

The American National Tree Award: Thaddeus Stevens

Thaddeus Stevens, a prominent leader amongst congressional abolitionists during the mid-nineteenth century, revolutionized American culture through advocating equal rights for African Americans. As a member of U.S. House of Representatives, Stevens' sarcastic wit and passionate verbal sparring gained him both notoriety and esteem from his contemporaries. His unwavering stance against discrimination and inequality sparked contentious debates with opposing congressmen. When a proslavery senator declared that slaves were "the gayest, happiest, the most contented, and the best-fed people in the world," Stevens responded, "If this be so, let us give all a chance to enjoy this blessing. Let the slaves who choose, go free; and the free who choose, become slaves."

After the outbreak of the Civil War, Stevens relentlessly urged President Lincoln to shift the war's purpose from restoring the Union to ending slavery. Stevens also played a pivotal role in structuring and passing the 13th Amendment, which marked a permanent end to slavery in the United States. However, Stevens' contributions to the Union during the Civil War were not limited to his efforts against slavery. His position as the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Congress' tax-writing body, meant that his support was crucial to the financing of the war. Using his oratory skills and determination, Stevens helped pass legislation that accumulated 4 billion dollars to fund the Union army.

Thaddeus Stevens' dedication to improving the country persisted even after slavery was officially abolished. During the Reconstruction efforts in the South, he suggested a plan to confiscate the plantations of the richest Southern aristocrats and redistribute the land to former slaves. However, President Andrew Johnson decided to enact lenient policies that allowed Southern states to send delegates to Congress. In defiance, Stevens vigorously rallied support within Congress to provide and protect the rights of newly freed slaves. He then proposed a 14th Amendment to the Constitution that would grant African American men all the rights of citizenship while revoking those rights from former Confederate leaders and soldiers. Congress considered aspects of the proposed amendment to be excessive, and altered it so that it did not include black voting rights and punished only a small number of Confederate leaders. Stevens denounced the modifications, but ultimately supported the revised amendment which passed in June of 1866.

The Constitution of the United States represents the culmination of centuries of progress and enhancement. For a significant portion of the United States' existence, the principle of racial equality had been absent from American life and politics. This was remedied when Thaddeus Stevens recognized the importance of racial equality and dedicated his life to incorporating it into the Constitution. His efforts improved the lives of millions of people and weakened the misconception of white superiority. Despite being overlooked by many historians, Thaddeus Stevens was a visionary who redefined America.