled his work on Thaddeus Stevens *Nineteenth-Century Egalitarian*; Trefousse utilized Stevens’ passion for abolition and public education as conclusive evidence of his lasting legacy of egalitarianism.<sup>2</sup>

Several biographers extended Stevens’s egalitarianism further to portray him as an enemy of wealth and privilege. Samuel W. McCall observed that the Pennsylvanian “deemed no man so poor or friendless as to be beneath the equal protection of the laws, and none so powerful to rise above their sway.” He concluded, “Privilege never had a more powerful nor a more consistent foe.” Thomas Frederick Woodley used the term *The Great Leveler* as the title of his biography, so designating him as the leveler when it came to his political life and career, and James Albert Woodburn portrayed him as a “relentless foe of Privilege” in *The Life of Thaddeus Stevens*.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, some historians have been very critical of Stevens’s support for the protective tariff and American industry, considering him a defender of the elite rather than the common person. In *Old Thad Stevens: A Story of Ambition*, Richard N. Current identified the Pennsylvania congressman as a “champion” of Northern industrialists, at the same time claiming that Stevens assisted in bringing about “the Age of Big Business, with its concentration of wealth, its diffusion of poverty, its inequalities and its inequities.” Furthermore, Alphonse Miller, who did recognize the egalitarian propensities of the Commoner, wrote that Stevens “was the most powerful legislative advocate that big business had.”<sup>4</sup>

Both historical interpretations reflected only part of Stevens’s true thinking on economic issues. While he did spend his life aiding the poor and oppressed, he also sought to bolster the upper class and business community. Stevens was more a complex economic and political thinker than a guardian of the poor or a representative of the elite. Like most Republicans of that era,

he displayed an obsession with the concept of equality, whether political or economic, due to the fact that he staunchly believed in the “absolute equality of all men before the law.”<sup>5</sup> Whether they endorsed the freedom and political rights of African Americans, defended the different economic classes from oppression by the government, or professed the concept of equality of opportunity for everybody, Republicans believed they were trying to treat all citizens equally. Thaddeus Stevens was no different. The Commoner’s principles, words, and actions, which were those of the most Republican Party generally, strictly benefited neither the rich nor the poor; indeed, Stevens strove for a certain type of egalitarianism based upon the concept of economic class equality.

Even though Thaddeus Stevens spent most of his life in the Keystone State, he was born in Danville, Vermont, in 1792. He experienced many obstacles on his road to success. He was born with a clubfoot, which forced him to walk with a cane as he became older. A horrid disease caused him to lose all of his hair; he would wear a wig to cover his embarrassing baldness. In addition, Stevens’s father disappeared, and his mother was left to raise four sons by herself in an extremely impoverished situation. His destitute condition as a child shaped part of his future political thinking. As he remarked in 1837, poverty was “a blessing—for if there be any human sensation more ethereal and divine than all others, it is that which feelingly sympathises with misfortune.”<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his private life, Stevens was an avid helper of those in need, willing at any moment, as Alexander Harris wrote, “to extend a helping hand.”<sup>7</sup> His charitable contributions were legendary, and many of his Republican colleagues, such as John Sherman and James G. Blaine, reminisced about it decades later in their autobiographies and memoirs.<sup>8</sup> According to one newspaper, Stevens had “done more to comfort and aid and foster the poor, and the poor man’s children, ever since he had a dollar to spare.” A famous incident occurred when Stevens returned home to witness a widow’s house and farm being auctioned due to foreclosure. Stevens entered the bidding, won the farm for \$1,600, and then returned the property to the widow free of charge. When the Commoner died in 1868, his will earmarked large sums for his relatives, churches, schools, and colleges, and he never collected funds totaling thousands of dollars from business sales or loans.<sup>9</sup> Stevens gave, as several historians observed, “freely” and “recklessly, without regard to merit or necessity.” Undoubtedly, his experiences as a poor child made him more aware of the difficult circumstances that low-income people

faced each day. In *Thaddens Stevens: A Being Darkly Wise and Rudely Great*, Ralph Korngold pointed out that Stevens hated poverty because it restricted and humiliated people who were caught in that horrid state, which helps to understand his unwavering devotion to assisting them with his own personal finances.<sup>10</sup>

Along with his private charitable gifts, Stevens aided the poor during his public career as a member of both the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and the U.S. Congress. In the Pennsylvania House, Stevens was one of the first members to call for free public education for all children. When the measure was being debated, opponents sought to derail it by forcing the towns to keep public records of their low-income children. Stevens utterly detested this provision. He commented, “Hereditary distinctions of rank are sufficiently odious; but that which is founded on poverty is infinitely more so.” If this provision was to go into effect, the law ought to be renamed “an act for branding and marking the poor, so they may be known from the rich and the proud.” Stevens hated the idea of using schools to denigrate the poor when the intention of the program was to benefit all economic classes, including the children of the affluent who could also send their children to these free schools. Recording the names of poor children produced “castes and grades, founded on no merit of the particular generation, but on the demerits of their ancestors; an aristocracy of the most odious and insolent kind—the aristocracy of wealth and pride.” Due to his passionate criticism of the law, the Pennsylvania House of Representatives reversed their decision and removed it from the education bill.<sup>11</sup>

In 1837 Stevens was invited to attend the Pennsylvania Constitutional Convention. Yet again, the Commoner found himself defending his stance on public education and attacking the notion of making impoverished children a matter of public record. This time, he insisted that the idea created “one rank, composed of the wealth of the land, and another of the plebeians and poor,” and its ultimate effect was to devastate “the spirit of many of your young men.” He continued to deride the idea as uncaring and harmful, observing that making such a blatant distinction between children of different economic classes was not “in accordance with that spirit of liberty, which should prevail in every free country.”<sup>12</sup>

When he won election to Congress, Stevens resumed his push for more free public schools. In 1862, in the midst of the Civil War, he supported a bill establishing schools in the District of Columbia, to be funded from the profits gained by the Washington and Georgetown Railroad. Several members

of Congress spoke out against the bill, and Stevens deduced that they did so because they did not believe poor children were worthy of educating with public money. “We should,” said Stevens, “take care of the rising generation, and give them an opportunity of being educated, whether their fathers and mothers are able to educate them or not.”<sup>13</sup> The House eventually passed the bill. Moreover, he backed the creation of the Department of Education to help the newly freed slaves receive schooling to become productive citizens. He was critical, though, of giving them an upper-level education too quickly, preferring to teach them the basics so that they might be able to vote, find work, and take care of themselves. Speaking on the House floor a month before his death, Stevens said, “I should be ashamed to vote against educating the people. I would track them from the lowest man or boy who could be taught to read and write upward until the sciences would become germane to their condition.”<sup>14</sup>

The issue of free public schools became a vital component for the Republican Party and its program for creating a self-sustaining and self-reliant citizenry within the United States; the party hoped to give “every child growing up in the land of opportunity of a good common-school education.”<sup>15</sup> Republicans believed education was so important because it would transform children into upstanding and intelligent adults—central to an informed electorate. Free education as well led to the diffusion of intelligence and opportunity to succeed in the nation’s capitalist economy. It helped not only the poor children whose parents were mostly unable financially to provide a decent education, but also those children in the middle and upper classes who were also allowed to attend the schools for free.<sup>16</sup> At the end of his life, Stevens judged the cause of public education in Pennsylvania his only successful venture as a political figure, mentioning to a friend that it “was the proudest effort of my life. It gave schools to the poor and helpless children of the state.”<sup>17</sup>

Besides helping the poor in general to improve their condition, Stevens fought all of his life to aid African American slaves. For the more “radical” Republicans, ending the institution of slavery was a passionate mission. Since they presented themselves as the party of equality, these Republicans led campaigns to give slaves economic freedom and political rights, which they espoused in their 1864 and 1868 party platforms.<sup>18</sup> They wanted African Americans to enjoy the benefits stated in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, just as most whites had experienced for the first 100 years of the nation’s history; this included the right

to have an equal opportunity to pursue their version of the American dream and enjoy the fruits of their hard work.<sup>19</sup>

It has never been clear as to why Stevens took what was, at that time, a radical position on the slavery question. Some speculated that his transition occurred when, as a young lawyer, he defended a slave owner in court against a slave who claimed she was free because for some time she lived in Pennsylvania, which had already outlawed slavery. He won the case but probably felt guilt for standing on the side of slavery. After that point, "Stevens believed that the ownership of human beings was wrong and that equal rights were the cornerstone of republican institutions." Whatever the occasion, he worked tirelessly to end the institution and to reach out his hand in assistance to them whenever it was possible through his law practice and his efforts with the Underground Railroad.<sup>20</sup> In 1850, during Stevens's first term in Congress, members debated how to handle the newly acquired lands from the Mexican War, especially concerning the slave question. When Henry Clay fashioned the Compromise of 1850, Stevens denounced the measure as too conciliatory to the Southern states.<sup>21</sup> He continued to speak zealously against slavery throughout his many years as a member of Congress; one of the most famous examples occurred in January of 1862, when he pleaded to his colleagues to utilize a victory in the Civil War as a means to end slavery. "Without slavery," said the Pennsylvanian, "we should this day be a united and happy people. So long as it exists, we cannot have a solid Union." Stevens admitted that he could never condone "ownership of any human being in any human soul;" from his standpoint, slavery created "savages of human beings," and the only way to prevent this from happening was to halt its practice. He concluded his speech by declaring,

The occasion is forced upon us, and the invitation presented to strike the chains from four millions of human beings, and create them MEN; to extinguish slavery on this whole continent; to wipe out, so far as we are concerned, the most hateful and infernal blot that ever disgraced the escutcheon of man.

With the end of the war in 1865, Stevens witnessed his lifelong goal accomplished when the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, became a part of the U.S. Constitution.<sup>22</sup>

Although the slaves achieved freedom, many still faced dire circumstances. Most had very little money, no land, no homes, and little if any education.

Once more, the ex-slaves found an ally in the Commoner. Stevens sponsored the formation of the Freedmen's Bureau, which built schools and provided job skill training to African Americans. He, however, deemed even that insufficient, and in 1866 Stevens presented to Congress a measure that would offer forty acres per man from land confiscated from Southerners during the war.<sup>23</sup> Despite some congressional support, President Andrew Johnson, along with more moderate Republicans and the Democrats, wanted to give the land back to pardoned rebels. This action angered Stevens, as many African Americans had already settled the land and built homes, schools, and churches for themselves. Stevens condemned those who opposed his plan, stating, "Some of our friends here still retain a portion of their old hatred of the negro."<sup>24</sup> When it appeared inevitable that the lands were going to be returned to the former owners, Stevens tried to help the African Americans by having the government pay them twenty-five dollars per acre for land they had improved. "By our Freedmen's Bureau law, the abandoned lands were ordered to be seized and allotted among the freedmen. This has been done," declared Stevens. They utilized the land wisely, fostering strong communities, but

It is now sought to allow the rebels whose lands we thus seized to come back and expel the men whom the Government allotted these freeholds, as it was bound to doing honestly and in law. Those freedmen are to be turned out. It does not say that the Government shall expend twenty-five dollars an acre for the land for the purpose of placing these freedmen somewhere else, where they have no homes and no plantation to work. I say that would be cruel and unjust.

The Republican-controlled Congress eventually passed Stevens's measure. Johnson vetoed the bill, but there were enough votes in both chambers to override his veto.<sup>25</sup>

While helping the unfortunate, Stevens saw no problem in assisting with equal zeal the needs of the wealthy and business community. The chance to accumulate wealth was a central principle for most Republicans and their views on economic policies for the United States. Lincoln once remarked in 1860 that the best course of action for the government to take on the economy was "to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can."<sup>26</sup> Most in the party felt, just as Lincoln, that those who had achieved wealth and stature were positive examples that would encourage everyone to strive to reach such heights. Republicans also believed that the accumulation of

wealth by some led to national prosperity that benefited every person participating in the economy.<sup>27</sup> As George Boutwell succinctly stated, “every man is interested in adding as much as possible to the wealth of the community.”<sup>28</sup>

Stevens demonstrated a strong desire to accumulate wealth for himself. In 1811 he entered Dartmouth College as a sophomore and excelled academically, giving the valedictorian’s address when he graduated in 1814. He reasoned that the greatest asset of a civilization was the pursuit of property and wealth. Before humanity had turned to the “acquisition and unequal distribution of wealth,” they lived “in a state of barbarism,” characterized by an equally shared poverty. Societal improvements only came when men began pursuing “new motives of pleasure and profit.” Although the pursuit and acquisition of wealth led to abuses and luxury, Stevens considered these inevitable byproducts of a process that produced more comforts and greater happiness and, therefore, was “more entitled to applause than censure.” Besides, “debauchery, intemperance and idleness” were the inevitable results of the unequal distribution of wealth, and they were more prevalent in an impoverished community than an affluent one. Stevens continued, “If the lofty mansion sometimes becomes the habitations of costly excess, the hovel and the cabin are as frequently polluted by the gratifications of baser passions.” The pursuit of wealth caused society to improve itself, and that improvement “has banished barbarism” for a more civilized and cultured society.<sup>29</sup>

Stevens recounted the fact that most historical civilizations witnessed the jealousy and hatred the poor classes held against the wealthy because they felt overpowered and abused by them. With this seed of hatred, demagogues who supposedly “championed” their cause easily seduced the poor; this led to what Stevens termed “party spirit” in the political sphere, and its ultimate consequences were division and conflict in a nation. To prevent this negative outcome, the pursuit and unequal distribution of wealth should be praised instead of punished. Stevens saved his criticisms for people who abused wealth rather than those who earned it. His overall economic philosophy here corresponded to an important strain of the early republic’s republican ideology: productive citizens would earn unequal amounts, but in a virtuous society where all men were free to pursue their economic interests, the extremes and political byproducts of inequality could be avoided.<sup>30</sup> In later years, the Republican Party would also condemn the idea of instigating a “war on property” by those seeking to advance their own political agenda. As Abraham Lincoln remarked in an 1864 speech, “Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another; but let him labor diligently and build one for himself.”<sup>31</sup>

As chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, Stevens took a strong interest in financial matters all through his years in Congress. Just as he willingly helped the destitute with free public education, Stevens also supported the wealthy and privileged classes in society; one of the most prominent examples of this was his criticism of a proposed progressive income tax. With the Civil War placing unprecedented financial strains on the U.S. government, Congress passed a law to create the nation's first income tax in 1861.<sup>32</sup> While Stevens was supportive of the idea, he also recognized that it would be unpopular, mainly due to the tax collectors coming to the doorsteps of every American household.<sup>33</sup> "The Committee of Ways and Means are conscious that it is a most unpleasant duty for them to propose such a measure," he said as he reluctantly voted for the tax. In 1862 Stevens supported an increase in the tax rate. However, he balked in 1864 when his colleagues attempted to enact three progressive rates for income taxation.<sup>34</sup>

A fellow Republican, Augustus Frank, proposed income tax brackets of 3, 5, and 10 percent.<sup>35</sup> When the bill came to the floor of the House, Stevens went into a long tirade, defending wealthy individuals and their right to keep their property from the confiscatory arm of the government. Referring to graduated tax rates as "vicious" for rich people, he complained, "It seems to me that it is a strange way to punish men because they are rich. . . . If any man dare go above a certain amount, more than I am worth or any other member, then we should take it all." Stevens held that the government should in no way make any distinctions between people, even if some have greater wealth and incomes than others. He completed his speech by remarking, "the principle of taxing a man worth \$20,000 more in proportion to his wealth is an unjust one. . . . If he is worth over a million dollars we might as well provide that the Government shall take the surplus."<sup>36</sup> Contending that a flat tax rather than progressive brackets was better for the nation, Stevens continued to support the wealthy a year later when Republican Justin Morrill of Vermont presented a bill to make one flat rate of 10 percent for incomes exceeding \$3,000; Stevens supported his proposal.<sup>37</sup>

As the debate on progressive income tax rates continued, many Republicans made similar arguments against the proposition. James Negley noted that "if the poor man has an unquestionable right of equality with the rich . . . so the latter has the same right of equality of the former." A Republican senator pointed to the fact that government should never "create nor tolerate any distinction of rank, race, or color." To Republicans, they were "a party of justice

and equality,” which included treating all men the same regardless of their current economic standing.<sup>38</sup> Despite strong attacks on the progressive rates, the 1864 bill became law until it expired in 1872.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the income tax, Stevens maintained a permanent commitment to high protective tariffs. The tariff, a centerpiece of Henry Clay’s “American System” that supported the industrialization of the United States, was eagerly espoused by businesses to protect their products from cheap foreign goods.<sup>40</sup> Although it was primarily an ideal promoted by Whigs, Republicans developed the tariff into a central philosophy for economic development, believing that it not only helped the wealthy and business community, but also the workers and general population. As Eric Foner pointed out in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, Republicans argued that the tariff “was designed primarily to advance the interests of labor . . . to protect American workingmen against the competition of cheap foreign labor.”<sup>41</sup> As they explained in their 1872 party platform, their duty as part of a representative government was to shape legislation “to secure full protection and the amplest field for capital, and for labor.”<sup>42</sup> Since they deemed that the tariff benefited both labor and capital equally, it was a worthy proposition for the federal government to defend and implement.

Stevens, as a businessman in the iron industry, consistently backed the tariff. During his first stint in Congress, the Pennsylvanian gave a lengthy oration on the advantages of a high protective tariff, claiming that it would increase manufacturing and economic activities in the great cities of the West and Midwest. Only “barbarian tribes,” he argued, practiced free trade, whereas high protective tariffs had proven over history to be the “true, natural, and wise policy of nations.” He also contended that labor would eventually reap the rewards of a prosperous economy, noting that it was “impossible to benefit labor without aiding capital, and its impossible to benefit capital without aiding labor.”<sup>43</sup>

During the Civil War, Stevens continued his protectionist ways. He supported the Morrill Tariff of 1861 that raised the rates and attacked those who sought to lower the tariff. Free traders were “blind to everything but a theory which is a mere theory, and can never be reduced to practice without crushing all industry of this country.”<sup>44</sup> When in 1866 a congressman from Iowa suggested lowering the tariff to help poor farmers in the West pay for cheaper industrial products, Stevens outwardly rejected the idea, pointing out,

I had hoped the time had arrived for building up in every neighborhood, in every portion of the country, a market for our home products.

We have long enough been tributary to the pauper labor of Europe, and we have long enough been deluded by the idle idea that when we put protection upon articles manufactured in this country we injure consumers here.

Stevens closed his remarks by calling the idea of a low tariff and free trade “erroneous.”<sup>45</sup>

Besides the tariff, Republicans believed government support for railroads was “demanded by the interests of the whole country,” so a national railroad needed to be speedily built.<sup>46</sup> Stevens belonged to the Committee on Pacific Railroads, calling them “one of the greatest enterprises of the age.”<sup>47</sup> In 1862 he proposed a bill to provide Union Pacific \$50 million in government subsidies and 11 million acres of government land to build a national railroad; he stated that the railroad “should be speedily built.”<sup>48</sup> He also wanted a Northern Pacific Railroad to be constructed to help settle the sparsely populated western states. Identifying railroads as the “great civilizers,” Stevens asserted that they would bring the fractured nation together after four years of war and destruction: “we bind together our nation, because by it the countless millions which would soon swarm into the western world would be united by the bonds of interest.” This interest, according to Stevens, was based on mutual economic benefit; industrialized states, such as Pennsylvania, now had the ability to promote their products in the new markets in the West. Stevens wrote several other bills to aid the construction of railroads, including lines from Washington, DC, to New York City and from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean. He hoped to furnish for free public lands to the People’s Pacific Railroad Company. Hans Trefousse noted that Stevens had a “permanent devotion” to the new transportation system that utilized iron (which he manufactured) for its lines, and Miller wrote that Stevens and the corporations “saw eye to eye.”<sup>49</sup>

“We have made no distinction,” Stevens stated during the debate of progressive income tax rates, “between one man and another because one is richer than another.”<sup>50</sup> Stevens neither encouraged the impoverished to blame the wealthy for their predicament nor ignored them when he defended the upper class. Stevens despised distinguishing between the different economic classes, evident in both his antagonism for progressive tax rates and recording the names of poor children in public schools in the state of Pennsylvania. When he backed a bill, he usually argued how it would ultimately benefit everybody. It is a fact that Thaddeus Stevens advocated for a protective tariff in his tenure in Congress and supported the ambitions of big business, such as

railroad companies, but he did so believing that in a strong industrial nation the common laborer and farmer would profit as much as the capitalist. He defended the wealthy class's right to own and maintain property, while also pushing for free public schools to help poor children and for land for the newly freed slaves.

Stevens shared with the new Republican Party a determination to treat all men equally. With its more radical members, he fought diligently to end slavery and grant political equality for African Americans. Likewise, they believed that since the government should make no distinctions between men based upon their skin color, it should not, as well, discriminate based upon wealth. During his entire life and career, Stevens supported economic opportunity for all classes, and doing his best to construct policies to benefit both the rich and poor. We can only wonder how he would have reacted, had he lived another decade, to the trials of the Molly Maguires and the railroad strikes in 1877 where these interests emerged as incompatible.

## NOTES

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48. *Congressional Globe, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, 1949–50*.
49. *Congressional Globe, 39th Congress, 1st Session, 2244*; *Congressional Globe, 38th Congress, 1st Session*; Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 194; Miller, *Thaddeus Stevens*, 225.
50. *Congressional Globe, 38th Congress, 1st Session, 1876*.