

# Thaddeus Stevens the Savior: A History and Psychology of a Man Who Reformed America for the Rise of the Obama Presidency

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper was to reveal the psycho-historical work of Thaddeus Stevens, a 19th century American political leader known for his aggressive and fearless focus on the issues of Civil Rights and the African-American struggle. Stevens's use of rigid psychology in terms of aggressively pursuing a new political attitude for the United States of America in the South especially was significant. The south was historically known for its racial worldview, ethnic history, and cultural behaviors that were highly influenced by hate and violence against persons of Black African ancestry. Stevens's desire to bring change and shape white racial attitude and behaviors towards non-whites by any means necessary was noted in this paper. The paper showed how Stevens words and works made it possible for a man like President Obama to become a historic candidate for the presidency, winning the office twice.

**Keywords:** Stevens, History, America, Obama, South, Civil Rights, African

## 1. Stevens's background

Thaddeus Stevens was an American political leader of the old Republican Party, a party that then represented the diverse cultural thinking that is now regarded as the preserve of Democrats.

Today's Republican Party is known for its minimal focus on the issues of Civil Rights and the African-American struggle, and has absorbed the worldview of the old Southern Democrats in terms of opposition to multiculturalism.

Stevens is a grossly neglected personality in the history and psychology of America, partly on account of his cinematic demonization in D. W. Griffiths's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film that glorified white supremacy and celebrated the Ku Klux Klan. The film's portrayal of Stevens as malicious and cruel had a negative impact on his image in the popular culture of America, and the South in particular. It took at 100 years from his last appearance on film, *The Birth of a Nation*, for his true personality as a daring and original champion of civil rights to be represented in Steven Spielberg's 2012 *Lincoln*. This has helped to bring the true Stevens back into public consciousness in the new poly-cultural America of Barack Hussein Obama, the first U.S. President of African ancestry and American background.

Stevens, whose parents came from Massachusetts, was born in Danville, Vermont, on April 4, 1792. He was one of four boys raised by a single mother after their abandonment by his alcoholic father. He was teacher by background and a lawyer by profession and at the age of 24 opened a law practice in Gettysburg, where he worked for many years. Stevens was known for purchasing the freedom of many slaves, and gave legal representation to slaves for nothing. He entered the Pennsylvania legislature in 1833, and during his seven-year period in office he earned his standing as the savior of the Pennsylvania public schools.

## 2. Stevens Public Work

He later moved to the city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he established a successful law practice, and was then elected to Congress, first from 1848 to 1853, and again from 1859 to 1868, representing Lancaster. One of the most powerful leaders in 19th-century America, and an influential member in the House of Representatives, he focused much of his life's work on changing the attitude of white Americans towards non-whites, and blacks in particular (Trefousse, 1997; Brodie, 1959).

Within about two years in Congress, Stevens was aggressively pursuing a new political attitude for the United States of America, and in November 1861 became the first – before President Lincoln – to introduce a resolution to emancipate all slaves. Although this was defeated, he did succeed in passing a legislation that abolished slavery in the District of Columbia and the territories.

By 1862 he, along with pro-black freedom fighters such as Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, urged Lincoln to speed up emancipation in all states, a provocation that led Lincoln to comment: "Stevens, Sumner and Wilson simply haunt me with their importunities for a Proclamation of Emancipation. Wherever I go and whatever way I turn, they are on my tail, and still in my heart, I have the deep conviction that the hour has not yet come" (White, 1910, p. 45).

Stevens pursued his desire for a speedy attitude change in Lincoln in a more aggressive manner, and on January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation.

Stevens's goal was to bring about a collective change in whites' attitude towards blacks. On a definitional level, an attitude is "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols" (Hogg & Vaughan 2005, p. 150). Attitude is further defined as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly&Chaiken, 1993, p. 1).

From the point of psychoanalysis – African/black perspectives on human psychology – Stevens viewed white attitudes towards blackness as flowing from a deep consciousness of white supremacy or the supremacy of whiteness; a psychological creation with selfish social and economic purposes (Oshodi, 2011).

Although a white man himself, Stevens had an open-minded attitude, avowing, "I advocated through a long life, equality of man before his creator" (Brands, 2012, p. 421).

Stevens evidenced the pain and struggle of the underprivileged, the deprived and the oppressed on the basis of his own difficult childhood experiences, marked by fatherlessness and poverty, as well as disability resulting from a club foot. His openness towards all humankind and personal ease with people of all backgrounds led him into a long relationship with Lydia Hamilton Smith, a woman of biracial background who was equally known for her war against white oppression of blacks and women.

The abolishment of slavery was Stevens's main focus. His understanding of whites' deeply ingrained racial and discriminatory attitudes pushed him to the view that the adoption of punitive tactics, including legislation, was a reasonable way to control, coerce, or shame persons holding such attitudes into change. Given that whites had used coercion and physical aggression to maintain their dominance over non-whites, Stevens saw the conscious control of racist leaders and institutions as a way to slowly deconstruct and reconstruct the racial mentality of whites, and cause them to reflect on the wickedness, dictatorship and barbarism of the South.

### **3. Stevens form of rigid psychology**

On a psychological level, he sought ways to reconstruct racist personalities such as President Andrew Johnson. Using his political influence, Stevens persuaded the House of Representatives to agree to Johnson's impeachment, although the move failed in the Senate by one vote.

In contrast to the lenient reconstruction measures initiated by Presidents Lincoln and Johnson, Stevens pressed for the prolonged use of cohesive and solid punishment, in very organized and specific ways. Along with his congressional Radical Republicans, Stevens used the punitive Reconstruction Act of 1867 to bring about some form of behavioral modification in white southerners, and especially their leaders. The existing state governments in the South, which were still made up of former Confederate leaders, were removed, and the states placed under the strict military rule of the U.S. Army. Supporters of the Confederate government were disallowed from voting or holding political office, and government jobs were awarded to so-called scalawags, carpetbaggers and former slaves, categories of people who came to be loathed in the South.

The fact that former slaves were placed in positions where they were able to dominate their former masters was a direct form of behavioral learning in terms of negative consequences for one's past actions. Stevens's use of aggressive pressures and acts to bring about attitude change in the South appeared justified, as many white Southerners saw their defeat in the war as God's punishment for their sins, and turned increasingly to religion.

Stevens appeared to anticipate southern resistance to attitude change, as many states bypassed congressional laws protecting blacks by passing "black codes" that excluded African-Americans from voting, education, land ownership, and employment. To change the attitudes of white southerners who remained convinced of their racial superiority even after their defeat in the Civil War, Federal troops were used to protect blacks and insure that laws were followed during reconstruction in terms of readmitting the South to the Union.

### **4. Stevens on freedom and Obama's ascension**

Stevens championed the passage of the three amendments to the US Constitution: the 13th, which outlawed slavery; the 14th, which ruled that black people were citizens of the United States and that all people were protected equally by the law; and the 15th, which gave all people the right to vote regardless of race.

Stevens saw the South as an enemy to the American Union, and therefore meted out punishment to former Confederates and their rebel leaders, followed by confiscation of lands and properties. Such acts of centralized punishment from a legitimate power – the Congress –succeeded to a large extent in forcing racist Southern players to interact and cooperate with such an aggressive partner as the Federal legislative house.

As a strategy, Stevens's stringent approach improved the overall behavior of white southerners long after his death in 1868, and at least for the duration of the ten-year military occupation. But in the long run, after President Hayes ended Army involvement in the South, white southerners resumed control of state governments, and their racial aggression and assaultive behaviors against blacks worsened.

In his July 13, 1866 speech to the House of Representatives calling for the passage of the 14th Amendment, Stevens had argued that this legislation, along with reconstruction plans, could lead to a "perfect republic," in which all citizens enjoyed equal rights and all institutions were freed from "human oppression". As a final,

lasting model of attitude change, Stevens requested that he be buried in the Shreiner-Concord Cemetery in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where the state accepted all races for burial.

Almost a century after Stevens's death, another open-minded white political leader, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, banning racial and ethnic discrimination against non-whites. He also signed Voting Rights Act of 1965 that removed widespread discrimination in voting. These great deeds did not go down well with white Southerners. Like Stevens, LBJ knew the deep-seated anti-black mindset of the South, which led him to comment after the Civil Rights Act finally became law that "We've lost the South for a generation."

By "we", Johnson met the Democratic Party, a reality that showed itself by the end of the 1960s, when the racist Dixiecrats who had dominated the party in the south for more than a hundred years flocked en masse into the Republican Party. With its legacy of Jim Crow and racial hatred, the South is now, 150 years after Stevens's death, the home of the new Republican Party, whose support base in many states is almost 95 percent white; in contrast, 95 percent of African-Americans, particularly in the South, are Democrat supporters.

The rise of President Obama to the nation's highest office appears to be a fulfilment of Stevens's hopes and dreams. The coming of a man called Barack Hussein Obama II has brought deep unease to many southern whites, who appear to be still haunted by Stevens, with his shadow always watching over the nation on matters of race and equality.

President Obama is seen as representing everything Southern white tradition has historically hated: his parentage is biracial, he has emerged from a partly Muslim background, and he is part of a multicultural coalition. All these factors give racist whites an irrational reason to oppose him. The apparent psychocultural jinx placed by Stevens on the deep South, whether in the form of past military occupation, or his wishes for the future – realized in the shape of Obama's presence as black, half-black or half-white man and a product of intermarriage – leave Southern whites in a state of perplexity.

The mindset in the deep South was that "We'll never have a black President," but the influence that continues to flow from the words and works of Thaddeus Stevens has made it possible for a man like President Obama to become a historic candidate for the presidency, winning office twice.

While not a psychologist, Stevens appears to have realized that whites' emotions, behavioral actions and beliefs about blacks would remain dangerous, which is consistent with the current perceived intense race relations under President Obama.

As a man, Stevens was motivated by goodwill for the nation and for goodness in the South. His whole life was devoted to a national vision of a racially just society where equality, fair share and opportunity reigned across all geographical and racial lines.

While Stevens's collective fights and deeds paved the way for the Obama presidency, his wish to see America move healthily in our current multicultural global world is worth remembering and pursuing. Stevens's desire to bring change and shape white racial attitude and behaviors towards non-whites by any means necessary is also worth our attention, study and understanding, as we move ahead for progress in the 21st century.

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