

NOT YOURS TO GIVE

In the early 1800's, Congress was considering a bill to appropriate tax dollars for the widow of a distinguished naval officer. Beautiful speeches had been made in support of this bill. It seemed that everyone in the House favored it. The Speaker of the House was just about to put the question to a vote, when Davy Crockett, famous frontiersman and Congressman from Tennessee, rose to his feet.



"Mr. Speaker, I have as much respect for the memory of the deceased and as much sympathy for the suffering of the living as any man in this House, but we must not permit our respect for the dead or our sympathy on the 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. Sir, this is no 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. I cannot vote for this bill, but I will give one week's pay, and if every member of Congress will do the same, it will amount to more than the bill asks."

There was silence on the floor of the House as Crockett took his seat. When the bill was put to a vote, instead of passing unanimously as had been expected, it received only a few votes.

The next day Crockett was asked why he had spoken against a bill for such a worthy cause. In reply, Crockett related the following story:

Just a few years before, Davy had voted to spend \$20,000 of public money to help victims of a terrible fire in Georgetown. When the legislative session was over, Crockett made a trip back home to do some campaigning for his re-election. One constituent, named Horatio Bunce, bluntly informed Crockett, *"I voted for you the last time. I shall not vote for you again."* Crockett, feeling he had served his constituents well, was stunned and inquired the reason.

Bunce replied, *"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. The Constitution, to be worth anything, must be held sacred, and rigidly observed in all its provisions."*

"Well, Colonel, where do you find in the Constitution any authority to give away public money in charity? No Colonel, Congress has no right to give charity. Individual members can 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."

"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 usurpation, and a violation of the Constitution. You have violated the Constitution in what I consider to be 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 could not answer him," said Crockett. *"I was so fully convinced that he was right."* 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. If you will forgive me and vote for me again, if I ever vote for another unconstitutional law, I wish I may be shot."*

After finishing his story, Crockett said, *"Now sir, you know why I made that speech yesterday. There is one thing now to which I will call your attention. You remember that I proposed to give a week's pay? There are in the House many very wealthy men, men who think nothing of spending a week's pay or a dozen of them, for a dinner or a wine party when they have something to accomplish by it."*

Some of these same men made beautiful speeches upon the debt of gratitude which the country owed the deceased, 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 it is the one great thing for which most of them are striving, and many of them sacrifice honor, integrity, and justice to obtain it."

