

**Davy Crockett Story**  
**Government Moneys Should Never be Used for Private**  
**Ventures**

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A CONSTITUTIONAL LESSON FROM DAVY CROCKETT

HON. PHILIP M. CRANE OF ILLINOIS

Wednesday, May 1, 1991

Mr. CRANE:

Mr. Speaker, recently, a friend of mine, Dr. John Shea, who is a world renown otolaryngologist from Memphis, TN, brought to my attention a reproduction of a little story that I had not heard or seen in some time. The story was told on the House floor by Davy Crockett who was then serving as a U.S. Representative from Tennessee. His story concerns two votes on spending bills and how those votes were

interpreted by one of his constituent's. The story is an excellent lesson in the principles of the Constitution. In light of the obvious inability of Congress to resist the temptation to irresponsibly spend money that is not their own, I hope that my colleagues will read the following reproduction of Davy Crockett's floor speech and grasp its significance and vote accordingly.

### EVERY CONGRESSMAN NEEDS DAVY CROCKETT'S GREAT SPEECH AGAINST THE WELFARE STATE

One day in the House of Representatives, a bill was brought up to appropriate money for the benefit of the widow of a distinguished naval officer. Several beautiful speeches had been made in its support. The Speaker was just about to put the question to a vote when Colonel David Crockett arose: "Mr. Speaker, I have as much respect for the memory of the deceased, and as much sympathy for the sufferings of the living, 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 to so 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 bills 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 was lost.

Later, when asked by a friend why he had opposed the appropriation, Crockett gave this explanation:

"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 homeless 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 in 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 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

the 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.

" '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 said, '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 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?'"

" '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 money 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 many thousands are 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 of 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 stipulation, 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.'

### "NOT YOURS TO GIVE"

"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 on 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 goodbye. I must know your name.'

" 'My name is Bunce.'

" '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.'

"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 act. He was the oracle of the whole country around him, and his fame had extended far beyond the circle of his immediate acquaintances.

"Though I had never met him before, I had heard of him, and but for this meeting it is very likely I should have had opposition and been beaten. One thing is 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 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. I got to see him two or three times every year; and I will tell you, sir, if everyone 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.

"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 have 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 my self as well as to you. Whether you will vote for me is a matter for your consideration.'

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

" 'And now, it remains 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 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 credit for it. And now I hope he is satisfied with this convert and that he will get up here and tell you so.'

"He came up on 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 the 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 drops rolling down my cheeks. I tell you, 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 made as a member of Congress.

"Now, sir," concluded Crockett, "you know why I made that speech yesterday.

"There is one thing 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 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 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 weighted 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 is the one great thing for which most of them are striving, and many of them sacrifice honor, integrity, and justice to obtain it."

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