

David Crockett: Advice to Politicians (1833) & Comments on Martin Van Buren (1835)

David Crockett was a rugged frontiersman—bear hunter, rifleman, scout, and Indian fighter—elected to Congress twice from Tennessee. He preferred the name “David,” though plenty of historical matter would have us believe everyone called him by the more folksy-sounding “Davy.”

Crockett was first elected to Congress in 1827. According to story, he introduced himself in Congress brazenly: “I am David Crockett, fresh from the backwoods, half-horse, half-alligator, a little touched with the snapping turtle. I can wade the Mississippi, leap the Ohio, ride upon a streak of lightning, and slip without a scratch down a honey locust tree. I can whip my weight in wildcats and if any gentleman pleases, for a ten-dollar bill, he can throw in a panther too.” This unabashed self-introduction made quite a stir in Washington, where Crockett became well-liked despite his boastfulness.

Though his political career was not overly distinguished, Crockett’s reputation was one of honest action apart from blind party discipleship. He often warned his audience to “remember that a government big enough to give you everything you want is also big enough to take away everything you have.” Several times he was a White House guest of President John Quincy Adams.

Crockett was also known for his frontier-style candor. He once attended a menagerie at a Washington exhibition with a few of his congressional colleagues. As Crockett watched some caged monkeys, he remarked how similar the animals looked to one of his least favorite political brethren. No sooner had Crockett made the comparison than he was surprised to see that very congressman standing near and listening. Seizing the moment, Crockett faced him squarely and said, “I suppose that I ought to apologize, but I can’t tell whether to you or the monkey!”

Crockett became an admirer of Andrew Jackson based on his military service under the fellow Tennessean in the Creek War (1813-14). However, in politics, Crockett leaned toward the Whig Party, which was formed in staunch opposition to “King Andrew.” Perhaps Crockett’s most notable action was his firm resistance to the enthusiastic Indian Removal policy embraced by President Jackson. (Crockett also took issue with the Jackson administration economic policy, which he believed stripped the federal government of its ability to adequately regulate the nation’s money supply.) When Crockett decided to butt heads with Jackson, he effectually committed political suicide.

Angry after his re-election defeat in 1835, Crockett told his Tennessee constituents they could “go to hell” and he would “go to Texas,” whereupon he did just that. Leaving his wife behind, Crockett led a modest militia—the Tennessee Mounted Volunteers—to aid the Texas independence movement. There, he became the most famous Alamo casualty when Mexican forces under General Santa Anna overran the makeshift garrison in March of 1836.

Contrary to myth, the 50-year-old Crockett did not fight to his death, madly bonking Mexican onrushers with his rifle, “Old Betsy,” as his last brave, desperate act. Instead, he was among a handful of Alamo defenders captured, possibly tortured, and then executed by Santa Anna over the protest of one of Santa Anna’s chief officers. Whether or not Santa Anna knew the identity of Crockett before ordering his death is questionable. Crockett’s heroic death, sarcastic wit, partial literacy, rampant boastfulness, constant optimism, and steadfast courage are cemented in American historic folklore forever.

The following passage is excerpted from *Colonel Crockett's Exploits and Adventures in Texas*, originally advertised as Crockett's authentic diary purportedly taken from the Alamo by a Mexican officer who was later killed in battle. In 1884, the book was determined to be the work of Richard Penn Smith.



“Attend all public meetings,” says I, “and get some friend to move that you take the chair. If you fail in this attempt, make a push to be appointed secretary. The proceeding of course will be published, and your name is introduced to the public. But should you fail in both undertakings, get two or three acquaintances, over a bottle of whisky, to pass some resolutions, no matter on what subject. Publish them, even if you pay the printer. It will answer the purpose of breaking the ice, which is the main point in these matters.

“Intrigue until you are elected an officer of the militia. This is the second step toward promotion, and can be accomplished with ease, as I know an instance of an election being advertised, and no one attending, the innkeeper at whose house it was to be held, having a military turn, elected himself colonel of his regiment.” Says I, “You may not accomplish your ends with as little difficulty, but do not be discouraged—Rome wasn’t built in a day.

“If your ambition or circumstances compel you to serve your country and earn three dollars a day, by becoming a member of the legislature, you must first publicly avow that the constitution of the state is a shackle upon free and liberal legislation, and is, therefore, of as little use in the present enlightened age as an old almanac of the year in which the instrument was framed. There is policy in this measure, for by making the constitution a mere dead letter, your headlong proceedings will be attributed to a bold and unshackled mind; whereas, it might otherwise be thought they arose from sheer mulish ignorance. ‘The Government’ has set the example in his [Jackson’s] attack upon the Constitution of the United States, and who should fear to follow where ‘the Government’ leads?

“When the day of election approaches, visit your constituents far and wide. Treat liberally, and drink freely, in order to rise in their estimation, though you fall in your own. True, you may be called a drunken dog by some of the clean-shirt and silk-stocking gentry, but the real roughnecks will style you a jovial fellow. Their votes are certain, and frequently count double.

“Do all you can to appear to advantage in the eyes of the women. That’s easily done. You have but to kiss and slabber [slobber over] their children, wipe their noses, and pat them on the head. This cannot fail to please their mothers, and you may rely on your business being done in that quarter.

“Promise all that is asked,” said I, “and more if you can think of anything. Offer to build a bridge or a church, to divide a county, create a batch of new offices, make a turnpike, or anything they like. Promises cost nothing; therefore, deny nobody who has a vote or sufficient influence to obtain one.

“Get up on all occasions, and sometimes on no occasion at all, and make long-winded speeches, though composed of nothing else than wind. Talk of your devotion to your country, your modesty and disinterestedness, or on any such fanciful subject. Rail against taxes of all kinds, officeholders, and bad harvest weather; and wind up with a flourish about the heroes who fought and bled for our liberties in the times that tried men’s souls. To be sure, you run the risk of being considered a bladder of wind, or an empty barrel. But never mind that; you will find enough of the same fraternity to keep you in countenance.

“If any charity be going forward, be at the top of it, provided it is to be advertised publicly. If not, it isn’t worth your while. None but a fool would place his candle under a bushel on such an occasion.

“These few directions,” said I, “if properly attended to, will do your business. And when once elected—why, a fig for the dirty children, the promises, the bridges, the churches, the taxes, the offices, and the subscriptions. For it is absolutely necessary to forget all these before you can become a thoroughgoing politician, and a patriot of the first water.”

The excerpt which follows is taken from *The Life of Martin Van Buren, Heir-Apparent to the “Government” and the Appointed Successor of General Andrew Jackson*, a campaign biography written by Crockett in 1835. It begins with a comparison of outgoing President Jackson and Martin Van Buren, who served as Jackson’s second term Vice-President. Virtually hand-picked by the politically omnipotent Jackson, Van Buren soundly defeated a host of Whig Party candidates in 1836 to become the nation’s eighth President.



Jackson is open, bold, warmhearted, confiding, and passionate to a fault. Van Buren is secret, sly, selfish, cold, calculating, distrustful, treacherous, and if he could gain an object just as well by openness as intrigue, he would choose the latter.

But there is one thing in which I think all will agree, that Martin Van Buren is not the man he is cracked up to be; and that if he is made President of the United States, he will have reached a place to which he is not entitled, either by sense or sincerity; and that he owes his good luck to the hangers-on of office, who, to serve themselves, have used the popularity of General Jackson to abuse the country with Martin Van Buren.

A pleasant anecdote is told of Van Buren when he was quite young. It is truly like him, and planted the principle upon which he has acted ever since. A warmly contested election was approaching, and the friends on both sides, being people of influence, used great exertions and became very excited; Van Buren applied to a knowing politician for his opinion about the result. Since the answer expressed much doubt, young Martin, casting his eyes wishfully toward the ground, said, “I do wish I knew which party would succeed, as I want to take a side, but don’t like to be in the minority.”

- What does Crockett mean when he states “their votes . . . count double”?
- What “cost nothing” to politicians, according to Crockett?
- Do Crockett’s instructions to politicians seem quaint and intended as facetious or shrewd observations about the potential to sway the voting populous during the Jacksonian years?
- What accusations did Crockett make regarding Van Buren in this passage? What principle did he claim Van Buren followed?
- Why would Crockett, an opponent of Jackson, write favorably of Jackson in this biographical account of Van Buren?
- What hint does Crockett supply that indicates he considers the election’s outcome to be a foregone conclusion?
- Briefly describe Jackson’s general position on each of the following major political issues of the early 1800s: protective tariff, national bank, federal funding for internal improvements, availability of western land, slavery, and Indian removal. Make an educated guess regarding Crockett’s position on each of these issues.
- Based on the two readings, what animals would you suppose Crockett might use to portray Jackson and Van Buren in a political cartoon? Provide a short explanation.