

Crockett on the Power to Make Charitable Donations



David Crockett

History's immortals sometimes offer a glimpse of their greatness in events other than those that granted them immortality.

Tennessee militia colonel David Crockett, perhaps best known for his role in the 1836 defense of the Alamo, also served three terms in the United States Congress between 1827 and 1835. Nationally known during his lifetime as a political representative of the frontier, Crockett apparently came by that reputation honestly, inasmuch as he was not above listening to his constituents. The following excerpt from an 1884 biography by Edward Sylvester Ellis, *The Life of Colonel David Crockett* might reveal how his own rural electorate taught him the importance of adhering to the Constitution and the perils of ignoring its restrictions.

Crockett was then the lion of Washington. I was a great admirer of his character, and, having several friends who were intimate with him, I found no difficulty in making his acquaintance. I was fascinated with him, and he seemed to take a fancy to me.

I was one day in the lobby of the House of Representatives when a bill was taken up appropriating money for the benefit of a widow of a distinguished naval officer. Several beautiful speeches had been made in its support, rather, as I thought, because it afforded the speakers a fine opportunity for display than from the necessity of convincing anybody, for it seemed to me that everybody favored it. The Speaker was just about to put the question when Crockett arose. Everybody expected, of course, that he was going to make one of his characteristic speeches in support of the bill. He commenced:

"Mr. Speaker -- 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. This government can owe no debts but for services rendered, and at a stipulated price. If it is a debt, how much is it? Has it been audited, and the amount due ascertained? If it is a debt, this is not the place to present it for payment, or to have its merits examined. If it is a debt, we owe more than we can ever hope to pay, for we owe the widow of every soldier who fought in the War of 1812 precisely the same amount. There is a woman in my neighborhood, the widow of as gallant a man as ever shouldered a musket. He fell in battle. She is as good in every respect as this lady, and is as poor. She is earning her daily bread by her daily labor; but if I were to introduce a bill to appropriate five or ten thousand dollars for her benefit, I should be laughed at, and my bill would not get five votes in this House. There are thousands of widows in the country just such as the one I have spoken of, but we never hear of any of these large debts to them. Sir, this is no debt. The government did not owe it to the deceased when he was alive; it could not contract it after he died. I do not wish to be rude, but I must be plain. 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 of our own money 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."

He took his seat. Nobody replied. The bill was put upon its passage, and, instead of passing unanimously, as was generally supposed, and as, no doubt, it would, but for that speech, it received but few votes, and, of course, was lost.

Like many other young men, and old ones too, for that matter, who had not thought upon the subject, I desired the passage of the bill, and felt outraged at its defeat. I determined that I would persuade my friend Crockett to move a reconsideration the next day.

Previous engagements preventing me from seeing Crockett that night, I went early to his room the next morning and found him engaged in addressing and franking letters, a large pile of which lay upon his table.

I broke in upon him rather abruptly, by asking him what devil had possessed him to make that speech and defeat that bill yesterday. Without turning his head or looking up from his work, he replied:

"You see that I am very busy now; take a seat and cool yourself. I will be through in a few minutes, and then I will tell you all about it."

He continued his employment for about ten minutes, and when he had finished he turned to me and said:

"Now, sir, I will answer your question. But thereby hangs a tale, and one of considerable length, to which you will have to listen."

I listened, and this is the tale which I heard:

"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. When we got there, I went to work, and I never worked as hard in my life as I did there for several hours. But, 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, and everybody else seemed to feel the same way.

"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. I said everybody felt as I did. That was not quite so; for, though they perhaps sympathized as deeply with the sufferers as I did, there were a few of the members who did not think we had the right to indulge our sympathy or excite our charity at the expense of anybody but ourselves. They opposed the bill, and upon its passage demanded the yeas and nays. There were not enough of them to sustain the call, but many of us wanted our names to appear in favor of what we considered a praiseworthy measure, and we voted with them to sustain it. So the yeas and nays were recorded, and my name appeared on the journals in favor of the bill.

"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, and I thought it was best to let the boys know that I had not forgot them, and that going to Congress had not made me too proud to go to see them.

"So I put a couple of shirts and a few twists of tobacco into my saddlebags, and put out. I had been out about a week and had found things going very smoothly, 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, and was about turning his horse for another furrow when I said to him: 'Don't be in such a hurry, my friend; I want to have a little talk with you, and get better acquainted.' He replied:

"I am very busy, and have but little time to talk, but if it does not take too long, I will listen to what you have to say.'

"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 [a knock down blow -ed.] I begged him to tell me what was the matter.

"Well, Colonel, it is hardly worthwhile 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 did not intend to avail myself of the privilege of the constituent to speak plainly to a candidate for the purpose of insulting or wounding you. I intend by it only to say that your understanding of the Constitution is very different from mine; and I will say to you what, but for my rudeness, I should not have said, 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 that 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 say 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.'

"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 entrusted 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. No, Colonel, Congress has no right to give charity. Individual members 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. 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. There are plenty of wealthy men in and around Washington who could have given \$20,000 without depriving themselves of even a luxury of life. 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."

"I have given you," continued Crockett, "an imperfect account of what he said. Long before he was through, I was convinced that I had done wrong.

He wound up by saying:

"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.'

"I tell you I felt streaked. I saw if I should have opposition, and this man should go to talking, he would set others to talking, and in that district I was a gone fawn-skin. I could not answer him, and the fact is, I was so fully convinced that he was right, I did not want to. But I must satisfy him, and I said to him:

"Well, my friend, you hit the nail upon the head when you said I had not sense enough to understand the Constitution. I intended to be guided by it, and thought I had studied it fully. I have heard many speeches in Congress about the powers of Congress, but what you have said here at your plow has got more hard, sound sense in it than all the fine speeches I ever heard. If I had ever taken the view of it that you have, I would have put my head into the fire before I would have given that vote; and if you will forgive me and vote for me again, if I ever vote for another unconstitutional law I wish I may be shot.'

"He laughingly replied: 'Yes, Colonel, you have sworn to that once before, 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.'

"If I don't,' said I, 'I wish I may be shot; and to convince you that I am in earnest in what I say I will come back this way in a week or ten days, and if you will get up a gathering of the people, I will make a speech to them, Get up a barbecue, and I will pay for it.'

"No, Colonel, we are not rich people in this section, but we have plenty of provisions to contribute for a barbecue, and some to spare for those who have none. The push of crops will be over in a few days, and we can then afford a day for a barbecue. This is Thursday; I will see to getting it up on Saturday week. Come to my house on Friday, and we will go together, and I promise you a very respectable crowd to see and hear you.'

"Well, I will be here. But one thing more before I say good-by. I must know your name.'

"My name is Bunce.'

"Not Horatio Bunce?'

"Yes.'

"Well, Mr. Bunce, I never saw you before, though you say you have seen me, but I know you very well. I am glad I have met you, and very proud that I may hope to have you for my friend. You must let me shake your hand before I go.'

"We shook hands and parted.

"It was one of the luckiest hits of my life that I met him. He mingled but little with the public, but was widely known for his remarkable intelligence and incorruptible integrity, and for a heart brimful and running over with kindness and benevolence, which showed themselves not only in words but in acts. He was the oracle of the whole country around him, and his fame had extended far beyond the circle of his immediate acquaintance. Though I had never met him

before, I had heard much of him, and but for this meeting it is very likely I should have had opposition, and had been beaten. One thing is very certain, no man could now stand up in that district under such a vote.

"At the appointed time I was at his house, having told our conversation to every crowd I had met, and to every man I stayed all night with, and I found that it gave the people an interest and a confidence in me stronger than I had ever seen manifested before.

"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 told you Mr. Bunce converted me politically. He came nearer converting me religiously than I had ever been before. He did not make a very good Christian of me, as you know; but he has wrought upon my mind a conviction of the truth of Christianity, and upon my feelings a reverence for its purifying and elevating power such as I had never felt 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 word by storm.

"But to return to my story. The next morning we went to the barbecue, and, to my surprise, found about a thousand men there. I met a good many whom I had not known before, and they and my friend introduced me around until I had got pretty well acquainted -- at least, they all knew me.

"In due time notice was given that I would speak to them. They gathered up around a stand that had been erected. I opened my speech by saying:

"Fellow-citizens -- I present myself before you today feeling like a new man. My eyes have lately been opened to truths which ignorance or prejudice, or both, had heretofore hidden from my view. I feel that I can today offer you the ability to render you more valuable service than I have ever been able to render before. I am here today more for the purpose of acknowledging my error than to seek your votes. That I should make this acknowledgment is due to myself as well as to you. Whether you will vote for me is a matter for your consideration only.'

"I went on to tell them about the fire and my vote for the appropriation as I have told it to you, and then told them why I was satisfied it was wrong. I closed by saying:

"And now, fellow-citizens, it remains only for me to tell you that the most of the speech you have listened to with so much interest was simply a repetition of the arguments by which your neighbor, Mr. Bunce, convinced me of my error.

"It is the best speech I ever made in my life, but he is entitled to the credit of it. And now I hope he is satisfied with his convert and that he will get up here and tell you so.'

"He came upon the stand and said:

"Fellow-citizens -- It affords me great pleasure to comply with the request of Colonel Crockett. I have always considered him a thoroughly honest man, and I am satisfied that he will faithfully perform all that he has promised you today.'

"He went down, and there went up from that crowd such a shout for Davy Crockett as his name never called forth before.

"I am not much given to tears, but I was taken with a choking then and felt some big drops rolling down my cheeks. And I tell you now that the remembrance of those few words spoken by such a man, and the honest, hearty shout they produced, is worth more to me than all the honors I have received and all the reputation I have ever made, or ever shall make, as a member of Congress.

"Now, sir," concluded Crockett, "you know why I made that speech yesterday. I have had several thousand copies of it printed, and was directing them to my constituents when you came in.

"There is one thing now to which I will call your attention. You remember that I proposed to give a week's pay. There are in that House many very wealthy men -- men who think nothing of spending a week's pay, or a dozen of them, for a dinner or a wine party when they have something to accomplish by it. Some of those same men made beautiful speeches upon the great debt of gratitude which the country owed the deceased -- a debt which could not be paid by money -- and the insignificance and worthlessness of money, particularly so insignificant a sum as \$10,000, when weighed against the honor of the nation. Yet not one of them responded to my proposition. Money with them is nothing but trash when it is to come out of the people. But it is the one great thing for which most of them are striving, and many of them sacrifice honor, integrity, and justice to obtain it."

Sources: <https://www.constitution.org/cons/crockett.htm>; also, "Sockdolager! A Tale of Davy Crockett in which the old Tennessee bear hunter meets up with the Constitution of the United States," a booklet reprinted from The Freeman magazine as a slightly condensed version from "The Life of Colonel David Crockett, compiled by Edward S. Ellis (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1884).