



Written by [Wallis W. Wood](#) on April 15, 2010

## Davy Crockett and the U.S. Constitution

When you hear the name “Davy Crockett,” what do you think of?

If you’re of “a certain age,” as the more diplomatic among us like to say, you probably think of Fess Parker wearing a coonskin cap. The incredibly popular television program in which he starred had every boy in America (and a few girls, too) clamoring for their own buckskin jacket and coonskin cap.

A few years later John Wayne played Davy Crockett in the film *The Alamo*, laying down his life at the Alamo for the cause of Texas’ independence. About the same time the Kingston Trio had a hit with a song called “Remember the Alamo.” I can still remember most of the lyrics.



But before the events portrayed in the movie and the television show, the famed frontiersman served for a couple of terms in the United States Congress — from 1827 to 1831 and again from 1833 to 1835.

After his defeat in the 1834 election he said, “I told the people of my district that I would serve them faithfully as I had done; but if not ... you may all go to hell, and I will go to Texas.” He eventually did, and died on March 6, 1836, when the Alamo finally fell to Mexican troops after an 11-day siege.

It is an episode from his time in Congress that I want to tell you about today. Davy himself first told the tale, in a speech on the floor of the House that he later reprinted under the title “Sockdolager!”

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A “sockdolager” is one of those slap-your-forehead moments, when something suddenly becomes blindingly clear to you. That’s how Davy felt when he came to realize that his understanding of the U.S. Constitution was sadly lacking. Here’s what happened.

Near the end of his first term, Davy decided to visit the western edge of his district to see how much support he’d get if he decided to seek reelection. To appreciate how different campaigning was back then, let me quote the beginning of Davy’s tale:

So I put a couple of shirts and a few twists of tobacco into my saddle-bags 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.

Can you believe it? No fancy entourage, no public relations flacks paving the way, no reporters covering the scene. Not even a buggy with a suitcase or two; it was just Davy, a horse, and a couple of saddle-bags. Life sure was different back then, wasn’t it?

Davy introduces himself to the farmer and says, “I am one of those unfortunate beings called



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candidates, and —”

Before he could continue, the man interrupted and said, “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 supposed you are out electioneering now, but you had better not waste your time or mine. I shall not vote for you again.”

Needless to say, the young congressman is surprised and asks the man why on earth not. The farmer replies, “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.”

As Davy says, when he later related the story on the floor of Congress, “This was a sockdolager!” I told the man, “There must be some mistake, for I do not remember that I gave my vote last winter upon any constitutional question.” The man replies, “No, Colonel, there’s no mistake. Though I live here in the back woods 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?”

Crockett replies, “Certainly it is. And I thought that was the last vote for which anybody in the world would have found fault with.”

Then comes the classic denouement: “Well, Colonel, where do you find in the Constitution any authority to give away the public money in charity?”

Let me pick up the rest of this part of the story, exactly as Davy Crockett told it on the floor of Congress: “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.’”

I’d love to share the farmer’s entire response with you, but I don’t have room here. Instead, let me do two things. First, let me direct you to Davy Crockett’s complete speech. The website Personal Liberty Digest has created a special link to “Sockdolager!” by Davy Crockett. To see it, just [click here](#).

Second, let me go right to the farmer’s concluding remarks. He told the congressman, “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.”

Davy has no choice but to acknowledge the truth of what he’s heard. He tells the man,

“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.”

What are the chances, ladies and gentlemen, that your congressman would ever make such an admission — or such a speech — today?



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You really should read the rest of the story. You'll be delighted to learn that when Congressman Crockett gets back to Washington, the House has taken up a bill to appropriate money for the wife of a distinguished naval officer. Everyone who has spoken about it has declared himself in favor. It looks like it will pass unanimously when Davy Crockett takes the floor.

To read what he says, and what happens next, please [click here](#) to enjoy Davy Crockett's "Sockdolager!"

And remember the story the next time your congressman votes to take your money for some government activity that is nowhere to be found in our Constitution.

Until next time, keep some powder dry.

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