



Written by [Brian Farmer](#) on October 8, 2018

Published in the October 8, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 19

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## Not Theirs to Give

*The friendliness and charity of our countrymen can always be relied upon to relieve their fellow citizens in misfortune.... Federal aid in such cases encourages the expectation of paternal care on the part of the Government and weakens the sturdiness of our national character, while it prevents the indulgence among our people of that kindly sentiment and conduct which strengthens the bonds of a common brotherhood.*



— President Grover Cleveland, vetoing a congressional appropriation of \$10,000 to buy seed grain for drought-stricken Texans

In the American Association of Retired Persons July-August 2018 issue of the *AARP Bulletin*, under the Your AARP: Washington Watch section, it was reported that “Lawmakers Look to Save Imperiled Pensions.”

The article stated, “Such plans mostly cover union employees, such as truck drivers and construction workers, who paid into pensions administered by several unions and companies. About 10 million workers and retirees have these pensions, but the plans that cover about 1.3 million of them are severely underfunded.”

The article concluded by saying, “AARP has testified before Congress on the issue and is calling on members to contact their lawmakers and demand that they enact legislation protecting the earned pensions of workers and retirees.”

The stance that AARP has taken on this matter made me recall the quote at the top of this commentary. AARP’s attitude also made me recall a story about Davy Crockett, who was campaigning for reelection to Congress some time after he had voted to use taxpayer money to help citizens in Georgetown recover from a fire. As the story goes, Crockett approached a farmer who was plowing his field and asked for his support, but the farmer sternly refused, citing Crockett’s vote on the Georgetown fire. Crockett tried to defend himself by saying that a great and rich country should not shrink from spending a paltry \$20,000 to relieve the suffering of women and children.

The farmer replied, “Well, Colonel, where do you find in the Constitution any authority to give away the public money in charity?” The farmer continued:

It is not the amount, Colonel, that I complain of; it is the principle. The power of collecting and disbursing money at pleasure is the most dangerous power that can be entrusted to man. 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 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



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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.

Going back to the matter raised by AARP: Who is responsible for the underfunded pensions? Isn't the situation due to financial mismanagement and sometimes even labor union corruption? Why should we taxpayers now be responsible for bailing them out? The bulk of us taxpayers have no pensions, but according to AARP we should sacrifice for those who do! What's up with that?!

If a pension fund is underfunded by 50 percent, for example, then why not just cut the pension payout by 50 percent? That would still leave those workers and retirees with the bonus of a pension, in addition to Social Security, which is more than most of us have.

What AARP is advocating is what Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850), a French economist, statesman, and author, describes in his treatise *The Law* as "legal plunder." Bastiat explains, "But how is this legal plunder to be identified? Quite simply. See if the law takes from some persons what belongs to them, and gives it to other persons to whom it does not belong. See if the law benefits one person at the expense of another by doing what the citizen himself cannot do without committing a crime."

If I take your money, I will be brought before a court for having committed a crime: theft. If I were to plead not guilty because I used the money to subsidize my underfunded pension, nobody in their right mind would expect the judge to say, "Well, then you are free to go." But let the government take your money for the same purpose and AARP cheers. Go figure that one out!

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