

SPEECH
OF
HON. THADDEUS STEVENS,
OF PENNSYLVANIA,

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, FEBRUARY 13, 1867.

The House having under consideration the bill (H. R. No. 1143) to provide for the more effectual government of the insurrectionary States—

Mr. STEVENS said:

Mr. SPEAKER: In the present state of my health a few words must suffice for what I have to say at this time. Besides my physical inability, I feel a moral depression, possibly without sufficient cause, when I see the condition of the great party that is responsible for the doings of this Congress, and to which I belong; to see it, in my judgment, about to destroy itself, to place itself in a condition which ought to destroy it.

For the last few months Congress has been sitting here, and while the South has been bleeding at every pore, Congress has done nothing to protect the loyal people there, white or black, either in their persons, in their liberty, or in their property. Although we are insensible to it, the whole country is alive to the effect of the supineness with which this Congress has conducted itself. I of course have no right to reproach anybody. I do not reproach any one. I simply grieve that such is the condition of the country, one which is not realized apparently by the House, and especially that part of it which is responsible to the nation. We are enjoying ourselves in a tolerable way, those of us who have health and spirits, while the South is covered all over with anarchy and murder and rapine.

The President has sought to establish what

he says will effect the union of these States, if yielded to by Congress. The Congress has declared that the President has usurped powers which do not belong to him; that all that he has done is void in the face of the law; and that Congress alone has the power to protect these people and to create governments, and yet we sit by and move no hand, we sit by and raise no voice to effect what we declare to be the duty of Congress. I know not how other gentlemen may view it, but so far as I am myself concerned—I charge none else with it—I view it as great dereliction of duty.

We are asked by gentlemen why we who are upon the joint Committee on Reconstruction have not presented some plan upon which Congress could act. We have been asked it with some acrimony by the gentleman from Ohio [Mr. SCHENCK] and others on this side of the House; we have been asked it with more propriety by gentlemen on the other side.

Now, it must be remembered that during this session of Congress we had no opportunity of acting until after the holidays, and since that time we have had but little over a month. It must be remembered that when the holidays had passed and Congress had again assembled there was a plan, whether good or bad, presented to this House for consideration, upon which a debate of three weeks took place without any attempt to amend it. And then there was a course of action pursued on the part of a gentleman, [Mr. BINGHAM,] who, it seemed

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to me, in a most unparliamentary and discourteous manner took charge of that bill when it had been reported, before the author of it had any opportunity to make any motion in regard to it; and with a vigor, an energy, and if I may say so without offense, with a doggedness which would have done great credit to Stonewall Jackson in his palmiest days. Although appealed to, time after time, he refused to allow the bill to be open to amendment. It will be remembered that I asked that the motion to recommit should be withdrawn, to give an opportunity to the House, if they did not like the bill in its then condition, to go on and perfect it. But it was defiantly refused; and inasmuch as this House sustained the refusal I of course have nothing to say. I accept the position, as the rebels do, because it cannot be helped.

But we have been told that we do not offer anything. I do not know whether that bill was good or bad; I thought it was a good bill; I had labored upon it in conjunction with several committees of loyal men from the South for four months, I had altered and realtered it, written and rewritten it four several times; and found that it met the approbation of numerous societies and meetings in all the southern States. It was, therefore, not altogether my fault if it was not so good a bill as might be found; but I did think that, after all, it was uncivil, unjust, indecent not to attempt to amend it and make it better, to see whether we could do something to enable our friends in the southern States to establish institutions according to the principles of republican government.

I warned the House that if that bill should go back to the committee it must die. My vigorous friend from Ohio assured us that such would not be the effect, that the bill would come back here fresh and blooming in the course of a couple of days. Where is it now? Why have we not something in lieu of it that suits the gentleman? for I may say that this bill came from that same committee, after careful examination, with the unanimous consent of every member of the committee belonging to this side of the House except one. It came here with a perfect understanding that if it was to pass and become a law it must pass without amendment. It was not intended as a

reconstruction bill. It was intended simply as a police bill to protect the loyal men from anarchy and murder, until this Congress, taking a little more time, can suit gentlemen in a bill for the admission of all those rebel States upon the basis of civil government.

But, sir, this bill encounters precisely the same obstacles as the other, and is met in precisely the same spirit. There are in it some words in regard to which there is a difficulty about the spelling. Several of my friends cannot accept the bill because adverbs are improperly placed; and while on this side of the House gentlemen do not pretend to object to its main features, yet they do object to its particles and its articles; and what is worse than all, for I have tried to alter the language to suit my friends around me, they have with a pertinacious determination taken every possible step to pledge this Congress to what we are pleased to call a constitutional amendment, as a finalty, so that its adoption by the South shall secure their admission. Gentlemen on this side have maintained that these conquered districts are States; and my friend from Ohio [Mr. BINGHAM] declared this morning with proper exultation that he had succeeded in passing through this House a bill which uses the word "States" precisely as the President uses it in his theory as to the right of admission of those claiming to represent the rebel States.

But, sir, the gentleman's announcement was no news to me. It was only in accordance with what I have seen all winter. I saw it in the magnificent peroration of the gentleman in the last discussion with regard to the bill to which I have referred. It is now proposed to pledge Congress in advance to that to which we have no right to pledge them—the admission of those States when certain things shall be done. Why, sir, are we to pledge future Congresses?

Mr. SHELLABARGER. The gentleman will permit me to say that there was embodied in one section of the Louisiana bill a distinct declaration that if the State should seek representation here under the Constitution provided for in that bill, its admission shall be on such terms as the Congress to which application is made shall demand. That provision was inserted for the very purpose of excluding

the conclusion that Congress when the time comes shall not declare what it may deem the proper terms of admission.

Mr. BLAINE. And my amendment leaves the question entirely to future Congresses, just exactly as that does.

Mr. STEVENS. What I am speaking of is this proposed step toward universal amnesty and universal Andy-Johnsonism. [Laughter.] If this Congress so decides, it will give me great pleasure to join in the *io triumphe* of the gentleman from Ohio in leading this House, possibly by forbidden paths, into the sheepfold or the goatfold of the President.

Now, sir, what do we propose by this bill? We propose simply to protect them, and if any gentleman chooses to introduce to-morrow a joint resolution based on the bill of the gentleman from Ohio, the New Orleans bill, and making it applicable to all these States, I have no doubt that it will be passed through this House in a few hours and will become law. If the other can become a law, so could it.

But why tie us up by this pledge in advance to the constitutional amendment? I do not like to say anything against that amendment, sir, although I have no respect for it. But why touch it? There is a difference of opinion; why distract the party, unless it is for the benefit of others in other quarters?

Mr. Speaker, I feel quite unwilling to discuss questions of this kind after seeing the foregone conclusion of the House, but I am so clearly impressed with the importance of this bill that I have thought proper, unwell as I am, to say this much.

If, sir, I might presume upon my age, without claiming any of the wisdom of Nestor, I would suggest to the young gentlemen around me, that the deeds of this burning crisis, of this solemn day, of this thrilling moment, will cast their shadows far into the future and will make their impress upon the annals of our history, and that we shall appear upon the bright pages of that history, just in so far as we cordially, without guile, without bickering, without small criticisms, lend our aid to promote the great cause of humanity and universal liberty.

I know that the gentlemen upon the other side of the House believe that this is a harsh measure; and so does the gentleman from

Ohio on this side, who to-day, and the other day, made beautiful appeals to our sense of humanity, and depicted the glory of a great nation forgiving great criminals for unrepented crimes.

I am aware that gentlemen, here and elsewhere, have seemed to be ambitious to enunciate principles of forgiveness, benevolence, and mercy still more startling and saintly than those of the Athenian or the Galilean sage. Sir, generosity and benevolence are the noblest qualities of our nature; but when you squander them upon vagabonds and thieves you do that which can command no respect from any quarter. The sublime, I might almost say divine, doctrines or religion promulgated by Socrates, and so much more nobly and divinely expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, seem to require acts of self-restraint almost beyond the reach of man. And yet in urging forgiveness they refer simply to private offenses, to personal transgressions, where men can well forgive their enemies and smother their feelings of revenge without injury to anybody. But what has that to do with municipal punishment? What has that to do with political sanction of political crimes? When public tribunals, municipalities, nations pass sentence for crimes committed and decree confiscation for crimes unrepented, there is no question of malignity. When the judge sentences the convict he has no animosity. When the hangman executes the culprit he rather pities than hates him. These acts have no faculty of cruelty in them. Cruelty does not belong to their vocabulary. These officers of the law are but carrying out what the law decrees. The law commands, the law executes; but the law is unimpassioned. The law has no feeling of malignity, no feeling of vengeance. Gentlemen mistake, therefore, when they make these appeals to us in the name of humanity.

Mr. Speaker, I desire to say what perhaps had better not be said, that gentlemen who are thus, either by direction or indirection, defending the cause or palliating the conduct of these rebel traitors are making for themselves no good record with posterity. They, sir, who while preaching this doctrine are hugging and caressing those whose hands are red and whose garments are dripping with the blood of our and their murdered kindred, are covering them-

selves with indelible stains, which all the waters of the Nile cannot wash out.

Mr. Speaker, a single word as to the number of amendments. There are seven of them; and I am satisfied that any one of them, if ingrafted upon this bill will be sure to kill it. This bill proposes to do certain things. If there is anything further desired, let it be accomplished in some other way. The bill of the gentleman from Ohio [Mr. ASHLEY] may be a good bill, but it has no business here, it is not pertinent to this question. Of the amendment of the other gentleman from Ohio [Mr. BINGHAM] I have already spoken. The amendment of his colleague [Mr. LAWRENCE] shows great care and wisdom; but I implore that gentleman not to thrust it upon this bill to its utter destruction. Just so with the amendment of the gentleman from Kentucky, [Mr. TRIMBLE.] The bill of the gentleman from Maine [Mr. LYNCH] is a very desirable one and more effective than that of his colleague from Maine, [Mr. BLAINE,] and could I vote for either, did I not know that either would be ruinous to this bill, I would accept that in preference to any other.

The amendment of the distinguished and gallant gentleman from Massachusetts [Mr. BANKS] has undoubtedly much talent in it. It applies, however, only to a single State—

Mr. BANKS. I did not propose any amendment to this bill.

Mr. STEVENS. I know; but it is on the file of amendments. I fear that that bill would not succeed. It proposes to set up a contrivance at the mouths of the Mississippi, and by hydraulic action to control all the States that are washed by the waters of that great stream. [Laughter.]

So I might go on with two or three more. The amendment of the gentleman from Maine, [Mr. BLAINE,] as I said before, lets in a vast number of rebels, and shuts out nobody. All I ask is that when the House comes to vote upon that amendment it shall understand that the adoption of it would be an entire surrender of those States into the hands of the rebels.

Mr. Speaker, I feel that I have already trespassed too long upon the House; and as there may be a wish to take the vote now, as it is about four o'clock, I shall sit down, so as to leave it to the House to determine.

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