

Thaddeus Stevens: An Address on Reconstruction (1867)

Thaddeus Stevens was a leading Radical Republican who championed such Reconstruction measures as harsh punishment for Confederate leaders and a strong federal role in reconstructing the governments of the former Confederate states and in ensuring equal rights for all in the south. In this speech before Congress, Stevens argues for the passage of his Reconstruction plan, which included granting freed slaves the right to vote.

Source: Address to Congress by Thaddeus Stevens in *Congressional Globe*, 39th Congress, 2d Session Part I, January 3, 1867.

Nearly six years ago a bloody war arose between different sections of the United States. Eleven States, possessing a very large extent of territory, and ten or twelve million people, aimed to sever their connection with the Union, and to form an independent empire, founded on the avowed principle of human slavery and excluding every free State from this confederacy. They did not claim to raise an insurrection to reform the Government of the country—a rebellion against the laws—but they asserted their entire independence of that Government and of all obligations to its laws. They were satisfied that the United States should maintain its old Constitution and laws....No one then pretended that the eleven States had any rights under the Constitution of the United States, or any right to interfere in the legislation of the country....

The Federal arms triumphed. The confederate armies and government surrendered unconditionally. The law of nations then fixed their condition. They were subject to the controlling power of the conquerors....

In this country the whole sovereignty rests with the people, and is exercised through their Representatives in Congress assembled. The legislative power is the sole guardian of that sovereignty. No other branch of the Government, no other Department, no other officer of the Government, possesses one single particle of the sovereignty of the nation....

Since, then, the President cannot enact, alter, or modify a single law; cannot even create a petty office within his own sphere of duties; if, in short, he is the mere servant of the people, who issue their commands to him through Congress, whence does he derive the constitutional power to create new States; to remodel old ones; to dictate organic laws; to fix the qualification of voters; to declare that States are republican and entitled to command Congress to admit their Representatives?...

To reconstruct the nation, to admit new States, to guaranty republican governments to old States are all legislative acts. The President claims the right to exercise them. Congress denies it and asserts the right to belong to the legislative branch....

The President is for exonerating the conquered rebels from all the expense and damages of the war, and for compelling the loyal citizens to pay the whole debt caused by the rebellion. He insists that those of our people who were plundered and their property burned or destroyed by rebel raiders shall not be indemnified, but shall retain their own property, most of which was declared forfeited by the Congress of the United States. He desires that the traitors (having sternly executed that most important leader, Rickety Weirze, as a high example) should be exempt from further fine, imprisonment, forfeiture, exile, or capital punishment, and be declared entitled to all the rights of loyal citizens. He desires that the States

created by him shall be acknowledged as valid States, while at the same time he inconsistently declares that the old rebel States are in full existence, and always have been, and have equal rights with the loyal States....

There are several good reasons for the passage of this bill [radical reconstruction]. In the first place, it is just. I am now confining my argument to negro suffrage in the rebel States. Have not loyal blacks quite as good a right to choose rulers and make laws as rebel whites? In the second place, it is a necessity in order to protect the loyal white men in the seceded States. The white Union men are in a great minority in each of those States. With them the blacks would act in a body; and it is believed that in each of said States, except one, the two united would form a majority, control the States, and protect themselves....

Another good reason is, it would insure the ascendancy of the Union party. Do you avow the party purpose? exclaims some horror-stricken demagogue. I do. For I believe, on my conscience, that on the continued ascendancy of that party depends the safety of this great nation. If impartial suffrage is excluded in the rebel States then every one of them is sure to send a solid rebel representative delegation to Congress, and cast a solid rebel electoral vote. They, with their kindred Copperheads of the North, would always elect the President and control Congress....For these, among other reasons, I am for negro suffrage in every rebel State. If it be just, it should not be denied; if it be necessary, it should be adopted; if it be a punishment to traitors, they deserve it.

Review Questions

1. What is Steven's proposal?
2. Whose interests (social, economic, and political) would Stevens's proposal have served?
3. Whose interests would it have threatened?