

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.
Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Fifty-Five

Davy Crockett

LESSON IDEA

To examine closely one incident in the life of Davy Crockett, and to learn from it an important constitutional principle that is regularly violated by politicians today.

PREPARATION

Look up some facts and figures on expenditures for the war on poverty and for welfare which will tie this lesson in with current government policies. Recommended sources are *American Opinion* and *The Review Of The News*.

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DAVY CROCKETT — probably everyone has heard of this famous hunter, Indian fighter, frontiersman, and pioneer; but did you know he served as a representative from Tennessee in the Congress of the United States? Or that he fought as hard to protect the Constitution from its enemies as he did to protect his family from Indian massacres? Or that he knew more about one of the basic principles of our Constitutional Republic than most politicians do today?

One day, for example, while Davy was serving in Congress, a bill came up which proposed using public money to pay benefits to a widow of a distinguished naval officer. It seemed to be a worthy cause, a nice thing to do, and the Speaker of the House was ready to ask for a vote when Crockett rose from his seat and asked to speak.

"Mr. Speaker," began the Tennessee pioneer, "I have as much respect for the memory of the deceased, and as much sympathy for the sufferings of the living, if suffering there be, as any man in this House, but we must not permit our respect for the dead or our sympathy for a part of the living to

lead us into an act of injustice to the balance of the living. I will not go into an argument to prove that Congress has no power to appropriate this money as an act of charity. Every member upon this floor knows it. We have the right, as individuals, to give away as much of our own money as we please in charity; but as members of Congress we have no right so to appropriate a dollar of the public money. Some eloquent appeals have been made to us upon the ground that it is a debt due the deceased. Mr. Speaker, the deceased lived long after the close of the war; he was in office to the day of his death, and I have never heard that the government was in arrears to him

"Every man in this House knows it is not a debt. We cannot, without the grossest corruption, appropriate this money as the payment of a debt. We have not the semblance of authority to appropriate it as a charity. Mr. Speaker, I have said we have the right to give as much money of our own as we please. I am the poorest man on this floor. I cannot vote for this bill, but I will give one week's pay to the object, and if every member of Congress will do the same, it will amount to more than the bill asks."

Crockett sat down. No one replied. And when the vote was taken, the bill was defeated. The avalanche of approval expected for such a "worthy cause" only minutes before, dwindled into nothingness.

The next day, when challenged by a fellow Congressman to justify his position, Crockett told the following story:

“Several years ago I was one evening standing on the steps of the Capitol with some other members of Congress, when our attention was attracted by a great light over in Georgetown. It was evidently a large fire. We jumped into a hack and drove over as fast as we could In spite of all that could be done, many houses were burned and many families made houseless, and, besides, some of them had lost all but the clothes they had on. The weather was very cold, and when I saw so many women and children suffering, I felt that something ought to be done for them. The next morning a bill was introduced appropriating \$20,000 for their relief. We put aside all other business and rushed it through as soon as it could be done

“The next summer, when it began to be time to think about the election, I concluded I would take a scout around among the boys of my district. I had no opposition there, but as the election was some time off, I did not know what might turn up When riding one day in a part of my district in which I was more of a stranger than any other, I saw a man in a field plowing and coming toward the road. I gauged my gait so that we should meet as he came to the fence. As he came up, I spoke to the man. He replied politely, but, as I thought, rather coldly

“I began: ‘Well, friend, I am one of those unfortunate beings called candidates, and —’

“‘Yes, I know you; you are Colonel Crockett. I have seen you once before, and voted for you the last time you were elected. I suppose you are out electioneering now, but you had better not waste your time or mine. I shall not vote for you again.’

“This was a sockdolager I begged him to tell me what was the matter.

“‘Well, Colonel, it is hardly worth-while to waste time or words upon it. I do not see how it can be mended, but you gave a vote last winter which shows that either you have not capacity to understand the Constitution, or that you are wanting in the honesty and firmness to be guided by it. In either case you are not the man to represent me. But I beg your pardon for expressing it in that way I intend by it only to say that your understanding of the Constitution is very different from mine; and that I believe you to be honest But an understanding of the Constitution different from mine I cannot overlook,

because the Constitution, to be worth anything, must be held sacred, and rigidly observed in all its provisions. The man who wields power and misinterprets it is the more dangerous the more honest he is.’

“‘I admit the truth of all you say, but there must be some mistake about it, for I do not remember I gave any vote last winter upon any constitutional question.’

“‘No, Colonel, there’s no mistake. Though I live here in the backwoods and seldom go from home, I take the papers from Washington and read very carefully all the proceedings of Congress. My papers says that last winter you voted for a bill to appropriate \$20,000 to some sufferers by a fire in Georgetown. Is that true?’

“‘Certainly it is, and I thought that was the last vote which anybody in the world would have found fault with.’

“‘Well, Colonel, where do you find in the Constitution any authority to give away the public money in charity?’

“Here was another sockdolager; for, when I began to think about it, I could not remember a thing in the Constitution that authorized it. I found I must take another tack, so I said:

“‘Well, my friend; I may as well own up. You have got me there. But certainly nobody will complain that a great and rich country like ours should give the insignificant sum of \$20,000 to relieve its suffering women and children, particularly with a full and overflowing Treasury, and I am sure, if you had been there, you would have done just as I did.’

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

One of the best books we can recommend for a deeper study of the proper functions of government regarding charity and welfare is *The Law* by Frederic Bastiat. Bastiat was a French economist, statesman, and author who did most of his writing in the late 1800’s. His analysis of law and government explain more fully what Davy Crockett’s farmer friend meant when he warned that government charity would open the door wide for “fraud and corruption and favoritism on the one hand, and for robbing the people on the other.”

The Law is available from most American Opinion Bookstores (\$1.00 in paperback); or from American Opinion, Belmont, Massachusetts 02178.

“It is not the amount, Colonel, that I complain of; it is the principle. In the first place, the government ought to have in the Treasury no more than enough for its legitimate purposes. But that has nothing to do with the question. The power of collecting and disbursing money at pleasure is the most dangerous power that can be intrusted to man, particularly under our system of collecting revenue by a tariff, which reaches every man in the country, no matter how poor he may be, and the poorer he is the more he pays in proportion to his means. What is worse, it presses upon him without his knowledge where the weight centers, for there is not a man in the United States who can ever guess how much he pays to the government. So you see, that while you are contributing to relieve one, you are drawing it from thousands who are even worse off than he. If you had the right to give anything, the amount was simply a matter of discretion with you, and you had as much right to give \$20,000,000 as \$20,000. If you have the right to give to one, you have the right to give to all; and, as the Constitution neither defines charity nor stipulates the amount, you are at liberty to give to any and everything which you may believe, or profess to believe is a charity, and to any amount you may think proper. You will very easily perceive what a wide door this would open for fraud and corruption and favoritism, on the one hand, and for robbing the people on the other.”

Let's interrupt our constitutional expert for a moment to consider that last sentence. What about the current billion dollar Congressional expenditures for the so-called war on poverty and for welfare? Have these federal programs led to fraud and corruption and favoritism? Have hard-working people been robbed? [*Encourage family discussion.*]

DAVY CROCKETT'S farmer critic made it very clear that Congress has no right to give charity. "Individual members," he said, "may give as much of their own money as they please, but they have no right to touch a dollar of the public money for that purpose. If twice as many houses had been burned in this county as in Georgetown, neither you nor any other member of Congress would have thought of appropriating a dollar for our relief.



DAVID CROCKETT
Member of Congress 1827-31, 1833-35

There are about two hundred and forty members of Congress. If they had shown their sympathy for the sufferers by contributing each one week's pay, it would have made over \$13,000 The congressmen chose to keep their own money, which, if reports be true, some of them spend not very creditably; and the people about Washington, no doubt, applauded you for relieving them from the necessity of giving by giving what was not yours to give. The people have delegated to Congress, by the Constitution, the power to do certain things. To do these, it is authorized to collect and pay moneys, and for nothing else. Everything beyond this is usurpation, and a violation of the Constitution.

“So you see, Colonel, you have violated the Constitution in what I consider a vital point. It is a precedent fraught with danger to the country, for when Congress once begins to stretch its power beyond the limits of the Constitution, there is no limit to it, and no security for the people. I have no doubt you acted honestly, but that does not make it any better, except as far as you are personally concerned, and you see that I cannot vote for you.”

How would you have answered such a man? Was his knowledge of the Constitution sound? If you had known he was right, would you have had the courage to admit it? [*Ask for opinions.*]

Davy Crockett answered his critic in a manly way; he humbly admitted he had been wrong and that his vote for the Georgetown disaster had been unconstitutional. But the hard-headed farmer was not moved in the slightest by Davy's apologies or his solemn oath not to vote for another unconstitutional law.

"You have sworn to that once before," the plowman replied, "but I will trust you again upon one condition. You say that you are convinced that your vote was wrong. Your acknowledgment of it will do more good than beating you for it. If, as you go around the district, you will tell people about this vote, and that you are satisfied it was wrong, I will not only vote for you, but will do what I can to keep down opposition, and, perhaps, I may exert some little influence in that way."

And so that is precisely the way it worked. The humbled candidate reported his conversation to every crowd he addressed and to every man whom he met; and his critic-teacher — a man widely known for his intelligence and integrity as well as for his kindness and generosity — gave the frontier congressman his full support in return. The two men, in fact, became close friends.

Before the election, Davy visited his former critic and later reported: "Though I was considerably fatigued when I reached his house, and, under ordinary circumstances, should have gone early to bed, I kept him up until midnight, talking about the principles and affairs of government, and got more real, true knowledge of them than I had got all my life before"

"I have known and seen much of him since, for I respect him — no, that is not the word — I reverence and love him more than any living man, and I go to see him two or three times every year; and I will tell you, sir, if every one who professes to be a Christian lived and acted and enjoyed it as he does, the religion of Christ would take the world by storm Now, sir, you know why I made that speech yesterday."

What proves that Davy was sincere and not just pretending to agree with his critic to win votes? [*Ask each family member for an opinion. Discuss*

humility, honesty, and moral principles.] Would many Congressmen today react to criticism with the humility of a Davy Crockett?

Concluding Thought

No matter how worthy the cause or how emotional the appeal, Davy Crockett remembered the lesson he had learned from his farmer friend; he realized he was not elected by the people of Tennessee to give away their tax dollars for welfare or charity. He might give what he liked from his own pocket; but not as a public servant. For the public's money was not his to give.

Looking Ahead

Because he would not compromise his principles, Davy's career in Congress was cut short by the political maneuverings of Andrew Jackson and James K. Polk. In disgust, the ex-Tennessee Congressman moved to Texas, a frontier territory ruled by Mexico. There he died as he had lived, fighting for a principle and a cause he thought right and just. Next week, the details of that story.

DURING THE WEEK

Apply the Constitutional principle of this lesson to current political bills being considered by Congress. Apply the same principle to past legislation which dealt with poverty or welfare. Study the preamble to the Constitution, and discuss the general welfare clause which has been stretched to justify million-dollar government expenditures.

Preamble To The Constitution

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

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