

Thaddeus Stevens. Oil-tinted photograph, Mathew Brady. Office of The Architect of The Capitol, U.S. Capitol, Washington, D.C.

Old Thad Stevens

By Hans Trefousse

Stevens was ready to lead the Radical Republicans in reuniting the Union—but sometimes even they were not ready for his far-reaching reforms.

It was during the Civil War and Reconstruction that Thaddeus Stevens really became famous. The leading radical in the House, like his colleagues he has often been portrayed as constantly struggling with the administration, frequently colliding with Lincoln, just as he later collided with Andrew Johnson. In reality, however, he again conformed to the norm. Neither he nor the other radicals could ever have accomplished anything had Lincoln not sympathized with them. The fact that this situation changed after the president's death—Johnson had no understanding of their goals—contributed substantially to their difficulties. It was the interaction between Lincoln and radicals like Stevens that enabled the country to prosecute the war. It also made possible the final extinction of slavery.

Convinced that the war presented an opportunity to end the "peculiar institution" once and for all, the radicals lost no time in agitating for emancipation. Old Thad stood in the forefront of this struggle. Arguing that by rebellion the South had forfeited all constitutional rights, at the first session of the wartime Congress he stated that only the laws of war were applicable to it; the victor could do with the vanquished what he pleased. "I wish gentlemen could read what Vattel says about this subject," he admonished. "One of the most glorious consequences of victory is giving freedom to those who are oppressed." One of the few Republicans refusing to vote for the pro-slavery Johnson-Crittenden Resolutions, he predicted that the time would come when every bondsman in the South would be called upon to help restore the Union.

As a radical leader, Stevens was without peer.

Relentlessly driving his colleagues forward, he marshaled his hosts, took advantage of parliamentary loopholes, and delivered blunt speeches, totally free of evasion. Observers now remark upon his over-hanging brows, his thin, stern lips, and his defiant expression. They also recognize his steadfast devotion to his cause.

He never flagged in its advocacy. At the opening of the regular session of Congress, he introduced resolutions calling on the president to declare free all slaves who aided in the suppression of the rebellion. Early in 1862, when the bill for emancipation in the District of Columbia was to be discussed, he announced his intentions of not permitting any other legislation to interfere with it. "It is somewhere provided that all the wicked shall be damned," he said to an opponent who wanted the inhabitants to vote on the subject. "I would propose to my colleague that he propose a proviso to that, 'providing they consent thereto.'" He also became a persistent advocate of the Second Confiscation Act, which called for the emancipation of the slaves of insurgents and for the recruiting of black soldiers. These measures passed. General emancipation, however, had to await the president's action.

Like Stevens, Lincoln abhorred slavery. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong," he stated. Nevertheless, he had a much better sense of timing than Stevens and the radicals. Making use of them to counteract the conservatives, he was able to move at his own speed. But he always moved forward, and without him, Stevens could hardly have prevailed.

Although Lincoln had not been the Com-

moner's first choice, early in 1861 Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase assured him that the president-elect was a man to be depended upon. Charles Sumner, too, said that the president was only some six weeks behind, and Lincoln himself did not deny it. "These radical men have in them the stuff . . . on which we must mainly rely . . .," he admitted. "If one side must be crushed out and the other cherished, there could be no doubt which side we would choose as fuller of hope for the future. We would have to side with the radicals."

He believed them nearer to him than their opponents, though bitterly hostile to him personally. "They are utterly lawless—the unhandiest devils to deal with," he said, "but after all, their faces are set Zionwards." And so he made use of their abolitionist activities for his own similar purposes.

" . . . Stevens was always in advance of public sentiment. . . ."

The first example of this collaboration was the president's approval, albeit reluctant, of the First Confiscation Act. And while the radicals, with Stevens in the lead, were busily working for emancipation, Lincoln approached border state representatives to urge them to free their slaves. He signed the bill for freedom in the District and, after asking for certain modifications, the Second Confiscation Act as well. In fact, persistent radical agitation enabled him to draw up his Emancipation Proclamation. It was not as thoroughgoing as Stevens would have liked, but it was definitely a step forward.

During 1864 and 1865, the radicals were hard at work to pass a constitutional amendment ending slavery throughout the country. Stevens was wholly committed to it, and Lincoln, too, believed that an amendment was necessary to make emancipation permanent. He was nominated on a platform specifically advocating it; moreover, it could never have been passed without his aid. Using patronage and other executive pressures, he managed to procure the needed votes.

Old Thad's final statement on the measure was a brief speech in the House on January 13, 1865. Proudly reviewing his longtime opposition to slavery, he expressed the hope that his epitaph would read, "Here lies one who never rose to any eminence, and only courted 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, language, and color." Some two weeks later the House, prodded by the radicals

and helped by Lincoln, passed the amendment. Slavery was well on the way to extinction. The radicals in general and Stevens in particular had done their work well.

The radicals' final wartime problem was the question of Reconstruction. On this subject Stevens was more extreme than most of his colleagues. But even on this issue, on which they differed fundamentally, Lincoln and the radicals, including Stevens, held some views in common. Stevens believed that the seceded states were out of the Union; Lincoln did not. Yet no more than Stevens was he willing to allow conservative Southerners to have their way once the war was over. Some radicals sought to prevent this by calling for black suffrage, a proposal so extreme that Stevens did not clearly advocate it until after the war. The president, however, did not reject it. At first privately in a letter to Governor Michael Hahn of Louisiana, and then publicly in his last speech, he also urged at least limited black enfranchisement.

Like so many of his colleagues, Stevens never fully appreciated Lincoln. He frequently criticized the president: for dismissing John C. Frémont, for countermanding David Hunter's emancipation orders, for vetoing the Wade-Davis Bill, and for retaining conservatives in the Cabinet. Yet he did establish a working relationship with the White House. "He and Lincoln," recalled Alexander McClure, who knew both well, "worked substantially on the same lines, earnestly striving to attain the same ends, but Stevens was always in advance of public sentiment, while Lincoln ever halted until assured that the considered judgment of the nation would sustain him. . . . Stevens was ever clearing the underbrush and preparing the soil, while Lincoln followed to sow the seeds that were to ripen in a regenerated Union."

According to McClure, it would have been impossible for Lincoln to issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862 had Stevens not declared for the abolition of slavery at the beginning of the war. These observations were an accurate description not only of the president's relations with Stevens but with the radicals as a whole as well.

However, it was Johnson, not Lincoln, who was to be responsible for executive policies after the war, when Reconstruction became the country's foremost concern. The new president had no patience with the aspirations of the freedmen; if he considered black suffrage at all, he did so merely so that "the radicals, who are wild upon Negro franchise, would be completely foiled. . . ." It was obvious that he could not cooperate with the radicals, and especially not with Stevens, who was still

acting as the advance agent of radical policies, often more extreme than his colleagues.

Old Thad had never approved of a Southerner on the Union ticket. "Can't you find a candidate for Vice President of the United States without going down to one of those rebel provinces to pick one up?" he had protested to McClure in 1864. But the Tennessean was nominated and elected, and Stevens could do nothing about it.

It soon became apparent that Johnson's methods differed from Lincoln's. Notwithstanding a brief honeymoon following his assumption of power, the new president showed plainly that he did not agree with the radicals. After recognizing the wartime government of Virginia, on May 29 he made public his plan of Reconstruction. Requiring little of the South, it made no provision for black suffrage.

Stevens' enemies often maintained that his radical views, if not strengthened by hatred for Southerners who destroyed his iron works, were merely excuses for attaining party advantage. These accusations never fazed him. "Do you avow the party purpose?" declaims some horror-stricken demagogue," he said. "I do. For I believe that on the continued ascendancy of that [the Republican] party depends the safety of this great nation." Without safeguards, he knew that Southern Democrats would return to Congress, combine with their Northern associates, and undo all the gains of the blacks. Dreading this possibility, he was determined to prevent it.

In the radical effort to block Johnson, Stevens took a leading position. First he tried to appeal directly to the president. "Call an extra session," he urged, but his repeated entreaties had no effect. Then he made his objections public. In a speech at

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Lancaster, Pennsylvania on September 6, he again insisted that the Southern states were not in the Union. They were conquered provinces, in which all the large estates of insurgents were liable to confiscation. Part of the land ought to be given to the freedmen; the remainder could be used to pay for the expenses of the war. As for the suffrage, he pointedly insisted that it was up to Congress to decide whether it wished to enfranchise all those who had fought for the Union or only those of a "paler hue."

In addition to making public his opposition to the president's program, the Commoner also prepared for the opening of Congress. His friend and former fellow townsman, Edward McPherson, Clerk of the House, could omit from the roll the names of all Southerners, even those undoubtedly loyal. Moreover, Stevens prevailed upon a caucus called shortly before the opening of Congress to agree to a Joint Committee on Reconstruction to which all matters pertaining to the South were to be referred. Congress would thus be able to checkmate the president.

Old Thad's scheme was carried out without a hitch. Despite objections, not one Southerner's name was called when McPherson read the roll. And the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, with Stevens heading the House contingent, was set up as planned. The representatives of the states reconstructed according to Johnson's lenient plan were unable to force their way into the national legislature. That many of these states had also passed black codes virtually remanding the freedmen to slavery helped Stevens and his allies to obtain widespread support.

Although the president had been temporarily defeated, he was by no means willing to give up. Counting on the assistance of the large moderate element in Congress, he made an able plea for his cause. But Stevens, speaking for the radicals, had his answer ready. Calling for the establishment of territorial governments in the South, he pointed out the dangers of renewed Democratic rule. Not until the Constitution had been amended to protect the freedmen could the insurgent states be readmitted, he argued. He even called for land for the blacks, but few of his associates were prepared to go that far.

During the next three months, Johnson's uncompromising course alienated the very elements whose support he needed. Vetoing the Freedmen's Bureau and Civil Rights bills, he affronted the moderates. Engaging in bitter personality conflicts and undignified name calling, he offended against good taste. To some extent, Stevens, now a symbol of radicalism, emerged as his chief antagonist.

On Washington's Birthday, 1866, the president replied to a group of serenaders at the White House. Reminding his audience that he had fought traitors and treason in the South, he boasted that he was still in the field against men "at the other end of the line" who were opposed to the restoration of the Union. "You ask who they are," he shouted. "I say Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania is one; I say, Mr. Sumner, of the Senate, is another, and Wendell Phillips is another."

For two weeks Old Thad said nothing in reply. Then he rose in the House to make a few remarks, incidentally referring to Johnson in friendly terms. Representative Hiram Price of Iowa interrupted. Was not the speaker the Thaddeus Stevens to whom the president, in a recent speech, had made uncomplimentary allusions? And now that same Thaddeus Stevens spoke kindly of Johnson? Was there not some mistake?

The Commoner immediately replied. He was glad to make use of the opportunity to declare that

"What good will moderation do you? If you don't kill the beast, it will kill you."

the speech the gentleman from Iowa mentioned had never really been delivered. It was all part of a gigantic hoax perpetrated by the Copperhead party who had been persecuting the president ever since March 4, 1865 (when he had been drunk and the New York *World* had called him an "insolent, drunken brute in comparison with whom even Caligula's horse was respectable."). The *World* had since come to Johnson's support, and now Stevens, "in order to prove the truth . . . about this hoax," sent to the clerk a copy of the article in the Democratic paper. The clerk read the *World's* insults. When the reading was finished, Stevens rose again. "If these slanderers can make people believe that the President ever uttered that speech," he continued, "they have made out their case. . . . Having shown . . . that it was fallacious, I hope they will permit me to occupy the same friendly relations with the President I did before."

Stevens' sarcastic rejoinder was an indication of the steady worsening of relations between Johnson and Congress. Acting for the majority, Old Thad and his committee prepared an alternative to the president's policy, the later Fourteenth Amendment. The measure contained a due process and equal protection clause, as well as provisions to reduce the representation of states disfranchising blacks. Stevens, who in company with other radicals did not approve of its comparatively mild features, had originally prevailed upon the Reconstruction Committee to report a more stringent measure with eventual black suffrage. At the last moment, however, William P. Fessenden, the committee's moderate chairman, fell sick with a mild form of smallpox, the varioloid. Out of courtesy, the proposal was held up until he recovered, and by that time, the moderates had dropped the



Impeachment proceedings against Johnson charged him with violating the Tenure of Office Act, with conduct unbecoming to a president, and with trying to disgrace Congress. Stevens played a prominent role in drafting the articles of impeachment and in presenting the case before the Senate, though he took little part in the trial itself. The Senate vote fell one short of the two-thirds needed for conviction. Serving with Stevens on the Impeachment Committee were (left to right) standing: James F. Wilson; George S. Boutwell; General Joshua Logan. Sitting: Benjamin Butler; Stevens; Thomas Williams; John A. Bingham. Courtesy of the National Archives.



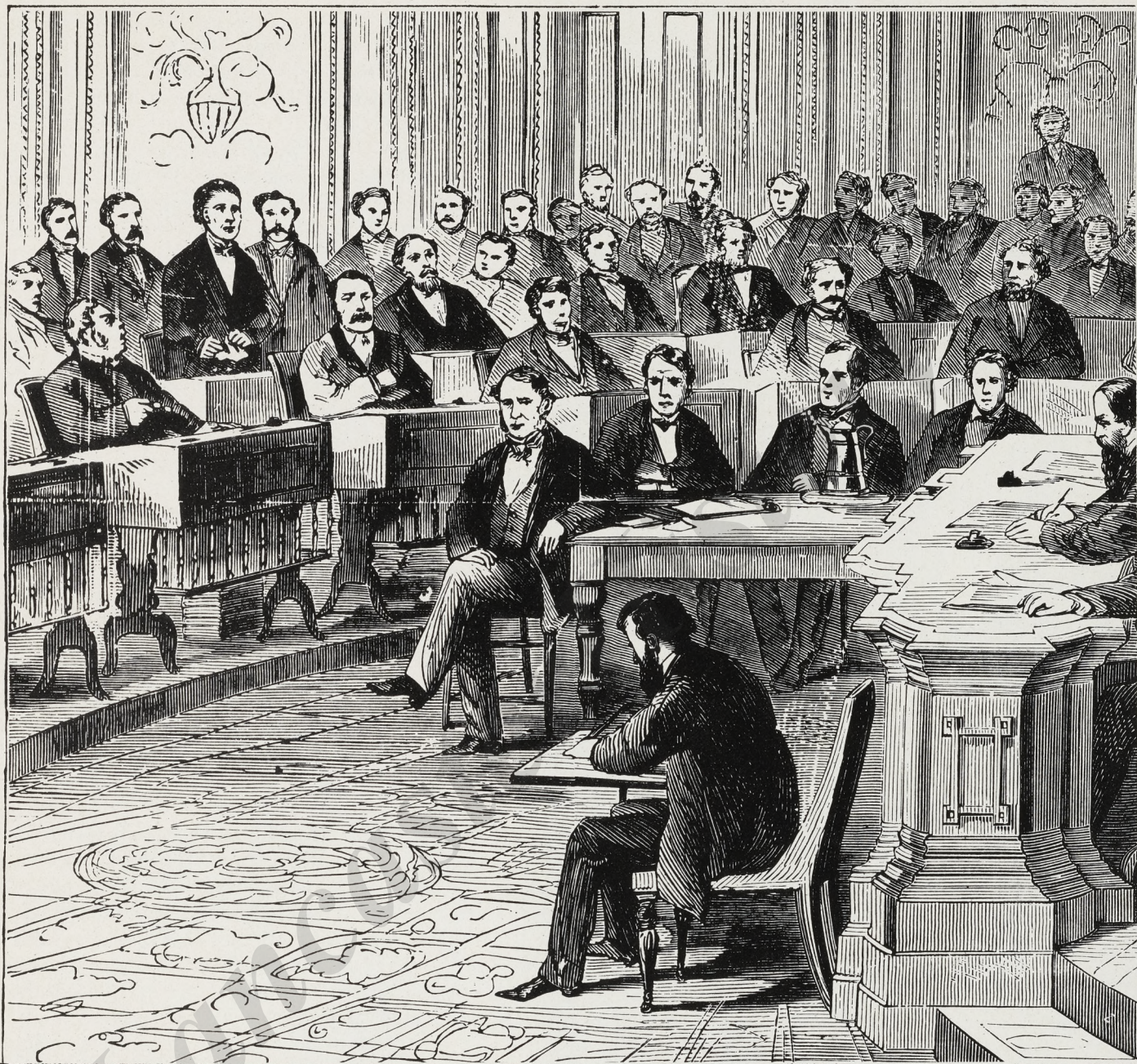
suffrage and other radical provisions. "Damn the varioloid," said Stevens. "It changed the whole policy of the country." But he loyally supported the amendment, for which he had once again cleared the path.

It was lucky for the radicals that Johnson opposed even this mild change. The break between him and Congress was now complete, and during the midterm elections of 1866 the voters were given a clear choice. They could endorse either the president's lenient program or the more radical course of Congress. After four national conventions and Johnson's "swing-around-the-circle," a campaign trip to Chicago during which he continued to attack in unmeasured terms the radicals in general and Stevens in particular, the electorate rendered its verdict. It repudiated the president.

Stevens knew how to take advantage of this situation. Returning to Washington late in November, he said that he had been altogether too conservative in the past, but that he intended "this session to be very radical in my views." And as Johnson still refused to compromise, the Commoner proceeded to carry the radical program further.

The radicals' principal concern during the new session was the Reconstruction Act. Determined to protect blacks and Unionists against the outrages to which they were exposed in the South, Stevens made use of his position of leadership to introduce legislation to remand the entire section to military rule. In addition, he proposed a bill for Negro suffrage in the South. On this subject, he was again ahead of his colleagues, and in spite of his impassioned pleas, moderates in the Senate succeeded in amending the legislation so as to provide a method of restoring the seceded states. The result was the first Reconstruction Act. It placed the South under military rule but also required Southerners to adopt constitutions sanctioning black suffrage. In addition, they had to give their assent to the Fourteenth Amendment. It was not what Old Thad wanted, yet he had again laid the ground work for legislation to elevate the freedmen.

The passage of the Reconstruction Act did not lessen Stevens' conviction that the president continued to be a major obstacle. Like all of the radical postwar efforts, the execution of the program was severely crippled by Johnson's interference. Congress might consistently override his vetoes, but his attorney general could still interpret the law in such a way as to make it less stringent; supplementary Reconstruction acts might be passed, but he could still dismiss generals he deemed too extreme. Afraid of his remaining in-



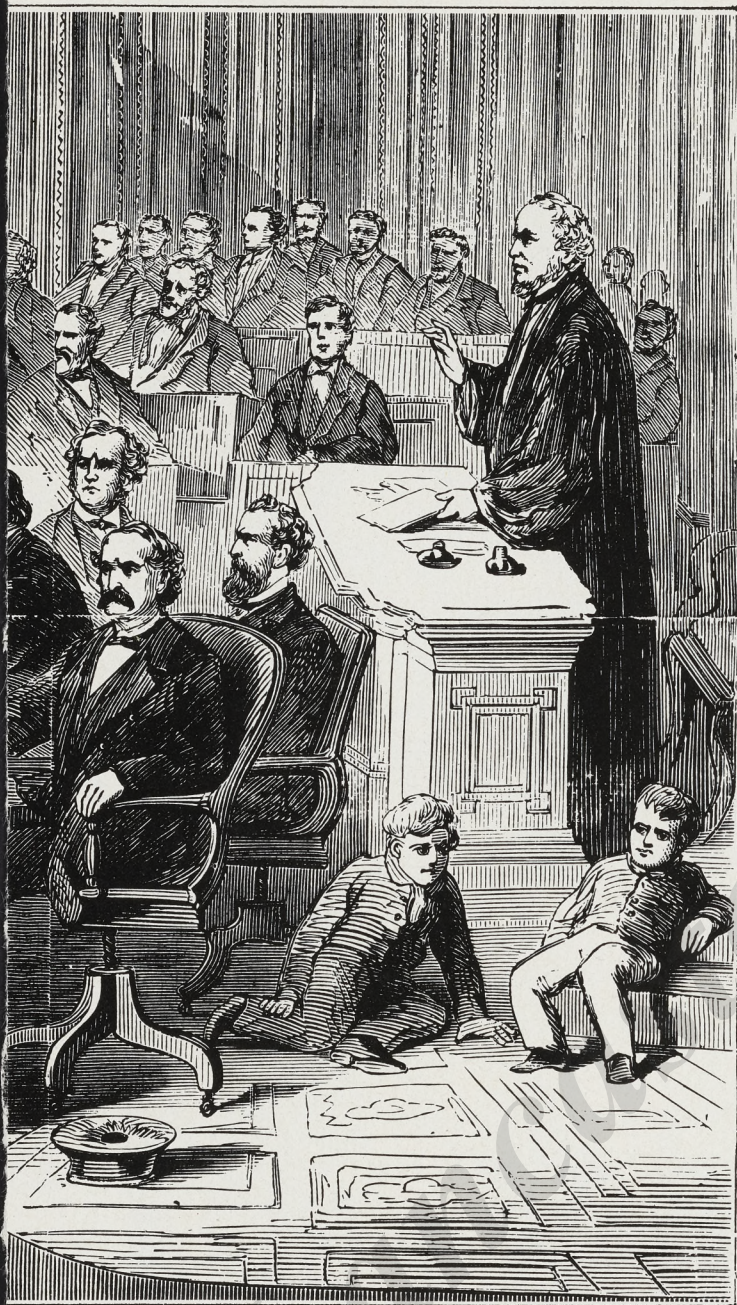
Stevens entering the Senate Chamber to present the articles of impeachment. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, March 21, 1868.

fluence, Congress sought to shackle him with the Tenure of Office Act, restricting his powers of removal. It also curbed his authority as commander in chief of the army. Then, in the summer of 1867, he dismissed Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who had been cooperating with the radicals. It was too much. Stevens concluded that Reconstruction could not succeed as long as Johnson remained in office.

Thus Old Thad became one of the principal advocates of the radicals' most dramatic effort:

the impeachment of the president. Deeply disappointed when in December 1867 the first attempt to remove Johnson failed, he tried again after the president quarreled with General Ulysses S. Grant. But he did not succeed and concluded that the Republican party was a party of cowards. It was not until February 24, after Johnson dismissed Stanton again, that the impeachment resolution finally passed. "Didn't I tell you so? What good did your moderation do you? If you don't kill the beast, it will kill you," Stevens repeated over and over again as he moved from one group of colleagues to another.

Although the Commoner, looking haggard and pale, was now very ill and had to be carried to



his seat by two strong young men, he still had enough will power to serve as one of the managers to prosecute the case. The eleventh article of impeachment, the first one to be voted on, was his. Johnson had denied the legitimacy of Congress, it charged. In pursuance of this theory, he had disregarded the Tenure of Office Act. It was Stevens who, as one of a committee of two, notified the Senate of the impeachment; it was he who was generally regarded as the soul of the prosecution, and it was he who was most upset when the Senate failed to convict. "The country is going to the devil," he shouted, waving his arms in the air. He tried to frame new charges; he tried to create a new anti-Johnson majority by favoring the admis-

sion of newly reconstructed states. Congress, however, was unwilling to pursue the subject further. Stevens' great crusade had come to naught.

His increasingly feeble health, his inability to remove Johnson, and the Republicans' seeming lack of radicalism depressed the Old Commoner. Even the Negro suffrage amendment, which he had long advocated, was not included in the party's 1868 platform. "My life has been a failure," he complained to McClure. "With all this great struggle of years in Washington, and the fearful sacrifice of life and treasure, I see little hope for the Republic." He conceded that he had at least been able to provide for the establishment of free schools in Pennsylvania, but the future seemed bleak. When he died on the night of August 11-12, 1868, the radical movement had lost its most capable leader. It soon began to decline.

He was not mistaken in his premonitions of failure. Possibly encouraged by the acquittal of Johnson, within less than a decade after Stevens' death every last Southern state had reverted to conservative control. As time went on, the blacks, lacking the economic strength he had proposed to give them, were once again practically disfranchised, frequently lynched, and permanently kept at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Yet Stevens had not lived in vain. The Civil War and Reconstruction amendments, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and finally, after he was gone, the Fifteenth, conferring freedom, civil rights, and the suffrage upon the blacks, remained part of the Constitution. Although frequently disregarded and distorted, in the second half of the 20th century they enabled the country to resume the march toward that racial equality to which he had dedicated his life.

Thus Stevens' story illustrates that of the entire radical movement. Without the agitation of these misnamed "Jacobins," the amendments could never have been passed, the groundwork for racial democracy never laid. These reforms constitute his monument. It is a monument of which any man can be proud. ■

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