

Davy Crockett:

Congressman

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History 1301

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America has a rich variety of iconic figures. Some, like Uncle Sam or Captain America, are purely fictional symbols, while others, like George Washington and Abe Lincoln, really lived. Davy Crockett is most remembered for his death at the Alamo, but he was also a politician. This might seem unlikely, since his formal education was limited, and he claimed to know little of political matters. But in reality, Crockett had several assets that helped him as a politician. His limited schooling actually made him a better representative of the less educated common man. Moreover, he was not entirely ignorant of politics, as he claimed. He understood and applied the principle of popularity with the electorate. In addition, he observed the political arena and drew his own policies regarding the issues of the time. These assets made Davy Crockett successful on the campaign trail.

Several scholars have examined the political roots of Crockett's popular image, focusing on how this reputation was fabricated for political reasons. James A. Shackford argues that Crockett was simply a naive backwoodsman who was used by anti-Jacksonians in order to further their own selfish objectives. In turn, they created a legendary reputation for him. Thomas E. Scruggs disagrees. He says that Crockett was not simply a "naive" tool of the anti-Jacksonians, but rather an independent political character who had his own policies. This paper focuses on several aspects of Crockett's life and career, instead of his popular image, to show that he was not a political dupe, but rather an independent politician, a successful campaigner.¹

1. M. J. Heale, "The Role of the Frontier in Jacksonian Politics: David Crockett and the Myth of the Self-Made Man," *Western Historical Quarterly* 4, no. 4(1973): 422-23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/967284>; John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol For an Age*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 80; James Atkins Shackford, *David Crockett: The Man and the Legend*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 286; Thomas E. Scruggs, "Davy Crockett and the Thieves of Jericho: An Analysis of the Shackford-Parrington Conspiracy Theory," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 3(1999): 497-498, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3125244>.

Initially, Crockett's lack of education seems to stand in contradiction to his success in gaining office. After all, politicians are smart men who can understand how government works, right? Compared to the widespread literacy of modern America, Crockett seems near illiterate. He writes that his formal education amounted to 4 days when he was 12, and 6 months when he was 18. Indeed, he says, "it will be a source of astonishment to many, who reflect that I am now a member of the American Congress,—the most enlightened body of men in the world,—that at so advanced an age of fifteen, I did not know the first letter in the book." To illustrate visually, the following is an excerpt of a letter he wrote to his brother:

My Dear Brother

I received your favour of the 11th inst and parused its contents with great Pleasure all except that part whare it Relats to the disagreeable situation of friends Differing it is certainly the worst of all furiz I Received a letter on yesterday from John which affected my feelings a great deal that was in consequence of the Death of our Poor Dear little neece Rebecca ann Bürgin

The lack of punctuation is glaring, not to mention the several misspelled words. How could such an uneducated man successfully get into office in our country?²

It is important to remember that the widespread literacy of today was not the norm back then. In the early to mid 1800s, most of American civilization was located along the eastern seaboard. At this point, Tennessee was still part of the frontier (hence Crockett's reputation as a frontiersman). In the year 1840, out of Massachusetts's total white population of 729,030, 21.98% were in primary or common schools. On the other hand, in Tennessee, only 3.92% of the 640,627 white population were in primary or common schools. Thus, compared to most

2. David Crockett, *The Autobiography of David Crockett* (1923: Internet Archive, 2012), 28-29, <http://www.archive.org/details/autobiographyofd00croc>; Ibid, 39-40; Ibid, 36; David Crockett, "Letters of Davy Crockett," *American Historical Magazine* 5, no. 1(1900): 41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42657501>.

people in the state, Crockett was not unique in his low amount of schooling. He was like the people around him.³

The similar level of literacy that Crockett had with the people gave him a natural advantage in his campaigns. Crockett ran for (and held office in) the Tennessee legislature, as well as the U.S. House of representatives. As a potential voice in the law-making body, it was important for him to represent the needs and desires of his constituents. When the voters looked at Crockett, they saw a common man like themselves. Surely he would represent their needs and desires, because he already shared them. In his critique of American government, Alexis de Tocqueville mentions Crockett in a footnote, remarking incredulously how this common man won at the expense of a more “qualified” politician, “a man of talent and moderate wealth.” A man of talent and moderate wealth would not have had so much in common with most of the Tennessee voters, and so he was actually less qualified. This is why Davy won, and it is part of why he was so successful in his campaigns.⁴

This identification that Crockett had with his constituents was an innate advantage to his campaigning. He did not choose to be born and raised in Tennessee with little education. But he also had acquired advantages, such as his popularity with the voters.

Crockett built upon his natural affinity with the people of Tennessee to boost his popularity, and this gave him another edge on the campaign trail. Knowing that the voters were fickle, he did not sit back and rely on his similarities with them. They needed to be constantly reminded that he was not only *a* candidate, but *the* candidate that they wanted. One way that he

3. “Historical Census Browser,” University of Virginia Library, accessed April 2015, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/state.php>.

4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Historical-Critical edition, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2010), PDF, 320.

did this was through his wit on the public platform. For example, he writes that in one of his first political campaigns, he found it quite difficult to make a candidate's speech. He laments that he could not tell his audience anything about government, and that he choked on his own words. He ended up telling the people that there simply wasn't a speech in him, amusing them with a few anecdotes, and inviting them all to the liquor stand. This may not seem like a campaign success story at the surface, but a deeper look shows the truth. Crockett didn't appear to his audience like a man who was well versed in government matters (and he wasn't), but they liked his speech anyway. Furthermore, his opponent, who was *not* ignorant of government matters, had a much smaller audience than Crockett did. Most of the people were at the liquor stand "whetting their whistles" and listening to more of Crockett's stories. This was not a lucky coincidence. Crockett distracted the audience on purpose, and he says that it gained him the votes for that event.⁵

Crockett regularly employed his wit on the campaign trail. During the 1827 congressional race, one of his opponent's long speeches was interrupted by a flock of guinea fowls. After the birds had been driven away, and the speech was concluded, Crockett seized the opportunity, and asserted that the birds had been calling, 'Crockett, Crockett, Crockett.' The people cheered at this, and his opponent was "mighty plagued." Obviously, the birds weren't really cheering for Davy, and the people knew this. But they thought it was a good joke, and it lightened things up after several long, boring political speeches. It made Crockett's opponent look bad, and the audience left with a good impression of Davy on their minds.⁶

5. Crockett, *Autobiography*, 93-94.

6. *Ibid*, 131-32.

Davy Crockett built up his popularity in his autobiography as well. The previous examples of his skill on the public platform are all taken from his self-authored biography, and thus, they must be taken with a grain of salt. It is likely that Crockett sometimes twisted the facts in his favor. It can't be assumed that everything in his story that puts him in a positive light is absolutely true. Does this mean that the previous examples do not show his skill in electioneering? No, it does not. In fact, it strengthens the point. When Crockett uses exaggeration or clever wording in his book, the explicit meaning of his words may not be accurate; however, the implicit meaning is. Crockett thought it worthwhile to construct a better image of himself through exaggeration and clever wording. To cite a previously used example, at one point in his story, he emphasizes the “great” difference between his lowly beginnings and his office in Congress. He points out that it would be a source of astonishment to many, that at fifteen-years of age he did not know the first letter in the book, and that now he was a member of the “most enlightened body of men in the world.” A popular ideal of the time was that of the self-made man—a man who brought himself from lowly beginnings to success and prosperity. Crockett was trying to connect himself to this image. In doing so, he was trying to raise himself in the esteem of the Tennessee voters—many of whom were common men like himself. Crockett was not ignorant of political matters. He understood the importance of being popular with the voters, and he understood that to do this, he needed to connect himself with the popular ideal of the time.⁷

Crockett understood this basic principle of voter popularity, and he employed it well. This gained him popularity as a candidate, without requiring him to know much about the political landscape of the day. But he did not remain ignorant in this respect.

7. Ibid, 36.

In order to further his validity as a candidate and secure the people's favor, Crockett observed the political events of the day and drew his own conclusions about them. At the beginning of his political career, he writes that he knew little of political matters. However, he listened to the speeches of other candidates who did, and learned "pretty fast," as he put it. He writes of a long speech that he gave later in his career (only two years before his death at the Alamo) at a public hotel, concerning Andrew Jackson's policies. He starts out by describing his previous support of Jackson, how he had fought for him in the Creek War, and how he had held high hopes for Jackson's presidency. He reveals that he was disappointed, however, and he so he stopped supporting the president. "Gentlemen, I am now against Jackson," he says. He goes on, denouncing the president's policies, even going so far as to compare Jackson with King George III of England—that tyrant against whom the Americans fought for freedom in the Revolution. This is strong language against any American president, especially within only a century of that war. Further, he says that just as the Roman people approved Caesar's trampling of the law, so the "Jackson man-worshippers" approved of Jackson's trampling of the law. By this point in his career, Crockett definitely had a confidence in his political knowledge, as demonstrated by these stark comparisons. If he had been as ignorant of the political stage as he claimed early on in his career (again, there is a possibility that he exaggerated this), he wasn't any more. This confidence in his own opinions gave him more credibility as a candidate, because it showed his ability to understand and analyze the situation of politics at the time. Not long after this, Crockett was in Washington D.C. for a session of Congress wherein Jackson apparently asked Congress for the power to make war on France. Crockett gives a detailed explanation of why this was not constitutional. He says that if only Congress has the power to declare war, then they should not

give permission to the president to do so whenever he feels ready. He also says what his course would have been: instead of making war on France, he would have boycotted trade with her. Whether or not his opinions on this subject were right, they *were* detailed and well thought out opinions. Again, this shows not an ignorance of the politics, but rather a confidence in the knowledge of it.⁸

Davy Crockett was successful on the campaign trail. He was elected to office in both the Tennessee legislature and the U.S. House of Representatives. This was due in large part to his ability to identify with the constituents of the state of Tennessee. They felt that they could trust a common man like themselves to represent them in the law-making branch of the country. Crockett also understood the vital role of popular image in politics. Through his campaign speeches and literary exaggeration, he applied this understanding in order to boost his popularity with the voters. But he did not stop there. As he continued through his political career, Crockett learned the issues of the day, and formulated his own policies concerning them. This gave him even more validity as a candidate. It is clear why he was successful in attaining political office. Davy Crockett was more than a rough frontiersman who died a hero while swinging his rifle at the Alamo. He was able to serve his country throughout his life in politics. And he did.

8. Ibid, 92; Ibid, 94; David Crockett, *An Account of Col. Crockett's Tour to the North and Down East* (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey and A. Hart, 1835), PDF, 182-188; Ibid, 192-195;

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