

# 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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**D**AVY 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.

