

DAVID CROCKETT IN KENTUCKY

Royce E. Flood

While traveling through Kentucky in July of 1834, Congressman David Crockett of Tennessee delivered political addresses in Louisville and Elizabethtown. In these speeches he proclaimed the standard Whig position and strongly attacked President Andrew Jackson for partisan operation of the post office, for opposing the Second Bank of the United States, and for political inconsistency. Crockett also attempted to present favorable images of himself and a negative picture of the President. These speeches are excellent examples of the day's political oratory and also indicate the nature of the opposition to Jackson which existed in the President's home state.

During the third week of July, 1834, the citizens of northern Kentucky played host to a most distinguished visitor. Colonel David Crockett, the noted Tennessee congressman, passed through their region on his way home from Washington. Prompted by local officials, he delivered two major addresses, in Louisville and Elizabethtown, which forcefully presented the prevailing Whig position on the issues of the day and roundly denounced President Andrew Jackson. This paper will analyze both the issues and images presented in these speeches in an attempt to reveal the nature of the speaker and of the era's partisan political oratory.

1834 was the climactic year of David Crockett's life.¹ He had risen from initial poverty to become a dominant figure on the frontier and one of the nation's noted citizens. The major elements in this climb were a native intelligence, a gift for witty speech, a favorable record as a soldier in the Creek Wars, and a fortunate second marriage to a wealthy widow. Crockett was twice elected to the Tennessee state legislature (in 1821 and 1823) and, after an initial failure, was elevated to Congress. As one of the first frontiersmen to sit in the House, Crockett proved to be a thorn in the side of the Jacksonians who formed the majority of the Tennessee delegation in Washington. Although he had been elected as a Democrat -- indeed, it would have been impossible to run successfully under any other banner in the Tennessee of the 1820's -- Crockett really had little in common with Andrew Jackson or most of

his partisans. The Jacksonians represented the upper and middle classes; Crockett was truly the supporter of the frontier poor and was "one of the few individuals who dared to support the rights of West Tennesseans against the Nashville basin and East Tennessee regions."² His quests for improved western transportation networks and for favorable federal land policy were constantly thwarted by the Jacksonian majority who, following the President's lead, opposed internal improvements and cheap land. Constant legislative defeat, reinforced by genuine dislike of many of Jackson's policies, drove Crockett, by the start of his second term in 1829, into the arms of the opposition Whig Party.

Although temporarily forced out of office by a narrow defeat in 1831, Crockett returned to Congress two years later, eager to spread the gospel of Whig anti-Jacksonism. He accomplished this, and simultaneously promoted himself, by a series of tours throughout the Northeast and by speeches in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Once the congressional session was completed, Crockett resumed his tour, visiting cities along the Ohio River on his homeward journey. Thus it was that he came to bluegrass country.

Although Crockett had expressed a strong desire to return quickly to Tennessee, it is clear that he was not at all unhappy about the opportunity to address the Kentuckians. There were several reasons for his eagerness to speak. First, since the home state of Henry Clay was a Whig stronghold, Crockett had

every reason to expect a favorable reception of his views. In addition, as an avid opponent of Andrew Jackson, the Frontiersman actively sought opportunities to express his dislike of the President. Finally, there existed a personal connection in Crockett's friendship with Representative Thomas Chilton of Kentucky. Chilton was a native of the state, was a member of the bar of Elizabethtown, and, interestingly enough, was elected to Congress for the same three terms as was Crockett. Chilton was one of the first to defend Crockett when the latter broke with the Democrats and was apparently of great help during the writing of the Tennessean's autobiography. Thus Crockett was only too happy to help his friend by speaking in Chilton's district.³

Given the above "Kentucky connection," it seems quite surprising that there are in Crockett's addresses only passing references to local personalities or conditions. The reasons for this omission seem two-fold. First Crockett was probably unfamiliar with local issues or regional concerns. As far as history records, this was his first and only major political tour of the Bluegrass State; thus he simply lacked the information necessary to discuss local problems. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the issues which were vital to Crockett and to the Whigs generally were national, not local, in scope. The question of internal improvements affected the entire West, while tariffs, political patronage, and the

destruction of the Second Bank concerned the whole country. Thus it may well be that Crockett correctly analyzed his Kentucky audience when he addressed them almost entirely on matters of national interest.

Crockett was heard by two disparate groups. In Louisville the address was delivered in the court house yard, as the speaker immodestly claimed, to "the largest concourse of people that ever has been assembled in Louisville since it has been settled."⁴ The Elizabethtown speech was presented to a relatively small group at a dinner for party leaders. Regarding the specific persons, historical references give little evidence as to who was actually present. In the introduction to his Louisville address, Crockett mentioned "the celebrated Mrs. Drake," apparently a reference to the well-known actress Frances Ann Denny Drake, who made several tours of the American West. Representative Chilton may well have been present at the Elizabethtown dinner, since one of the toasts at the conclusion of Crockett's speech was in Chilton's honor. Although Henry Clay was similarly toasted, it is quite certain that he was not present, since Crockett could hardly have failed to mention the presence in the audience of the national leader of his party. In each case, however, the majority of the audience must certainly have been Whig partisans, as evidenced by the enthusiastic reception of the speaker's views.

Regardless of what persons were present, Crockett was determined to acquaint them with "the real and true situation

of our once happy country."⁵ As might be expected, therefore, the arguments with which he regaled the audience were pure Whiggery: Jackson was a tyrant, his policies were moving the country to the edge of ruin, and only a Whig victory in the next election would salvage the nation.

The three major issues which Crockett argued in front of the Kentuckians were political patronage, the corruption of the post office, and the destruction of the Second Bank of the United States. Jackson has long been regarded as the father of the spoils system at the federal level, and Crockett was quick to attack the President for this aspect of his administration. According to the Frontiersman, Jackson had dismissed anyone who opposed his election and had then appointed his own partisans to fill the vacant offices. As Crockett explained the process, "as soon as he took his seat as President, the first inquiry was, who has had the audacity to vote against Andrew Jackson? The man that had dared to do this, had to take to his heels; he got his walking ticket. . . . The next question was, who had huzzaed most and loudest for the 'greatest and best?' The man that had, was qualified to fill any office in the government." So bad had this situation become that "men who had grown gray in the service of their country, and who understood their duty, were turned out of office to make room for the worshippers of Andrew Jackson."⁶ Thus, according to Crockett, the President was guilty of partisanship of the worse kind, basing his administration on subservience rather than competence.

Secondly, Crockett deplored the wasteful practices of the post office and the partisan increase in the number of its officers. Initially he argued that the department was needlessly expanded: "In the old times, that is, in the prodigal times of Adams and Clay, there was forty-four clerks in the post office department, and now there is, I am informed, ninety-six; and at the last session, there was a modest demand on Congress for forty thousand dollars to pay for extra clerks."⁷ Such extravagance had produced its natural result; the new postmaster "exhausted the surplus . . . and . . . actually got the department into such a state, that it is about half a million worse than nothing."⁸ In spite of such increases, the department seemed less able than before to perform its functions; witness Crockett's description of the situation in his own district.

When in Congress . . . I tried to get a stage-route . . . but I couldn't succeed . . . As soon as a Mr. Fitzgerald, my successor, one of the true stripe, went on, it was thought highly important to have the route established that I wanted. Well, in fixing the route, they left out Troy, in Obion county; and the people there began to complain of Mr. Fitzgerald, that he had neglected them, and in all probability they might neglect him at the next election.⁹

No, all this new post office was good for was to produce "extra servility, extra impudence, extra electioneering, extra provision for friends, extra votes, extra trumped-up charges, extra printing offices, and extra loans for extra kindnesses."¹⁰

Finally, in true Whig fashion, Crockett excoriated the President for his attack on the Second Bank of the United States. Jackson had felt the Bank guilty of meddling in politics and of supporting opposition candidates; he therefore, against the advice of the House, had withdrawn the federal deposits from the institution and had vetoed its renewal charter. The Bank's president, Nicholas Biddle, then proceeded to call in loans, artificially restricted credit, and attempted to create a panic to force Jackson to alter his course. The Whigs, many of whom had been helped by the Bank, rose to its defense. Crockett launched several lines of attack against the President's action. First, the Bank was a perfectly safe place for federal monies. "The House of Representatives had declared, on solemn vote, that the deposits were safe; and this bank had actually paid out upwards of four hundred and sixty millions of dollars, without one cent of loss or expense to the government."¹¹ Secondly, Jackson's scheme for re-allocating the deposits to local banks promised disaster, as history showed. "In 1811 . . . we were compelled, for several years, to deposit the revenue of the country in the identical kinds of banks that General Jackson tells us he is now depositing the revenue in In about five years . . . by making these local banks places of deposit, the government lost one million five hundred thousand dollars to the country."¹² Finally, those who managed the local banks would be the ones to suffer if anything went wrong; as Crockett asked the citizens of Louisville, "do you sleep sound, when you know

that your name is on the paper, binding you and yours to repay money deposited in the bank where you are a director, and have but one voice in twelve to prevent its being loaned out to Tom, Dick, or Harry? Remember, that a day of reckoning is coming."¹³

Thus concerning himself with patronage and finance, post office and banks, Crockett left the modern reader an insight into the major considerations of the day. Even more important than the issues, however, were the images which the speaker was attempting to create. In his addresses at Louisville and Elizabethtown he was constantly trying to construct positive pictures of himself and negative views of Andrew Jackson.

Crockett presented himself in at least three different guises. He was, first, the poor uneducated frontiersman who had risen in spite of all disadvantages to the position he now held. Thus in Elizabethtown he apologized, "I shall be compelled to address you in homespun language -- in my own plain manner; for I have never had the opportunity of an education, which enables men to use the refined language that is common for gentlemen to use, filling a high station, such as I have been chosen to fill, by a portion of the people of Tennessee."¹⁴ Indeed, so destitute was he of ability that were it not for the desperate state of the country he would not dare speak; as he told the people of Louisville,

I have been requested by many citizens to address you. . . . This I would most assuredly have refused in common times; but from recent occurrences . . . I conceive it due from every public servant to present to the people the real and true situation of our once happy country. . . . And all I am sorry for is, that the citizens of Louisville had not a more capable organ to perform that duty than your humble servant.¹⁵

Such disclaimers served two important functions. First, they fulfilled the image of Crockett that his Whig supporters wished him to present and which his audience expected. The prevailing picture of the Tennessee Congressman emphasized his lack of formal training and his natural cleverness; any different image would have disappointed colleagues and auditors alike. Secondly, the apology served to neutralize any failings in the speech. If the address proved a disaster, the audience could not fairly claim to have been cheated; after all, they had been warned. If, on the other hand, a strong effort were forthcoming, the impact would be all the greater, given the speaker's initial lack of advantage. In either case the speaker profited from the device.

In his second image, Crockett built a picture of glorious independence. As one of the few Tennesseans who dared to speak out against the President, Crockett was able to make much of his refusal to be curbed by the administration: "When I was first elected I knew nothing about this party discipline. . . . I am no man's man. I bark at no man's bid. I will never come and go, and fetch and carry, at the whistle of the great man in the white house, no matter who he is."¹⁶

This type of defiance was exactly the position most admired by the virulently anti-Jackson Whigs, and could not help but enhance the esteem in which they held the speaker.

Finally, Crockett revealed that he was honest and strong enough to admit error. In the opening lines of the Elizabethtown address he confessed to having been duped by Jackson in the early stages of the President's career.

Crockett explained,

in making my remarks, I will be reluctantly obliged to say some harsh things about the acts of a man I once supported. I was one of General Jackson's first soldiers; I helped him gain his glory; and I was as sincere in my support of him as any man in America. I had heard the hue and cry against Messrs. Adams and Clay; they were called the prodigals. . . . I believe this was all true, and I joined in the cry to put them down.¹⁷

Crockett thus allied himself with all those who found they could no longer support the policies of the administration and at the same time showed himself to be a man of stature. Not for Crockett the petty position that feared to admit a mistake; for him the grandeur of spirit which could say "I erred, but now I see the light."

Thus as an uneducated, but shrewd, frontiersman, proud of his independent honesty, Crockett fulfilled the audiences' expectations of him as a speaker and as a man. Even as he was building himself up, however, the Frontiersman lost no opportunity to tear down President Andrew Jackson. Three separate images of the man in the White House were created for the Kentucky audiences.

First, the President was pictured as a deceitful, inconsistent politician who had espoused certain positions in order to get himself elected and who, once in office, had changed his stance on nearly every issue. In order to bring this situation home to his listeners, Crockett created an analogy to a candidating clergyman who during his trial period "would preach up your own doctrines of foreordination and the Trinity," but who, having received the pulpit, "would preach the doctrines of Unitarianiam, or any other different from what you thought." Such an individual deserved only to be expelled "with disgrace stamped on his forehead." Jackson was equally deserving of such treatment, for "has he not acted a fraud upon the people? Is it not political hypocrisy and moral dishonesty?"¹⁸

Crockett listed the issues on which the chief executive had altered his course. Before the election Jackson "was . . . the firm friend and supporter of internal improvements by the general government; . . . was then in favor of the tariff; and most of all . . . was to reform the government and retrench its expenditures!!"¹⁹ On each of these a change had occurred and while such a turnabout "may suit some people," Crockett vowed, "it does not suit me."²⁰

Secondly, Crockett argued that the President was tyrannical; indeed, he deserved to be compared to the notable dictators in history. He was similar to the detested King George III in that he had rejected petitions of the people

for redress of their grievances. "King George the Third . . . brought oppression after oppression upon the American colonies, till his burthens became intolerable. The people laid their petitions in heaps at the feet of his majesty. They were treated with silent contempt."²¹ This was scarcely different from the recent bank crisis when "there were two hundred thousand petitioners, who sent their memorials to Congress, praying for a restoration of the deposits. And where were these memorials sent? To a packed committee, made by a party speaker."²² Indeed, so close was the parallel that Crockett found it easy to refer to the President as "King Andrew the First."

Jackson was also similar to another famous tyrant of old. Like Julius Caesar, the President had personally taken control of the entire government and scorned the people's representatives. The country now saw "one man holding the sword of the nation in one hand, and seizing in the other the purse of the people, bidding defiance to Congress, to the laws, and to the nation."²³ Certainly these acts, argued the speaker, placed the chief executive among the least worthy leaders in history.

Finally, the President had proved an incompetent administrator, for he had selected a group of partisan misfits to surround him. They were, according to Crockett, "a set of the greatest scrubs on earth."²⁴ They included Representative Stevenson of Virginia, the previously mentioned "party speaker" of the House, and future Chief Justice Taney, whom Jackson used

merely as "his tool."²⁵ Most important of all was Vice President Martin Van Buren, " a political Judas"²⁶ who "like a real Gopher, works more under than above ground"²⁷ and who had been "smuggled into the vice-presidency, in the seat of Jackson's breeches"²⁸ even though as a youngster he had been a "little, lying, tale-telling boy."²⁹ Clearly, one of the greatest charges against the President was his poor choice of subordinates.

Thus as an inconsistent, tyrannical, mal-administering president, Jackson clearly deserved the scorn of every right-thinking citizen of the country.

In the end the tide of Jacksonian popularity which he was bucking proved too much for Crockett; his Democratic opponent in the 1835 election returned him permanently to private life by margin of two hundred votes. Yet Crockett left behind a notable legacy, and not the smallest part of it continues to be the spiteful, yet delightful, partisan oratory he exhibited in his tour through the Bluegrass State.

NOTES

Royce E. Flood (Ph.D. Northwestern University, 1972) is Associate Professor of Speech, Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana.

¹For the most comprehensive examination of Crockett's life, see James A. Shackford, David Crockett: the Man and the Legend (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956).

²Stuart Stiffler, "Davy Crockett" the Genesis of Heroic Myth," Tennessee Historical Quarterly, 16 (June, 1957), p. 134.

³For the role of Chilton in the writing of Crockett's autobiography, see Shackford, pp. 89-90, and 128.

⁴David Crockett, An Account of Colonel Crockett's Tour to the North and Down East (Philadelphia: Cary and Hart, 1835), pp. 158-9.

⁵Tour, p. 159.

⁶Tour, p. 184.

⁷Tour, p. 163.

⁸Tour, p. 164.

⁹Tour, p. 167.

¹⁰Tour, p. 166.

¹¹Tour, p. 169.

¹²Tour, p. 169.

¹³Tour, p. 171.

¹⁴Tour, pp. 182-3.

¹⁵Tour, pp. 159-60.

¹⁶Tour, pp. 172-3.

¹⁷Tour, p. 183.

¹⁸Tour, p. 160.

¹⁹Tour, p. 161.

²⁰Tour, p. 184.

²¹Tour, p. 185.

²²Tour, p. 188.

²³Tour, p. 186.

²⁴Tour, p. 172.

²⁵Tour, p. 187.

²⁶Tour, p. 191.

²⁷Tour, p. 172.

²⁸Tour, p. 190.

²⁹Tour, p. 191.

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Beginning in this issue, on the following pages, is a debate concerning directions which our professional field should take. The first article is by the editor of this journal, followed by a response by Ralph Hillman, current President of TSCA, and followed by a further response by Jim Brooks, the first editor of this journal. All three writers have been presidents of TSCA, and are affiliated with Middle Tennessee State University. We would invite your response to the issues raised in this debate for publication in future issues.