

DAVY CROCKETT: THE SPEAKER AND THE IMAGE

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The history of the United States is replete with heroes of varying sorts, ranging from the martyred President John F. Kennedy, back through humorist Will Rogers and orator Daniel Webster, to the rip-roaring backwoodsman Davy Crockett. The American hero characteristically projected an image which caught the imagination of those who knew him, an image which became for later generations the real man.

David Crockett was a frontiersman, a husband and father, a bear hunter, a state representative, a Congressman, and a martyr. His reputation and the image he presented was created, to a great degree, by his speaking. Because of his appeal, he was elected to both state and national legislatures. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Crockett's appeal through his public speaking fostered the development of his image as frontiersman, clever hero, philosopher, demigod, and martyr.

Crockett's Public Speaking

Davy Crockett's success as a speaker was due to his identification with his constituents of the backwoods. Kenneth Burke suggests that one can "persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image,

attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his."¹ As the embodiment of the American frontier values, Crockett achieved consubstantiality with his audiences by the persuasive presentation of himself, his attitudes, and his beliefs.

The first step in Crockett's rise to political fame was his election as magistrate in the Tennessee community of Shoal Creek where he developed his famous motto, "Be always sure you're right, then go ahead." Although he had read no law books, he impressed his neighbors with sound judgments. When he began his career as a legislator, he continued to promote the idea that he was as innocent of "high-falutin'" city talk as were his neighbors.

In 1821 during his first campaign for state legislator from the same area, he attended a frolic where both candidates were asked to speak. In his autobiography he described in detail the occasion, his reactions, and his speech:

A public document I had never seen, nor did I know there were such things; and how to begin I couldn't tell. I made many apologies, and tried to get off I tried to speak about something, and I cared very little what, until I choaked up as bad as if my mouth had been jamm'd and cramm'd chock full of dry mush At last I told them I was like a fellow I had heard of not long before. He was beating on the head of an empty barrel near the roadside, when a traveler, who was passing along, asked what he was doing that for? The fellow replied that there was some cider in that barrel a few days before, and he was trying to see if there was any then, but if there was he couldn't get at it. I told them that there had been a little bit of speech in me a while ago, but I believed I couldn't get it out. They all roared out in a mighty laugh.²

Pleased with Crockett's humorous tales, the voters found it easy to identify with their peer -- nervous, homely in manner and dress, unknowledgeable about governmental affairs.

Crockett had no difficulty in being reelected in 1823 from his western Tennessee district near Reelfoot lake. His tactics, recorded by Walter Blair, were designed to identify himself with the voters:

When he ran for the next session, he walked into a meeting and said to the crowd, "I don't want it understood that I've come electioneering. I've just crept out of the cane to see what discoveries I can make among the white folks." But he gave the voters chaws of tobacco and drinks of whisky, he told them some more good yarns, and he won again.³

In the election for the United States Congress in 1827, while campaigning against Colonel Alexander and General Arnold, Crockett stated that his two competitors seemed afraid of each other but ignored him in their speeches:

They, therefore, were generally working against each other, while I was going ahead for myself, and mixing among the people in the best way I could. I was as cunning as a little red fox, and wouldn't risk my tail in a "commital trap."⁴

Crockett had always been a likeable fellow, quick with a witty remark; he was especially adept at taking advantage of opportunities for his personal benefit. One such occasion occurred during this campaign when the three competitors appeared on the same platform to speak. Davy, scheduled first, spoke briefly and was then followed first by Alexander and

then by Arnold. Crockett gave the following account:

The general took much pains to reply to Alexander, and didn't so much as let on that there was any such candidate as myself at all. He had been speaking for a considerable time, when a large flock of guinea-fowls came very near to where he was, and set up the most unmerciful chattering that ever was heard They so confused the general, that he made a stop, and requested that they might be driven away I told him that he had not the politeness to name me in his speech, and that when my little friends, the guinea-fowls, had come up and began to holler, "Crockett, Crockett, Crockett," he had been ungenerous enough to stop, and drive them all away. This raised a universal shout among the people for me, and the general seemed mighty bad plagued.⁵

The voters were pleased with the ability of a candidate to outsmart another; this was evidence of "natural ability" and required no "book learning" to accomplish.

Crockett continued this campaign with funny stories, frequently passing around horns of whiskey, "not to get elected of course," he said righteously, "for that would be against the law; but just . . . to make themselves and their friends feel their keeping a little."⁶ His audiences approved.

His first important speaking occasion in Congress arose after his reelection in 1829 with the discussion of the problem of land speculation in which Crockett strove for low prices and long-term payments on the land for the benefit of the settlers. He opposed the majority, including his one-time idol Andrew Jackson. Constance Rourke, one of Crockett's biographers, records excerpts from Crockett's speech to the House concerning the plight of the settlers:

Their little all . . . is to be wrested from them for the purposes of speculation, and a swindling machine is to be set up to strip them of what little the surveyors and the warrant holders have left them. It shall never be said that I sat by in silence!⁷

Doubtlessly his constituents appreciated his efforts in their behalf, but they saw even more clearly that he had failed. The cause of the settlers had been dealt a severe blow with the defeat of Crockett's suggestions. Rourke credits Crockett with a unique understanding of the implications of this issue, remarking that:

. . . in a most vital relationship, that of an eager people to the new, rich land, equal opportunity did not exist. Crockett himself could not have judged of the final results of this blow Few seemed able to perceive the relation of an equitable land ownership to the purposes of a democracy. None the less Crockett stands head and shoulders above the average thinker of the time, even above many in high places, because of his grasp of a fundamental principle and his willingness to fight for it.⁸

A second major issue eliciting speeches from Crockett was the problem of the disposal of Indian lands. President Jackson had proposed a bill to remove the five tribes of the Southwest to areas west of the Mississippi River, even though this violated the treaty. Crockett, risking his own political career, vigorously opposed Jackson. Friends discouraged his opposition to the powerful President, but he replied:

I'll wear no man's collar. Long ago I fixed on a motto. That motto is "Be always sure you're right, then go ahead." I follow it to this day, and I shall always follow it, come what will. The President is wrong about the Indians, and I know it.⁹

Davy was the only Tennessee delegate against the bill:

I know I stand alone from my state None of my colleagues agree with my sentiment, but if I should be the only member of the House who voted against the bill and the only man in the United States who disapproved of it, I would still vote against, and it would be a matter of rejoicing till the day I died that I did so.¹⁰

Furthermore, Crockett was not really representing his constituents for most of them were either opposed or indifferent to the issue. With homely expressions he stood his ground, but to no avail. Even though he was supported by many people in the North and East, by the Society of Friends, and by many lawyers, Jackson's influence prevailed and the tribes were removed. Moreover, Crockett had displeased his constituents on two counts: he had failed in his attempt to secure low land prices, and he had not represented them on the Indian issue. He lost the election in 1831.

Crockett rallied, however, and was reelected in 1833. During this term of office his major speaking occasions arose on his tour to the Northeast. Everywhere he went he addressed cheering crowds as the toast of the Whig party, for he was an ex-Jackson supporter who could appeal to the coonskin voters. Although Crockett did not consider himself affiliated with any political party, he had in fact aligned himself with the Whigs merely by opposing Jackson. He was interesting to the northeasterners also because he was a prime example of a frontiersman,

a Tennessee backwoodsman. Vernon Parrington's analysis is revealing:

Popular imagination seized upon him and endowed the mighty hunter of the canebrakes with the fugitive romance that had been gathering for years. He was erected into a mythical figure that drew to itself the unappropriated picturesque that sprang spontaneously from the crude western life.¹¹

Everything Crockett did on this tour was material for newspaper articles. His speeches were reprinted, although Parrington suggests they quite probably were revised beforehand.¹² As a result of the tour, Crockett became nationally famous. Some historians claim that he was exploited by the Whigs to counteract the Jackson influence.¹³ Rourke denies this,¹⁴ but regardless of whether or not he was used as a political pawn, the crowds approved of him.

Using an appropriation bill as a point of departure, Crockett gave one of his last speeches to the Congress in June 1834, aiming his speech primarily at Andrew Jackson:

I now believe we ought to lay this bill on the table, too, and all other appropriation bills. Sir, it is useless to pass appropriation bills What have we seen, sir? We have seen him seize the treasury of this country, and remove it from where the law had placed it; and I now ask any gentleman of this House to satisfy me why the same law that will authorize him to take the money from where the law had placed it, will not bear him out in also distributing it where he pleases? . . . Sir, I do not consider it good sense to be sitting here passing laws for Andrew Jackson to laugh at; it is not even good nonsense. Sir, what does he care for your laws or the constitution? He is the Government, and his will is the law of the land Sir, the people will let him know that he is not the Government. I hope to live to see better times.¹⁵

Crockett had opposed Jackson as early as 1829; each year had brought more subjects for dissension between them. While Crockett was popular, Jackson controlled the party machinery. Davy was severely defeated in 1835 and immediately left for Texas.

Although Crockett was no longer in office, his fame and popularity did not die; in fact, they grew to great proportions. His humor and wit were emphasized, his homely speech exaggerated. Tales were circulated about Davy and his exploits which while mostly fictional were nevertheless consistent with his reputation. A combination of forces, chief among which was his speaking, united to make Davy Crockett famous. He appealed to the voters as "just plain folks" on grounds other than intellectual. He used "every available means of persuasion" including wit and humor, liquor and tobacco, ridicule, sharp-shooting, and hunting stories. Yet, once elected, he did not take lightly his duties as a representative. His impassioned, sincere rhetoric in Congress won recognition; and he achieved a homely statesmanship. He spoke to cheering throngs on his tour and was greatly admired. As Kenneth Porter suggests, "Davy Crockett . . . was a man about whom legends began to cluster even in his lifetime."¹⁶

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SPEAKING ON THE CROCKETT IMAGE

"Hero-worship answers an urgent American need," says Dixon Wecter. "Homage to heroes is a vital part of our

patriotism."¹⁷ Crockett was a frontiersman who achieved the status of hero. Upon him were bestowed all the qualities befitting such a figure, and his popularity knew no bounds. In describing the Crockett legend, Rourke states:

The Crockett stories even distantly approached the realm of the epic, not merely because of the persistent effect of the scale or because of their theme of wandering adventure, but because they embodied something of those interwoven destinies of gods and men which have the great epical substance. The tales were brief and scattered; the bias was comic; a perverse and wayward spirit was abroad.¹⁸

The Crockett image is composed of many facets, each of which overlaps the other. It will be profitable to analyze this image and see how his speaking affected its various parts.

Frontiersman

"It was a fiction of the time," writes Walter Blair, "that, just as all Scotchmen were stingy, all frontiersmen were both wonderful in their capacity for drink and boastful in their talk."¹⁹ B. A. Botkin goes into greater detail in describing the image of the American frontiersman:

A composite picture of the American hero would show him to be a plain, tough, practical fellow, equally good at a bargain or a fight, a star-performer on the job and a hell-raiser off it, and something of a salesman and a showman, with a flair for prodigious stories, jokes, and stunts and a general capacity for putting himself over. Our nearest approach to a national myth, explaining and justifying the many contradictions in our heroes, is the frontier or pioneer myth. This reconciles the primitive virtues of brute strength, courage, and cunning with the economic virtues of thrift, hard work, and perseverance.

The backwoodsman was the first of our tall men, whose words were tall talk and whose deeds were tall tales.²⁰

Davy Crockett was a prime example of the backwoodsman with his tall talk and tall tales. His speeches, usually interlaced with stories of hunting and fighting exploits, had little to say of governmental matters and made use of humor and witty remarks. Handy with a gun, Crockett often combined speaking engagements and shooting matches. Because Crockett was a genuine backwoodsman, he appealed to his fellows, becoming recognized as a tall-talking, whiskey-drinking, coon-grinning frontiersman.

Comic Clever Hero

In describing the American hero, Max Eastman says:

These American heroes are not distinguished by size, but by humor. All mythical heroes have been exaggerations, but they have been serious ones. America came too late for that. Her demigods were born in laughter; they are consciously preposterous; they are cockalorum demigods. That is the natively American thing -- not that her primitive humor is exaggerative; but that her primitive exaggerations were humorous.²¹

Humor and comedy are a tradition in America. Sociologist Orrin Klapp describes the tradition of the clever hero:

Whether it is . . . Robin Hood escaping from the Sheriff of Nottingham or Davy Crockett outwitting his backwoods opponents with a trick, the victory of the clever hero is discernible. He either vanquishes or escapes from a formidable opponent by a ruse.²²

That a major facet of the Crockett image is the comic clever hero is suggested by Boykin:

Although in his own day Crockett's name was a household word for his jokes as well as his achievements, the image of the "Colonel" that endures to-day is not that of a national political figure or the martyr of the Alamo, but that of the comic backwoodsman.²³

Crockett's speaking contributed to this aspect of his image; his abundant use of humor and witty stories and his ability to outsmart his opponents on the speaker's stand as well as off stood him in good stead with his backwoods audiences. "The heroes . . . never stopped cracking jokes,"²⁴ remarks Malcolm Cowley; and Crockett offers a classic example. Davy's use of humor and wit revealed assumptions common to both speaker and audience and aided the establishment of his image.

Coonskin Philosopher

The coonskin or crackerbox philosopher in America is a person who in homey, down-to-earth language expresses the common sense and deeper intuitions of the people. Many of our comic heroes have also been crackerbox philosopher, such as Abe Lincoln, Will Rogers, and Davy Crockett. Many of Crockett's sayings were circulated with his stories, as examples of "horse sense." The most famous of all his rustic maxims was his motto, "Be always sure you're right, then go ahead." Because it was appropriate for a new nation, and especially fitting for a frontier community, this proverb appealed to people. Often the stories that Crockett told in his speeches exemplified some homely adage; for example, he told a Philadelphia audience that as long as General Jackson went straight:

. . . I followed him; but when he began to go this way, and that way, and every way, I wouldn't go after him; like the boy whose master ordered him to plough

across the field to the red cow. Well, he began to plough and she began to walk; and he ploughed all forenoon after her. So when the master came, he swore at him for going so crooked. "Why, sir," said the boy, "you told me to plough to the red cow, and I kept after her, but she always kept moving."²⁵

Commenting on Crockett as a philosopher, Botkin compares him to Lincoln:

In his role of cracker-box philosopher and story-telling politician, the coonskin Congressman anticipates Lincoln, although with Crockett story-telling was a business rather than an art -- the business of being a wag and a good fellow.²⁶

Demigod

Like the legends surrounding William F. Cody ("Buffalo Bill"), John Henry, Jonathan Chapman ("Johnny Appleseed"), and Daniel Webster ("Black Dan"), the stories about Davy Crockett grew into gigantic proportions. These tall tales picture Crockett as killing bears at the age of three, being weaned on rattlesnakes' eggs and whiskey, catching a comet by the tail, and ultimately greasing the frozen axis of the earth with bear grease. Blair's comments on these tales about Davy are instructive:

During Crockett's lifetime, and particularly after his heroic death in the Alamo in 1836, tall tales about him circulated in yarn-spinning sessions and in print. He was pictured in such tales as a comic demigod, doing superhuman deeds imagined by exuberant storytellers. These tales combined imagination of the sort one finds in poetry with enough robust humor to make them palatable to ordinary men. They are related to the earlier whoppers of Samuel Peters, the later yarns of Mark Twain, and the present-day fantastic moving pictures of Walt Disney.²⁷

Because Crockett was by nature and environment boastful, it was a natural consequence that legends about him should boast of his greatness. But the boasting and bragging which was characteristic of Crockett's speaking never reached the bounds of the legends which sprang up after his death.

Martyr

Many of America's heroes, such as Abraham Lincoln, Nathan Hale, Jim Bowie, and John Kennedy, have been martyrs. Klapp suggests the significance of the hero's death:

Heroic deaths have two common themes: voluntary sacrifice for a cause and defeat by treachery The martyred heroes usually die fighting for a cause against superior enemies or are persecuted by a powerful tyrant We may recall some of the most familiar forms of legendary betrayal; Davy Crockett was stabbed in the back while defending the Alamo.²⁸

There have been many accounts of the manner of Crockett's death, but it is generally accepted that he was killed during the fighting at the Alamo.

Much of Davy's speaking foreshadowed his actions in Texas. His staunch defense of the settler against land speculation and his total opposition to unfair treatment of the Indians in the face of political ruin are quite in harmony with his stand for freedom and democracy in San Antonio. Crockett's martyrdom was the final star in the crown of one who had already endeared himself to the hearts of many Americans. Stories about Crockett's death emphasized

his willingness to sacrifice himself; he is reputed to be the first man to "step across the line" and volunteer to remain in the face of overwhelming odds. Virgil Baugh describes Davy's role as martyr:

There have been countless eulogies of the heroes who fell at the Alamo -- Travis, Bowie, Crockett, and others -- but Davy Crockett dominates them all in the affections of the American people The reasons are not hard to find His quick wit, his droll stories, his cunning in outwitting men who were far better educated and more sophisticated than he, his innate sense of justice and fair play, his bravery . . . endear him to us now as they did to his contemporaries. He rightfully belongs to the company of those frontiersmen and heroes who helped to formulate, as they best expressed them, the basic aims and ideals of American democracy.²⁹

CONCLUSION

The Crockett image is a many-sided picture. Known as a frontiersman, a bear-hunter, an Indian fighter, a Congressman, a comic storyteller, a coonskin philosopher, a martyr, and a demigod, Davy presents a composite representing many of the ideals and values of the American people of his time. His speaking contributed to this image in many ways -- through his funny stories, his wise sayings, and his bitter debates in Congress. The image was created by a number of forces, his own public speaking being chief among them because it revealed the values and aspirations that Crockett shared with his audiences.

The publishers of his autobiography provide an accurate

summary:

. . . the tall, buckskin-clad, coonskin-capped figure of Davy Crockett caught the public imagination in his own time as it does today. In the forests and along the rivers of the frontier, he was the best of his breed; bear-killer extraordinary, tireless, fearless, a man who could peel the bark off a tree with his grin or tame the lightning in the sky. In the halls of Congress, in the newspapers of Eastern cities, among the crowds that clamored to hear him speak during his tour of the northeast, he was the epitome of the frontier type, the unpolished backwoods wit and talespinner, the "rip-tail snorter, the yeller flower of the forest, half-horse and half-alligator," who could "swim further, dive deeper and come up dryer" than any other man in his district. Davy Crockett was "America's first 'Superman.'"³⁰

The name of Davy Crockett is well known today; his words and his legends have survived a century and still serve to amuse and inspire us.

NOTES

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¹Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 579.

²David Crockett, The Life of Davy Crockett (Signet edition; New York: New American Library, 1955), p. 72.

³Walter Blair, Horse Sense in American Humor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p. 32.

⁴Crockett, p. 103.

⁵Crockett, pp. 103-104.

- ⁶Blair, p. 32.
- ⁷Constance Rourke, Davy Crockett (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1934), pp. 131-32.
- ⁸Rourke, p. 133.
- ⁹Rourke, p. 137.
- ¹⁰Rourke, p. 135.
- ¹¹Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (3 vols.; New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927), II, p. 173.
- ¹²Parrington, II, p. 177.
- ¹³Parrington, II, p. 177.
- ¹⁴Constance Rourke, "Davy Crockett: Forgotten Facts and Legends," Southwest Review, XIX (January, 1934), p. 153.
- ¹⁵U. S., Congressional Record, 23rd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1834, X, Part 4, 4586.
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- ²⁰B. A. Botkin, ed., A Treasury of American Folklore (New York: Crown Publishers, 1944), pp. 2-3.
- ²¹Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 168.

²²Orrin E. Klapp, "The Folk Hero," Journal of American Folklore, LXII (January-March, 1949), p. 20.

²³Botkin, p. 6.

²⁴Malcolm Cowley, "American Myths, Old and New," Saturday Review, September 1, 1962, p. 7.

²⁵Crockett, p. 118.

²⁶Botkin, p. 6.

²⁷Walter Blair, The Literature of the United States, Walter Blair, et al., eds. (2 vols.; Chicago: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1961), II, p. 270.

²⁸Klapp, p. 22

²⁹Virgil E. Baugh, Rendezvous at the Alamo (New York: Pageant Press, Inc., 1960), pp. 131-32.

³⁰Crockett, p. 262.