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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THADDEUS STEVENS

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High on the list of "Damn Yankees" is the name of Thaddeus Stevens, the most radical of the Radical Republicans who imposed their will upon the prostrate South during the Reconstruction Era. Millions of "Unreconstructed Rebels" nourished their agonizing disappointment and seething fury by concentrating on Stevens as the symbol of everything they hated.

Until recently historians did little to dispel the sulphurous aroma which surrounded the man in death as in life. The consensus of historical opinion is probably best summed up in the words of James Truslow Adams, who called Stevens "the most despicable, malevolent and morally deformed character who has ever risen to high power in America."¹

It was inevitable that anyone so thoroughly condemned as Stevens would be re-evaluated by later historians, and total condemnation might even be replaced by total commendation among certain ubiquitous revisionists. The latter school of thought reached its zenith in Ralph Korngold's mawkish presentation, *Thaddeus Stevens: A Being Darkly Wise and Rudely Great*,² a work which seemed to merit consideration as a scholarly endeavor.

Just as inevitable as the revision was the revision of the revisionists, wherein the same old material would be sifted over and over again in an effort to arrive at a true evaluation of the man who could not possibly be as bad or as good as the extremes represented. Fawn Brodie's *Thaddeus Stevens: Scourge of the South*³ is the latest and best attempt at honest evaluation.

Recognizing the limitation of a paper of this length, no attempt will be made to discuss and catalog the many biographies of Stevens, for those biographies run from the childishly naive work of Elsie Singmaster⁴ to the competent, scholarly work of Richard Current,⁵ to whom all subsequent biogra-

¹Epic of America (Boston, 1931), p. 257

²New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955. Hereinafter cited in text by author and page number only.

³New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1959. Hereinafter cited in text by author and page number only.

⁴*I Speak for Thaddeus Stevens* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947).

⁵*Old Thad Stevens: A Story of Ambition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1932).

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phers are indebted for their Stevens bibliography. A comparison of the Korngold and Brodie works would seem to furnish a firm base for investigation, as both are recent publications, solidly researched. Even though the authors apparently used the same material, their conclusions were so antithetical as to excite curiosity.

Korngold's thesis is that Stevens' disposition can be traced to the fact that he was born lame and sickly, and that as a result of his physical deformity and social rejection he became cynical and defensive while at the same time he became a humanitarian and a natural friend of the downtrodden. Korngold believes that if we accept this thesis all of Stevens' actions become consistent with these characteristics. So far this is the rather standard interpretation of the motivation of Thaddeus Stevens, but Korngold became so enamoured of his subject that he could find no serious fault with him thereafter.

That Korngold is blindly prejudiced in favor of Stevens may be noted in a few illustrations: One of the most damaging blows to the reputation of Thaddeus was the allegation that he murdered a young Negro girl who was pregnant by him. This rumor followed Stevens around for a number of years, and though the weight of evidence seems to clear Stevens of any direct involvement in the crime, there was enough public pressure to warrant a trial. Thaddeus was cleared in court, but because the most damaging evidence was mysteriously withheld, the cloud of suspicion would never be entirely dissipated. On the face of it this whole episode is of critical value in determining the character of "Old Thad," yet Korngold is able to dispose of the circumstances in one innocuous sentence and the disposition of the drama in one page (Korngold, 27), he too omitting the damaging evidence though undoubtedly it was known to him.

Another instance of blind devotion is uncovered in Korngold's treatment of an incident which occurred while Stevens was a student at Dartmouth: Stevens, angered that cows were loosed on the campus, and aggravated at the resulting piles of manure, borrowed an axe and maliciously hacked one of the cows to death. Korngold, in a sentence or two, mentions only that a "prank" which inadvertently resulted in the death of a cow was the cause of Stevens' temporary expulsion from Dartmouth (Korngold, 7).

A third and last incident will suffice to prove the case against the impartiality of Korngold: Stevens' young nephew, Alanson Stevens, whom he had raised and subsequently employed in his Caledonia Iron Works, had taken a common-law wife, and a child, Jennie, was born to the couple. The couple claimed to have married later, but Stevens never forgave them

nor softened toward the child. When Alanson went into the Union army Stevens wrote him letters full of malicious innuendo concerning the girl, whom he continued to address as Mary Primm (Brodie, 100, 101). When Alanson was killed in the war Stevens saw to it that the girl was not allowed the small pension due her as Alanson's widow, despite the fact that Alanson had acknowledged her in writing as his lawful wife (Brodie, 101). Thaddeus, unrelenting as ever, allowed his grandniece, Jennie, to die at the age of eleven, and presumably was gratified to note that Mary Primm, broken in spirit and destitute, began to drift "from one man to another" (Brodie, 102). Korngold, as to be expected, barely mentions this unsavory incident except to say that Stevens considered Alanson's common-law marriage "bad behavior" (Korngold, 123).

If we are to believe Korngold, Stevens was an extremely likable and popular fellow, yet it is a fact that Thaddeus was never invited to join any social organization, was blackballed by Phi Beta Kappa in spite of academic qualification, was disliked by his closest associates in college, was excluded from the Freemasons and the County Bar Association, rose slowly through the Republican ranks, and was never able to gain a Senate chair though this was a constant ambition—at one time he ran third in a three man field vying for a Senatorial chair from Pennsylvania, receiving only seven votes and being soundly beaten by no less a character than Simon Cameron.

Stevens was never popular in the normal sense of the word. Mrs. Brodie, delving into the letters of his contemporaries, has uncovered a wealth of information bearing out the fact that Stevens was "the most unpopular man on the floor," and was considered "unfit to lead any party" (Brodie, 259). Stevens certainly had friends and admirers, but there seems little reason to doubt that they were in the minority, and that Stevens was deserving of the unpopular reputation with which he has been saddled for so long. Richard Current, in speaking of Thaddeus, said that "bewigged, clubfooted, sarcastic Old Thad Stevens was the imperious kind of man whom few could love but to whom none could be indifferent or lukewarm."⁶

Political power, then, did not stem from an engaging personality, yet there is no question about the actual authority which Thaddeus enjoyed in the House. The evidence of that leadership is concrete and incontrovertible, and one might well question the source of such control.

Mrs. Brodie tells us that part of Stevens' political success was attributable to his indifference to public opinion; having no fear of public reaction he would have no compunction about using any means possible to achieve any goal. His "religion of

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antislavery" (Brodie, 86) was not a popular one, but it was one which had vociferous and growing support in the 1850's, and when the Republican party finally made slavery an issue Thaddeus was already ensconced as the leading opponent of slavery. At the conclusion of the war he kept his party in a particularly uncomfortable position, for he insisted on the stern application of the principles the party was **supposed** to represent, at a time when they would rather have modified their program to gain more popular support.

Since success is the art of compromise it behooves us to note that Stevens, in spite of his relentless pursuit of certain goals, was not above accepting temporary compromises along the way. In those particular programs where he would accept no compromises, as in the confiscation and redistribution of Southern plantation lands, and the impeachment of President Johnson, he invariably met with defeat. It seems that at times his Puritan morality demanded punishment above all else, and this intense preoccupation with punishment (Brodie, 306) would place unnecessary impediments before his legislative objectives.

A complete listing of the many factors which contributed to his political prowess would be tedious and trite, for much of his power was derived from the usual sources; seniority, Chairmanship of the Ways and Means Committee, legislative reciprocity, etc. To this writer, the first gear of Stevens' political drive was that he was by nature an antagonist, most happy when he was in the minority—when he felt that he was directly or indirectly persecuted or oppressed. The very consistency of his political orientation would add greatly to his success as a legislative leader. That his personal life might run contrary to his political principles did not bother him in the least.

His reputation remains many-sided partly because his character and history were full of paradoxes and contradictions. He was a humanitarian lacking in humanity; a man of boundless charities and vindictive hates; a Calvinist convinced that all men are vile who nevertheless cherished a vision of the Promised Land where all men should be equal before the law; a revolutionary who would carve up the estates of the "bloated aristocrats" of the South, but in the same breath offer to defend Jefferson Davis in his trial for treason. He was an equalitarian who would pinion the Southerner for his racial bigotry and caste prejudices, but who for twenty years would live with a colored woman as his mistress, apparently content with a relationship common in the Southern aristocracy, and one that Northern abolitionists generally pointed to with horror. (Brodie, 20)

Putting his personal life aside, Stevens was a politician first and foremost. Furthermore, he was a political tiger who would **not be caged**—a tiger who was determined to devour his enemies. Is it strange that few of his constituents were anxious to anta-

gonize this hungry, uncaged tiger? His biting sarcasm could demolish the most worthy opponent, and his claws remained sharp from constant battle with his enemies.

Stevens' basic strength also stemmed from the righteousness of his cause, a fact about which he was absolutely certain, and a fact that his enemies found hard to circumvent. Before the war he saw the slave as a hunted animal, and he centered his life around trying to help this hunted animal escape forever to a life of freedom equal to that of his tormentor, the Southern Planter. During the war—the period which saw him rise to political heights in the national legislature—he consistently strove to gain freedom for the slave, threatening and trying to push President Lincoln to terminal acts which Lincoln did not think politically advisable at the time—acts concerning slavery, for the most part: As the war dragged on Thaddeus came to believe that the strength of the South and the reason for its ability to defend itself so well was the control which the planter class exercised over its human property. The most effective weapon against the Confederacy, therefore, was to destroy that strength by emancipation, but Lincoln believed that the Union could be saved only if the border states would not secede; he felt that emancipation would throw them into the arms of the South and perhaps lead to the permanent destruction of the Union. Lincoln philosophied that "by general law life and limb must be protected; yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life; but a life is never wisely given to save a limb" (Korngold, xi).

During the period of Reconstruction the South itself, by its intransigence, allowed Stevens to play the role of the distraught parent who was forced to deal harshly with his obstreperous child. This fortuitous circumstance was augmented by the similar intransigence of President Johnson, another "child" who would not recognize the authority of its "parent." Stevens saw himself playing the role of the indulgent parent when he offered ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment as the sole price of readmittance to statehood, and he was again playing the role of the indulgent parent when he offered President Johnson his advice. The rejection of these offers probably pleased Stevens, as it added to his righteous indignation and opened the door to any action necessary to bring these children under control.

In conclusion, perhaps the physical deformity of Stevens did contribute to his bellicose, defensive nature. Perhaps his quarrelsome attitude did stem from self-hatred. Perhaps he did represent the minority as a matter of self-association. The end is the same. Thaddeus Stevens pursued a lonely, thankless path, casting weeds and seeds as he passed. The weeds survive, but so

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do the seeds—emancipation, universal suffrage, free schools, tolerance. If these seeds ever blossom to outgrow the weeds of sectional animosity, they may one day provide a touch of beauty to the ugliness that was Thaddeus Stevens.