REVIEW CHAPTER

4

Section 4

AMERICAN LIVES Thaddeus Stevens

Passionate Man of Principle

"[If members of Congress would] fling away ambition and realize that every human being, however lowly-born or degraded by fortune, is your equal and that every inalienable right which belongs to you belongs also to him, truth and righteousness will spread over the land."—Thaddeus Stevens, last speech in Congress (1868)

Thaddeus Stevens devoted his congressional life to removing slavery, which he called "a curse, a shame, and a crime." Once that goal was achieved, he labored to win equal rights for African Americans. He accomplished these goals because he was a skilled lawyer and legislator and tireless in his efforts.

Born in Vermont, Stevens (1792–1868) grew up poor and lacking a father, who either died or left his family when he was very young. He applied himself in school, however, and after attending Dartmouth College settled in Pennsylvania. He became a lawyer. Living near Maryland—a slave state—Stevens saw African Americans taken to court as fugitive slaves. He defended many of them, frequently winning the person's freedom.

He was generous with money. Stevens often took no fee for his defense of fugitive slaves. He once used his savings to purchase the freedom of a man about to be taken south as a fugitive. During the Civil War, Confederate raiders destroyed an iron works he owned. Stevens sent money to the families who lost income when the works shut down.

He was elected to the Pennsylvania legislature in 1833. He became known for his legislative skill; his passionate, sometimes angry speeches; and his defense of principle. He won passage of a law that made education free throughout the state. When opponents tried to overturn it, he criticized the move as an effort by the wealthy to suppress the poor. He refused to sign the new Pennsylvania constitution of 1837 because only whites were allowed to vote.

After a brief retirement, Stevens returned to public life, this time in the U.S. House of Representatives. He began to push the antislavery cause with energy and his sharp tongue. He worked against the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Law. His hatred of slavery became anger at Southerners. No polite debater, he blasted Southern representatives as slave-drivers—and also condemned Northern representatives who did not work against slavery.

During and just after the Civil War, he was perhaps the most powerful member of the House of Representatives. He urged aggressive prosecution of the war and lashed out when he felt Abraham Lincoln was not taking strong enough measures. He dismissed Lincoln's plan for emancipation as "diluted milk and water gruel." At the same time, he remembered his commitment to the poor. In arguing for the income tax needed to fund the war, he promised it would be a progressive tax: "No one will be affected by the provisions of this bill whose living depends solely on his manual labor."

After the Civil War, Stevens used his power to punish the South, end slavery, and ensure African-American equality before the law. "The foundation of [Southern] institutions . . . must be broken up and relaid, or all our blood and treasure have been spent in vain," he said. He bitterly opposed Andrew Johnson's mild Reconstruction plan. To combat this plan, he got Congress to create a joint committee on reconstruction, which he dominated. He pushed passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, which ended slavery; the Civil Rights Act of 1866; and the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave African Americans the right to vote.

Growing increasingly ill, Stevens led the effort to impeach Andrew Johnson. A few months after the Senate trial ended with Johnson a one-vote survivor, Stevens died. Following his wishes, he was buried in an African-American cemetery.

Questions

1. How does the quotation at the top of the page reflect Stevens's actions during his life?
2. Would Stevens's style of debate be likely to persuade opponents to accept his ideas?
3. Stevens judged his life a failure. Would you agree? Why or why not?