

THADDEUS STEVENS' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE OMNIBUS BILL

In deference to the writer and at his special request this paper appears in the spelling recommended by the Simplified Spelling Board:

Quotations showing that slavery was regarded as a divine institution, and that negroes were to be kept in everlasting bondage in fulfilment of the curs pronounced on Canaan:

"It is a fearful abuse of God's word when men refer to the curs of Canaan in defence of American slave-traffic, and slave-holding, as is done in the Southern portions of the United States." — Lange's Commentary on Gen., p. 342, first column.

"I do not propose to discuss the justis or injustis of slavery as an abstract proposition. . . . It is enuf for me elsewher to know that it was establishd by decre of Almighty God, that it is sanctiond in the Bible in both Testaments from Genesis to Revelation." — Jefferson Davis in U. S. Senate, February 13, 1850.

"He (the negro) by nature or by the curs of Canaan is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system." — A. H. Stevens, 1861.

"Indeed, it would scarcely excite surprise if with the impious audacity of those who projected the tower of Babel they (the abolitionists) should attempt to scale the battlements of heaven and remonstrate with the God of wisdom for having put the mark of Cain and the curs of Ham upon the

African race insted of the European.”
—Gov. McDuffie of S. Car., Message,
1835.

The Attitude of Buchanan On the Abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia.

“That senator (Mr. Buchanan) presented from the peple of his own State a petition for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. He presented it as a matter of respect to those who had enclosed it to him, but he moved that it be rejected, and made a speech in favor of its rejection.”—Jefferson Davis, in United States Senate, February 13, 1850.

Preliminary Remarks in Extenuation of the Imperfections of the Paper.

The Hon. James Bryce, in his History of the Holy Roman Empire, p 50, says: “The interest of history lies not least in this, that it shows us how men hav at different times entertained holely different notions respecting the relation to one another of the same ideas or the same institutions.”

Dr. Arnold, in the preface to his great history of Rome, says: “I am wel aware of the great difficulty of giving liveliness to a narrativ which necessarily gets all its facts at second hand. . . . One who is himself a statesman and orator may relate the political contests even of remote ages with sumthing of the spirit of a contemporary; for his own experience realizes to him in a great mezure the scenes and the characters which he is describing.”

It is, therefore, to be expected that the account which will be given of the Great Commoner’s part in the strenuous Congressional contest over the Omnibus Bil by one who has stood aloof from political activity will lack

the vividness in presentation of one who participated in those struggles and witnessed those exciting scenes in the national capital—the preludes of the Civil War.

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The first and essential qualification of the historian is truthfulness. The omission or suppression of the disagreeable is as inadmissible as the addition or interpolation of the agreeable. The witness before the world as well as before the court of justice must tell the whole truth, but to speak the whole truth concerning Thaddeus Stevens in this community requires sum courage; for he has become almost a saint in the eyes of that people whose emancipation he advocated with all his heart and all his mental powers; and as the successful obstructioist whose great oration is believed to have turned the tide and consequently to have prevented the repeal of the law on which is based and out of which has grown our present magnificent system of public instruction, he stands deservedly high in the estimation of all friends of universal education. His name has indeed almost become a synonym for education, liberation and political equality and educational institutions in cities and towns are proud to bear the name of Thaddeus Stevens.

The subject assigned to me is limited to a single act of the 31st session of Congress, 1849-50, to the beginning of the career of Thaddeus Stevens as a member of the national house of representatives. Moreover, I am not to duplicate what has been presented by Mr. Atlee in his paper on Stevens and slavery. It should be remembered that the great controversy of the time was carried on chiefly in the Senate where Calhoun and Jefferson

Davis spoke for the South, Clay and Benton for the Border States and Webster and Seward for the Northeast.

"The Senate, February 5th and 6th, proceeded to the consideration of the following Resolutions, submitted by Mr. Clay on the 29th of January:"

**Senator Clay's Resolutions, Also Called
The Omnibus Bill.**

"It being desirable for the peace, concord and harmony of the union of these states, to settle and adjust amicably all existing questions of controversy between them, arising out of the institution of slavery, upon a fair, equitable, and just basis:

"Therefore: 1st Resolved, That California, with suitable boundaries, ought upon her application to be admitted as one of the States of this Union, without the imposition by Congress of any restriction in respect to the exclusion or introduction of slavery within those boundaries.

2d. Resolved, That as slavery does not exist by law, and is not likely to be introduced into any of the territory acquired by the United States from the Republic of Mexico, it is inexpedient for Congress to provide by law either for its introduction into or exclusion from any part of the said territory; and that appropriate territorial governments ought to be established by Congress in all of the said territory not assigned as the boundaries of the proposed State of California, without the adoption of any restriction or condition on the subject of slavery.

3d. Resolved, That the western boundary of the State of Texas ought to be fixed on the Rio del Norte commencing one marine league from its mouth, and running up that river to the southern line of New Mexico:

thence with that line eastwardly, and so continuing in the same direction to the line as established between the United States and Spain, excluding any portion of New Mexico, whether lying on the east or west of that river.

4th. Resolved, That it be proposed to the state of Texas that the United States will provide for the payment of all that portion of the legitimate and bona fide public debt of that State contracted prior to its annexation to the United States and for which the duties on foreign imports were pledged by the said State to its creditors, not exceeding the sum of \$——, in consideration of the said duties so pledged having been no longer applicable to that object after the said annexation, but having thenceforward become payable to the United States; and upon the condition also that the said State of Texas shall, by some solemn and authentic act of her legislature, or of a convention, relinquish to the United States any claim which it has to any part of New Mexico.

5th. Resolved, That it is inexpedient to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, while that institution continues to exist in the State of Maryland, without the consent of that State, without the consent of the people of the District and without just compensation to the owners of the slaves within the District.

6th. But Resolved, That it is expedient to prohibit within the District the slave trade in slaves brought into it from States or places beyond the limits of the District either to be sold therein as merchandise or to be transported to other markets without the District of Columbia.

7th. Resolved, That more effectual provision ought to be made by law according to the requirement of the

constitution for the restitution and delivery of persons bound to service or labor in any State who may escape into any other State or Territory in the Union.

And 8th. Resolved, That Congress has no power to prohibit or obstruct the trade in slaves between the slaveholding States, but the admission or exclusion of slaves brought from one into another of them depends exclusively upon their own particular laws. --App. to Cong. Globe, part I, p. 115—31st Congress 1849-50.

These are the resolutions which President Taylor hapily denominated the Omnibus Bil, as being intended to satisfy, as far as conditions then permitted, all parts of the country. As a hole, they wer not adopted, but severally and substantially they wer enacted into law. Mr. Stevens did not await their arrival in the Hous, but on the 20th of February, the Hous being in Committee of the Hole on the State of the Union, on the reference of the President's message, he made a violent attack on slavery in general and on the return of fugitiv slaves in particular. As this subject was assigned to and treated by Mr. Atlee, it can find no place here.

On the tenth of June he made another and even fiercer attack on the peculiar institution, but this has also received attention in Mr. Atlee's paper, which forbids attention to be given to it here. To one thing, I may, however, be allowed to call attention: it is this, that in both speeches Mr. Stevens always castigates his Southern opponents with more consideration than those from the North.

A Democratic Colleg's Reply to Thad. Stevens' First Speech On the Subject of Slavery in the District of Columbia.

An extract from the speech of Mr. Ross, the member from Bucks county, in reply to Stevens, and the latter's rejoinder in the beginning of his second speech, will abundantly illustrate this.

"Sir, if my colleag (Mr. Stevens) when he adress the committee, had raisd his eyes to the portrait of Washington frowning at his ignobl attempt to excite one section of the union agenst the other; or, if the hart of that member had throbd with even one patriotic impuls, he would hav shrunk back to his seat coverd with shame and remors for his libel upon the guvernement of his cuntry. Sir, I envy not the feelings of any one who can rise in his place, and in a deliberately prepared speech, pronounce the guvernement of his cuntry a despotism. I envy not the man who can thus defame the memories of Washington, and Franklin and Madison and of the other sages and patriots of the Revolution by whom this constitution was formd. No, sir, I envy no such man, and I would leav him alone in his shame if a sens of duty did not require me to notis sum other passages of that most extraordinary speech. In refering to the cours of the South that member has dared to speak of his Democratic colleags in the following indecent and insulting language:

"You have more than once frightened the tame North from its propriety, and found "doughfaces" enuf to be your tools. And when you lackt a given number, I take no pride in saying, you wer sure to find them in old Pennsylvania who (which?) in former years has rankt a portion of her delegation among your most submissiv

slaves. But I hope with sum fears that the race of "doughfaces" is extinct. I do not see how it coud wel be otherwise. They wer an unmanly, an unviril race, incapabl, according to the laws of nature, of reproduction. I hope they hav left no descendants. The old ones ar deep in their graves. For them, I am sure, ther is no resurrection for they were soulles."

But he 'even went stil further, and denounced every northern man who did not vote for the slavery restriction 'as a traitor to liberty and recreant to his God.' Sir, I may wel ask whether this is the representativ hall of the nation! whether we ar the fre representativs of a fre peple, or the "submissiv slaves" which my colleag has charged that we ar? for surely, language so offensiv, and impudence so unblushing hav never heretofore been seen or herd in any respectabl assemblage of men. I know, Sir, that it should be treated with the scorn and contempt which every honorabl mind must feel for its author. It is an old proverb and as tru as it is old that the bad tung of a bad man can defame no one. Pennsylvania knows that member. With deep humiliation she acknowledges the acquaintance. His history has been the history of her wrongs and her misfortunes. But, sir, the memories of the past hav long since placed an impassabl gulf between him and her. She has affixt a brand upon him, as deep and as indelibl as the wrongs which she sufferd at his hands wer grievous and intolerabl. Yes, Sir, the day of mischief ther has past and the Democracy of Pennsylvania may wel laugh to scorn his vulgar, indecent and unmanly abuse not only of her own representativs, but of her southern brethren also. In a mind constituted as is that member's, no dout sum apology may be found

for this extraordinary speech. If, Sir, I had ever been an applicant for high office under the General Government, and had been defeated by the South with equal bitterness. [The office of Speaker]; if, sir, I were so degraded in feeling as to desire to raise the negro to social and political equality with the white man, perhaps I too might denounce the slaveholder as recreant to his God. If, Sir, I were so insensible of the dignity of my position and so lost to all sense of propriety as to be regardless of what was due to my colleagues and to this House, perhaps, I too might stigmatize as doughfaces every one who did not think as I thought and vote as I voted. Or, if, Sir, I had been on any occasion a traitor to liberty, and had, by force of arms, endeavored to treat an election as if it had never taken place (the Buckshot war), perhaps I too might denounce as traitors every northern Representative who stood by the constitution of his country. But, sir, there is one thing I could not do; I could not rise in my place, and utter these sentiments, just after I had voted for a slave holder for President (Zach. Taylor was a slave holder. He was the Whig candidate), in preference to another candidate who was born, educated, and lived on free soil (Lewis Cass, the Democratic candidate); and in preference to another candidate who was the embodiment of the principles which I professed (Van Buren, the Free Soil candidate). Nor, Sir, could I rise in my place and so defame the character of good old Democratic Pennsylvania as to represent that she participated in any such sentiments. No, Sir, Pennsylvania entertains no such sentiments or feelings. No son of hers, who had been born upon her soil, and had breathed in early life her pure mountain air, would have given

utterance to such sentiments, etc." We will now listen to an extract from the speech of Mr. Stevens on the 10 of June, a rejoinder to the replies made to his first speech:

"I do not remember one of the numerous gentlemen who have referred to my remarks who has attempted to deny one of the facts, or refute one of the arguments; they have not listened to them merely to vituperate their author. To such remarks there can be no reply by him who is not willing to place himself on a level with blackguards. I cannot enter that arena. I will leave the filth and the slime of Billingsgate to the fishwomen and to their worthy coadjutors, the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. Millson), from N. Carolina (Mr. Stanly), from Kentucky (Mr. Stanton), from Tennessee (Mr. Williams), and all that tribe. With them I can have no controversy. When I want to combat with such opponents and such weapons I can find them any day by entering the fish market without defiling this hall.

I beg those respectable fishladies however to understand that I do not include my colleague from Bucks county among those whom I deem fit to be their associates. I would not so degrade them.

"There is in the natural world, a little spotted, contemptible animal which is armed by nature with a fetid, volatile, penetrating virus, which so pollutes whoever attacks it, as to make him offensive to himself and all around him for a long time. Indeed, he is almost incapable of purification. Nothing, Sir, no insult shall provoke me to crush so filthy a beast."

In his first speech made Feb. 20th, 1850, he had given utterance with no uncertain sound as to how he would regard northern members who should vote to permit the extension of sla-

very or its possible introduction into the recently acquired territory. He said: "Sir, for myself, I should look upon any northern man, enlightened by a northern education, who would directly or indirectly, by omission or commission, by basely voting or skulking, permit it (slavery) to spread over one rood of God's free earth as a traitor to liberty and recreant to his God."

The friends of Mr. Stevens cannot but wish that his language had not been such as, to some extent, at least, if not entirely, to justify "The Intelligencer" of March 5, 1850, saying "That he was the same bold, reckless demagogue that he ever was." "He mostly abused the southern people." That southern members regarded his language as vulgar, as not fit to be used in the halls of legislation and in the presence of the ladies in the galleries is no doubt true, and was loudly asserted by the southerners.

On the motion that the question as to the admission of California, made February 8, 1850, by those who feared that that State would be admitted as a free State, be laid on the table (Cong. Globe, p. 375) Stevens voted in the negative because he wanted a debate on the question, and this afforded him the first opportunity to be heard on the slavery question.

For a motion having been made to adjourn, Stevens voted no and it was lost by 155 to 43. Mr. McEllernard then moved that the House go into a Committee of the Whole, which was voted down; Stevens voting no. It was again moved that the House adjourn, and the motion was lost again, Stevens voting no. Another motion to go into a Committee of the Whole was lost by 110 to 81, Stevens voting in the negative. Another motion to adjourn and one to go into Committee

of the Hole were lost, Stevens voting as before. (Cong. Globe, pp. 376-377.)

After fifteen motions to adjourn made that same day, the Hous did finally adjourn without a division, Stevens having voted in the negativ every time but the last. (Cong. Globe, pp. 379-385.)

As the Hous was constituted of 112 Democrats, 105 Whigs and 13 Fre Soilers, these tactics wer evidently resorted to to prevent debate and if possibl the admission of California as a fre state. To this preventing of debate "The Intelligencer probably alludes when it says of Stevens that until about two weeks ago he was quiet, and that a great many members wisht him to remain so." His speeches fully justified their fears of the eruption of that volcano. The substance of these having been given by Mr. Atlee as already stated, they wil not receiv further attention here. It may be wel, however, to call attention to what he contended for point by point.

1—That Congres has exclusiv power to legislate for the territories. He bases his opinions on decisions of the Supreme Court and on the rights derived from the acquisition by war and treaty, but he explicitly denies that "the Constitution follows the flag," as as a matter of cours; but with great vigor appealing to fundamental principles as set forth in the Declaration of Independence and Bills of Rights he denies it the right to legislate slavery into any territory.

2—That Congress has the power to admit new States into the Union, but that those States be formd of territory previously belonging to the Union.

3—That the strongest motiv for acquiring California and New Mexico was that ther might be more territory into which slavery might be intro-

duced, and that Texas had been admitted for the same reason.

4—That “every man may take his property with him” into the territory of the United States, “conforming to the local law when he gets ther.”

5—That he will never consent to the admission of another slave state into the Union.

On the motion made July 29, 1850, that California be admitted Stevens calld for the yeas and nays on a motion made to adjourn. After much filibustering, consisting of motions to appeal, to lay on the table, to amend, to prevent the admission of California, the victory was finally won, September 7, 1850.

On all motions Stevens consistently stood by his guns, resolutely opposing the spread of slavery. On the second of the Compromise measures, the bil organizing New Mexico and Utah as a territory without the mention of slavery, which was added as an amendment or rider to the bill defining the northern boundary of Texas and paying her ten millions for assenting to such demarcation, Mr. Stevens spoke in part as follows:

“.....We ar askt to add fifty thousand square miles of our territory now fre, to Texas, and surrender it to slavery and give ten millions to pay her for taking it. Sir, if Texas wer to giv us ten millions, I would not sel it to her for such a purpose.....I would do ful justice to Texas. I would not take a foot of land which belongs to her. Nor would I giv her any to train her slaves upon.” The bil past the Hous September 4, 1850, and thus the second, third and fourth of Clay’s resolutions were substantially adopted. The sixth and seventh of Clay’s resolutions past September 9, 1850. The seventh was the one out of which the fugitiv slave law was to be

evolved. I have not been able to find any extended remarks or any speech made by Mr. Stevens on this bill. In his previous speech on the general subject of slavery he had however included a discussion on the fugitive slave law as it then stood and with the non-observance of which both Clay and Webster charged the North. I will make a short extract from his 10th of June speech:

“The distinguished Senator from Kentucky (Mr. Clay) wishes further to make it the duty of all bystanders to aid in the capture of fugitives; to join in the chase and run down the prey. This is more than my constituents will ever grant. They will strictly abide by the constitution. The slaveholder may pursue his slave among them with his own foreign myrmidons, unmolested except by their frowning scorn. But no law that tyranny can pass will ever induce them to join the hue and cry after the trembling wretch who has escaped from unjust bondage. Their fair land made by nature and their own honest toil, as fertile and as lovely as the Vale of Tempe, shall never become the hunting ground on which the bloodhounds of slavery shall course their prey and command them to join the hunt.”

The enacting of the fugitive slave law was the work chiefly of the extreme South, and was “forced upon the North for other reasons than the desire to recover lost property.” The motive of its advocates was to humiliate the North for having forced upon them the bitter medicine of free California.

It was passed by their votes. “Thirty-three representatives from the North were either absent or paired or dodged the vote.” (Rhodes, Vol. V, 183.)

After the vote was announced Stevens suggested “that the Speaker

should send a page to notify the members on our side of the House that the fugitive slave bill has been disposed of and that they may now come back into the Hall."

In harmony with this are the remarks of Jefferson Davis: "Sir, the northern majority on that occasion allowed the southern minority to pass the bill. The north did not pass it. They did not meet their obligations to the constitution and their faith to the Union. Seats were vacated and southern members were allowed to pass a law which had to be executed at the North." (Von Holst 1850—4, p. 27.)

Note—I may be allowed to add, although this is not included in the topic assigned, that on February 16, 1852, Stevens presented a petition signed by citizens of Lancaster county praying for the repeal of the fugitive slave law. (Cong. Globe, 26,668).

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